Capes, Cups, and Glittery Things

by GoldsJRZGirl

Summary

Loki died and was reborn at the end of Thor the Dark World. As a result of his resurrection he was allowed a second chance at redemption and now fights with his brother Thor and the Avengers, and has adopted nine mortal children to give him and them the family they never had. This is their story . . .

Notes

#1 Getting Away With Mischief series

written for a prompt by Loki’s Ladies group—"Loki goes into battle wearing an unusual cape which causes a villain to drop dead laughing". Loki’s three-year-old baby girl makes him a surprise, one that will gain the God of Mischief a new reputation.
Loki dreamed of sandcastles and the sparkle of sunlit waves, coconut sunscreen and triple decker ice cream sundaes. He was just about to bite into his cone when the strident theme of Wagner’s Ride of the Valkyries interrupted his lovely reverie.

Rolling over, he groped for his phone, growling, “Nine Hells, Thor!” Blearily he looked at his screen and saw a text from his brother blinking.

Avengers Assemble! Kang is back! Yes, Loki, this means you.

Dragging a hand across his eyes, the Master of Mischief sat up. He felt like the Sandman had dumped a ton of sand into his head and he yawned before brushing his unruly ebony locks away from his face. His fingers danced across the keyboard.

On my way. Just let me wake up Sam and get dressed.

Hurry, brother. Time’s flying.

“Yeah. Yeah. Keep your armor on!” Loki grumbled, crawling out of bed. “I’d like to see you be all chirpy if you’d spent the last night soothing your petrified Seer baby girl back to sleep after a nightmare, O Mighty One!”

As the only adult in a houseful of kids, he’d developed the habit of occasionally talking to himself so he would have an adult conversation. He padded across the thick emerald green carpet in his usual nighttime attire of green and gold boxers adorned with Old Norse runes, a gift from his eldest child, Sam, who loved history and sewing in her spare time.

After emerging from the shower in record time, he dried his hair with a brief spell and began to pull on his costume, armor, and boots. His helmet was on a stand beside the closet and Laevateinn was hanging high up on the wall where no little sticky fingers could grab her, with a Don’t Touch Me ward surrounding her. He’d learned that kids and sharp swords didn’t mix after the first year the kids had moved in and Max ended up with stitches after Vince tried to “ninjify” him while Loki was in the shower.

Cape . . . where’s my cape? He looked about for his shimmery emerald and gold cape then recalled he’d left it hanging over the chair in the kitchen last night since he’d been helping Serena with her book report, while his two youngest, Maximus and Aleta, ages four and three, drew pictures and used the Jewel Bedazzler on their spare T-shirts. He buckled Laevateinn on and tucked his horned helmet under an arm then headed to the kitchen to grab his emergency snack satchel, cape, and hopefully a quick bite to eat.

On the way he knocked at Samantha’s door. His eldest fosterling was 15, tall, skinny, and trans gender who was sometimes Samantha and other times Sam. Today, she was Samantha, he noted, when she opened the door, because her blond spiky hair was pink at the tips. “Morning, kiddo.”
“S’up, Dad?” she yawned, rubbing her eyes. She had on her favorite cat pajamas. “You get called out again?”

“Afraid so. Your uncle just texted me. Kang’s up to his old tricks again.”

“That crazy old fart? Kick his butt, Dad,” she urged. “I’ll watch the rugrats till you get back.”

“I’m just glad it’s Sunday,” her father said, then gave her a hug. “Gotta run, darling. I’ll see you later.”

“Be safe,” Sam hugged him back. “Go, Dad. Before the little spark hears ya.”

Loki tucked his phone into a pocket of his pants and hurried into the kitchen. He hit the button on the coffee maker, thank the Norns Sam had set it up to insta brew the night before. As Dark Magic coffee flowed into his travel mug with his special golden helmet logo on it, he zapped a bacon, egg, and cheese Hot Pocket with magic and scarfed it down. Breakfast in five seconds. He thought, licking his fingers. Kang, couldn’t you have picked another day to invade Midgard? I was gonna make waffles with lingonberry jam and maple bacon, you son of a diseased jackal. He cast a longing look at the waffle iron before grabbing his insulated snack satchel and slinging it over his shoulder.

In his pocket, his phone beeped. Loki, where are you?

Oh, keep your shorts on, Thor! He thought irritably as he donned his helmet.

He spied his cape over the back of the chair, next to the plastic case containing Aleta’s art supplies and Bedazzler. He reached for it just as a dark-haired moppet wearing Beauty and the Beast pajamas pattered into the kitchen and latched onto to his boot like the Midgard Serpent.

“What? No, of course not, Aleta.” He knelt to hug her and she wound her arms about his neck, her little lips brushing his cheek. “What are you doing up, spark? Thought you were asleep.” So much for my quick getaway. Must be getting slow in your rebirth, Laufeyson.

Her cherubic face scowled up at him. “I Dreamed you was fightin’ some Bad People. I came to tell you but you were gone!”

“No!” Aleta howled. “I don’t want you to go! The Bad People could hurt you!” Her fingers winched into a stranglehold.

“Ack! Samantha, stop!” Loki gasped. He patted the tiny Seer on the back, murmuring, “Hey, hey stop that, they can hear you all the way across Bifrost, alskling. Nobody’s gonna hurt me. I’ve got my magic helmet, remember? And my spells and Uncle Thor’s got Mjolnir to send the Bad People on a one way trip into space. Okay?”

He put a finger beneath Aleta’s quivering chin and tipped her head up till she was looking into his eyes. He met her teary gray ones with his own brilliant emerald orbs. “Okay, alskling?”

Slowly she nodded, for though she hated when he went away, she also could tell he was being truthful with her. At least as truthful as he could be, given he didn’t know what the outcome of this mission would be. “Kay,” she sniffed. “Will you be home for dinner?”
“I hope so,” he replied softly. “But if not, Samantha can make grilled cheese and bacon for you,” he named one of her favorite foods. “Tell you what... if you’re good tomorrow we can have a tea party.”

“A tea party? With Uncle Thor?” she crowed.

He winced as he went momentarily deaf. “Sure. I’ll invite Uncle Thor over and we can bake cupcakes. How’s that sound, princess?”

“Yay!” she cheered. Then she hurled herself at Samantha. “Manthy, I’m gonna have a tea party with Uncle Thor an’ Daddy! With crimpets, n’ cupcakes, n’ scones.”

Samantha held her and smiled. “And who’s gonna make all those fancy cakes, little spark?”

“We are! You n’ me!”

“Guess we’re gonna have a bake-a-thon, huh?” she winked at her father as he climbed stealthily to his feet.

“Just don’t burn down the house,” he muttered as his phone whistled yet again.

“Go!” Samantha mouthed, and the God of Mischief slipped out the door and teleported to the Avengers hanger, his cape slung over his arm.

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“You’re late, brother!” Thor grumbled as soon as Loki appeared in the hanger. “What kept you?”

“I had to say goodbye to your niece,” Loki replied shortly.

“And this took ten minutes?” Thor frowned.

“You try going somewhere with a three-year-old half-strangling you and hanging on your boot, and see how far you get.” Loki snorted.

Natasha giggled. “I’d pay money to see that!”

“Enough chitchat,” Tony called. “Get on the plane. Kang and his soldiers are burning the Brooklyn Bridge.”

They quickly boarded the Quinjet, greeting Hawkeye, Cap, and the Hulk as they did so. As Loki and Thor sat down and strapped in for the flight, Cap revved the engines and the plane took off.

Iron Man followed in a flare of his jet boots, soaring into the sky to take the point as they headed towards the chaos on the Brooklyn Bridge.

Loki placed his cape on the seat beside him along with his satchel. He caught Thor eyeing it wistfully. “What is it, Thor?”

“Do you have anything to eat in there? I’m starving like Fenrir wolf.”

His brother smirked. “Did you skip breakfast again?” Rummaging in his satchel, he emerged with a banana, a power bar, and a chocolate chip muffin. “Here, take your pick.”

“Chocolate chip muffins!” Natasha exclaimed. “Loki, since when are you Betty Crocker?”
Thor wrinkled his brow in puzzlement. “I know not who this mortal Betty of Crocker is but I’ll take the muffin, Loki.”

Loki tossed him the muffin, it was devoured in two bites. “Want one, Nat?” he asked Black Widow.

At her nod he passed out muffins to everyone on board.

“More?” Thor wheeled, giving him puppydog eyes.

“Bottomless pit!” Hawkeye laughed.

Loki shook a finger at the Asgardian. “Ah, ah. How do you ask?”

“Loki!” Thor growled.

The Master of Mischief smirked his signature grin. “Why brother, if you’re going to set an example for my kids you need to remember the manners Mother taught you and ask me—politely.”

The rest of the team tittered as Thor flushed and muttered, “As you wish. Loki, please I have some more?”

“Pretty please with a cherry on top?”

“Not funny!” Thor snapped. “The god of Thunder doesn’t beg!”

“Here. Now don’t say I never gave you anything,” Loki tossed him another muffin. “You sure are grumpy this morning. Is that time of the month again?” he demanded outrageously.

Natasha nearly choked to death on her muffin.

Steve was laughing so hard the Quinjet nearly did a spin until JARVIS put it back on course.

“Hey? What’s going on in there?” Stark demanded through his headset. “What’s so funny?”

“Loki,” answered Steve.

“Figures! Shelve the comedy act, Frosty,” ordered Tony.

Loki rolled his eyes. “The comedy’s my brother, not me. And don’t call me Frosty, Rustbucket. I’m not a snowman.”

“Loki, are you having a joke at my expense?” Thor queried, licking his lips, muffin crumbs all over his scarlet wool cape and armor.

“Always, brother,” the mischievous god chuckled. Then he handed Thor a napkin. “Wipe your mouth, you’re a mess.”

“What are you my mother?” Thor sniffed, accepting the napkin.

“Nine Hells forfend!” Loki coughed. “I’d shoot myself!”

“Yeah he’s got eight already, he doesn’t need anymore,” Clint chortled. “But these muffins are delicious. Got milk, Mischief Maker?”
“Do I look like a cow?” demanded Loki indignantly. He sipped his coffee. Then he added, “Oh, by the way, Thor, Aleta’s invited her uncle to her tea party tomorrow.”

“Ooo! Can I come?” Clint hooted.

“Shut up, Hawk!” Loki snapped, at the same time Thor glared at the archer balefully.

“Do not mock my celebration with my little niece, archer,” scolded the Thunder God. “If there are more of these muffins with chocolate at this party then I will drink whatever tea she wishes.”

“Oh there’s lots more, I promise. And macaroons, and Reeses brownies—Samantha and the little spark are baking today for it.” Loki informed him.

Thor looked extremely happy and Steve asked plaintively, “Can I come?”

“Next week,” Loki sighed, and made a mental note to add that to his iPhone.

He absently ate the banana he was holding, thinking wryly that his Avenger family was a lot more accepting since they had all become honorary uncles and aunts to his children, some of whom were disabled, some had extraordinary powers, and some were normal if troubled kids, but all of them were loved by him fiercely.

“What are we celebrating, Loki?” Thor asked as the plane began to descend.

Loki shrugged. “Uh... that I came back from this mission and so did you? It’s Aleta, Thor, she doesn’t have to have a reason to have a tea party except that she missed us.”

He felt a warm glow deep inside as he said those words, illuminating the dark spaces in his soul. The love of his children had done what no superhero could—they had transformed him from a vengeful, hateful being into one who was capable of great love and sacrifice. Oh, he was still a thief and sometime a liar but he was also more responsible and happier than he had ever been in all his two thousand years. For at last he had what he had always wanted and never dared to hope for or acknowledge—a family who loved him just as he was.

“Heads up, guys!” Tony yelled. “We’re approaching the bridge!”

Everyone prepared to fight Kang. Loki pulled on his cape, which could make him able to hover short distances and to deflect bullets, energy blasts, and magical energy. Good thing I washed this last night, he thought, inhaling the scent of lemon detergent and stroking the silky material. Laevateinn rattled in her sheath as the jet flew towards one end of the burning bridge.

At the other end of the bridge, police were desperately trying to corral all the innocent bystanders in their cars and pedestrians from the fire and the super soldiers along with their megalomaniac leader Kang, who was flying about on something that looked like an airborne jetski.

The Quinjet went vertical and hovered just above the bridge so the Avengers could jump out.

“Avengers Assemble!” Cap yelled their familiar battlecry.

“And let’s kick some interstellar ass!” added Loki gleefully, drawing his sword in one hand and sheathing his opposite palm with eldritch fire.

He stepped gracefully from the jet, his cape billowing out behind him like a pair of wings.

As he touched down on the ground, amid the chaos Kang’s robots and brainwashed goons were causing, he tossed a firebolt at two robots who were about to shoot him down, then parried a blow
from a goon with his sword. “Slow as molasses!” he taunted, spinning about and kicking his opponent in the leg.

As the goon’s knee crumbled, Loki seized the advantage and spun Laevateinn and bashed the other’s head with the golden hilt. In deference to the Avengers creed, he didn’t kill as he might have once, instead knocking the enemy unconscious. Loki snapped glowing magical restraints upon him, then turned, cape flying to confront another opponent.

As he did so, he caught the sound of giggles and laughter. *Norns grant me patience! I’m surrounded by idiots!* He spun, planting one gold boot firmly on the concrete, his teeth bared in a feral snarl. “Something funny, mortals?”

He conjured another glowing bolt of magic.

To his shock, the blond haired mortal was shaking with mirth and pointing at him. “Aww! Now if that don’t beat all!”

“What are you gibbering about?” Loki growled. “Kneel, worm!”

His companion howled, “Do ya got smiley faces on yer shorts too, pretty boy?”

*What the blazes?* Loki shook his head, then subdued the snickering mortals with his magic. As he snapped restraints on them he muttered, “What in Hel have you been smoking? Must be some powerful hallucinogen.”

Tossing his cape back over his shoulders he went to assist Thor and Cap, who were fighting Kang.

“Down, Thor!” he called, and fired off two concussive blasts from both hands, knocking the megalomaniac off his flying jetski.

“Blast you, Loki!” spat Kang, struggling to get to his feet.

“Catch, Conqueror!” Steve yelled and his shield flew at the caped warrior.

Kang was forced to roll to avoid being clobbered and ended up behind Loki as a result.

The Master of Mischief turned slightly and catcalled, “That’s where you belong, worm! On your belly!”

Kang lifted his head, pulling out a small yet powerful plasma gun. “I kneel to no one, you Asgardian clown!” He aimed the gun at Loki’s back.

But just as he would have fired, he caught sight of something upon the god’s cape. It was something so astonishing, so utterly improbable, and so hilarious that Kang forgot he was going to shoot Loki. Instead he began pointing and doubling over with laughter.

“Ooh . . . oohh . . . ha HA HA!” howled. “Where’s your pink dress, Loki to go with your glittery cape?!”

Loki spun around, furious and bewildered. “Kang, you imbecile! Just shut up and surrender! You’re trying my patience!”

The villain was on his knees now, giggling in a most unseemly and insane fashion. “Oh sweet magical flying unicorns—hahahaha!”
Thor stared at the hysterical villain in puzzlement. “Mayhap he has suffered a brain seizure?” Then he looked at his brother, and his eye was caught by Loki’s fluttering green and gold cape.

The Thunder God’s cerulean eyes went wide. Then they crinkled in amusement. “Jormungdr’s Scales!” He bit his lip and then despite a valiant effort let out a huge belly laugh. “Oh, brother . . . you should see . . .!”

Loki was growing more and more annoyed. “Thor, what the Hel is so funny, you big lummox?”

His brother was nearly convulsed with laughter, tears streaming down his face.

“Do you know what’s wrong with him, Cap?”

Steve blinked, looked, and then he covered his mouth with a hand. “Umm . . . umm . . . Loki? You might want to . . . ahh . . . look at your cape . . .”

Rolling his eyes, Loki unfastened his cape, muttering about everyone being stricken with stupid disease today. He shook it out and peered at the familiar emerald fabric with gold runes bordering it. “Nine Hells!” He face palmed himself. “Aleta Laufeyson, what did you do?”

For there in glittering bedazzle studs, was a large smiley face on his cape—and if that were not enough, it was accompanied by the words I Luv You, Daddy surrounding it in pink jewels!

“Nice costume, brother!” chortled Thor, slapping his knee.

Loki felt a hot flush crawl up the back of his neck. Aleta, WHY? he groaned, as behind him Kang collapsed on the ground laughing fit to die.

“What’s going on?” Tony demanded, landing beside them. “Why is he cracking up?” he indicated Kang.

“It’s Loki’s new cape!” Steve smirked. “He . . . err . . . bedazzled Kang!”

“What?” then Tony caught sight of the glittery new addition to the Mischief God’s attire and his suit shook with laughter. “Oh my God! You’ve been . . . adorified!”

“Stop! Stop!” Kang begged. “I can’t take any more!”

“Then don’t look, you pathetic despot!” Loki growled. He had never been more embarrassed in his life.

Soon the rest of the team was also laughing, and the Asgardian heaved a sigh, eyeing the surprise his baby girl had given him with a martyred air. Why me?

Until he recalled an old saying—if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em.

A corner of his mouth quirked up in a reluctant grin. Then he chuckled. “I knew I shouldn’t have left my cape out last night.”

“You live and learn . . . Dad!” Clint snickered.

“You’re lucky she didn’t bedazzle your helmet too—Princess of Asgard!” hooted Tony.

“Aww shut up!” Loki coughed, then he gave in and began to laugh too. He was going to have to have a rather long talk with his three-year-old imp about decorating things with her Bedazzler without asking. But he had to admit the sentiment warmed him down to his toes.
Then he heard a click. “What---oh no, Stark, you didn’t!”

Tony waved his iPhone triumphantly. “One push of a button, and this is all over Tumblr, pal.”

Loki’s eyes narrowed. “You dare?”

Smirking, Tony slipped the phone into his suit. “I wonder how many hits this would get?”

“That goes viral and I swear you’ll regret it!” Loki threatened.

“Why? You looked so cute and huggable!” Natasha teased.

“I am not cute!” Loki huffed, folding the cape and starting back towards the jet. “Cute is for puppies, kittens, and fluffy bunnies, not me!”

Oh yes, he was going to have a very long talk with his child as soon as he stepped foot in the house, he vowed. But his mouth quirked upward again and he thought reluctantly that she was his daughter all right. For that had been a prank worthy of himself.

Of course that didn’t stop the rest of the Avengers from twitting him unmercifully all the way back home.

“Ooo ahh how bee-you-ti-ful!” Clint warbled.

“It’s a new fashion trend—Loki the Bedazzler, God of Glitter!” Natasha whooped.

Loki thought about throttling whichever of her uncles had gotten Aleta the Bedazzler. He was never going to live this down, he thought ruefully. It would be the first time in the annals of Avenger history where a villain had been defeated by laughing himself into surrender.

“Loki, you need pants to go with the cape,” Thor guffawed.

“Watch it, brother. Or I’ll tell her you want one to match!” Loki snorted. Then he burst out laughing at Thor’s horrified look. Kids! They drive me insane, but oh, they make my life interesting!

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A rather weary Master of Mischief arrived back at his town house, glittery cape slung over his shoulder. The smell of chocolate, peanut butter, and cinnamon permeated the air, making his mouth water. “Hey, I’m home!”

“Hey, Dad, how’d it go?” asked Nathan from his wheelchair where he was playing SuperMarioKart. “Did you send those villains crying for their mommies?”

“Of course,” Loki laughed, and tousled his unruly mop of red hair. “Are those chocolate chips I smell?”

He neatly avoided the Lego tower Max was building on the rug and made a beeline for the kitchen.
Looks like the house is still intact, he mused just as a tiny torpedo shot out from the kitchen table and barreled into him at full speed.

“Daddy!”

“Whoa, spark!” Loki laughed, just managing to keep his balance. “Maybe you ought to try out for quarterback of the NFL, huh?” He scooped up his baby girl and tossed her into the air. “Miss me?”

“To the moon n’ back!” she yelled, and when he caught her again, she hugged him and cried, “Didja see the s’prise I made for you?”

“Uh . . . yes . . . I saw it,” he coughed. And so did everyone else on the Brooklyn Bridge.

“What surprise?” Samantha asked, coming out to also hug her parent. She handed Loki a peanut butter chocolate brownie.

“Mmm, thanks! After the morning I’ve had I need this,” He bit into the treat with utter bliss. Chocolate and peanut butter were food of the gods, he thought happily. Forget Idun’s apples!

“I baked that all by myself!” boasted Aleta.

“You did?” Loki pretended astonishment.

“Hey! I helped,” Samantha objected. Then she said, “What surprise, Aleta?”

“I maked Daddy a new cape,” she announced, holding the cape out for her sister to inspect.

“You what?” Samantha took the cape and gasped. “Odin’s spear, Aleta! You bedazzled Dad’s cape?” At her sister’s proud nod she stared at her father. “And you went out of the house like that?”

“Uh . . . I didn’t know . . . not until we were in the middle of a battle . . .” he admitted.

“No way!” gasped Hunter, his second oldest who was twelve. “Dad, how could you fight wearing that?”

“Very quickly,” Loki admitted.

“It’s pretty!” Aleta sang.

Hunter rolled his eyes. “Dad’s a superhero, Aleta. He’s not supposed to look pretty!”

“Is too!”

“Are not! You did that to my jacket and I’d drop dead of embarrassment!”

“You’re mean, Hunter!” sniffl ed Aleta.

“Ahem!” Loki cleared his throat. He looked at his youngest and said gently, “It was a . . . lovely surprise,” If I was a five year old attending a My Little Pony convention.

“See? Toldja!” Aleta cheered. “An’ you can wear it when you go to work.”

Loki nearly choked to death on his second brownie. “Uh . . . err . . . Aleta I think it’s too pretty for me to wear to work.”
“But why?” the little girl looked as if the world had ended.

“Because it makes him look like a sissy,” Hunter informed her.

“Hush!” Loki ordered. He went and sat down at the table with his daughter on his lap. “Aleta, if I had to wear that everyday to work your uncles might get jealous because I looked so brilliant in it,” he lied smoothly. “So I decided I’m going to hang it right over here on my art wall.”

He gestured and the cape, in all its glittering glory, attached itself to the wall dedicated to all the children’s artwork. “There! Now it has its own place of honor.”

And perhaps one day Thor and the rest of them will forget about it. Oh, who am kidding? They’ll be telling the story of Loki’s Love Cape to my grandchildren!

“Daddy, did ya invite Uncle Thor to the tea party?” Aleta asked, tugging on one horn of his helmet.

“Yes, sweetie. He’s coming tomorrow. Are you all done baking?”

“Uh huh! Manthy and me baked lots and lots.”

“Yeah and they wouldn’t let us eat any,” Hunter grumbled.

“Oh quit whining,” Samantha ordered. “I have some put aside for dessert.”

“I can’t wait to taste them,” Loki said sincerely. “Neither can Uncle Thor.”

“Yay!” Aleta clapped her hands.

Loki smiled down at the little imp, then he said, with a devilish smirk, “You know, Aleta, Uncle Thor thought my cape was amazing.”

“He did?”

“He liked it so much he couldn’t speak,” Loki continued gleefully. “So maybe you could make him a new cape tomorrow?”

"I can! I can!” she cried enthusiastically. "I got lots of pretty colors and stars n' moons!"

Hunter made a gagging noise.

Loki threw back his head and laughed loudly. Oh Thor! Just wait till tomorrow! Then we’ll see who has the last laugh, brother!
Thor's Surprise

Chapter Summary

Thor attends a tea party and gets an unexpected surprise from Loki's two mischievous children!

2

Thor's Surprise

*Tea, crumpets, and makeovers—they're not just for little girls anymore~ *Loki

The day of the tea party dawned bright and early, Loki thought as he sipped his second cup of Dark Magic while watching the sunrise. Since becoming a parent to nine unwanted (except by him) orphans had taught him the necessity of rising early so he could have time to himself to relax. Relaxation was all important to maintaining your sanity, a fact he had learned very well over the last three years. So he allowed himself to bask in the serenity of the moment, enjoying the panorama of colors in the sky and the peaceful sound of silence.

Soon enough, that silence would be broken by the children waking up for school—only his two youngest were not school age yet—but right now they were all still blissfully in the realm of slumber. The god leaned back on the sofa and tucked his long legs under him in a classic lotus pose. Then he began to meditate, letting the soothing mantras center and focus his awareness—both within and without. His magic flared, stirred, then glided back into his mind, gathering in a still pool waiting to be used.

He remained that way for the better part of a hour, only emerging from his trance when he heard the sound of feet tromping down the hall and the slam of the bathroom door. Then he came back to the now, and rose gracefully to his feet, entering the kitchen to start the breakfast he had set out before drinking his coffee—which today was French toast with bananas, cinnamon, and maple bacon. Loki had a love affair with maple bacon, adoring the sweet salty taste, and his children did too, so he made it often.

Soon enough the aroma of it lured Sam, his oldest daughter/son, Hunter, Belle, Serena, Nathan, Vince, Lucy, and Maximus into the kitchen. All of them greeted their parent with their usual affection, some with mumbled good mornings, the younger ones with a hug. Sam, who today had dyed the tips of his hair blue, got everyone's preferred beverage and Belle set the table. Each of the children had specific chores of the day—said chores rotated each week and were posted upon a color coded chart. Hunter got all the lunches together, putting them in their appropriate backpacks.

Loki looked over from flipping the French toast and said, "Do you all have anything I need to sign before you go to school? Permission slips, homework?"

"I'm good," Sam answered.

"You already signed mine," Serena reminded him. She was Loki's fey child, delicate looking as
spun glass, with platinum hair she dyed different colors and eyes the shade of a midnight ocean. She was eight that year.

"Dad, I have band practice," Lucy reminded him. "I'll take the bus home though."

"Okay, but if you get out later than four, call me," he agreed. The school provided transportation for extra curricular activities, but Loki wasn't too fond of his kids using at certain hours.

Loki brought the platter of French toast and bacon to the table, saying as he set it down, "Belle, watch your book before you get syrup on it," to his bookworm, who was currently reading *The Saga of Brunhilda* in its original tongue. Belle was not just a bookworm, she was also a mage, one who had Lorekeeper abilities, meaning she could recite and remember anything she read or heard, no matter what language it was in. Her frightful intelligence had caused the orphanage managers to label her a freak and odd, her outbursts of magic had terrified them and led to them labeling her "an incurable misfit" among other things. She had been the first child Loki had adopted, her magic calling attention to his own.

The others had followed in rapid succession, each with their own unique issues, and backgrounds. Some had called the God of Mischief crazy for adopting so many children, and said he was doomed to failure, but time had proven all the naysayers, one of whom had been his brother, wrong. Loki's little family thrived, in no small part due to the shapeshifting god's unique ability to understand, empathize, and seek solutions outside the box. As Serena had put it so succinctly one day in an assignment asking what they liked best about their mom or dad, "My dad loves us even when we're bad, and he doesn't expect us to be perfect and that makes all the difference. He loves us just the way we are."

Belle looked up from her book, her dark eyes sparkling. She had long curly hair the color of a walnut that accented her pixie face. "Don't worry, Dad. I put a shield charm on the pages."

Loki patted her shoulder. "That's my girl," he said approvingly.

"Belle damage a book?" Hunter laughed. "That's like a priest spitting on his altar."

He speared three pieces of French toast, and five pieces of bacon, and devoured them hungrily.

"Jeez! Breathe once in awhile," Sam remarked. "You act like you haven't eaten for a year."

"I'm hungry! Lemme alone," his brother muttered. The twelve-year-old was lean as coursing hound, with shaggy black hair, the uptilted eyes of his Asian mother, and he wore a silver eternity knot in one ear and a leather jacket with a wolf on the back of it. Before coming to live with Loki, Hunter had been a member of the gang Fenris, and had been known for his quick hands, vicious right hook, and fiery temper. He was no longer a member, or a delinquent, due to Loki's persuasion, but he had never forgotten what it was to go hungry.

"Maybe he's trying out for the out eat Uncle Thor contest?" Lucy suggested. She was a blond with huge sea green eyes, the third youngest, at five.

"Hunter couldn't out eat Uncle Thor," objected Vince, who was seven, a stocky boy with wheat colored hair and hazel eyes. "I don't even think Dad could."

Loki chuckled. "No? You'd be surprised."

"Yes, he could," Sam argued. "It's in the myth of Thor and Loki in Jotunheim."

"Not everything in the myths is true, Sam," Belle stated. "Some of it's just stories."
"But that one's true, right, Dad?"

"Most of it, yes. But I don't have time right now to point out the reality." He did a quick head count—and came up one short. "Where's Aleta?"

"She was still sleeping," Max told him. "I tried to wake her but she wouldn't get up."

Loki frowned. Aleta was normally up with the birds, like her name. "All right. Finish eating. I'm going to go check on your sister."

Concerned, Loki teleported over to Aleta's room, wondering if his artistic little Seer was coming down with something. Normally Aleta woke him up, by bouncing on his stomach. Luckily Loki's stomach muscles were tougher than the average mortal's, or else he might have ended up throwing up from his three-year-old's enthusiastic wake-up call.

"Aleta?" he called, opening the door to her room. "Alskling, are you okay?"

Her little rose pink canopied bed was empty, the covers rumpled and askew. He turned to see where she had gone, and heard her little voice coming from his bedroom. "Aleta?"

Three strides took him to his room, where he found his wayward little imp parading about his room wearing a green tea towel tied to her neck, carrying a glittery plastic wand, which she pointed at the array of stuffed animals and dolls lined up on the floor before her, and ordered dramatically, "Kneel! I am the Princess of Asgard! You were made to be ruled!"

The sight nearly made him laugh out loud, it was so adorable . . . until he saw that she was wearing his helmet, which was of course ten times too large and kept falling over her eyes. She reached up with one chubby hand and nearly impaled her finger on the end of one horn.

"Ahem! Aleta Lenore Laufeyson, what do you think you're doing?" he asked softly, his tone stiff with disapproval.

His daughter shoved the helmet back and peered up at him. "Hi, Daddy! I'm 'tending to be a princess an' all my subjects hafta kneel when I walk by." She indicated her dolls, which she had knocked down as she marched. She gave him a crooked grin that would have melted a fire giant's heart.

Fortunately, Loki was a frost giant. "Well, Princess Aleta, you seem to have touched something that doesn't belong to you." He indicated his helmet, which was now hanging down her back, the horns touching the carpet.

"But Daddy—I was just borrowing it," she pouted.

He raised an eyebrow. "Did you ask me?"

"Umm . . . no . . ." she lowered her eyes to her gold fabric slippers, which were now digging a hole in his carpet.

He quickly pasted a disappointed Look on his face. He knew how to do that very well, having been the recipient of countless Looks himself as a child. Among other things. "What have I told you about touching my things, little miss?"

She bit her lip, her expressive gray eyes shimmering with tears. "But I needed it! You can't play princess of Asgard without it!"

He went down on one knee, saying gravely, "We've talked about this before, Aleta. Why don't I
want you touching my helmet?"

"Umm . . . cause it's . . . umm . . . pointy an' I could fall an' hurt myself," she recited.

He nodded. "And what else?"

"Umm . . . umm . . . I don't know . . ."

"Oh, I think you do, little scamp. How do you think I feel knowing you went and took my helmet?"

"Not very happy," she muttered to the carpet.

"Very good," he nodded. "Just like you'd feel if I did this—" he gestured and all of her stuffed animals and dolls flew into the air and then landed on the rug in a heap.

"Hey!" she squawked in protest. "You messed 'em all up!" She gave him a scowl then whined, "I don't like it when you touch my stuff, Daddy."

"And I don't like it when you touch my helmet," he reiterated. "Understand?"

"Uh huh," looking utterly woebegone, she came over to him, almost tripping over her towel cape, the helmet sliding forward to cover her eyes.

He bit his lip hard. "Well?" he forced himself to maintain that disappointed demeanor, though he really longed to laugh at the sight of his little imp in his too big helmet.

"M'sorry!" She went to take the helmet off, and he quickly grabbed it before she could scratch herself. "Am I in trouble?"

"You ought to be," he said, sending the helmet back to its stand. "I ought to call off that tea party —"

"Noo!" she wailed, tears splashing down her cheeks.

He held up a hand. "But I won't . . . as long as you promise me to never ever touch my things without asking again."

"I promise!" she threw herself at him.

He hugged her tightly. "You'll keep that promise, won't you, Aleta? Because a princess always keeps her word."

She nodded rapidly. "I'll 'member."

He kissed the top of her head. "All's forgiven." He set her down. "Now why don't you come and eat breakfast? I made French toast and bacon."

"Yummy!" she cheered. Then she glanced back at her dolls. "Now how am I gonna be the princess?" she asked in aggrieved tones.

"Maybe you could use this instead?" Loki snapped his fingers and a small replica of his helmet appeared, made of soft fabric, with a large pink jewel in the center and the words **Loki's Princess** embroidered on the sides. *I'm such a pushover! But I can't bear to see her unhappy.*

"For me?" she cried, as he placed it on her dark hair. "Thank you, Daddy! It's so beautiful!"
"Just like you," he said, and tweaked her nose. "C'mon, let's go eat. I'm starving."

"Me too!"

He bowed and gestured to the door. "After you, Princess Aleta."

She processed regally from the room, the tea towel dragging on the floor, her glittery wand held before her.

_Laufeyson, you are SO much trouble when she gets older! More trouble than you've ever been in your whole life!_

All that morning Loki was kept busy fixing the dining room for the tea party. He made sure the tablecloth was freshly ironed, the crystal and gold vase filled with fresh cut roses and each place set with mismatched china, which was how they held tea in Victorian times. He lined up all the treats Samantha and Aleta had baked on the buffet, adding others he had baked that morning also. Knowing Thor, they needed the extra, and enough so he could bring some back to share with the other Avengers. Loki made sure to keep two plates of various treats for the other kids as well, so they didn't feel left out.

Aleta kept running in and out, getting underfoot, and asking, "Is Uncle Thor here yet? Is he?"

Loki rubbed his forehead. "How many times have you asked me that now? Five hundred?"

"Okay, it feels like five hundred," he amended. "Why don't you keep watch out the window and tell me when you see him coming up the sidewalk?"

"Oo-kay!" she yelled, her voice echoing off the high ceilings.

Loki winced. By the time she grew up he was either going to be deaf or addicted to Prozac. Probably both.

He went to get one last tray of macaroons out of the oven when he heard Aleta yodel, "Daddy! Uncle Thor's he—ee—re!"

"I hear you, spark," he called back as the doorbell rang. "And so does half of Manhattan."

Anyone who thought little girls were quiet and biddable had never met Aleta, he thought wryly. She could give a firecracker noise lessons.

"Uncle Thor! Uncle Thor!" chorused his two children as Thor opened the door and lifted both kids in his arms for a bear hug.

Loki smiled, listening to the merriment while he transferred cookies to a tray.

"Are you ready for my tea party, Uncle Thor?" Aleta asked.

"Indeed, Princess Aleta. Is that a new crown on your head?"

"Uh huh! Daddy gave it to me!" she declared proudly.

"Yeah, after she took his helmet without asking," Max reminded.

"Tattletale!" Aleta snapped.
"Enough, scamps. Let's not quarrel, I hear enough of that from your uncles at the mansion," Thor interrupted. "Max, show me where I can put my helm."

"Over here. On the hat rack next to the protective runes," Max declared.

Loki froze with a cookie half on the tray. Protective runes? What runes? 

Moments later he heard Thor's voice boom. "Loki! You'd better come out here!"

"What happened now?" the Master of Mischief sighed. He walked into the den.

"Daddy, Max drewed all over the wall!" Aleta announced with all the relish of a judge condemning a murderer.

Loki's eyes went wide as he took in one wall, the one nearest the door, whose soft beige and evergreen stripes were now covered with elementary Norse runes in colorful magic marker. "Maximus, what the—" he quickly bit off the swear word he was about to utter.

"Loki, you allow your children to deface their home?" Thor queried. "Father would never have allowed—"

"Thor, please don't tell me what our father would have done," Loki said swiftly.

"But when you did the same to the feast hall—"

"Thor!" Loki growled. "I don't need you reminding me, I know. But I'm not Father, now let me handle this."

"Ooo you're in trouble!" Aleta hissed.

"Shut up!" Max sniffled.

"Daddy, Max told me to shut up!"

"Aleta, hush!" her father ordered. "It's my turn to talk." He looked at his son. "Max, care to explain this?"

His small son, who ironically looked the most like him, said quietly, "Dad, I wasn't drawing on the wall—"

"Loki, he's lying," Thor interrupted.

Loki shot him a sizzling glance. "Thor, you shush too! Maximus, what do you mean? Aren't those drawings?"

"No. They're runes of protection. I drew them so no villains could come into the house and kidnap us. See—there's algiz and kaunaz and eiaz ... " Max recited, pointing out the runes for protection, magic, and fire and then the name rune—Laufeyson combined with the rune for inheritance or family—othila.

The runes were crudely drawn but they were recognizable, and especially for a mere four year old, were quite an achievement. "I see. So you were trying to protect us? You didn't think my wards were enough?"

Max shook his head. "Aleta said she Saw Bad People trying to find us ... so I just ... wanted to help." He looked crestfallen.
"You should have asked me first," Loki reprimanded gently.

"I forgot. Are you mad?" his son sniffled.

"No . . . just surprised. Next time ask first."

"Okay. Can we go and have the tea party now? I'm hungry," Max said wistfully.

"Go and sit down at the table," Loki waved him off. "You too, princess."

They scampered off and Thor just gaped at his brother. "That's it? You're not going to punish the boy?"

"No, Thor. He didn't do anything worthy of being punished. He was trying to protect his family. His execution wasn't the best but his heart was in the right place. Besides, it's just magic marker—it'll wash off."

"Father would have—"

"By the Nine, Thor, don't tell me what Father would have done," Loki growled, his emerald eyes flashing with pain and anger. "You forget, brother, I still bear marks from that incident! For doing the same thing as my son."

Thor gaped at him. "I never . . . why didn't you say something . . .?"

"What good would it have done? You would have agreed with him!" Loki hissed. "You and him—both two peas in a pod. Both ever ready to ascribe nasty motives to me and never ask me why I did something to begin with." He shook his head. "I'm done with this conversation."

"Loki—"

"End of discussion," he cut off the Thunder God with an icy glance. "This is my house and my son and I'll decide who gets punished around here. I learned to pick my battles, Thor, and this is not worth getting mad over. Go and sit down, you're here for a party not to bring up the past. I'll get the tea."

As Loki returned to the kitchen to retrieve the small pots of different tea, Thor looked after him sadly. I wasn't going to agree with him, Loki. I was going to apologize for misunderstanding. Then he went to sit down, luckily Loki had a special chair sized for his large frame and not one of those skimpy ones like the fancy teashops in Manhattan. One of those would have broken to kindling beneath him.

Loki returned with the tea, a smile gracing his lips, their disagreement forgotten, and the tea party proceeded without a hitch. There were three kinds of tea—Yorkshire Gold, Oolong Citrus, and White Dragon Peach. There was honey, sugar lumps, lemon and milk to put in it.

They all laughed when Max put six sugars in his cup and Loki twitted, "Want some tea with your sugar?"

They all ate the finger foods—besides chocolate chip muffins, cookies, Reeses brownies, fudge macaroons, blueberry and cinnamon scones, lemon curd, and lingonberry jam with sweet cream cheese, Loki had also made water cress and cheese sandwiches, cucumber with chives and mayo, ham salad on pumpernickel, and pimento cheese on wheat.

Thor stared at the little sandwiches. "Loki, these are hardly a mouthful each! Do mortals eat like
birds at these parties?"

"No, but . . . well . . . it's like a snack before dinner. Go ahead, I made enough."

Thor ate two trays of all the sandwiches, and most of the baked goods on all the trays.

"See?" Max nudged Aleta. "Toldja nobody can out eat Uncle Thor."

"Daddy ate the rest," she argued. The children had each picked their favorite treats and sandwiches before the adults and drank two cups of tea each.

"Let me just bring these dishes into the kitchen," Loki said slyly. "Aleta, why don't you show your uncle the new shirt you made with your Bedazzler?" he encouraged.

"Okay! Lemme get it!" she jumped off the chair to run into her room. "I maked a shirt like I maked Daddy's cape!"

"Ah . . . your daddy's cape . . . it was . . . very glittery," Thor said tactfully.

"Yeah. It was too sparkly," agreed Max. "Hey, you wanna see what I made in art class? Dad took us to this place where they taught us to make pottery and stuff outta clay and I made a bottle."

"I would like that very much, Max."

"Be right back!" his nephew said, and then he too took off.

Thor watched in amusement. These children move like . . . what's the expression Tony uses? Greased lightning.

Soon Max was back, eagerly showing his uncle his little potion bottle, which had green, gold, and red stripes on it. "Look!"

Thor took the tiny bottle carefully and examined it. "This is marvelous, Max," he said honestly. The little boy beamed, reminding the Thunder god of his brother as a child, the resemblance was striking. If I didn't know better I would think this boy truly is Loki's son. But he knew none of the children were related by blood to his brother. Not that it mattered. Loki was forever saying that love created ties deeper than blood.

Aleta returned with the shirt and began to discuss makeovers with Thor.

Loki nearly died laughing carrying the dishes into the kitchen. By the Nine, spark! Give your uncle a makeover!

"Aleta . . . I don't think this make over is something a warrior would do," Thor began.

"Uh huh. Sam says the old British warriors wore makeup. And they braided their hair," Aleta informed him.

"Yeah and the Vikings did too," Max put in.

"Uh . . . err . . . well . . ." Thor coughed.

"Oh, come on, Thor. You're not afraid to have your hair braided, are you?" Loki teased.

"Afraid? I am not!" Thor blustered. "It's just . . . it might be unmanly."

"Dad let Aleta braid his hair," Max told him.
"Yeah but . . . he's a magician . . ."

"So? You saying I'm not a man?"

"Sometimes you aren't."

"What's that got to do with the price of tea in China?" Loki snapped. "Never mind, Aleta. Your uncle is scared a few braids are gonna wreck his hero image."

"Loki! I did not!" Thor objected. "Fine. You may give me two braids, little niece."

"To start," Loki whispered gleefully. He handed Aleta a comb and some beaded leather ties.

While his daughter began to comb out Thor's blonde hair, Loki returned to gathering up the dishes.

It was then that Max accidentally knocked over his potion bottle . . . which contained a few drops of a powerful sleeping elixir. He had poured a little in from what remained in the cauldron when Belle had helped brew some sleeping potion as part of her magic lesson earlier that week, unknown to either mage.

The clear potion dripped onto the remainder of Thor's scone, soaking quickly into the pastry.

"Uh, Uncle Thor—" Max began, but Thor didn't hear him as he was busy talking to Aleta.

The boy watched in alarm as his uncle promptly picked up the scone and gulped it down.

Aleta had just finished one braid when Thor suddenly tilted his head forward and fell asleep on his hand. "Huh? Max, he fell asleep!"

"I know . . . umm . . . it's kinda my fault . . .I spilled some of my magic potion in his scone . . ."

Aleta shrugged. "Maybe that's okay. Daddy always says he wants a nap in the middle of the day, so . . ."

"I hope he doesn't get mad," Max said worriedly.

"It was an accident. You don't get in trouble for that," Aleta pointed out. "Now help me do his hair."

"Do what? More braids?"

"And the hair dye. Look, we have all these colors . . ." she displayed her kit of rainbow washable hair dye.

"Neat! I'll do this side," Max said, and took the green bottle.

Soon the slumbering Thunder God sported braids in every color of the rainbow.

"Pretty!" Aleta clapped her hands. "Now we gotta do his nails. What color should we paint 'em?"

Max looked thoughtful. "Red and blue. He wears those colors all the time."

"Okay. Here's the blue paint." She handed her brother some blue sparkly polish and the two children carefully painted each nail.
"Now we need to decorate his cape n' armor." Aleta picked up the Bedazzler.

"Kay. I'll do the armor," Max announced. "You do his cape."

He took some more hair dye and began to draw some more runes on Thor's armor—in dayglo orange, blue, and green. Then he added some stickers that he found inside the case—of purple ponies and pink butterflies.

Aleta carefully drew a heart on Thor's red cape in dazzling diamond studs. She put an arrow through it and then added a flower and wrote Luv Ya! When she was done the cape sparkled like a thousand stars. Pleased, she went and got Thor's winged helmet and used the Bedazzler to outline the wings in gold studs.

"Hey, we forgot Mjolnir," Max reminded her.

"Ooops!" she cried, and went and wove some sparkly pink and purple ribbons around the handle, with beads. Then she added some stickers—puffy pink hearts and unicorns.

"Is he done?" Max asked uncertainly.

Aleta studied her uncle. "Yup! He's ready!" she gave her brother a high five.

"Kids, what are you—Yggdrasil's Roots!" Loki gasped upon seeing the makeover his intrepid artists had given the mighty Avenger.

He clapped a hand over his mouth, trying to smother the giggles emerging from between his lips.

"Daddy, Uncle Thor fell asleep so I gave him a makeover. Isn't he pretty?"

"Uh huh . . . he's . . . he's . . . brilliant . . ." gasped the God of Mischief.

He quickly snapped several pictures with his phone of the comatose Avenger with his rainbow cornrowed hair, his blindingly picturesque armor, the heart cape, the glittery helmet and best of all Mjolnir covered with pink and purple ribbons and puffy pink hearts and unicorns.

He quickly typed Thor Meets the Rainbow Connection and sent it off to Tony's email.

Then he lost it and doubled over laughing hysterically.

Aleta stared at him. "Daddy? Why are you laughing?"

"Your uncle . . . he . . . it's . . ." he abruptly dissolved into giggles again.

Max grinned. "Grown-ups!" Then they both started laughing too, because hearing their father's mellifluous laughter was infectious.

Loki swore he had never laughed so much in all his millennia of existence. He laughed until tears ran down his cheeks, he laughed so much he worried he might lose control of his bladder. But every time he thought he was under control, he had only to glance at his brother—the Mighty Glittery God of Thunder—and he started howling with laughter all over again.

Then he realized something. "Uh . . . Aleta . . . why is Uncle Thor asleep?"

"Cause he ate a sleepy scone Max made him."

"A what?"
"I didn't mean it!" Max cried, then told his father about the spilled potion.

"Oh, is that all? That will wear off in about . . . ten minutes. Let's get him a mirror so he can see how lovely he looks," Loki smirked and fetched a large full length floor mirror which he set in front of the Thunder God.

Thor began to stir and Aleta yelled, "It's time to rise and shine and say hello to Mr. Sun!"

Thor nearly jumped out of his boots. "Wha-!"

"That's my wake up song. Daddy sings it when my sisters and brothers won't wake up for school," his small niece told him. "It always works."

"Loki, that's horrible," Thor grumbled. "Are the braids finished?"

"Take a look," Loki urged.

"Loki, why are you smirking?" Thor asked suspiciously.

"Uncle Thor, I wanna know how you like my makeover," Aleta began sweetly.

Loki suddenly had a coughing fit. "'Scuse me . . . I need a drink." He ran into the kitchen.

Thor sighed and glanced at his reflection in the mirror.

The next sound heard on the block was screaming.

"LOKI!"
The Contest

Chapter Summary

Belle has to write a poem for a contest at school and is hesitant but with Loki's encouragement writes a good one until a bully at school attacks her.

3

The Contest

Whoever invented Legos was a medieval torturer in disguise. Just ask any parent~ Loki

The familiar tones of the theme from Asgardian Quest interrupted Loki's reverie. He fished his phone out of his back pocket, where the number from Derek Magnusson flashed onscreen. He wondered what his company CEO wanted at six AM on a Sunday. Magnusson was in charge of Laufeyson Tech, Loki's video game design company. He had first started it three years ago, after adopting Belle, Hunter, and Nathan, as both a means to support himself and his family and an alter identity here on Midgard, because your average mortal could never handle the truth of his existence as an Asgardian god. His first video game, Asgardian Quest, which was one of the pioneers to use a VR helmet that not only enabled you to interact in the game as if you were there but also to speak with other gamers as you encountered them, was such a huge hit that it became an international sensation practically overnight and had made him a billionaire. So he need never worry about money here on Midgard, which was a good thing considering he had nine children to support.

"Laufeyson," he answered on the second ringtone.

"Mr. Laufeyson, sorry to disturb you on a Sunday, sir-"

"What is it, Derek?" Loki interrupted him.

"There's been a slight delay in the launch of Asgardian Quest 2."

"Delay? What do you mean?" The sequel to the megahit was due to be released in three months, just in time for summer vacation.

"We're having a bit of difficulty with the interface, sir. . ."

As Derek went on to detail the problem, Loki rose and went into the kitchen to brew another cup of coffee, clad only in his favorite pair of black jeans and a gold T-shirt, silent as a stalking cat in his bare feet.

He was so engrossed in his discussion, phone in one hand and coffee mug in the other, that he failed to notice the scattered Legos lying on the carpet next to the coffee table. Last night Nathan and Max had been building a space shuttle and hadn't finished it before their bedtime. By some phenomenon known only to the gods of the Lego universe, part of the space shuttle had become detached during the night and ended up on the floor, where the distracted Asgardian promptly stepped on them.
CRUNCH!

Pain shot up his foot like he'd just impaled himself upon a thousand shards of glass. He gave a most ungodly yelp and nearly spilled his coffee all over. The phone dropped onto the rug as he slammed the mug on the table and grabbed his injured foot, which still had the offending Legos stuck to it.

"Sweet mother of a masturbating donkey!" he snarled, spitting out colorful phrases in Old Norse, because he'd learned the hard way not to use swear words around his three and four year old they could repeat. Bloody buggering hellfire! Cradling his foot he sat down on the couch to remove the head of the smiling astronaut from his toe. "What are you smiling at you son of a diseased Jotun's ass? Surtur's hairy balls, that hurt!"

On the floor Derek was calling anxiously, "Mr. Laufeyson? Sir, did something happen?"

"No because I always hold phone conversations on the floor, you numbskull," Loki muttered. He reached for the phone. "Derek? Yes, I just stepped on a Lego. I'm fine. Just run the new algorithm I told you by the tech department and let Rossiter do his job. I'll call you later."

He placed the phone on the table, wincing as he removed more plastic from his foot, muttering several more uncomplimentary things about the inventor of Legos ancestry as he did so.

"Dad? Why are you wishing blood worms gnawed your enemy's penis off and roasted it over a slow fire built from his mother's entrails?" Belle queried innocently from the doorway.

Loki's head snapped up to meet the young Lorekeeper's curious gaze. "Forget you heard that." He rubbed his foot gently to alleviate the sting. Of course Belle would know exactly what he'd been saying. "I stepped on some Legos."

"Are you okay?" she asked sympathetically.

"Yes," he lied. "I'm banning Legos from this house."

Belle shook her head and snapped her fingers. A wet washcloth with an enchanted rose on it appeared in her hand. "Here. This'll make you feel better. It's soaked in arnica wash." She knelt beside the couch and gently wrapped the cool washcloth about his throbbing foot.

"Thanks, Dr. Belle," he said gratefully, as the arnica soothed the pain away. He scowled at the partially completed space ship. "I swear the idiot who invented these torture devices in disguise is laughing somewhere. They're just as deadly as medieval caltrops."

Belle giggled. "You're exaggerating, Dad. You're not bleeding."

"I could be bleeding internally," he refuted. "That's what bruising is and I'm sure I am after four of the cursed things broke when I stepped on them. Just wait till I get a hold of your brothers..."

"The arnica will help," she replied serenely, knowing as soon as he was free from pain his temper would die down. "That's why I wear slippers." She indicated her fuzzy cat ones peeping out from her rose embroidered nightgown.

"I was talking on the phone and I forgot," he sighed.

"To Uncle Thor?"

"No. He's still mad at me for sending Uncle Tony those makeover pictures," her father said with a smirk.
"He'll get over it. Even he has to admit it was hilarious," Belle chuckled.

"Priceless. And seriously, he's going senile if he thinks I wouldn't snap a few pictures of that after Tony did of me during the Cape Incident."

"What's Uncle Tony gonna do with them? Post them to Instagram?"

"Not if he wants to keep breathing."

"Dad!" she reproved.

"Hey, I have enough embarrassing stuff on social media about me I don't need Smiley Loki too! And your Uncle Thor would be even less forgiving. You know how these ancient warrior types are, little Lorekeeper."

"I know. Norns forbid his dignity is a little ruined," she rolled her eyes.

"Mine is already shot, but those pictures would just add more fuel to the fire," her father pointed out.

"I don't think so. I think your fangirls would love it."

"What fangirls? I don't have any-"

"You mean you really don't know?"

"About what? I'm not the most popular god in the Norse pantheon, sweetie, even though my kids love me. I'm the Master of Tricks and Mischief. Hardly my father's favorite son," he said, looking dejectedly down at his wrapped foot. "Mortals all think I'm out to get them. I'm the villain, not the hero."

"Not anymore," she disagreed. "Let me show you." She summoned her tablet and began to type rapidly. "Here. Look at this. And this. And this."

He scanned several articles and pages, his eyes growing wider and wider. "Loki's Ladies-we are Loki's Army?!"

"See? You have an army of women who all love you," Belle declared, grinning at his astonishment.

"I don't . . . How . . .?"

"Stories change, people change . . . you changed," his daughter answered quietly. "People don't think like they used to-that the magician is some coward and people who live by their wits weak and worthless. They rewrote the meaning of a hero, Dad. Remember how you told me that how people see you can change when you change how you see yourself? Well . . . you changed how you saw yourself . . . you're not just the troublemaking god anymore . . . you're our dad." Her slender hand closed over his. "Love binds deeper than blood. Any story can be altered, if you make different choices. When you chose to love us, you changed the ending."

"Did your magic tell you this?"

"No. My heart did."

He smiled back at her, his evergreen eyes filled with new hope. "Are you sure you're ten? When did you get so wise?"
"When you adopted me and taught me to love myself just the way I was—and that I wasn't a too smart magical freak nobody ever wanted." She rested her head on his knee, her dark hair falling over his lap.

His hand reached out and carded her hair, combing the thick silky strands with his fingers. "My wise little raven. I found a treasure beyond price that day my magic led me to you. Did you know all the best kings in the Nine Realms had a Lorekeeper as an advisor? To remember all the stories and sagas, the laws and judgments, and to help them be a better ruler?"

"Like Merlin and King Arthur."

"Yes. Like that."

"I can help you too, Dad."

"You already have, alskling. More than you know," he whispered. He kissed her forehead.

"So who were you talking to?"

"Derek," he replied. "They were having some issues with the new Asgardian Quest 2."

"But they can fix it, right?"

"Yes. I told them how. Don't worry, it'll be out by the launch date."

"Did you put a Valkyrie and a Runemistress option in this one?"

"I did. And a Jotun witch doctor too. You'll see when we get the prototype." Loki promised.

Belle squealed happily. "I can't wait to test it out!"

"That won't be for a few more weeks yet." He shifted slightly and removed the towel over his foot. The throbbing and redness was gone. "I feel much better now. Want to help me make breakfast today?"

"Okay. Let's have cheese and chive omelets and maple sausage with hashbrowns." Belle sat up, then sprang to her feet.

"Sounds good to me," Loki said, standing up and testing his foot gingerly.

"Don't forget your slippers."

"I won't," he assured her, summoning them from the bedroom and putting them on.

*I'm going to have to invent a spell that makes me impervious to Legos,* he thought as he followed Belle into the kitchen.

As Belle got out the eggs, sausage and other ingredients, she told her father, "There's a poetry contest that Miss Linden is asking the whole class to enter. But it's not just fifth grade but sixth too. And the best poem wins a trip to the Met and dinner at Jekyll and Hyde."

"Who's putting up the money for those prizes?" Loki whistled.

Belle shrugged. "Some of the school board. I don't know." She bit her lip. "I'd like to win it but . . . I don't know if I'm a good enough poet. I mean, I write in my journal because that's what a Lorekeeper does, but that's not the same." Lorekeepers were compelled to keep a chronicle of
events in their life and the lives of those close to them. Loki had known this and gave Belle a beautiful green Italian leather journal engraved with her initials and runes for privacy. It had a silver raven clasp.

Loki turned from pulling the frying pan out of the cabinet and wrapped his arms about his mystical child. "Belle, my *astor*, you can write anything you set your mind to. Your Gift is with words, and what's a poem but words on a page? I'm sure once you try, you'll write something wonderful."

"Are you just saying that?"

"No. Remember-you can do anything if you believe. That's as true now as it was the first time I told you."

She still looked uncertain.

"Trust in yourself."

"I trust you," she murmured.

"Then trust me when I tell you you can write a poem as good as any kid in the whole school," he told her earnestly, his voice filled with unshakable conviction.

"Okay," she said, then ask, "When I finish it, would you read it over for any mistakes?"

"Of course. When is this contest?"

"It's not till two weeks from now. But the deadline to hand in our poems is next Thursday."

"You have plenty of time then."

She sighed and leaned against his chest. "But I don't even know what to write about."

"That's easy, little raven. You write what you know best."

She looked thoughtful as she drew away to begin scrambling the eggs in a large bowl.

Loki grated cheese and then set the hashbrows in the pan to cook. Father and daughter cooked companionably, and for a few moments it was like it had been in the beginning, just the Master of Mischief and his Lorekeeper daughter.

Until the rest of the brood woke up and stampeded into the kitchen.

"Hey, what's for breakfast?" Vince shrilled.

"Yeah, I'm starving. Can we have pancakes?" Hunter asked.

"You're always starving," Belle said as she flipped an omelet.

"What's this? You forget how to say good morning?" their father queried as he turned the sausages sizzling in the pan.

"Good morning, Dad!" came the chorus of voices, as Samantha, Nathan, Lucy, Serena, Max and Aleta joined them.

"That's better. Lucy, it's your turn to set the table, I think," Loki prompted.

"I wanna help!" Aleta cried.
"You can get the napkins, spark," Samantha said, and she handed some to the small girl.

Nathan went to get the orange juice and chocolate milk and tea.

Once everyone was eating, Loki sat down at his place at the head of the table and said, "Nathan and Max, you two left your Legos out this morning and I almost broke my ankle when I stepped on them."

"Uh oh, you is in big trouble," Aleta cried.

"Sorry," the boys apologized.

"Don't do it again. Or else no Legos are allowed in this house. If you can't pick up your toys then you don't deserve to have them."

"We'll remember, right, Max?" Nathan said.

Max nodded. "I toldja we shoulda moved it into the dining room, Nate."

"We can do it after breakfast," his brother said affably. Nathan was among the most easy going of the Laufeyson children. He was also the only ginger haired child among the rest of the dark and blond haired siblings.

While the children cleaned up after breakfast, Loki called Derek back to see if the algorithm had worked and spent an hour discussing the new game and ironing out glitches.

Meanwhile, Belle retreated to her favorite sanctuary, the library, where she attempted to write her poem.

Half-an-hour later she was surrounded by crumpled up balls of paper and was no closer to writing a line of poetry then she had been this morning.

Frustrated, she muttered a few colorful phrases in Old Norse, then said in English, "I can't do this. I told Dad I couldn't." She stared down at her notebook, feeling like a failure.

"Can't do what?" Serena called as she entered the library, her platinum hair streaked with violet today. She wore a purple skirt and a lavender top, the color combination making her look like an evening star fallen from the heavens. "What are you writing, Belle?"

"I'm trying to write a poem. But I can't seem to get started."

"For the poetry contest?" Serena asked knowingly.

"Yes, but . . . it's not like writing in my journal. There I just record what went on. But this . . ."

Serena gave her a sympathetic look. "I suck at writing. I wish I could help though. Maybe Dad could . . ."

"He already tried. I don't know why he thinks I can do this."

"I do. It's cause you're the best writer in this family."

"Yeah right. I'm a joke," Belle laughed bitterly.

"No you aren't. I'm lucky I can write my name with my dyslexia," Serena reminded. "The only thing I'm good at is math." She studied her sister. "What did Dad say you should do?"
"Believe in myself. And write what I know. But what I know is . . . us. Our family."

"So write about us," Serena said simply.

"Who would want to read a poem about our family?"

"Me. And you know how I hate reading."

"Okay . . . thanks, number cruncher."

"Anytime, bookworm." She waved as she left the room, her sudoku book tucked under her arm.

Belle nibbled on the end of her pencil as she considered what to write. On the desk in front of her was a picture cube of Loki and her siblings. The picture had been taken last Christmas. They were all happy, but Belle could recall a time when that hadn't always been so. A time before Loki had come for them. Back when they were the misfits and outcasts no one wanted in their family.

Suddenly inspired, she began to write rapidly in neat cursive across the page, the words flowing from her brain into her pen and then onto the paper. She wrote feverishly for twenty minutes until her hand ached and she had to stop to shake it out.

She read over what she had written, then added one last line.

"There! I think I'm done."

She picked up her notebook and went to show Loki.

She found him relaxing with a book on the couch. He was reading Centennial by James Michener, resting his tablet on his bent knees. She went and laid her notebook on the table beside him. "I'm finished. Read it whenever you want."

He looked up and set the tablet aside. "I can read it now."

"You don't have to," she said nervously, her hands twisting her blue shirt. "And you can tell me if it's horrible. It's only a rough draft."

"I'm sure your version of horrible and mine are totally different." He reached for her notebook.

Just then the doorbell rang.

"I'll get it," Belle said, and went to open the door. "Hi, Uncle Thor!" she greeted her uncle. "Are you here for Sunday dinner?"

"Hello, bright raven," he smiled at her, speaking in Old Norse, since he knew she enjoyed practicing languages. "Yes, I am. I brought some ham and carrots for the potluck."

"I'll put them in the kitchen," she told him in the same tongue, taking the bag from him. Potluck was the name of the soup they always made for Sunday dinner. It was made with whatever vegetables, meat, and pasta or rice they happened to have in the house. Loki started the pot of chicken broth boiling and then they just added whatever they felt like to it. Thor usually brought something for it, this time it was a ham bone with large chunks of meat and several carrots, which Belle scrubbed and chopped, throwing everything into the pot. The soup already contained celery, spinach, tomatoes, and onions.

Thor was soon mobbed by the rest of Loki's children, until he ended up in a playful wrestling match with all the children on top of him. Except for Nate who waited until the others had the
massive god pinned before tickling his nose with a feather.

"Help, Loki!" Thor called.

Loki glanced up from reading Belle's poem. "Sorry. Busy."

"Loki! I'm being attacked by an army of ants," Thor cried, pretending to be overwhelmed.

"An ant has no quarrel with a boot, brother," Loki replied, then turned back to the notebook.

"Gotcha!" Aleta shrieked and jumped up and down on her uncle enthusiastically.

"And one of them jumps like a flea," he grunted.

"Aleta Fleata!" Vince teased.

"I'm not a flea! I'm a princess!" Aleta cried, indicating her helmet.

"Loki! Is a book more important than rescuing me?"

"Yes. This one is," he said with a sly grin.

"Do you surrender?" Max cried, bouncing on Thor's knees.

Thor pretended to make a valiant effort to rise, with children dangling all over him like monkeys from a banyan tree.

A pair of green eyes peered over the top of the notebook.

Nate went and tickled the back of Thor's knees with his feather.

"Ahh! A sneak attack!" the Thunder god cried. Then he sank to his knees.

The children cheered.

"Oh how the mighty have fallen!" Loki teased.

"You could have helped," Thor growled, scowling at Loki.

"Why?" the God of Mischief asked playfully. "It was more fun to watch my kids beat you up."

Thor heaved an aggrieved sigh. "All right scamps. You won. Now let me up."

The kids crawled off him, congratulating each other.

Thor rose and peered at his brother. "You're as much in love with ink and paper as the bright raven. What are you reading?"

"Belle's poem," he answered, his velvet voice rough with emotion. There was a curious sheen in the emerald eyes as he finished the poem.

"She gave you some verse to read?"

"No she wrote it," Loki corrected. "Here. Read this."

Thor took the notebook, and read the following poem.

**The Orphan's Lament**
Once there were nine orphans
Unwanted and alone,
No one to love them, no place to call home.
We were the children the world threw away,
the misfit, the cripple,
A magical freak, delinquent,
ghost sensor, trans gender, drug czar's daughter,
dyslexic, prostitute baby, Seer of futures too scary to know
spit on and cast out wherever we go.
we are the lost, starveling raggedy strays,
forgotten children who pray
for a home and a family that aren't taken away.
No birthdays, no holidays, no one to share
in joys and sorrows, nobody to care
for hearts that were broken in unending despair.
Until one day came someone who'd been there,
who was the misfit, always misunderstood,
his family always thinking he was up to no good.
He offered us sanctuary, what nobody ever had,
acceptance, love, family, a dad.
Our pasts were erased, we could all start anew,
with a name and a home, and love that was true.
We are no longer the forgotten mistakes
lost and unwanted, rejected by fate
now we have family who will always stay,
ever hurt us or beat us, or send us away.
We may be an imperfect mischievous lot,
but we are Loki's beloved children, Laufeysons all,
forever and always, through trials great and small.
This is our story, a tale yet untold.

-Belle Laufeyson, age 10

Thor finished the poem, then dashed a hand across his eyes. "It's dusty in here, Loki. Don't you clean?"

His brother snorted. "Maybe I need to hire someone." He knew as well as Thor there was not a speck of dust anywhere.

"Belle wrote this? Did you assist her?"

"No. She wrote it herself and asked me to read it. It gets you, doesn't it?"

Thor nodded. "Like a fist squeezing my heart. She's a powerful skald, Loki."

"I know. She wrote it for a contest for school."

"She should win. Not just because she's my niece, but because this is worthy of the great skalds of the North."

"Damn straight," Loki agreed. "Any poem that can make you and me cry is amazing."

"Do you mean that, Dad?" Belle cried from the kitchen doorway.

"I do. And your uncle agrees with me."

"Verily, bright raven, your words strike like a hammer into the chest of any warrior," Thor told her.

Belle beamed. "Wow! I can't believe you like it that much. Do you think . . . it could win?"

"If it doesn't your teacher is a blind deaf idiot," Thor stated.

"I happen to agree. And not just because you're my daughter," Loki concurred. "It really is an excellent poem."

"I'll go type it up right now and print out a copy for the contest," she said, her smile lighting her whole face. She took the notebook and clutched it to her chest as if it were a rare magical tome.

The next day Belle walked to her classroom, her precious poem clutched in her hands. Her friend Sadie Marcus walked next to her. "So you finished your poem?" Sadie asked. "I haven't even started mine."

"My dad and Serena helped me figure out what to write."

"You're lucky. My dad's always too busy to bother helping me with my homework. And my brother's too little to even read." Sadie sighed.

"Maybe I can help you at recess?" Belle suggested.

Suddenly a large shadow fell over the two girls as a tall boy wearing designer jeans and an expensive varsity letter jacket stepped into their path, blocking their way. "Aww! Isn't that sweet! The two teachers pets are gonna help each other!"

Belle halted, her stomach plummeting to her knees. "Why do you care, Richter?"
"I don't," the blonde boy snorted. "Except it makes you even more of a reject than you already are. Then again, your name's Laufeyson, so it goes without saying you're a freak. Your whole family are the poster kids for rejects that nobody except your geek dad would dream of adopting."

"Go jump off the GW Bridge, Richter!" Sadie snapped. "Nobody cares what you think but you."

"Ooo, Laffy's geek friend thinks she can tell me what to do," hooted Richter. "Newsflash, geek girls-I run this school. When I say jump, you say how high. When I walk into the room, you kneel and kiss my foot."

"In your dreams, you puffed up pathetic loser!" Belle cried angrily. "Now move, we need to get to class."

She managed to keep her voice from shaking but only just. Richter was the nastiest boy in Riverside School, everyone knew it and was afraid of him, because he never managed to get caught doing anything wrong and he was a rich arrogant boy who played on the school football team, whose father was a Wall Street tycoon on the school board. He was good looking, but looks had never impressed Belle, and she would sooner have dated the Midgard Serpent.

"We need to get to class," Richter mocked in a falsetto. "Too bad, so sad. Your perfect attendance is gonna have a big fat late mark next to your name, Laffy Taffy. You and Geek Girl Supreme are gonna get detention unless you do what I say."

"Slavery ended a hundred and fifty years ago, Simon Legree!" Belle snapped. She smirked when Richter looked puzzled. Of course the blonde oaf had never read Uncle Tom's Cabin. "The only thing I have to do is pay taxes and die. And I'm not doing either today."

Sadie was trembling. "Belle . . . don't get him mad, please."

"Yeah, Laffy, do what the geek says," sneered Richter. "If you wanna go to class, you gotta pay up."

Belle rolled her eyes. "What do you want, Don Corleone? My lunch money? Doesn't your daddy feed you?"

Sadie nudged her. "Belle, please! Just give him whatever he wants. If I'm late again, Miss Linden will give me detention."

"See Laffy. Geek Girl is right." Richter eyed her nastily. "Geek can give me the answers to our math homework. And you can give me this!" he cried, and snatched her poem from her grasp.

"No!" Belle shouted. "Give it back, you brain-dead son of diseased Jotun!" In her anger she forgot to speak English instead spitting insults in Old Norse. She didn't dare use her magic in public, she was too afraid of someone seeing and being taken away to a crazy home, plus she didn't know any spells to take down a boy who was two inches taller and outweighed her by twenty pounds.

"What the hell kinda language is that?" Richter sneered. "You forget how to speak English?"

"Shut up and give it back!" Belle yelled desperately.

"Ooh, it's a poem for the contest . . . think I'll just keep this . . . or maybe I'll just rip it into pieces." He went to tear it, and Belle saw red.

"May ravens peck out your eyeballs, you coward and rats eat your entrails!" Then she kicked the bully hard-right in the crotch.
To her shock, Richter folded up like a wet paper, dropping the poem on the ground and howling in agony.

"Whoa!" Sadie gasped. "Who knew your foot could be so lethal?"

Belle moved to grab her poem. "Come on, before we're late."

They had just made it inside the classroom and Belle put the poem on Miss Linden's desk with the other submissions when the door opened and Mr. Anson, the hall monitor came in.

"You-Laufeyson-come with me!" he ordered. "You're going to see Principal Lightfoot for fighting without provocation."

Belle gulped. "But I didn't . . . Richter was the one who was bullying me and Sadie. . . ."

"Tell it to the principal, Laufeyson," snapped Mr. Anson. He ushered Belle from the classroom, muttering, "Always knew these orphan street brats were no good!"

Belle felt her face go hot with shame and anger. Would her past always be held against her?
Loki's Justice

Chapter Summary

Loki comes to school to fight for Belle when the principal tries to railroad her. Then Hunter gets into a situation when members from his old gang show up.

4

Loki's Justice

The best way to deal with a bully is to never back down and to hit them where they're vulnerable—Loki

Belle huddled into the chair in Principal Lightfoot's office. She had only seen the man in passing during the day, for she was not normally in trouble at school. Now, however, she felt the tall man's disapproval clear across the room. He was a tall dark haired man in his late thirties, with a neat mustache and a tweed suit that looked like it had come from Brooks Brothers.

"Well, Miss Laufeyson, it seems you're following in the footsteps of your former delinquent brother, getting into a fight and inflicting significant bodily harm upon Richter Voss," he said shortly.

Belle flushed at the insinuation that she was a troublemaker when nothing could be further from the truth. "Sir, that's not really what happened. I was minding my own business with my friend Sadie when Richter blocked us from going to English class. He called me and Sadie rejects and said some nasty things about my family so I—"

"—so you decided to attack him and get even?" interjected Lightfoot.

"No! That wasn't why I kicked him—"

"Mr. Voss said that you shouted some foreign curse words at him before you kicked him. He suspects they were some kind of ethnic slur. Would you care to explain that, Miss Laufeyson? We take a dim view of any kind of racial insult here."

"I called him a coward in Norwegian," Belle answered. "I also asked him to give back my poem which he stole from me."

"Where did you learn Norwegian?"

"From me, Mr. Lightfoot," Loki announced as he walked into the office. He was dressed in a black Armani suit with an emerald green shirt and a gold tie, wearing Gucci loafers, his hair neatly combed back. He looked every inch the successful businessman that he was. "That's my native tongue, I'm a naturalized citizen of the United States."

"Dad!" Belle said, the word containing equal parts of relief and shame.

Loki came and put a hand on her shoulder comfortingly. "I've taught all my children about their heritage, but Belle is the only one who has mastered the language. She's a born linguist and can
speak many languages fluently. Now . . . does that sound like a child who would insult another's
ethnicity?"

"Mr. Voss thought—"

"Where is Richter Voss, Mr. Lightfoot? Why isn't he here? Shouldn't you have both parties
together so you can render a fair judgment?" Loki queried silkily, his eyes hardening to emerald
shards.

"Mr. Voss is down at the nurse's office, Mr. Laufeyson, recovering from a debilitating and
embarrassing blow your daughter dealt him when they met in the hallway," began the principal
stiffly.

Loki raised an eyebrow mockingly. "A debilitating wound? What did you do, Belle, stab him with
a pencil?"

"No. I kicked him in the crotch," she muttered, looking at her hands. She couldn't even look her
father in the eye. There was a lump as big as a mountain in her throat.

Loki coughed. "Ah. While that can hurt quite a bit, I doubt my daughter possesses enough
strength to debilitate a boy who is twice her size."

"The boy's lying on a cot for the past ten minutes moaning," Lightfoot objected. "I've called his
father to come and pick him up."

"Really? Why not put some ice on it? I've heard from Belle he's a football player, surely he's
gotten hurt worse than this before," Loki said disdainfully. "If it were me, I'd be ashamed to admit
a girl beat me up and wouldn't be acting like I was dying."

"That's not the point!" Lightfoot said stiffly.

"Isn't it? You have him accusing her of attacking him, yet from what I heard before I came in here,
you wouldn't even let Belle tell her side of the story. And she wasn't the only one involved. Her
friend Sadie Marcus was there too. Why isn't she down here so you can ask her what happened?"
Loki queried sharply.

"Well, I—" sputtered the principal.

"How can you make a good judgment when you don't have all the facts?" the Asgardian
demanded coldly. "Or do you just want to place the blame on my daughter? Perhaps because she's
adopted and didn't come from a decent background like Mr. Voss?" Loki's eyes narrowed to slits.
"Where I come from, judging someone on where they came from is called prejudice. Yet you dare
to insinuate my daughter is racist? And the cause of this entire fight?"

"Mr. Laufeyson, you misunderstand—"

"I misunderstand?" Loki drawled dangerously. "You're supposed to treat all these students fairly,
yet from what I see you accuse my daughter based on one boy's word and don't bother to let her
explain or to call her friend in to see what she says about the incident. And you claim to be fair?
Lightfoot, I've seen fairer carnival barkers."

"Now see here, Mr. Laufeyson!" began the principal indignantly.

"See what? You treating my child like some second class citizen without bothering to listen to all
the facts?" Loki sneered. "Oh, I forgot, Voss's daddy is on the school board isn't he? He pays your
salary. And he makes big bucks on Wall Street. That means a lot to you, doesn't it? It means you
"I-I never said—"

"You didn't need to. The proof is in the fact that Belle is here and Voss isn't. And neither is Miss Marcus." In a voice that was like silk over steel, so sharp it could draw blood, the Master of Mischief growled, "You think Richter's father can ruin you, Lightfoot? Well, think again. I can do ten times the damage to you as he could. All I need to do is go to the press with my story of how you have wrongfully persecuted a little orphan girl who before today had no record of any kind of disciplinary action and was being accused of harming a boy twice her size with a mere kick in the crotch." Eyes glinting, he continued, "Not only that, but I can go to any attorney in the city and bring a suit against you and this school for extreme prejudice. You think Voss's daddy can play hardball, Lightfoot? I assure you, I can destroy your career in a heartbeat." Loki hissed menacingly. "And I will . . . unless you stop harassing my daughter and let her talk! Understand?"

His temper was simmering like a cauldron about to bubble over. *You pathetic, petty, poor excuse for a mortal! If I were the god I used to be ten years ago, I'd turn you into an ant and step on you. But you're not worth me ruining my shoes or my redemption.*

The air in the room suddenly seemed to drop by about fifteen degrees. Lightfoot found his teeth chattering. "Now, Mr. Laufeyson, let's not be hasty—" he gulped, thinking that the other's green eyes were colder than arctic ice and just as deadly.

Loki's lips twisted into a cold smile. "All right. Why don't you call Miss Marcus down here? That way she can tell what she witnessed also."

Lightfoot told his secretary to page Sadie and soon the other girl, who was small, a little chubby, with glasses and frizzy hair, came into the office. She gave Belle a thumbs up when she spotted her, then turned and greeted Loki. "Hello, Mr. Laufeyson."

"Hello, Sadie," Loki said with a charming smile.

"Sit down, Miss Marcus. I want you to listen to what Miss Laufeyson has to say and then see if you agree with her." He nodded at Belle.

Belle began, telling everything that happened in the hallway. "When Richter grabbed my poem I . . . I got so mad I yelled at him in Norwegian. It's like a second language to me—my dad and uncle both speak it at home sometimes."

Loki noticed the slight hesitation in her speech and thought that Belle had probably been yelling insults in Old Norse, not that he could blame her.

"Then he told Sadie—he called her Geek Girl—he was going to make her give him the answers to our math homework and he went to rip my poem to shreds. I worked all yesterday on that poem for the contest and he only wanted to destroy it because he could. So I-I lost my temper and I kicked him. My brother taught me that to protect myself from guys who were trying to hurt me. Well, Richter was doing that."

"He told you to what?" Loki spat, fury edging his tone. *That wretched brat! How dare he? He's the one who ought to be on his knees—begging Belle's pardon for being a bully!* He whirled on Lightfoot. "Still think my daughter was at fault? What sort of boy demands a girl kneel and kiss his feet? I'll tell you what sort—a bragging little bully! If he'd said that to me, I'd have said he just dug his own grave."
Lightfoot began to sweat. "Miss Marcus, is what Belle said true?"

"Every word," Sadie said stoutly. "Richter has always picked on anybody smaller and weaker than he is. We were just his latest victims. I was gonna give in, because I was afraid of what he might do, but Belle—Belle showed him that the bookworm is mightier than the quarterback." Sadie said admiringly.

"That'll do, Miss Marcus. You're dismissed," the principal waved her off.

Sadie rose and said goodbye to Loki, mouthing to Belle "Call me later".

Belle gave her a brief wave, her stomach in knots.

"Well . . . I suppose that Mr. Voss was mistaken," began Lightfoot.

"That's not the word I'd use," Loki put in. "I'd say he outright lied about the whole incident, except for the part where Belle kicked him. Belle didn't attack him without provocation, instead she was the one being assaulted and provoked. So what does the school do in a case like this, Lightfoot?"

"Err . . . well, the guilty party is suspended for a week and since the school has a zero tolerance policy, the suspension would also extend to the other student involved only they'd only get three days of in-school suspension."

"You're serious? You'd punish my daughter for defending herself?" Loki was incredulous. "What kind of justice is that?"

"I'm sorry but it's school policy," Lightfoot sputtered in alarm. There was something about the businessman that sent chills down his spine. Laufeyson wasn't physically intimidating—Lightfoot was taller than he was—and yet the man had this presence that made the principal tremble. He didn't like it and couldn't understand why. The man was a computer geek that designed video games for a living!

Loki rolled his eyes. "I think it's time the policy was changed. And only the guilty party is punished." He patted Belle on the shoulder. "Maybe I need to run for a seat on the school board. And fix what's broken."

Lightfoot looked about to have a seizure in horror. "I'm sure you wouldn't have time . . . a successful businessman like yourself . . ."

Loki bared his teeth in a toothy grin. "Oh, I could make time." He bit back a laugh when he saw how much Lightfoot was terrified of the idea that Loki would get elected to the school board. "Very well. I suppose she can serve this sentence just this once. But I want your word that Mr. Voss will be suspended outside of school for a week for bullying and issued a warning that if anything like this happens again, he'll be expelled. Because I believe that is school policy, is it not?"

Lightfoot nodded reluctantly. "It is."

"Thought so. Also I want the little beast to give my daughter a public apology for his nasty behavior. Your word?"

"I promise I'll speak with the Vosses and make it clear that Richter can't bully anyone," Lightfoot agreed.

"Good," Loki purred, his green eyes like a sleepy cat's. "Oh . . . one more thing. I know you don't
like me, Lightfoot. That's okay though. You wouldn't be the first. However, don't think you can harass my children because of it. Try and I'll bury you. You'll be lucky to work as a janitor in a gas station."

Lightfoot shuddered. "I . . . I wouldn't . . ."

Loki smiled cheerfully. "Glad to hear it." Looking at his daughter, whom he could tell was quite upset by the incident, he made a split second decision. "I believe I'm going to take Belle home, Mr. Lightfoot. She's already missed half the morning and she's too upset to concentrate properly. She'll be back tomorrow to serve her sentence."

Lightfoot just nodded, rather like a marionette on a string.

Loki gently ushered Belle to her feet. "Come on, little raven." As he led his daughter from the room, he called, "Goodbye, Mr. Lightfoot." He turned to his daughter. "Go and get your things, honey. I'll meet you by the entrance."

Belle hurried back to her locker to retrieve her backpack, lunch, and books, just as Loki glided past the secretaries' desks in the front office. He was feeling quite pleased with how he had put the petty principal in his place and he added a little unconscious swagger to his step that made the two women present start salivating uncontrollably.

One nudged the other one and said in a whisper that was as loud as a shout to the god's supernatural ears, "Oh my Gawd, Becky . . . will you look at his butt!"

"I am! Be still my heart!"

Loki turned his head, and staring straight at the two mortals, gave them a wink and a teasing grin. Then he continued on his way. He had no intention of getting involved in a relationship here on Midgard, he was far too busy, but a little harmless flirting was not to be missed. Besides, he had the feeling that he had just made those women trapped in that office serving that idiot the happiest they had been in their lives and it felt amazing for once to be an object of affection rather than disgust. *Eat your heart out, Thor!*

Belle met him at the entrance, her backpack slung over one shoulder, and together they crossed the parking lot and walked down the sidewalk. "I teleported here in a hurry when I got the school's phone call, so we can either walk back home and stop for lunch on the way or I can 'port us back and cook something at home. I owe you ice cream, you know."

Belle gaped at him and stopped walking. "Ice cream?" she stammered. "After I got in trouble? Dad, I'm sorry I embarrassed you and made you quit work to come here," she began miserably, looking at her boots.

"Hey! Belle, you have *nothing* to be sorry for," he refuted, cupping her chin in one hand. "Don't cry, dearheart, or I'll have to go back and take that miserable excuse for an educator apart and I'm not really in the mood to have drool on my shoes and blood's so hard to get out of an Armani."

His teasing made her stop leaking tears, as he had intended. "You mean you're not mad at me?"

"Mad at you? Whatever for?"

"For getting in trouble and having to come here when you should be working on *Asgardian Quest 2* and having to find a babysitter for Max and Aleta—"

"Whoa!" he held up a hand. "First, you're not in trouble—not with me anyway. Second, I fixed the problems Derek had with the game so I wasn't busy when the school called, and third the imp
were bouncing off the walls today and your Uncle Thor was more than happy to take them to the park." He placed both hands gently on her shoulders and said softly, "Do you really think I would be angry or punish you for standing up for yourself, Belle? By the Nine, little raven, it was all I could do back there to keep from saying you should have made sure not to get caught and kicked him hard enough to never sire children!"

"But . . . but now Mr. Lightfoot thinks I'm a delinquent," she murmured softly.

"No, he doesn't. He knows he was wrong and right now he's praying I don't carry through with my threat to publicize this and cost him his job. Either that or praying I don't run for election to the school board. He's too busy worrying about saving his hide to even consider harming your reputation, sweetie, trust me on that. As for that little worm Richter he's lucky I didn't go and turn him into one for hurting you."

"Dad! You don't do stuff like that anymore, remember?"

"I know," he sighed. "But if anybody ever deserved to crawl on his belly, that little wretch does. Him and that piece of dung in the office who thinks it's all right to allow bullies to walk all over other people because they have rich fathers. You know how much I hate people like that, Belle? Overprivileged rich little snots who think they have the right to make anyone smaller than them kiss their backside and be grateful for it? I dealt with that kind of bully all the years I was growing up in Asgard," Loki said darkly. Though he refrained from mentioning that at one time one of those bullies had been his own brother, who had fallen under the influence of a crowd of noble sons who thought it great fun to torment the adopted skinny shapeshifter that lived in Odin's house out of charity.

"You did? But—but you were Odin's son," Belle whispered, shocked.

"Adopted son, sweetheart. It makes a difference, or at least it did then to those arrogant class conscious cowards. I was blood of their enemy, and they never let me forget it." He put an arm about her shoulders. "I know all the myths paint me as the one who sowed fights between the Aesir, but they're leaving out the real reason why I did so—which was to finally get back at those who made my life hell when I was younger. But no one wanted to know the truth and have the golden reputation of half the ruling class in Valhalla tarnished by learning their precious warrior sons were nothing but a pack of vicious bullies who tormented me on a daily basis until I learned magic enough to fight back. No, it was far easier to blame Loki as the reason behind all the strife. Yes, I enjoyed pranks and mischief but I never would have taken it to the lengths I did if someone had stood up for me back then."

"But didn't Uncle Thor help you?"

"Your uncle was crown prince of Asgard, and he had his own friends," Loki answered evasively. "And I had too much pride to hide in his shadow."

"But didn't your dad or mom see?"

He shook his head. "They were rulers, Belle, they were too busy doing that to pay much attention to the fosterling who had a reputation for tricks." He shook his head, sending the gloomy thoughts back to sleep. "But that's not important now. What matters is that you defended yourself and I will never be angry with you or punish you for that. It's a poor world we live in when you get in trouble for making a bully sit up and beg." He hugged her. "I'm proud of you, Belle. You showed everyone what a coward Voss was, including that idiot who calls himself a principal. I wish I could have been there to see that little toad get what was coming to him."

Belle found his words warmed her to the core, chasing away the lingering ghosts of fear, anxiety,
and disappointment. "I got so mad I was screaming that ravens should peck out his eyes and rats eat his entrails in Old Norse before I kicked him," she admitted.

"That's all? I would have wished his crotch infested by a thousand fleas and his arms broken so he couldn’t scratch them," the Master of Mischief grinned.

Belle made a face. "Eew! That's so gross!"

"And I suppose animals eating his guts and eyeballs isn't?"

"Yeah, but . . . yours sounds worse," she admitted.

"So, where would you like to go for lunch?" he asked again. "You pick, and afterwards we can meet your uncle and the little scamps for ice cream."

Belle looked thoughtful. "I know! Let's go to Chinatown to Lo's Kitchen," she said, naming a small family run Chinese and Asian restaurant they all loved to eat at. "I can get the double roast pork lo mein and you can have your curry pineapple fried rice."

"And the spring rolls and Crab Rangoon," Loki added, licking his lips. "We can do take out too so I don't have to cook tonight. Would you like to walk there or do you want me to 'port us?"

"Let's walk. We haven't been down to Chinatown since Christmas."

So that was what they did. It took them about fifteen minutes to do so and then ten more to get to the restaurant because Belle was browsing the myriad street vendors they saw. Loki stopped by a store called Mystical Candles and made a quick purchase while Belle was down a few stores looking at some Mandarin comic books.

He quickly placed a Notice Me Not charm over the bag and caught up with his daughter just as she paid for her comic and thanked the proprietor in flawless Mandarin. The wizened old man bowed and replied, "Honor to serve the beautiful daughter of esteemed Master Laufeyson." Then he caught sight of Loki and gave him an even deeper bow.

The Chinese community respected him because he had first approached them when seeking test subjects for his video game, as well as patronizing their establishments with his family, and he could speak to them, as Belle could, in their own tongue. He bowed back and offered a traditional Mandarin blessing before saying to Belle, "Shall we go eat now? I'm starving."

"Me too. The spring rolls are calling."

After a delicious lunch, and making arrangements to have their take out order delivered to the house at dinnertime, Loki 'ported them both to Central Park under the guise of an invisibility charm. They met up with Thor, Max, and Aleta, and while Belle played with her small brother and sister, Loki filled Thor in on what had gone on.

Thor was just as incensed as Loki had been, and declared maybe Lightfoot's office could use a hammer-shaped wall decoration.

"While I'd dearly love to see that, it's better no one connects us to the Norse gods," Loki laughed. "Besides, I think I got through to that thickheaded oaf."

"What about the boy?"

"Officially, he'll be suspended and on probation and have to give her a public apology. Unofficially though . . ." Loki's eyes glinted dangerously. "He's going to be the recipient of
nightmares so horrible he'll wet himself. Every night of that time. Because no one bullies my
daughter and gets off with a slap on the wrist."

He might be the reformed God of Mischief but he meant to ensure that Belle or any other child
never had anything to fear from Richter Voss ever again.

Thor nodded. "That's good justice, Loki."

"Glad you think so. Now let's get the kids and go have some ice cream."

Max fell asleep in Thor's arms before they got home, and Loki carried a sleepy yet cranky Aleta
into her room, murmuring, "Shhh, little spark. It's naptime." He pulled over the old rocking chair
and cuddling his baby girl began to sing softly in Norse the song he recalled his mother singing to
him as a baby. "Sleep, little one sleep, may moonbeams dance in your dreams, the sheep are in the
fell, the cows upon the heath, dream, my little one, dream, of cats that purr and toys that whirl and
sunny days to play in. The dark is nigh, by and by, you've naught to fear for I am here, sleep, my
little one, sleep."

His rich mellifluous voice filled the room, weaving a spell of perfect contentment that soon
soothed the toddler into slumber in a matter of minutes.

Belle nudged her uncle who had paused in the doorway of Aleta's room to listen, his eyes at half-
mast. "Uncle Thor! Psst!" she hissed. "You almost fell asleep standing up."

Thor blinked, then woke. "I . . . That song . . . it's what my mother used to sing to me long ago . . .
" He rubbed his eyes. "Loki's voice . . . it's as powerful as his silver tongue . . ." He blushed red in
embarrassment.

Belle giggled softly. "Dad should be on stage with his voice. But he only sings for us. He's sung
that lullaby to Max and Aleta forever and sometimes when we're sick to help us sleep."

Loki tucked his youngest into bed and then slipped out the door like a shadow.

"Need a nap, brother?" he queried slyly, his mouth quirking in amusement.

"Shut up, Loki!" Thor grumbled. "How do you remember that song after so much time? I can
only remember the tune."

"I was always smarter than you," his brother grinned. Then he added at Thor's glare, "If you
needed to sing little kids to sleep every night, you'd remember."

"Umm . . . well, I'd best be going back to the mansion . . ." the Thunder God muttered, trying
valiantly to suppress a yawn.

"Thor, you fly while you're half-asleep and you might take out the Empire State Building. Go take
a nap on the couch. I don't want to be responsible for destruction of an historic landmark."

"I'm fine!" his brother yawned.

"Uh huh," Loki chuckled. "Let me get you some coffee while you sit here," he urged the sleepy
Avenger to the couch with its forest green plush cushions.

"I think my two imps tired you out," he remarked.

"Don't be . . . ridiculous!" Thor snorted. "Two little children tire out the Mighty Thunder G—
zzzzz!" In mid-sentence, the blonde god simply passed out, asleep between one breath and the
"You were saying, brother?" Loki laughed.

"Max and Aleta could tire out an army of Green Berets," Belle smiled, and then she draped a fuzzy green throw with the words Got Mischief? on it over her comatose uncle.

"While they're all asleep, why don't we light some candles?" suggested Loki. There were several candles of various scents and kinds throughout the living room, kitchen, bathrooms, and bedrooms. "Let's see how well you remember our candle-lighting spell, apprentice."

Belle flexed her hands, smiling, for that spell had been among the first he had taught her—it was an elementary fire spark spell that most apprentices learned. Concentrating, she brought forth ten small glowing points of blue magical fire, then she blew on the sparks and sent them throughout the house to light all the candles.

"Very good," he praised. Then he snapped his fingers and said, "But looks like you forgot one."

"I did?" she blinked, puzzled.

"This one." He handed her a round candle in a pretty glass jar with a silver cover featuring a miniature jade dragon on top. Along the side of the jar was written Mystical Treasures Surprise in English and in Chinese characters.

"Dad! You bought this at Mystical Treasures!"

"While you were buying comic books," his eyes twinkled. "I figured after the day you had you could use a little surprise or two."

"You took me to lunch," she began. "And let me skip school."

"You wouldn't have been able to concentrate with your anxiety. And I was hungry too so that doesn't count." He held out the candle, which was green colored and smelled like peppermint and limes.

"Thanks!" she inhaled the aroma after removing the cover. "I wonder what's inside?"

"Guess you'll need to burn it and find out."

Belle lit the candle with her magic and placed it in the center of the kitchen table, where it gave off a tantalizing aroma.

"Mmmm!"

"My thoughts exactly. Why don't we have some peppermint tea?"

So they did, and sipped companionably, watching the candle burn and the flame dance, then reading together at the table until a few hours later when Thor woke up, feeling refreshed and returned to the Avengers mansion.

Belle went to examine the candle and saw to her delight that a small corner of a foil packet was visible. "Oh! I see it!"

"Another half an hour and you can fish it out of there," her father remarked.

"Really? How can you tell?"
"God of Fire, little raven," he answered. "I always know how fire will burn."

About thirty minutes later, Belle summoned the small foil packet to her. Inside was a beautiful jade pendant with a raven and quill upon it and the mystical runes for protection, magic, and knowledge. It was on a heat resistant green cord. "It's perfect! Did you ask for it?"

He shook his head. "No. I asked Master Chen to pick out something for you and looks like he picked well." He took the pendant for a moment, whispered something, and his hand glowed briefly with magic. "There!"

"What did you do?"

"A protection charm along with one that will allow me to know where you are and how you are. So if you ever need me I'll be there."

She slipped the pendant about her neck. This alone had been worth the trials of the morning.

Two weeks later:

It was taco night at the Laufeyson house. Which meant a buffet of hard and soft tacos, seasoned chicken, marinated steak, cheddar jack cheese, lettuce, tomatoes, guacamole, salsa, black bean salad, Spanish Rice and flan for dessert. Everyone took what they wanted, and ate either at the table or in the living room on pillows on the floor.

*Fifty First Dates* was on the TV and most of the kids were sitting on the couch watching it with their father, except for Aleta, Max, and Lucy who were playing Candy Land in the kitchen.

Hunter went into the kitchen to get another steak taco, and as he was munching it a text came in on his cell phone. Loki only allowed him and Samantha to carry phones, as they were the oldest and were often out doing extra curricular activities for school. Hunter played soccer and baseball, Samantha was on the debate team, History Club, Latin Club, and also played soccer.

Hunter peered at his phone and saw it was a text from his buddy Jake, asking if he wanted to play HALO over his house. Hunter texted back, agreeing but having to ask his dad. Loki said yes, but to be back by nine. Hunter quickly put some more tacos, salad, and flan into a bag to eat while they were playing.

Lucy looked up from moving her piece around the board and said, "What are you doing, feeding the neighborhood?"

"Mind your beeswax, squirt. It's Jake, he never has enough food in the house." Hunter said. He grabbed some bottles of Sprite Zero also then he raced out the back door and down the street till he came to Jake's apartment complex.

Jake's sister Maya answered the door at his knock. "Hey, Hunter," the eleven year old greeted. "What's in there?"

"Just some tacos and salad," Hunter said offhandedly.

"Ooh, can I have one? Your dad makes the best ones."

"Yeah, just don't eat them all. He handed her the bag. "Where's Jake?"

"Out back talking to some kids," she replied. "He said to tell you to meet him over there."

Hunter left Maya happily making a steak and chicken taco and went out back where there was a
Then he froze as he saw his friend cowering against a dumpster, surrounded by four older boys sporting leather jackets with studs and a familiar snarling wolf logo, their arms bearing tattoos of Norse designs with a wolf's head in the center. "Hunter, they made me . . ." Jake whimpered, bleeding from a cut on his lip. "I went to take the trash out and they were there waiting . . ."

"Let him go, Lang!" Hunter growled. "You have no quarrel with him."

"No, but I do have one with you, Huo," their leader, a large boy with three piercings in his ear wearing black jeans and boots, his dark hair in a top knot growled back.

"That's not my name anymore, Lang," Hunter said warily. "I'm Laufeyson now. And no longer your Beta."

"I don't care what name you give yourself, you swore a blood oath when you joined. Once a member of Fenris, always a member."

"Look, let him go and we'll talk," Hunter began, wishing he had thought to slip his pocket knife in his boot.

"He's insurance," Lang sneered, and there was a glint of metal as he flicked open his switchblade from his pocket and held it to Jake's throat. "Come with us, brother. We need to talk. Don't and this little pansy gets it."

"Lang, just let him go. I'll come with you, I promise. Word of honor," Hunter said desperately.

Lang's eyes narrowed to slits like a snake's. "Okay. Get!" he cried and released Jake. "Go inside, pansy, and if you breathe one word of this to anybody we'll come back and cut out your tongue."

Jake bolted for the apartment, while the rest of Fenris surrounded Hunter and escorted him down the street, melting into the shadows.
Night of the Wolf

Chapter Summary

Hunter must try and balance Fenris’ demands with that of his family without letting anyone—especially Loki—know

5

Night of the Wolf

*When your past comes back to haunt you, kick it in the teeth and tell it don't come around here no more—Loki*

Hunter found he was sweating beneath his jacket as he followed Lang, Snagi, Mort, and Crusher back to their old hideout at the abandoned warehouse six blocks away on 35th Street. The building still looked the same, he thought inanely, with its boarded up windows, peeling paint, and graffiti on the walls. The sidewalk in front of the warehouse was cracked with weeds growing out of it, and there was orange wire fencing in front of it as an attempt to warn people away and keep out the bums and addicts. Not that it worked, since Fenris made their headquarters here.

The boys, who ranged in age from twelve to fifteen, slipped through a back alley then climbed over the fence and through the door to the receiving room, which they had picked the lock to long ago, but left the rusty padlock dangling for show. Inside the warehouse was lit with several camping lanterns and floor lamps stolen from various furniture outlets. There were packing crates shoved together as a table, bare mattresses and pillows scattered on the floor along with surplus Army blankets. In a corner was a rickety table which a black cloth was draped. Upon it was a votive candle, a dish filled with scraps of food and above it presided a stone snarling wolf’s head mounted on a circle of Norse runes. This was the gang's altar and totem—Fenris the Hel-Wolf, Eater of Gods.

The air was stale and smelled of mildew, grease, and old urine. Hunter felt his stomach churn at the smell, he had forgotten after three years of being in a real home off the streets the scent of poverty and uncleanness. He fought to keep down his dinner, glancing about with wary eyes. Not much had changed since he used to run with the Pack. Yet Hunter himself was changed beyond all recognition from the street thief who used to pick pockets and break and enter for a living. When Loki had offered to adopt him, Hunter had taken the chance to reinvent himself and never regretted it.

But it would seem no matter how hard he tried, his past would never stay buried. It always showed up like a bad stomach virus to plague him.

Still, he wouldn’t let his old “friends” intimidate him. He wasn’t the same boy he used to be, who had nothing and no one except being part of Fenris, he reminded himself. He spun and looked Lang, whose name in Chinese meant "wolf", though Hunter was sure that wasn't his real name, but a street handle, right in the eye and said, "So, what was so important that you had to talk to me, Lang? I told you before . . . I'm no longer your Pack."

Lang glared at him. "That's where you're wrong. You might have left but I didn't give permission
for it. And I'm still the Leader of this Pack, little Fire Hunter." He shoved Hunter hard in the shoulder.

Hunter stiffened. "You may be Leader, Lang, but I'm not your Beta," he snapped. His hands came up automatically into fists. "You want to fight, then come on! Let's do it . . . and we'll see who really Leads this Pack."

"You think you can take me?"

"I don't think, I know," Hunter retorted. In the three years since he had been adopted he had spent time studying fighting techniques with his Avenger uncles, and he knew a lot more than he had when he had last run with Fenris. "Now what do you want, Lang? I don't have all night."

"Aww, does the wittle baby have a curfew?" sneered Snagi.

"Yeah will your daddy whip your ass if you come home late?" mocked Crusher.

Hunter's jaw clenched. "My father is nothing like yours," he snarled. Loki had never raised a hand to any of them that Hunter knew of. Which was unheard of back in the place he used to come from, where all the members of the Pack often sported bruises and cuts from their dad, stepdad, or mom's boyfriend's fists.

"Cool it, wolves," ordered Lang in a cold tone, and the others cringed and backed off. He had not gained his reputation as a vicious fighter by being nice. He turned to the altar and bowed, saying reverently, "Thank you, Lord Fenris, for allowing this Hunt to be a success . . . and bringing back our lone wolf into the Pack. Fenris rules!"

The declaration was echoed by the other members. Hunter had to bite his lip to keep from automatically repeating the familiar phrase.

Lang turned back to Hunter. "Lord Fenris made it possible to bring you back here for a reason, Beta. He still owns your loyalty."

"You're wrong. I'm a Laufeyson, that's my family now."

"Are they? Like hell! Your rich geek dad would dump you like a hot potato if he knew the truth about what you are, Hunter Huo!"

"He knows. I told him," Hunter said flatly. That was true . . . although there were a few things Hunter had been too ashamed to mention. "He said the past was done. So don't think you can scare me by threatening to go to my dad with some fake story."

Lang crossed his arms over his chest, his dark eyes colder than hoarfrost. "I think you're lying. But even if you're not, it doesn't matter. You saw a chance to get in good with a mark and you took it."

"What? No!" the other objected.

Lang laughed humorlessly. "You were always good at infiltration, Hunter, admit it. At first I had my doubts, but then I realized something. You're perfectly placed to get the money we need to pay off Peculiar Pete for the last run we did for him."

"Lang, I told you before, that dog is bad news not get involved with his smack runs," Hunter pointed out.

"And I told you, I make the decisions for this Pack, not you, Beta!" Lang spat.
"Fine! But don't expect me to save your ass," Hunter growled.

Lang's finger stabbed him in the chest. "You owe me, Huo! If not for me, you'd have been in the pen years ago after that job went south in the mall. I took you in and hid you and made you one of us. Now I'm calling in my marker."

Hunter shook his head. While he knew the older boy did speak the truth, he also knew he couldn't go down that dark road again. Yet it seemed that shadows followed him wherever he went. "I paid a long time ago, Lang."

"Not enough. But hey, if you won't do it for loyalty, I have another reason. If you don't help us I'll find that pansy friend of yours and cut him a few holes. Or those little kids you say are your new family."

Fear coiled in his gut. "Stay away from my family and my friend, Lang! I'll kill you if you hurt them!"

"You don't have the guts, puppy! All you're good at is lying, running, and hiding. And if you know what's good for you, you'll listen to what I have to say."

"Then quit jabbering and talk!" Hunter hissed. In his pocket, his phone vibrated. He had a feeling his father was calling him but didn't dare reveal he had a phone. Lang or Snagi would surely steal it.

"Here's what I want you to do. I need $250 before Monday to pay Pete for this latest run. I know your geek dad is loaded. Bring the money and put it in this box on the corner."

"Two hundred and fifty dollars?" Hunter repeated. It might as well be a thousand.

"That's pocket change to your old man," sneered Mort.

Hunter refrained from saying that it was peanuts to the drug dealer too. "Why are you running smack anyway? Pete never asked you before."

"That was before he almost got caught in a sting that went down last week. He can't be seen with anything or going anywhere suspicious. So he hired us."

"Your funeral, man," Hunter snorted.

"Yours too. If we go down, so do you," Lang pointed out.

"How do you figure that?"

"Everyone knows what you used to be. So it wouldn't be any stretch for us to frame you easy. We'd all swear you were in on it if we're caught . . . and I'd make sure to point the finger at you, traitor."

"You miserable son of a—" Hunter lost it then and swore at the other boy in terms he was sure the other would understand.

"Not only that, but we'd be sure to put the squeeze on your little happy family too. Lots of accidents can happen when nobody's looking."

Hunter lunged at the other boy, his fists swinging.

But Lang dodged and whistled and suddenly Hunter felt his arms grabbed by Snagi, Mort,
Crusher and two other gangers he didn't recognize. He struggled futilely but in the end he was overwhelmed. "Go f%$# yourself!" he spat, before taking several punches to the stomach and ribs.

"You forget, traitor, what it means to disobey your Leader," Lang sneered.

Hunter nearly crumpled to the floor. "Coward!" he rasped. "Six on one!"

"Pack justice is swift and harsh," recited Lang. The others howled in glee.

"This isn't justice!" Hunter gasped.

"Isn't it? It's our justice—the justice you forgot in your cushy house in Greenwich Village. You can run but Fenris always finds you!" Lang declared triumphantly. "And if you won't serve willingly, Beta, we'll make you—by taking away everything you have. We'll see if your new daddy still wants you once he knows the truth about everything you've ever done . . . about the son that caused the death of Rasper." Lang moved to grab Hunter by the shirt and haul him upright, practically spitting in his face. "You thought we'd forgotten, didn't you? But Fenris never forgets! And you left Rasper to die that night while you ran away and hid!"

Hunter trembled. "No! It wasn't how it happened! The Skull Crushers stabbed him and I went to try and find help. What else could I do? They would have killed me too."

"Good! Better you die a wolf than live a traitor!" Lang barked and then punched him hard in the chest.

Hunter cried out but was helpless to do anything else.

Tears trickled down his cheeks.

"Let him go," Lang ordered abruptly.

The hands released him and Hunter went to his knees on the floor, gasping for breath, spots dancing before his eyes. His hands cradled his midsection.

Lang's boot appeared in his line of vision. "Now . . . unless you want us to go to the coppers and implicate you in Rasper's death . . . and your geek dad find out he's harbored a killer all this time, you'll do what we want. I bet your old man and all those fancy uncles you got won't want to be near you once they find out you've been lying to them all this time. Once a delinquent always a delinquent!"

Sickened, Hunter rolled over and sat up. His head hanging, he whispered, "No . . ." The words bitter as bile in his throat, he answered, "Okay. I'll do it. But after . . . we're done . . ."

Lang smirked evilly. "I'll be the judge of that. For now . . . bring me the dough. Monday night nine o'clock sharp. And don't think you can renege on the deal. Anyone comes with you . . . they die. So unless you want another body added to the count . . ."

Defeated, he shook his head. "You . . . have my word . . ." he hissed, each syllable seeping from him like blood from a wound deep inside.

He had been wrong. Sometimes the past couldn't be put aside. Much less forgiven.

He stumbled to his feet and the gang members fell about him to either side, escorting him back to where it had begun.
"Remember!" Lang whispered, his eyes glinting red in the moonlight.

Then Fenris was gone, back into the shadows from whence they had come. Shivering, Hunter found the half-full birdbath in Jake's yard and used a corner of his shirt to clean himself up so Loki wouldn't notice. Lang knew better than to leave marks that could be seen.

In his pocket his phone vibrated. He slipped it out, and saw two texts flashing.

**Hunter, come home now! It's 9:05. ~Dad**

He texted back, **Sorry, fell asleep on Jake's couch. BBS.**

Wrapping his arms about his chest, he walked slowly back home, hurting and scared. *This is all your fault. All your fault. You should have known you could never escape the shadows. They always call you home. Always.*

When he entered the house, he found Loki sitting on the couch, reading his tablet. "Sorry I'm late," he said quickly, not meeting the green-eyed gaze. He didn't dare. Though Loki had said otherwise, Hunter was never quite sure that he believed the Asgardian couldn't read minds.

"Why didn't you answer your phone?"

"Left it in the kitchen." He replied with a rather surly tone in his voice. "What's with the third degree, Dad? I'm home now."

Loki frowned. "Watch the attitude," he ordered softly. He would tolerate some sass from his little zoo, as Clint sometimes called the children, but outright disrespect was not permitted.

"M' tired," Hunter mumbled, hiding a yawn. "Can I go now?"

Loki sighed. "Go to bed, but tomorrow we're going to have a talk about remembering to let me know if you're going to be late or not."

"Whatever, Dad," he made himself say with a hint of impudence, wanting to get away from Loki as quickly as he could, before he succumbed to the temptation to throw himself into the Mischief Maker's arms.

"Go to bed," his father ordered. "Before your mouth gets you grounded."

Hunter bolted up the stairs, thinking woefully that his mouth and his past had earned him a lot worse than a grounding this time.

Once again he had become the delinquent, the thief who could not be trusted, and soon enough he would commit a crime that no one, not even the reformed God of Mischief, would forgive.

He fumbled his way into the bathroom, used cold washcloths and arnica on his bruises then threw the evidence in the bottom of his wastebasket. Tomorrow he'd get rid of it in the dumpster. His mouth twisted. No, he hadn't forgotten how to cover his tracks.

He pulled on his T-shirt and then closed the light and slid beneath the sheets, where he tossed and turned, his mind in turmoil, tears trickling down his cheeks. A part of him wanted very badly to run to his father and confess everything, but he knew that was never an option.

Loki thought he had changed. But there were some sins that could never be washed away, and with this next deed he would brand himself a traitor to the Laufeyson name forever.
The next morning

Avengers mansion:

Over a second cup of coffee, Loki detailed the upcoming release for *Asgardian Quest 2* to Tony, Thor, and Steve, as well as explaining how Belle's problem with Voss had been solved. He didn't mention how he had implemented his own brand of Asgardian justice to the boy, knowing that Stark and Rogers probably wouldn't approve, but he was surprised when Tony stated, "You know, Loki, if you really want to make sure Voss and his dad toe the mark let me put in a word or two to my stock holders about how Voss isn't as reliable as he seems."

"You'd do that?" Loki asked, astonished.

"Sure I would! That's my niece that little arrogant bum was tormenting. And I know Voss Sr.—he's an arrogant jerk so I'd have no problem whispering in my shareholders ears that they ought to blackball Voss. The jerk's needed a set down for a while now, and this is just the excuse I need to do it."

"That is quite bold of you, Man of Iron," Thor approved. "Has the contest been judged yet, Loki?"

"Yeah we want to see if Belle wins," Steve said.

"I think the final results will be in this Monday," Loki answered. "Belle made it to the semi-finales so she has a good chance."

"We're all rooting for her," Tony declared. He eyed the mischievous god with concern. "You look kind of . . . stressed, Loki. Everything okay with the rest of your zoo?"

The Master of Mischief sighed. "Yes, the other kids are fine. Except recently Hunter has been giving me an attitude. Not his usual sass, though. He's been pushing it and I can't figure out why."

"He's what—twelve? I remember going through a phase when I was that age," Tony chuckled. "Sassed my old man to death and earned myself a few whacks. I'm sure you've been there too, Mischief Maker."

"Several times," Loki admitted. "But . . . this is . . . I don't know. I can't put my finger on it but it doesn't seem like the normal rebellious phase. For one thing, he hasn't tried to insist on doing something I've forbidden, or argued with me about any specific thing. He's just snippy and short tempered."

"Perhaps I can talk to him, Loki," Thor suggested.

"You're welcome to, brother. Before he gets on my last nerve and ends up grounded for Easter vacation."

It pained him to admit that Thor might get through to his obstreperous son where he couldn't, but right now he knew that someone needed to.

"I'll come over and take Hunter to a ball game," Thor said. "Perhaps there we can talk."

"Good idea." Loki said. "Well, I'd best get to the office. Stark, let me know what happens when you put Operation Take Down Voss into action."

"I'll text you," Tony grinned.
Hunter had put the fifty dollars he had received for his birthday in an envelope to give to Lang. He had been saving to buy a new video game, but now that plan was shot. Yet he still needed two hundred dollars and wasn't sure how to get it. He wasn't skilled enough to hack into Loki's bank account, and he knew that picking the pocket of the god was out of the question. None of them could sneak up on Loki, it was a running debate between the siblings whether he really did have eyes in the back of his head.

As the deadline drew nearer, Hunter grew more and more anxious. And more inclined to rebellion. That Saturday, he deliberately left his earbuds off and began blasting his favorite rock radio station. The staccato beat and depressing lyrics of Nine Inch Nails suited his mood perfectly.

The thumping bass caused Max and Nate to cover their ears downstairs and Aleta howled, "Daddy! It's too loud! I can't hear Beauty and the Beast!"

"Turn it down, Hunter!" Sam yelled crossly. "I'm trying to study!"

Loki suppressed an annoyed curse. *Nine Hells, this is really too much!* He teleported upstairs to knock on the door of his eldest son's room, wincing as the music assaulted his tender ear drums.

"Hunter David Laufeyson! Lower the music!" he yelled.

But the music was so loud he didn't hear his father.

". . .Bow down before the one you serve,
You're going to get what you deserve . . ."

While the lyrics were catchy and Loki even found them amusing in a way, he wasn't about to put up with this kind of thing occurring on a regular basis. He opened the door and stuck his head in.

Hunter was sitting on his bed, playing with a baseball, tossing it up in the air and catching it. Loki frowned and snapped his fingers. Immediately the noise ceased.

"Hey! I was listening to that, Dad!"

"You need to put your earbuds in, son. I don't want to need hearing aides at my age," Loki said with a hint of disapproval.

"At your age?" Hunter stared at him. "Umm . . . you're like two thousand."

"Two thousand and seven, to be exact." Loki corrected. "Your point?"

Hunter shot him a truculent glance. "Why can't I just listen to what I want?"

Loki leaned against the doorjamb. "I have no problem with what you were listening to—it was how. The whole house doesn't want to hear your death metal music. So quit giving me a hard time and put your earbuds in."

"I . . . don't know where they are," he admitted sullenly.

"Maybe if you cleaned up in here, you'd find them," his father suggested. He gestured to the messy bed, the gaming console controllers strewn all over the floor, empty plastic cups and laundry overflowing. "I can barely see the floor."

"Aww! It's not *that* bad!"
"I beg to differ. You don't live in a hovel," Loki told him firmly.

The boy glanced away. "Dad, you're such a—"

"Don't finish that sentence, young man," Loki warned, his emerald eyes flashing. "Because if you do you'll be spending the rest of tomorrow night cleaning this demolition zone and not going to the baseball game with Uncle Thor."

"What baseball game?" Hunter asked.

"The one he's taking you to," Loki replied.

"Me and who else?"

"Just you two this time," his father said. "If you quit sassing me and do what I say."

Hunter seemed to wilt under the disapproving Look he was getting, and he hung his head and murmured, "'Kay. Sorry. Can I still listen to Head Like A Hole?"

"Is that what it's called?" Loki raised an eyebrow. "Sounded more like some kind of cult for some god to me. Put these in." He held out a pair of earbuds.

"Thanks, Dad!" Hunter managed a smile and took the earbuds and attached them to his clock stereo and then put them into his ears.

"And try to clean up some of this mess after school tomorrow. Before you get bugs."

"Okay," his son agreed, then turned the stereo back on.

Loki teleported back downstairs, thinking that he wasn't quite sure why Hunter had seemed to regress back to the angry boy he had first adopted three years ago. Was this what he had to look forward to with all his children? Norns help me!

The snatch of song he had heard replayed itself in his head, and the mischievous god smirked as the lyrics awoke an imp of a prankster inside him. But he would have to wait to put that little plan into action.

Back in his room, Hunter contemplated the good fortune that had finally come his way. Going to a Yankees game with Thor was one way he could pick up the rest of the money he needed, all he had to do was work the crowd at the game between intermissions and he would soon have the cash. Then he could tell Lang to bite him and put paid to that chapter of his life once and for all. And best of all, no one in his family would ever know how he had betrayed them, and the secret he carried would remain hidden.

Then he did something he hadn't done in years. He went to his knees on the carpet and prayed to Fenris Wolf, thanking him for showing him the way to serve both him and his new family.
The agreement turns deadly, can Loki and Thor find Hunter before it's too late? And has Hunter broken Loki's trust forever?

6

Trust Me

_Fear is the enemy of trust. But love is the enemy of fear._ ~Loki

"Let's go, kids," Loki called to the rest of his children. "We're meeting Uncle Steve and Tony at the school so we can watch Belle read her poem."

"Last one in the van is a dead rat!" Vince yelled and sprinted for the door.

"You're so gross!" Serena shouted and darted toward the door, reaching it before her brother and yanking it open.

"No fair! We can't run that fast!" Lucy groaned.

"But we can trip 'em!" Max yodeled, and slid in front of Vince.

"Hey! You little idiot, I almost fell!"

"I'm telling! Daddy, Vince called Max an idiot!" Aleta shrilled.

"Blabbermouth!" her brother snapped.

"All of you, knock it off!" Sam growled. "You're behaving like hooligans."

"What's a hooligan?" Aleta asked.

"Kids who behave like animals," Nate replied, and then gunned the controls on his electric wheelchair, beating them all to the van. He pushed a button on the side and the back door slid open and a chair lift lowered down so Nate could maneuver on to it and then it lifted into the van and Sam locked the wheelchair into place.

"Nice going, Racer," she gave her brother a high five.

Nate had become paralyzed in an auto accident when he was six, the same accident had killed his parents, and made him an orphan. Because of this, despite his cheerful nature and intelligence, no one wanted to adopt the handicapped boy. Until Loki, that is. The Asgardian thought it a waste to let the boy spend his childhood in an orphanage when Nathan was bright and clever, able to build complex toys and robotics. At first the orphanage director had been reluctant to allow Loki to adopt the child, but Loki soon convinced them otherwise by redesigning his home to support Nate's handicap with the aid of his Avenger family. Steve, Tony, Thor, Clint, and Bruce had helped build ramps, install bars and chair lifts, a shower, commode, and Tony had designed a special electric wheelchair that could practically fly and had a special console that enabled Nate to
play video games, a cooler for drinks and snacks and gel cushions. The chair also possessed a canopy that could be raised or lowered in case of rain, a built in fan for hot summer days, and a robotic arm so Nate could pick things up that were above his head.

Nate called his chair the Magic Bullet, and with it he could do nearly everything a normal child his age could do, including play certain sports and games.

Loki made sure Aleta and Max were buckled into their car seats before setting off for the school, which was about a mile and a half from the house. The van had a few things built into it, like armor plates, night scope rifles, and smoke grenades and anti-aircraft missiles, just in case a villain took it into their head to go after Loki or his family. Loki usually relied on his magic to safeguard his family, but as Steve pointed out, some extra firepower couldn't hurt. The van also had extra safety features as well as a built in TV/DVD and X-Box.

They parked in the school parking lot and then followed their dad inside. Loki carried Aleta and held Max's hand, knowing those two's tendency to run off and find something they shouldn't be touching. His older children followed in an orderly fashion, and they met up with Tony and Steve by the auditorium entrance.

"We saved you seats down in front," said Steve. Because of Nate they were allowed to use the front row.

"Thanks," Loki said, and went to sit down next to Nate.

No sooner had he done so, then Max pulled on the sleeve of his green and blue sweater. "Daddy, I gotta go potty."

"I'll take him," Steve said.

"Max, go with Uncle Steve."

Max slid off his seat and took Steve's hand. "Hey, Uncle Steve, I'm big enough now to not pee on the wall," the toddler informed the Avenger.

"Uh . . . that's great, little buddy," Steve coughed, trying not to laugh.

"Why don't you tell the whole school?" Vince rolled his eyes.

"Hush!" Loki ordered, covering his face with his hand. The things that child came out with.

Then Aleta piped up with, "One time when Max was sick he missed the potty and peed on the floor."

Several older girls a few seats behind them giggled.

"Aleta Lenore!" Loki scolded.

"Well, he did," the little girl said matter-of-factly. "And Daddy stepped in it."

Tony nearly busted a gut laughing.

Loki just blushed and muttered, "There are no secrets when you live with a three-year-old busybody."

"I'm not a busybody!" his daughter pouted, her lower lip sticking out. "I'm a princess!" She indicated her gold jeweled helmet.
"Okay, Princess, now it's time to play the quiet game," her father said slyly. "And the first one who talks goes to bed early." He made a zipping motion by his lips.

Aleta copied him, and then curled up on his lap, her gray-eyed gaze watching everything.

The lights dimmed and then a spotlight was shone on the stage and Miss Linden walked on to announce Riverside's first poetry reading and afterwards the winners of the poetry contest would be announced.

Belle walked onstage along with Sadie and a few other girls and boys from her English class. All the Laufeysons cheered and clapped when they saw her.

Belle waved shyly and waited to be called up to read, her poem clutched in her damp fingers.

Meanwhile, at Yankee Stadium, Thor and Hunter had just gotten their seats near the dugout, and the Yankees and the Braves had just come out onto the field. Thor waited until the second inning before saying to his nephew, "How do you like the game so far?"

"Good," Hunter answered. "Especially since it's just you and me here and not my brothers and sisters."

"You don't like it when they follow you," Thor remarked.

"Not lately. Sometimes I just want to be alone," Hunter said honestly.

Thor nodded in understanding. "Occasionally, I felt like that too," he admitted. "It's hard being the oldest, the one to always set the example."

Hunter nodded eagerly. "Sometimes I get tired of . . . of always having to do stuff the right way." Though true, he immediately felt guilty, and added, "Dad's not . . . well he's not . . . um too bad . . . not like some of my friend's dads, we don't have rules about everything, and he's not always on me to obey either but . . . I just get tired of always having to be the good son, ya know?"

I can't believe you just said that, a part of him mocked. You aren't a good anything, and well you know it. The only thing you're good at, Hunter Laufeyson, is lying.

Then you are well chosen as the son of the God of Lies, whispered the unrepentant part of his mind.

Except since his rebirth, Loki was no longer that quick facile tongued liar. He had explained once to Hunter that like a snake shedding its skin or a shapeshifter trading flesh for fur or feathers, his ability to lie now came in a limited form. He could lie, but only to safeguard himself or those he cared about, and no longer for vain selfish hurtful reasons. I am all the promise of my youth fulfilled, all the bright pieces regained, born anew from fire and sorrow.

"It can be a heavy burden," Thor agreed. "Have you spoken to your father about this?"

The boy shook his head. "No. He's been too busy." Another lie. Hunter knew as well as any of his siblings that Loki would always make time to talk if asked. He had told them from the beginning that nothing was more important to him than his children—not even his job.

"Perhaps you might do so soon," Thor urged. "Loki isn't unreasonable. Not the way our own father was at times. And I think . . . he worries about you."

Hunter swallowed hard. I'm not worth him losing sleep over. But what he said aloud was, "I'm fine, Uncle Thor. Just kind of stressed with school and all."
Liar, liar pants on fire!

He was relieved to see, however, that the big warrior seemed to take his words at face value and didn't notice, the way Loki would have, the too pat answers falling from his lips and how his actions didn't match his glib tongue.

"Verily, then, shall we watch the game?" Thor abruptly changed the subject, happy that he had found the source of Hunter's discontent. Loki would be pleased.

"Yeah. I wanna see the Yankees hit one outta the park," Hunter said with unfeigned delight, for he truly loved baseball.

So they went back to watching the game and by the time five innings had gone by, the score was Yankees 10-Braves 6. It was intermission, and Hunter felt his stomach growl. He was hungry again, and it was time to put phase two of his plan into action.

"Uncle Thor, can I get something to eat? I'm starving," he said plaintively.

"So am I," the Thunder God admitted. "There is food and drinks over there," he waved at the concession stand.

"I gotta use the men's room too," Hunter added. "All that soda." That was also true, but not for that exact reason.

"Here. Take my wallet and buy some snacks," his uncle said, and handed him a shiny silver and blue wallet which Hunter never would have carried for it screamed easy mark. Except no one would be stupid enough to steal from Thor.

Hunter tucked the wallet inside the zippered pocket of his pants, then stood up, leaving his jacket on the seat. "Be right back. You want pizza?"

"Whatever you buy is fine. You know me, I eat anything."

Hunter flashed him a smile. Boy was that ever true! Once Loki had played a prank on his brother and cooked up a fish head and a goat head and chopped them both up and stuck them inside of a turkey. Then he served the turkey with stuffing to Thor and his brother had devoured it.

Hunter headed off to where the restrooms were first, and once inside a stall quickly pulled a different hoodie—a nondescript black one—over his Yankees one. If you were going to pick pockets you needed to be inconspicuous. He also went to count out the money in Thor's wallet for the food and soda he'd be buying, and saw to his astonishment that the wallet held close to a thousand dollars, some in twenties and some in fifties.

The boy gulped. Here was the money he needed . . . ripe for the taking. He shut his eyes, sweat trickling down his brow.

Are you crazy? It's Thor! You can't steal from your uncle! He'll pulverize you!

But even as he thought it, he knew the temptation was too much. If he took two hundred in both small bills and fifties it might not be missed until later. Thor was not Loki, since Loki would never have given one of his kids his entire wallet.

Shame warred with fear in his gut. He could just take what he needed for food and drinks, he thought and test his pick pocket ability within the crowd. In a crowd this size, a nimble fingers could always find easy pickings.
And yet . . . and yet . . . a bird in the hand was worth two in the bush.

He exhaled sharply, shut his eyes, and counted out two hundred dollars by feel, the tips of his fingers gliding over the money unerringly. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. And now there's no going back. I'll burn in hell for this. Or freeze.

He opened his eyes and quickly stuck the money inside the unmarked envelope. There! It was done.

Oddly enough, his stomach rumbled with a vengeance, and upon emerging from the restroom, the dark haired boy bought three hot dogs with everything on it, four slices of pizza, a huge carton of fries, two huge Cokes and two apple turnovers.

Then he texted Lang, telling him he would meet him in an hour as promised. By then the game would be almost over and he could manufacture another excuse to disappear before the final inning. It would only take twenty minutes to run back to the warehouse and drop off the money.

He bit into a hotdog with Sabrett onions and sauce as he walked back to where Thor waited, but the food tasted like sawdust in his mouth.

The game went well, with the Yankees hitting two more home runs. Finally it was the bottom of the ninth, with the Braves at bat. Hunter kept checking his phone, then finally rose and told his uncle he was going to run to the restroom before it got too crowded. "The Yanks won this anyway, so I won't be too mad if I miss some," he said.

His uncle, however, was glued to the field and barely acknowledged the boy.

Hunter slipped out of the stands, through the stadium, and off into the night.

Over at Riverside, Miss Linden had just announced the third and second place winners of the fifth-sixth grade poetry contest. Sadie had taken third and won a gift card to Barnes and Noble. A sixth grader named Bennett Drexel had won second place, which was a gift card to Red Robin.

"And for our grand prize winner . . . please congratulate Miss Belle Laufeyson!"

Poor Belle almost passed out, for she was sure she had lost.

Her siblings and her uncles were cheering and clapping and as for her father, he had Aleta on his shoulders and was almost jumping up and down, smiling in pure unadulterated delight. "Way to go, Belle!"

Belle couldn't help but smile back, noticing that several women in the audience near her dad seemed to be having trouble breathing, they were fanning themselves. Then Sadie was urging her to go up to the podium and accept her prize, which was tickets to the Met and dinner at Jekyll and Hyde.

As Belle stepped down from the stage to receive hugs and congratulations from her family, Loki's phone beeped with a text from Thor. The mischievous god ignored it, since he was too busy hugging his little raven. "Did I not say you could do it if you set your mind to it?"

"You did. Next time I'll believe you," Belle laughed, giddy with excitement. "I wish Uncle Thor and Hunter could have been here."

"Well, we can tell them about it," Loki said. "Let's see how the game went." He took his phone out to read the text Thor sent and felt his heart plummet to his boots.
Hunter missing. Looked all over, went to bathroom and never came back after last inning. I need you, Loki.

"Dad? What's wrong? You look like a ghost," Belle exclaimed, for all the color had drained out of his face.

"Hunter is missing. Thor can't find him," Loki said, panic sharpening his voice. "I need to get over there."

"We'll take the kids home, Loki," Steve said reassuringly.

"Here's my keys," the god tossed his remote at the Avenger.

"I'm sure Thor just lost him in the crowd. Happens all the time," Tony said, trying to be optimistic.

Loki shook his head. "I don't . . . no, something is wrong . . ." All of his intuition was screaming that this was not just a simple thing of getting separated in a crowded stadium.

"Daddy!" Aleta tugged on his leg.

"Aleta, Daddy needs to go find Hunter. Be good and go with Uncle Steve," he said, kissing the little minx on the forehead.

As he did so, however, the child's eyes went unfocused and she cried, "Watch out for the Big Bad Wolf, Loki! The Wolf took Hunter!"

A moment later Aleta was staring up at him, whimpering. "My head hurts!"

"I know, sweetie." He handed her to Steve. "Give her some children's Tylenol, there's some in my first aid kit inside the van. Sometimes the Visions do that to her."

Aleta began to cry, and Loki looked torn.

Until Tony said, "Go! We've got this! Go find him, Loki!"

"I'll be back," he called, then he vanished, teleporting directly to Yankee Stadium. Aleta's cryptic warning echoed in his ears.

Thor was waiting for him beside the concession stand, looking frazzled. "Loki, I swear he was only going to the restroom but when the game was over I looked up and he was gone. I even checked the car but he wasn't there. What should we do? I can't fly, not with all these people around."

"Thor, stop," Loki held up a hand. "I don't know where he is, all I know is that Fenris has him."

"Fenris? The Wolf?"

"No, Fenris, the gang he used to run with. Aleta had a Vision and told me before I came here."

"How do we find him?"

"We're going to play Search and Rescue," Loki said swiftly. "And I'm going to track him in wolf shape."

Then he blurred into an enormous green-eyed black wolf with a white star upon his forehead. He wore a green and gold blanket over his back with a harness which read NYC Finest! Valhalla
Thor frowned. "Loki, are you sure?"

Wolf-Loki gave a sharp yelp and then shoved his nose into the jacket Thor carried, filling his nostrils with Hunter's scent. Then he spun, paws dancing over the pavement.

Thor grabbed the lead dangling from the harness, then commanded, "Search, Loki!"

Wolf-Loki took off, sprinting for all he was worth across the parking lot, the scent of his human pup hot in his nostrils, tracking through the air.

Thor was nearly dragged trying to keep up.

"Whoa! Cool dog!" shouted some teenagers as Loki went by.

"That ain't a dog—that's a wolf!"

"No, it's a Search and Rescue dog! Must be part Malamute."

"And a wolf!"

"Looks like he's tracking somebody."

"I hope you find him, mister!"

"Me too," Thor muttered. "Loki, by the Nine, slow down a little! Before you pull my shoulder out!"

Wolf-Loki flicked an ear back. Humans were so slow! His paws barely grazed the pavement as he ran, using that economical wolf lope that could cover ground in a matter of seconds.

Soon they had crossed the parking lot and Wolf-Loki raced down a back alley.

It was then that Thor got tired of being dragged and unsnapped the lead. "Go, Loki! I'll follow you with Mjolnir!"

Wolf-Loki surged ahead, following the scent, leaping over fences, dumpsters, cars and anything else in his path.

Above him, Thor flew with Mjolnir, but even using the winds he was hard pressed to keep up with Wolf-Loki's supernatural speed and determination.

The black wolf's danger instinct was howling at him, and soon his pup's scent was joined by other human pups—but these smelled dangerous and there was one who was not a pup, but a man, and he smelled of strange herbs, danger, and blood.

The great wolf's claws clicked as he emerged from leaping over an orange fence into a place with a large empty yard where a big box-like structure brooded. There in the yard was his missing pup, surrounded by the others he had smelled. Wolf-Loki snarled, all his fangs showing.

_Danger, Hunter, danger!_

Hunter said something to the man with the odd herb smell, shaking his head.

One of the other pups pushed Hunter and cried, "You traitor! You broke our deal!"
"Lang, I don't do smack!" Hunter cried.

"And I don't make deals with little boys who don't pay up!" Pete cried, and then he hit Hunter so hard the boy fell onto the concrete, his head hitting the ground with a sickening crack.

"Pete! I think you killed him!" cried one boy.

That was all they had time to say before a gigantic green-eyed monster came out of the shadows and attacked the dealer with a howl of rage.

Pete screamed as the weight of the monster slammed into him, and he found himself on the ground with a creature the size of a pony on top of him, a monster whose fangs were as long as his fingers. Hot breath smote him and he went to push it away, but then its head turned and those dagger-like fangs tore through his arm like wet paper.

His scream of terror and pain echoed through the night.

The taste of blood drove Wolf-Loki mad. Snarling viciously, he attacked again, biting the man savagely in the shoulder and face.

"Help mee! Jesus, help!"

The Pack was frozen, unable to move, and Crusher whispered, "Holy crap it's Fenris Himself!"

"Come to take vengeance!" Lang whimpered, then fell to his knees crying.

Blood coated the black wolf's tongue, its salty sweet taste arousing the need to rip and tear and kill. This insignificant mortal had dared hurt his pup! He would pay—pay in blood. He howled in fury, then went to open the coward's throat and end his suffering when hands grabbed him from behind and dragged him off the man.

"Loki, no!" Thor yelled, grappling with the berserk wolf. "You mustn't kill him!"

Wolf-Loki snarled and snapped, his teeth meeting in the man's arm, as he fought to return and tear apart the prey upon the ground.

"Loki, dammit!" Thor swore, and cuffed the wolf's snout, pulling his arm free. He grabbed the ruff on either side of the wolf's face and shook him hard. "Loki, come back! Hunter needs you! Understand!"

Suddenly, the bloodlust left the green eyes, and abruptly the wolf quit trying to bite the Thunder God. Instead his pink tongue darted out and he licked Thor's cheek.

"Ugh! Gross!"

Whining, the wolf pulled free, shook himself, grimaced, and spat upon the ground.

Then the wolf blurred into Loki, who looked like he was about to be ill, and he pressed a handkerchief to his mouth.

"Disgusting!" he spat. "I hope to hell I don't catch anything from that scumbag." He looked at Thor. "Well, don't just stand there, brother, put cuffs on that piece of dung and the rest of these little rats! And call Bruce and tell him we need him to get the sick bay ready."

He knelt beside the comatose form of his son, gently feeling for broken bones and checking his pulse and breathing. "You're gonna be okay, son. I'm here," he whispered, his eyes misting with
tears. Then he gently lifted the boy in his arms and teleported back to the Avengers mansion, where Bruce and Pepper waited with a gurney.

**Several hours later:**

Loki sat slumped in a chair beside Hunter's diagnostic bed. The boy hadn't regained consciousness since being brought back to the mansion, Bruce told him that was due to a concussion when he hit his head on the pavement. In addition to that Hunter had three fractured ribs, various contusions, but otherwise was stable. Bruce had done an X-ray and said the concussion wasn't severe, taped the ribs and said all they could do now was wait until the boy woke.

Steve and Tony had texted Loki, letting him know the children were home safe and had been put to bed. Loki had told them Hunter had been found, he'd been attacked by a gang and was being treated over at the mansion.

That had been over an hour previous. And still the boy showed no signs of waking.

Thor had brought the dealer and the boys to the police, given a brief explanation of finding his nephew being attacked and then stating a feral dog had appeared and attacked Pete.

"It weren't no dog!" sobbed the dealer. "It were Fenris Himself! A wolf black as sin!"

The police put it down to a bad acid trip and Thor left them to deal with the boys and the dealer, who they found was carrying five grand in heroine and cocaine on him plus some cash.

Thor returned to the mansion to find his brother keeping silent vigil beside Hunter. "Has he woke yet?"

"No," Loki replied, lifting haggard emerald eyes to his brother's face. "What happened to you?"

Thor's costume was shredded and his arm bore a bandage from wrist to elbow.

"You did," Thor replied.

"What?"

"You don't remember? I grabbed you to keep you from killing that swine and breaking your oath and you . . . you went berserk and bit me."

Loki rubbed his eyes, which were hot and dry. "Oh hellfire! I'm sorry, Thor. I can't believe . . . that's never happened to me before . . ." He stared at the bandage like it was a venomous serpent. " . . .not in all the millennia I've shifted . . . I've always kept my mind . . . Forgive me."

He looked away in shame.

Thor came and clasped his shoulder. "There's nothing to forgive. Your son was in danger. That's never happened before when you've shifted. I'd go berserk too if it had been me."

Loki pressed a hand to his forehead. "By the Nine, Thor, it never should have happened! I'm a master magician, by Yggdrasil!" Regret tinged his next words. "How bad is it?"

"I've had worse sparring with the Einhijari," Thor chuckled.

"Liar," Loki muttered.

"Bruce sewed me up. Only twenty stitches. I'll heal."
"I'm sorry."

"Stop," Thor ordered. "Let it go, Loki." He glanced at the small figure under the mound of blankets. "How is he?"

Loki told him what Bruce had said. "But he hasn't woken up since this happened. Bruce says that's normal, that sleep is the way the body heals but . . . what if he's wrong? What if there's something else wrong? Like brain damage?" Fear blazed in the emerald eyes.

"Trust Bruce, Loki."

"Trust Bruce! That's all you have to say? My son could be a vegetable or something!" he snapped. Abruptly he rose and paced the room, muttering curse words in Norse, his eyes bloodshot. "Nine Hells, I need coffee."

"You need to lie down more," his brother said. "You look like you're going to collapse."

"I'm not leaving him," the other said stubbornly.

"Just lie down on the bed next to him," Thor said. "I'll stay and wake you if he comes to."

"Promise?"

"You have my word. Go to sleep, brother."

Loki reluctantly went and lay down upon the other bed and in moments was fast asleep.

Thor covered him with a green blanket.

An hour later:

Hunter's eyelids fluttered, then slowly opened.

"Well, look who's back with us," Bruce said, having been alerted to the boy's awakening by one of the monitors. "Hello, sleepyhead."

"Uncle Bruce?" Hunter queried, wondering if this were a dream. "Where am I?"

"You're at the mansion, of course," Bruce answered. "How are you feeling?"

"Like something stomped me."

"I'd say that's exactly what happened. Do you know your name?"

"My name? It's Hunter. Hunter Laufeyson."

"Good. How old are you? Where do you live?"

"Uncle Bruce, how can you not remember that?"

Bruce laughed. "I remember it fine. I'm seeing if you do."

When he had correctly answered both questions, Hunter asked, "Why?"

"You have a mild concussion, son. So I'm checking to make sure your memory isn't affected. You seem fine."
Now Hunter looked around more and saw a chair beside the bed. It was empty.

Bruce caught his gaze. "Your uncle was in that till just recently, when I made him go to bed."

"Where's Dad?"

"Right over there," Bruce indicated a large lump curled up under a blanket on the bed next to Hunter's. "Thor practically had to wrestle him into there. He was up all night with you."

"He was? Then he's not . . . he doesn't hate me?" Hunter asked in a very small voice.

Bruce shook his head. "Kiddo, your dad nearly went out of his mind when you disappeared. Dragged Thor through half of downtown looking for you. Hate you? Trust me when I say that man loves you to pieces."

For some reason that only made Hunter feel worse. He gulped and muttered into the pillow, "He won't after this."

Bruce chuckled. "You're kidding, right? Hunter, Loki is the last person in this family to judge anyone about mistakes. Now quite worrying and let me go wake him up. He left strict instructions for me to do so and this is one time he can command and I'll obey." He went to shake the Master of Mischief awake.

Loki wakened almost as soon as Bruce called him. "Hunter?"

"Is awake and talking," Bruce said with a smile. "Remembers who he is and everything. But you can see for yourself."

Then Dr. Banner stepped out of the room, leaving the two Laufeysons alone.

Loki came over to his son's bedside. "Hey, buddy. How are you feeling?" he asked softly.

"My head aches. And my chest feels weird."

"That's cause of the tape, son. Your uncle Bruce had to tape your ribs because you cracked a few," his father told him. "And your head hurts because you have a concussion from that miserable scum hitting you and knocking you on the concrete," Loki said and his eyes flashed sparks.

"Where—are they?"

"In jail. Don't worry about them. They can't hurt you anymore," Loki soothed. He gently put a cool hand on his son's forehead. "Good. No fever, at least."

"Can I have some water?"

"Sure. Wait a minute." Soon a paper cup of water floated over. Loki carefully helped him lift his head and put the cup to his mouth. "Small sips. Don't gulp it, you might upset your stomach and you don't want to throw up with a concussion. Trust me. Been there and done that."

"You've had one?"

"Yes. Got knocked around by more than my share of villains and heroes," Loki replied matter-of-factly. "Lucky I have a hard head."

"But I thought . . . all you Asgardians were invulnerable."
"Don't I wish! I'm not Balder, wolfling," Loki chuckled. "It takes a lot more to damage us than most mortals but we can get hurt. Or killed. We're immortal only in the sense that we'll never age after we reach adulthood or get sick like you." None of the children except Belle knew about his rebirth. It wasn't something he ever wished to discuss with them, and had barely discussed it with Thor. Belle knew because you couldn't hide something of that great magical magnitude from a Lorekeeper, and she also was the only one who understood the price he had paid to be reborn. For such magic always came with a price, and only another magician would understand fully all the price required. Even Thor didn't know everything, only that certain actions could damage his redemption, such as killing unless defending his life or those of ones he loved.

He placed the remainder of the water on a small rolling table, saying, "You can have more in a bit. Quiet giving me that look."

"But I'm thirsty," his son complained.

"Give your body a chance to wake up, son. You were unconscious for almost a whole night. And your stomach can get sick really easy with a concussion."

"Even on water?"

"Yes. And with your ribs cracked, the last thing you want is to throw up. It is not fun. So, listen to me, okay?" At his nod, Loki then asked, "Do you hurt anywhere else? I can give you something for pain if you do."

"M'fine," Hunter said quickly. He did ache but the worst pain was not something one of Loki's potions could fix.

"All right. But you tell me if you are. Don't play hero, you aren't an Avenger and you don't need to act like one," Loki said. Then he asked the question he had been pondering all night as he watched his son sleep. "What happened last night at the stadium, Hunter? Did Fenris kidnap you for some reason?"

The boy looked at his hands, thinking rapidly, here was the out he had been looking for. All he would have to do was to agree with what Loki had just assumed. He had been kidnapped and forced to steal money for Fenris to give to Pete. But he found he couldn't speak the words. One of the rules he had agreed to when Loki had adopted him was to never lie to his father. As formerly the most facile liar in the Nine Worlds, Loki could always tell when people lied to him, and all of his children knew better than to try it.

"No. I went to them," the boy muttered.

"You went to them," Loki repeated. "Why? Did they make you?"

"You aren't gonna like this," Hunter warned.

"Please, just tell me. From the beginning."

He listened as his son poured out the whole sorry tale—a tale of fear and blackmail and a secret the boy had hidden from everyone.

When he finished, Hunter lay back on the pillows, tears streaking his face and asked brokenly, "You gonna kick me out now? You should. I don't deserve to be part of this family."

"Don't you ever say that again!" Loki snapped. Then he covered his face with a hand and muttered, "Is that why you didn't trust me? Because you thought I would tell you to leave?" His tone was sharp with astonishment and hurt. "Norns, Hunter, am I so terrifying that you thought it
"You're the best one!" Hunter cried, horrified. "I'm the one who screwed up! Not you. I never wanted you to know cause I was afraid you'd hate me!"

"Hate you? Me, the Trickster Thief of the realms? I would be the worst hypocrite ever and I may be many things but that I'm not," the Asgardian snorted. "If that's all you were worried about-"

"It's not. I didn't just steal . . . I'm . . . a murderer too!" the boy hissed, his eyes dark as midnight in his pale face. "Now tell me you still want me."

Loki moved then, to perch on the edge of the bed and gently take his son's head in his lap. Long fingers threaded through the tangled strands as he whispered, "Silly wolfling, I will always want you. Nothing you have done can ever be half as bad as what I used to be. Now explain what in Hel you mean. Who did you kill?"

"His name was Rasper. He was a little younger than me, he ran off cause his old man was beating on him and joined Fenris about a year after I did. I was Beta then, and it was my job to show him how things were done. So I took him with me on a couple of easy snatch and grabs, and he was getting pretty good at it, but he went and lifted some dough off a Skull Crusher. We were at war with them back then . . . and Rasper didn't run like he ought to. Instead he tried to fight, the dumb jerk, and the Crusher had a knife. . . ." he coughed, winced, and Loki gave him more water.

"Where were you? I take it you weren't there?"

"No. I was casing out a mark. By the time I heard what went down, cause somebody saw and was screaming, the Crusher had already stabbed Rasper. I tried . . . I tried to stop the bleeding, but it was no good . . . and more Crushers were coming . . . so I ran to see if I could find a doc or call for one . . . but by the time I found somebody and brought him there it was too late. Rasper was dead."

"So how are you a murderer? You didn't stab the kid."

"Cause I left him and he died. Lang-that's the Leader, he said it was my fault, that I could have stayed and cause I didn't, Rasper's death was on my hands. He died cause I ran away," Hunter sniffled.

"No, son. He died because he got in a knife fight with someone who knew how to kill," Loki disagreed. "That little worm Lang was guilt-tripping you. Rasper's death wasn't your fault. You tried to save him."

"But he died 'cause I wasn't fast enough," Hunter sobbed.

"Ai, no. He might have died even if you'd had a doctor right there when it happened. Where was he stabbed?"

"Uh, between the ribs . . . I think. There was so much blood . . ."

"Sounds like the knife hit an artery. In which case he would have bled out no matter if you stayed or not."

"How do you know?"
"Because I've seen my share of fatal knife wounds. And I know my son. You're not a murderer, Hunter. Don't ever let anyone-especially not that lying piece of swamp trash who calls himself a Leader-tell you otherwise." He continued to card the boy's messy hair.

"You really mean that?"

"I do." Loki reassured him. "No court in the land would ever convict you, Hunter. The only reason Lang did was because you felt guilty. What happened afterwards?"

"A few days after that I turned myself in. That was how I ended up in Second Chance," he said, which was the name of the orphanage Loki had adopted him from.

"Is that the only secret you've been keeping from me? Or did you push old ladies down stairs too?"

"Dad!"

"Well?"

"Yeah. The rest you know." The boy met his eyes fearlessly.

The trickster god grabbed a tissue from the rolling cart and gently wiped the tears from his son's face. "I love you, wolfling."

"Then you're not mad?"

"Oh, I am. At how this could all have been avoided if you'd trusted me," Loki scolded. Hunter squirmed under the chastising gaze. "What are you gonna do to me? Beat me?"

"That knock on the head must have scrambled your brains," Loki chided. "You forgot what I told you when I adopted you-that I don't punish my children that way."

"Not even for this?"

"Ever. That hasn't changed. But you will be punished. I just need to come up with something suitable. One thing you will do, however, is give your Uncle Thor an apology for stealing from him."

"Dad, he'll kill me!" Hunter protested.

"He won't. But he might make you run laps around the mansion till you collapse. That's up to him, since you wronged him. The rest . . . I'll tell you later." he said with an evil smirk.

"Dad! Please can't you just tell me?" the boy begged.

"No. That's part of your punishment."

"That's torture!"

Loki raised an eyebrow. "Too bad. Next time don't get in trouble."

"Da-a-d!"

"Now don't pout. You're acting like Max," Loki waved a finger at him.

"You're mean!"
"I know. And I'm about to get meaner," he said with a snort. He snapped his fingers and a familiar blue phial appeared.

"No!" the boy yelped. "You know I hate that pain potion. It tastes gross."

"I also know it will help you better than anything a Midgard doctor would prescribe."

"I'm not hurting all that bad," Hunter argued.

"Yet. But you will be."

"You always think you know best."

"Because this time I do. Now-we can do this the easy way or the hard way. The easy way-you listen to me and take your medicine like the twelve-year-old you are."

"And what's the other way?"

"I treat you like a baby and hold your nose shut and pour it down your throat. Either way, it's up to you."

Realizing he wasn't going to win this battle, Hunter gave in. After all, he wasn't a baby. "Okay."

"Smart boy," Loki said approvingly. He propped the boy's head up and then handed him the phial.

Hunter screwed up his face, then drank the potion down in two gulps. "Ugh!"

"Here," Loki handed him a spoonful of honey.

Hunter sucked it off the spoon gratefully.

"There. Now was that so bad?"

"Yes," he grumbled. "Can you tell me now?"

"No. You'll know when I'm ready for you to know," his father answered maddeningly. "Now why don't you get some sleep?"

"How can I sleep when you won't tell me how much trouble I'm in?"

"Just close your eyes."

I'm not tired. I'm not," Hunter muttered, then his eyes shut and he fell asleep.

Which was exactly what Loki intended when he'd given him the pain potion. Smiling, he tucked the covers around his son and then went to text Steve and Tony to update them on Hunter's condition and make sure the rest of his little zoo wasn't holding their uncles hostage.
Some days you pray for men in white coats to take YOU away!~ Loki

While Hunter slept and healed, Loki went and took a shower and dressed in some of his jeans and a blue and gold pullover that he kept at the mansion in case his costume got shredded during a battle. After that he went into the kitchen and drank three cups of coffee and JARVIS made him scrambled eggs, waffles, and bacon for breakfast. Accustomed to Thor's eating habits, he made enough for three normal people. Anxiety brought out Loki's appetite, and he devoured it hungrily. He was on his third waffle when Thor came into the kitchen, now fully alert and rested, in his red and blue rugby shirt and blue pants. "Good morning, Loki. Bruce tells me that Hunter awoke, but the boy seems to sleep still."

"Morning, Thor. Sit and eat," Loki waved at the remainder of the food.

His brother raised an eyebrow. "Is that all that's left?" he asked, dismayed.

Loki waved a hand and the food on the table replicated itself in triple the amount. "That good enough?"

"It'll do for now," the Thunder God replied and began to pile a plate with food. "So, how is my nephew?"

"He's sleeping now because I gave him a pain potion. But before that we talked about what happened."

"Those boys, did they kidnap him?" Thor asked. "The man-he was one who ran drugs."

"I know. Scumbag sold drugs to children," Loki growled, his mouth twisting. "I wish I'd bitten his hand off."

"Aye," Thor nodded. "Loki . . . Hunter wasn't using some substance, was he?"

"No. He was supposed to pay the guy off from Fenris. Apparently the other boys owed this dealer, Pete, $250 dollars and they coerced my son into stealing the money for them and bringing it there to give to him. But at the last minute Hunter refused and that's when Pete attacked him."
Loki told Thor the rest of what Hunter had said, explaining what had gone on in the past, how he was blackmailed into stealing the two hundred dollars from Thor and that Hunter was sorry for it.

Thor looked shocked. "I never thought he would do such a thing. Why didn't he just tell me of these boys and their demands?"

"For the same reason he wouldn't come to me," Loki sighed. "He was ashamed and scared. He thought we wouldn't understand and kick him out of the family."

"That would never happen. We both know banishing someone doesn't work," Thor said.

Loki met Thor's cerulean gaze. "We do, don't we?" he said quietly in mutual understanding. "I told him he owes you an apology and you are free to punish him for his transgression. Within reason," he added.

"That is fair," Thor said, eating some more eggs with hot sauce. "I wouldn't hurt the boy, Loki."

"I know. I trust you. He's not a bad kid, just... misguided," Loki remarked. "Of course, any punishment we give will have to wait till his ribs mend. But this will give us time to think of something."

"I've already got something in mind. My goats," Thor smirked. "I believe a week or two of shoveling manure and taking care of them, plus doing some other chores around here will more than settle the debt between us. A little hard work is good for the soul."

"Yes." He stared at a piece of bacon in his hand mournfully. "If I had been watching more carefully this could have been avoided."

"Loki, you're too hard on yourself," Thor began.

"Not hard enough," his brother refuted. "I should have seen something wasn't right." The bacon fell unnoticed onto his plate. "By the Nine, that was me all those years ago! How in Hel did I miss it?"

"Brother, as the Man of Iron is wont to say-you cannot be everywhere and everything to everyone. Perhaps you didn't see because you were too close to the boy."

"Or I was blind," Loki muttered.

"We all were then. Stop punishing yourself for one mistake. 'Tis done. The important thing is that Hunter is safe and those who hurt him are locked up. You're a good father, Loki. You do things differently than our father, but they work for you and for them. You are there for your children, and I know so much of the time you felt that wasn't the case growing up."

"It wasn't. You were off with your warrior friends so you wouldn't remember, not the way I do. Father was gone half the time and Mother was busy running the kingdom. I learned a long time ago that if I wanted to be noticed and not brushed aside I created mischief. Because at least then I was seen and not told to run along and come back later," his brother said bitterly.

"I wish I had known sooner."

"As you say, what's done is done. I just have to make damn sure I don't repeat the mistakes they made." Loki concluded. "Which means that for part of his punishment, I will be having Hunter do community service-as Steve calls it-with my help. We will be cleaning part of Central Park up on the weekend. And the rest he can volunteer down at one of animal shelters. They always need volunteers to walk their dogs and clean their cat cages and perhaps he will meet new friends..."
"That's a good plan. It will teach humility and responsibility and also be something he may take pleasure in doing."

"You think?"

"Yes. Quit doubting yourself, little brother. You're doing a great job."

"Thanks, Thor." Loki said sincerely. He could tell his brother meant what he said and it made that gnawing kernel of self-doubt bury itself in the recesses of his mind.

"Are you going to eat that piece of bacon?" Thor asked plaintively.

"Here." Loki tossed it to him. Then he snatched the last waffle from the plate.

"Hey! I was gonna eat that."

"You snooze you lose," he grinned, then spread lingonberry jam and powdered sugar over it and ate it.

Hunter woke a few hours later, and apologized to his uncle, who scolded him gently and told him that Tanngrisnir and Tanngjóstr had their pen waiting for him to clean and manure the flower beds and garden around the mansion when Dr. Banner said he was healed enough. 'You want me to become a goat herd?' Hunter's eyes almost bugged out. "But Uncle Thor, I don't know anything about goats."

"You'll learn. My goats are friendly . . . unless you forget to feed them. Then they eat your clothes."

"I'm not wearing my jacket then," Hunter sighed. "How long will I be doing this?"

"Three weeks," Loki replied. "And in addition to that, you will be picking up litter in Central Park with me and volunteering at the local animal shelter three days a week."

"Am I gonna have time to sleep?"

"Yes. If you go to bed at nine."

"What? Dad, that's bedtime for Lucy!"

"Little nephew, after one day of such work you won't mind it at all," Thor told him.

Loki took a repentant Hunter home a few hours later, once Bruce had made certain the concussion was healing and told Loki to make sure the boy took it easy the next few days. That meant no school, for which Hunter was happy about, until he realized staying home involved helping with some housework, like folding the laundry. "All this?" he exclaimed in dismay as he saw the nine baskets, each labeled with the appropriate child's name, piled with clothing. "This is nuts!"

"Quit complaining. I do this every day. And I sorted it for you already," Loki pointed out.

"I think we need to hire a maid."

"I have. You."

"My ribs hurt sitting here."
"Here's a potion then," Loki said, holding a familiar blue phial.

"No, it's not that bad!"

"Then start folding."

Hunter groaned. Then he picked up a pair of Max's pajamas and began to fold them.

Twenty minutes later he had completed two baskets and Loki brought him some hot cocoa and crumpets with jam.

"Thanks, Dad," his son said gratefully.

"You can take a break after this. I need to re-tape you. How is your head?"

"Okay. It's not hurting anymore."

"Good."

Loki removed the old tape and applied warm cloths soaked in arnica to the livid purple and blue welts that covered his son's sides and chest before using new tape to rebind and support the healing ribs. As he did so, Max came into the den and saw.

The small boy's green eyes widened and he whimpered fearfully, "Daddy, did the Bad People do that to Hunter?"

"Yes, but they are in jail and can't hurt anyone ever again," Loki reassured him.

"Good! Or else I'd of blown them to the moon with your magic staff," Max cried angrily.

"Never you mind about my staff, little imp," Loki scolded. "That's not for little boys to play with." It was kept locked up in a cabinet only he could open but it never hurt to give a reminder.

"Does it hurt?" Max asked frankly.

"Yeah, some," Hunter replied honestly. "But Dad will fix it."

"Dad can fix anything," Max said confidently. "He fixed my knee after I fell down chasing Aleta yesterday." He showed Hunter his knee, which had a large colorful Band-Aid on it with moons and stars. "Is Dad gonna put a special Band-Aid on your ouch?"

Hunter chuckled. "They don't make 'em big enough, imp."

Max watched as Loki put tape around Hunter's ribs, then went and grabbed a marker from his art supplies and said, "I can make your Band-Aid like mine, Hunter! See?" And he began drawing and coloring stars and moons on the plastic strips.

"Max, what are you doing?" Loki asked, amused.

"I'm making Hunter a magic Band-Aid," the four-year-old answered. "So it makes the ouch go away faster."

"Max, there's no such thing as-" Hunter began, then stopped and ruffled the child's raven hair.

"Thanks, buddy."

"There! All done. Do you feel better?"
"Lots," his older brother smiled.

"You were very helpful," Loki praised. "But you ought to be taking a nap like your sister."

"Wasn't tired," Max pouted.

Loki helped Hunter put his shirt on then said, "Why don't you lay here next to your big brother and tell him how to fold clothes?"

"Okay! I know how cause I watch Dad," Max said, and promptly dragged the green Got Mischief blanket over him and lay down with his head on his brother's lap.

Hunter rolled his eyes as Max prattled on about the correct way to fold socks and soon his curious brother's mischievous eyes shut and he fell asleep.

'I don't blame you, buddy," Hunter murmured. "This is the most boring job ever." Then he yawned too. Five minutes later he nodded off over Aleta's princess shirt, and that was how Loki found the pair of them some ten minutes later. He carefully rearranged his older son with a pillow and then took a picture of the heartwarming scene with his phone. This would be one for the family album.

A few days later Hunter was growing restless from being stuck in the house, even though Loki kept him busy with small chores and he played his X-Box when he was sitting on the couch. He was currently doing a rerun of Asgardian Quest playing this time as a Lljosalfar magician, a character that started out weak but would grow to be one of the most powerful in the game. Or so said his father. "Dad, are you sure? I keep dying every time I fight the trolls and shamans on the bridge over the falls," Hunter grumbled.

"You can't confront them head on," Loki called from the kitchen. "You need to use your head and out think them. Magic isn't all about brute force. It's being cunning and tricky."

"I've only got three spells."

"You can defeat the trolls with what you have. You just need to think about where your enemy has weaknesses."

"Okay. Let's try this again," his son said, and rebooted from the last save he had.

The object of the game was to travel through the Nine Realms searching for nine keys that would free Loki from his prison in Jotunheim. In your travels you interacted with other gamers by using a special integrated VR helmet—which was shaped like Loki's own. Hunter had won the game before, but he usually played warriors and Aesir. This was his first time as a magic-using elf.

"Ooh! Can I play?" Max pleaded when he saw what his brother was doing.

"No. You're too little. You can't even read."

"I wanna play too," Aleta said. "I wanna be a princess."

"You can't either," Hunter said crossly.

"Why not?" his sister sulked.

"Listen imps, go away and quit bothering me, I need to concentrate," Hunter waved them away.

"We want to play!" Max cried. "Let us have a turn."
"Beat it, rugrats!"

"You're mean!" Aleta declared crossly. "Mean as spit and ashes!"

"And you're as annoying as a mosquito," Hunter returned. "Now buzz off!"

His sister made a face at him. "Make me!"

"Aleta, I swear—"

"That's enough," Loki said from the doorway. His voice was soft but implacable. "Aleta and Max, quit pestering your brother."

"But Daddy, we wanna play with Hunter," Max whined.

"Yeah, we asked nicely and Hunter's mean," Aleta sniffled.

"Dad, she's being annoying," his eldest son groused.

"Aleta, why don't you draw me a picture? I need a new kitten for the art wall," her dad suggested.

"Okay. I'll make you a baby Lokitty," she said and went to get her art box.

"Max, you can make me one too," he told his small son.

"No. I don't feel like drawing. I wanna play outside."

At that moment, Serena, Lucy, Nate, and Belle came home from school. Samantha was at her debate club today. His three older children went to grab snacks from the fridge and took their bags into the dining room to do their homework.

All except Lucy, who was only in kindergarten and almost never had homework.

Max ran to her. "Lucy, you wanna play outside with me?"

Lucy was Loki's sunny child, both in looks—she had golden hair and sea-green eyes—and in temperament, she was rarely cross and usually agreeable to anything her siblings or dad wished to do. One of her favorite things was to have Loki read to her—because the Mischief Maker knew how to do voices for different characters and when he read it was like the story came to life.

"Sure, Max," she said to her younger brother. "But lemme get a snack first. Dad, do we have any Savannah Smiles left?"

"Look in the cabinet, sunshine. I think we have one package left." Loki called, he was busy mixing the macaroni shrimp salad for dinner that night.

Lucy stood up on the stepstool to peer inside the pantry where the snacks were kept along the wall. "Found 'em!" she cried, and pulled down the box of Girl Scout cookies. They were lemon cookies with powdered sugar over them.

"Can I have one?" Max wanted to know.

"Of course. I always share," Lucy grinned. "You want milk too?"

"Yes, please."

She got both of them small cups of milk, then gave Max three cookies and took the same for
herself. "Mmm! I love these!"

"Me too!" Max agreed.

"Hey don't talk with your mouth full," Lucy reproved. "It's gross."

"Uncle Clint does it sometimes."

"That's 'cause men don't have any manners. Least that's what Miss Trudy says."

"I beg to differ. I have manners," Loki put in.

"I know, Dad. You taught us," Lucy remarked. She finished her cookies and milk and wiped her hands neatly with her napkin. "Let's play Rapunzel, Max. I'll be Rapunzel in the tower and you can be the prince that rescues me from the evil witch Goethal."

"Who's gonna be the witch?" Max asked.

"Umm . . . I'd ask Serena but she's busy with her homework. So we can pretend, okay?"

"Okay. Lemme get my sword n' shield." Max said, and ran to the toybox in the den and withdrew his small plastic sword, which looked very like his dad's, and a Viking buckler.

Lucy put on a purple dress like the one Rapunzel wore in Tangled, then grabbed the long blond wig and put it on her head. The braid was so long it trailed on the ground, so she tossed it over her arm as she ran out into the backyard after Max.

Loki's yard was not huge, but it did have enough room for the kids to run around in, was fenced, and sported a tree house in a large oak tree. The tree house had been there before the Laufeysons had bought the house and property, and it was a bit shabby and in need of a few repairs. Loki had planned to do that over the summer, as right now he was too busy ironing out the glitches in his new game before it launched, as well as assisting the Avengers.

The two children ran over to the tree house, which made the perfect tower for Rapunzel to get rescued from. Lucy scrambled up the ladder and sat on the platform and pretended to comb her long hair with a twig. "Oh I wish I could leave this tower and see the world," she called.

"I'll save you, Lady Rapunzel!" Max shouted, and he galloped over to the tower. "Quick! Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair!"

Lucy threw her braid down and said, "Who are you?"

"I'm Prince Max of Asgard! And I'm gonna rescue you from the evil witch."

He waved his sword at the big rhododendron.

"Hurry, Max! Before the witch comes back!" Lucy urged, then she began to climb down the ladder.

Normally surefooted as a cat, Lucy forgot how her braid tended to get in the way. Her sneaker stepped on the braid and her foot slipped. She went to grab hold of the ladder but the old boards suddenly gave way and she plummeted out of the tree and landed on the ground with a sharp smack.

"Lucy!" Max screamed in horror. "Lucy, are you okay?"

The little girl moaned. "Max . . . Max . . . get Dad . . . my arm hurts . . ." Her wig dangled askew
The little girl moaned. "Max ... Max ... get Dad ... my arm hurts ..." Her wig dangled askew on her head, and her purple dress was full of dirt and leaves. She cradled her left arm and cried.

Max dropped his sword and shield and ran towards the house yelling, "Dad! Dad! Lucy fell outta the tree house!"

Loki nearly dropped the entire tray of stuffed clams on the floor when he heard Max screaming. "Nine Hells!" he swore and teleported out to the tree house where Lucy was still sitting on the ground, her sea green eyes full of fear and pain. "Lucy, where are you hurt, baby?" He knelt beside her, his heart slamming through his ribcage.

"M-My arm . . . Dad . . . it hurts r-real bad!" she sobbed.

"Okay, sunshine. Let me take a look—" he reached out to touch her.

"Nooo!" she howled, hysterical. "Don't touch it!" She tried to scramble away but she jarred her arm and cried out in pain.

"Shh . . . Shhh . . . it's okay, I promise I won't touch you," Loki crooned. "Let me take a look with my magic. You won't feel anything." He murmured a quick diagnostic spell and his hand lit up with blue energy. He ran his hand above Lucy's arm and the spell revealed to him that her arm was, as he had feared, broken.

By then the other kids had come out of the house and were gathered on the back steps, watching worriedly.

"Dad, will Lucy be okay?" called Nate.

"Lucy, you have a broken arm, hon. So I'm going to take you to the hospital to fix it," he explained to the terrified child.

"W-why can't we go to Uncle Bruce?"

"Because Uncle Bruce and the rest of your uncles are out of town at a convention," Loki told her. *What a time to leave town!* "So we need to visit the hospital and get you fixed up there."

"Dad, I'm scared!" she whimpered.

"I'm right here, sunshine. We're gonna make you better." He quickly summoned one of his potions. "Lucy, I need you to drink this. It'll make your arm quit hurting for awhile."

"Okay." Unlike Hunter and half his children, she didn't fight him when it came to taking medicine.

He held the phial to her lips and she swallowed obediently. "That's my good girl," he said, then gave her a spoonful of honey to wash away the taste. Then he formed a cast from the air and wrapped it around the injured arm so it would be still. He would need to remove it when they arrived at the hospital, but for now it served to keep the limb immobile.

By then the potion had taken effect and his daughter was nodding off. He gently slipped his arms about her and lifted her. Then cradling her securely, he walked towards the house.

"Hunter, you're in charge while I'm gone. Text Samantha and let her know what happened. I'm going to bring Lucy to the ER. She broke her arm."

Max stared up at him, tears filling his eyes. "Is she gonna die?"
"No, son. She'll be fine, just her arm is going to be in a cast for awhile. You and Aleta get your jackets on. You're coming with me."

"Thank the Nine!" Hunter muttered.

Aleta came back holding her art case. "Daddy, can I take this?"

"Yes. Max, pick out a book too. We might be there for awhile."

Max took *Where the Wild Things Are* down from the shelf. It was one of his favorite books and Loki had made him a white wolf suit like in the story that he wore quite a bit. In his other hand he clutched Trickster, which was a soft plush black wolf wearing a gold cape and green shirt and horned helmet. It was his security toy.

Aleta picked up her lokitty, a black kitten with a gold helmet, and a green bow around her neck. Her name was Minx. "I'm ready!" she announced, holding the cat in one hand and her art case in the other.

Loki carried the sleeping Lucy to the van and placed her carefully in the front seat, buckled her in, and then started the van.

Max and Aleta climbed in their car seats and Belle fastened them in. "Be good and don't drive Dad crazy," she told them. "Dad, text me about Lucy."

"I will, little raven," he said as he pulled away down the driveway. He prayed the traffic wasn't too bad getting to Columbia Presbyterian. He turned on the GPS to get the traffic pattern, carefully pulling out onto the main road.

He had just stopped at a red light when Max piped up with, "Dad, what does this button do?"

Out of the corner of his eye he saw his inquisitive imp start to touch a green button on the door console. "Maximus, don't you dare!"

"How come? I wanna make the van into a tank."

"I don't care what you want. Don't touch that."

"No fair! I never get to do what I want."

A red car darted into the lane in front of him, forcing Loki to slam on the brakes. "Learn how to drive you son of a blind serpent!" he swore.

"What's this do?"

Max tugged on a lever.

A small taser popped up on the roof.

"What the-? Maximus, what part of don't touch anything don't you understand?" Loki snapped, hitting a button on the dashboard that retracted the taser.

"You said not to push the green button."

"Okay . . ." Loki felt a headache bloom behind his eyes. He took a deep breath and counted slowly to ten. "Now don't touch *anything*. No buttons no levers nothing! You hear me?"

"Yes, Dad."
Five minutes went by as Loki navigated through an intersection.

"Oww! Daddy, Max poked me!"

"I didn't. Trickster did."

"Nuh-uh."

"Uh-huh."

_Norns, I wish I had earplugs!_

"Hey! Aleta scratched me!"

"Noo . . . Minx did. She's mad at you."

"Tell your dumb cat to bite me!"

"You tell your smelly wolf to eat dead fishheads."

He turned down the street leading to the hospital, struggling to hold onto his temper.

"You shut up!"

"Oww! Daddy, Max pulled my hair!"

"Well, you kicked me, so there!"

"Both of you knock it off!" a frazzled Loki growled. "Don't make me pull this car over!"

"Oooh, you're in trouble!" Aleta sang.

Max put his hands over his ears. "Not listening!"

"They're coming to take you away . . . they're coming to take you away . . . hee hee haa haa . . . to the funny farm . . ." warbled Aleta.

"I wish someone would take me away," Loki said feelingly. _Right now that funny farm sounds like a resort!_

Abruptly, Aleta began to cry. "Noo! I don't want you to get taken away!"

"I was kidding!" he said quickly. _Mostly._ They finally pulled into the emergency room parking lot.

He commandeered a wheelchair and put the still sleeping Lucy into it. Then he said to Max and Aleta, "I want you to walk quietly by me and stay there while I talk to some doctors."

"Is Lucy gonna be okay?" Aleta asked sadly.

"Yes, spark. We just have to find a doctor to look at her."

He carefully pushed the wheelchair into the lobby and stopped by the registration desk. "Can I help you, sir?"

"My daughter fell out of our treehouse and broke her arm."

"I'm so sorry to hear that. Can you fill out this form and then wait until we call you into a room?"
Loki wrote rapidly on the sheet, handed the receptionist Lucy's health insurance card and his own as well as ID cards. He signed agreements to let Lucy be treated, a privacy agreement, and then he went to sit in the waiting room.

"Dad, when are they gonna fix Lucy?" Max asked.

"As soon as they can. Now you and Aleta play quietly while we wait." He removed the air cast and gently stroked Lucy's golden hair back from her forehead. His heart felt like it had shattered into a million pieces and he longed to get up and pace around the room like a wild thing.

He pulled out his phone, it chimed with the Beauty and the Beast theme, which meant Belle was texting him.

*How's Lucy? Are u at the hospital?*

**Yes. Waiting to see doc. Call you later.**

1. *Everything fine. Love ya! XOXO*

He put the phone back in his jacket, checked his watch, and wondered why the Hel it was taking so long to have someone come and look at his daughter? He understood about priorities, but still, this was his little girl and if not for his pain potion she would have been awake, frightened, and hurting. He reached out and took her hand in his, holding it gently.

*If you had fixed the tree house, you wouldn't be here right now, Laufeyson,* he berated himself.

*If Thor were here he'd tell you to stop feeling guilty and just worry about Lucy getting well. But Thor's not here and I'm falling to pieces. The only good thing is Lucy's still asleep and Aleta and Max are finally listening and playing quietly.*

But he knew all too well that never lasted long and someone better come soon or else he would ask why this was supposed to be an emergency room when no one seemed to worry that they had left a little girl unattended after ten minutes had gone by? Maybe he should have tried to set the arm himself? He did know how to field dress a wound.

*No, Loki. You're not a doctor, you're not even a medic. Just be patient.* In order to keep from going crazy, he opened up his ebook app on his phone and began to read *Centennial* again.

"Mr. Laufeyson? Come through this door, please. Nurse Berry will see you now."

*Finally!*

He wheeled Lucy into the room, with Aleta and Max following.

"Oh, what adorable children you have!" Nurse Berry, a slim woman of about thirty gushed.

"Thanks. That adorable part gets them out of trouble . . . sometimes."

"I'll bet. Let's see what happened to you, sweetie." Nurse Berry went to take Lucy's blood pressure and said, "Mr. Laufeyson, how long has she been asleep like this?"

"She fainted soon after I went and found her on the ground by the treehouse," Loki lied glibly.

"I told Dad to come cause Lucy fell," Max added.

"You're a smart boy to do that."
"Dad, she said I was smart!"

"You are. Too smart," Loki said, and tweaked his son's nose.

"Well, her vitals are all good, and except for the fact that she's asleep, she seems to have suffered no injury except to her arm. But if you'd like we can arrange to have an MRI done of her head and back."

"No. I'm sure she didn't hit her head. She was awake and aware when I came over to her. She was in a lot of pain though and I'm sure that's why she fainted."

"Poor thing!" Nurse Berry cooed. "She has such beautiful golden hair. Let's bring you in a room, Mr. Laufeyson. Our pediatrician on call, Dr. Chamberlain, will be with you shortly."

"How long will that be?" Loki demanded crisply. "I apologize for my abrupt tone but I don't want my daughter to wake up and be in pain while we wait another twenty minutes."

"I understand. He should be down soon, he was just doing rounds when we paged him. If she wakes, we can give her a shot for the pain."

Loki just nodded woodenly, thinking that by the time the doctor got there his potion would have worn off and he'd be forced to rely on Midgardian medicine instead of his magic. He was so concerned over Lucy that he didn't even realize Max and Aleta weren't beside him.

Back in the room with the odd black wire machine, Max said to Aleta, "Let's see what this does."

"The lady in the white coat put the black snake thing on Lucy's arm," Aleta frowned. "Minx thinks the snakey thing bit her."

"No. It hasn't got any teeth. Here, put your arm in there." Max ordered.

"It's too big."

"Put your arm and Minx in it."

Aleta did so and the cuff stayed on. Then Max began to squeeze the rubber ball like he'd seen the lady doing.

"Hey! We're being 'quished!" Aleta cried. "Max, stop! Minx and I don't like this snake machine."

She pushed the blood pressure monitor after yanking the cuff off her arm.

It crashed into the wall.

"Dumb snake machine!"

"Hey! I think you broke it," Max exclaimed. "Now you're in trouble!"

"Only if they know who did it," his sister reminded. She grabbed her art case. "C'mon, let's get outta here. We gotta find Daddy 'fore the men in the white coats come and take him away."

"The lady had a white coat," Max said worriedly. "And she took Lucy and Dad away."

"Hurry, Max! Minx says they're being kidnapped! I don't want them to go to the funny farm," Aleta whined.
"Where's the funny farm? And what's so funny about it?"

His sister shrugged. "I dunno. Hunter says it's where all the crazy people are."

"Dad ain't crazy! And neither is Lucy!"

"That's why we gotta save 'em!" she grabbed Max's hand and towed them out of the room.

They emerged into a short hallway with lots of doors on either side. They were just about to go into the room directly across from them when they heard loud footsteps.

"Hide!" Max yelped. "It's a crazy!

"Where?"

"Trickster says this way!"

The two toddlers ran into a large room with vending machines and posters of anatomy on the walls.

Aleta scrunched up her face. "Eew! This art wall is 'sgustig, Max! Where's the unicorns? And hearts n'flowers? And kitties? How can you have an art wall with no kitties?"

"Maybe they like skulls and guts?" Max said.

"Yuck! Minx says they're nasty! Who wants to see that?"

"It doesn't have any glitter either," her brother observed. "And those colors are boring."

Aleta nodded. Then her gray eyes went wide. "Max! Look! They gots a picture of some man's naked butt!"

Max giggled. "How'd they get it?"

"Maybe they walked in on him in the shower," Aleta mused. "You did to Daddy."

"I couldn't help it! I had to use the potty real bad and Sam was in the other one," Max defended. "What didja want me to do, pee on the floor?"

"Why not? You did that already."

He glared at her. "I was sick. Least I didn't barf all over my bed and Dad like you."

"Daddy said it was okay, Maximus!" Aleta snapped. "An' I'm not gonna 'scuss it anymore, so there!" she crossed her arms over her chest and frowned. Minx seemed to frown too.

"You started it by talking about that guy's naked butt!"

"So? I'm not the one going around showing his butt to the world. He needs to put some clothes on." Aleta said primly.

"Uh huh. 'Fore they arrest him," Max said. "Like they did old Mr. Hooper when he ran down the street naked on Halloween last year."

"I don't 'member that!"

"You fell asleep and missed it. But I was lookin' out Sam's window and we saw the whole thing!"
Max reported. "But Sam covered my eyes when he went by. Said I didn't need to see the old man's junk on display."

"Who cares? You see yours everyday."

Max shrugged. "Sam's weird sometimes. So... let's put some clothes on him."

Aleta opened the art case and passed out some glitter magic markers and stickers. "Shoulda brought the Bedazzler," she muttered.

Together the two children drew all over the wall with the anatomy posters. They put clothes over all the places where clothes should be, coloring pants, shorts, and shirts. Aleta put a dress on one poster then drew a unicorn and kitten next to it.

Max drew a wolf and then a frog. Then he made some Wild Things.

Aleta added some shiny butterfly stickers and hats.

"There! That looks much better!" she said, pleased. "Now nobody's butt's hanging out."

"I'm hungry." Max complained.

"Me too," Aleta sighed. "But all the food's locked up. How rude!"

"They must all starve in this place."

"Let's go see if they have a kitchen," Aleta announced.

They ran out into the hallway and spotted a large metal cart with wheels. On the bottom part were white sheets. But the top held some trays with plastic covers. Max stood on tiptoe. "What's in there?"

"Let's find out," Aleta said, and she climbed up the side and pushed a cover off. "It's food! Max, here's a hamburger!"

"Where? I want one!" He climbed up the other side and pushed off the other cover. "Gross! This one has something that looks like dog puke! Then he spotted something else. "Chocolate pudding!"

"Hey, can I have some?" Aleta asked, chewing on the hamburger, ketchup smearing her nose.

"Finders keepers, losers weepers," Max recited something that Vince always said.

"You're mean, Maximus! Sharing is caring!"

"Then why ain't you sharing your burger, Aleta?"

"Okay! You can have half... if you give me half the pudding. I only gots yucky lime JELLO."

Max made a gagging noise. "Gross! Dad never buys that."

"Cause Dad knows it makes us barf." She tore the hamburger in half. "Here."

Max took it and bit it. "Mmm!" Then he ripped off the top of the pudding container. "Take some."

"How? We need spoons, silly!"
"Why? Just eat it with your fingers."

"And get my dress dirty? Don't be dumb! Boys! So messy!"

Max stuck his tongue out. "Girls! So bossy!"

Aleta found a plastic spoon on the tray and began to eat the pudding.

When she had eaten half, she passed the container to Max who ate the rest by licking his fingers.

Aleta clucked at him. "You'd better wash your hands. Dad's gonna have a fit."

"Where's the bathroom?"

Aleta went down to another door and pushed it open. Luckily it was a bathroom.

Max ran inside.

Three minutes later he came back, his hands clean. "Uh oh."

"What do you mean, uh oh?"

"Umm . . . I kinda used too much soap . . . and now it's running all over the sink and the floor."

"Yikes! Let's get outta here!"

They ran into yet another room. This one had a strange machine in it with black drapes and lots of funny knobs.

"Whoa!" exclaimed Aleta. "What's that?"

"Looks like the 'lectric machine that Dr. Frankenstein used to bring his monster alive," Max said.

"Really? Let's bring Trickster and Minx alive!"

"All right!" Max studied the machine. "I think you gotta put them under the black drape on this clear thing."

Aleta dragged a chair over and pulled the drape back. She put her lokitty on the clear table thing and then Max did the same with his wolf. Then she threw the drape over the stuffed toys. "Now what? Nothing's working."

"I think we gotta turn some knobs." Max said.

"Hurry! Minx is scared of the dark."

"Huh? She's a cat. They can see in the dark."

"So? She's a baby."

Max turned some knobs and pushed a switch. The machine began to light up and flash glowing images on the wall.

"Ooh! Pretty!"

"It's al-i-ive!" Max yelled.
"Why are you screaming? I'm not deaf!"

"S'what you're supposed to do." Max said loftily. "Now we pull back the cover!"

He yanked off the drape.

Aleta scowled. "Liar! They ain't alive!"

"I never said it would work!" Max said indignantly. He picked up Trickster.

Aleta grabbed Minx. "Maybe the machine is broken?"

"Uh oh." Max said. "Let's go!"

The two intrepid explorers raced out of the X-Ray room. They were trying to decide where to go next when a door opened right down the hall and a rather irate Loki came out.

"Maximus! Aleta! Where have you two been?" he demanded.

"Looking for you," Max replied.

"Yeah the lady in the white coat took you away," Aleta cried.

"No one took me away. C'mere!" he knelt and held out his arms and the twin troublemakers ran into them. "You scared me to death! I thought I lost you!"

"We weren't lost, Daddy. We knew where we were the whole time," Aleta said sagely.

"Is Lucy fixed yet?" Max asked.

"No. The doctor is doing some X-rays."

"What's that?"

"Uh . . . it's when they use a machine to see your bones," Loki explained.

"Yuck! Daddy, the people who live here are weird," Aleta sniffed. "They hang pictures of men's naked butts on their walls!"

"W-What?" Loki gaped at her.

"Yeah, but we fixed them and gave them clothes so they wouldn't get arrested," Max said.

Loki put his face in his hands, laughing uncontrollably. "By the Nine, but you two are going to turn my hair white before you even go to school."

He carried them back inside the exam room. "Now . . . we have to wait here until the doctor comes back with Lucy."

"Dad, can you read the book to me?" Max asked, handing him Where the Wild Things Are.

Loki took a seat on the exam table and with a little one on each side, began to read.

"The nict Max wore his wolf suit and made mischief of one kind . . . and another . . ."

"Yup! That's Max!" Aleta nodded to Minx.
"Who asked you, Aleta?"

"Hush! Do you want to hear the story or not?" their father asked.

They grew quiet and Loki continued, "His mother called him "WILD THING!" and Max said, "I'll eat you up!" . . ."

As Loki continued reading, a puzzled orderly said to a nurse in the hallway, "I don't understand it. I went to answer a phone call and when I came back I found the cart like this!"

"And there was a flood in the bathroom. I had to call the janitor," the nurse said.

Later a tech discovered strange pictures in the last X-Ray room—of a silhouette of a cat and a wolf. Then Dr. Braden went down to get some candy from the vending machine and nearly had a coronary because someone had defaced all the anatomy charts. But no one had seen or heard anything.

Finally a nurse decided the hospital must be haunted. For who but a poltergeist could play tricks like that without being seen?

Chapter End Notes

some text quoted from Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice Sendak
Chapter Summary

More mischief occurs with Aleta and Max as Lucy gets her cast and Hunter's goat herd duties start and something goes really wrong!

8

Of Casts and Goats

Children are like goats—you can't turn your back on them if you still want your house in one piece—Loki

As Loki read about Max's adventures with the Wild Things, doing the appropriate sounds and voices for each scene, a few MA's and nurses gathered outside the exam room to listen.

"Who is that in there?" one sighed. "His voice . . . I could listen to him read my phone book!"

"Is it a famous actor?" guessed another.

"Uh . . . he's the dad of the little girl with the broken arm. I think his name is Laufeyson."

"Laufeyson?" exclaimed the younger MA. "That's the guy who invented Asgardian Quest! He's like . . . a billionaire video game designer!" She clasped a hand to her chest. "I can't believe he's here! I wonder if he'd mind signing my notepad? My boyfriend will be sooo jealous that I got to meet him. We're like obsessed with that game."

"I've never played it. But he seems like a nice guy. Not pushy like some rich folks."

"Who's he reading to?"

"His other two kids. I'm guessing they're his youngest."

The young MA's face fell. "Aww, you mean he's married?"

"What, you thought he was free to date?" laughed the older nurse.

"I kinda hoped," she sighed.

Inside the room, Loki had finished reading and suggested Max and Aleta draw quietly on the floor.

"Dad, why's it taking forever to fix Lucy?" Aleta wanted to know.

"Because the hospital is busy," he answered. "Why don't you and Max make Lucy a get well card while we wait here?"

"Okay! Minx says we need to put a big heart on it for lots of love," Aleta said excitedly.
"Trickster thinks we need to put arms on it so they can hug Lucy," Max put in. "Hugs always make me feel good."

Aleta took a piece of paper from her art case and folded it carefully in half. Then she drew a large red heart in the middle. "Here. You can draw the hug, Max."

While his little mischief makers discussed what else to draw on the card, Loki sent a text to Thor and the other Avengers, telling them what had happened in their absence. He then reopened his book and began to read.

Soon a small hand was tugging on his shirt. "Daddy, lookit! We made Lucy a card. Only we can't write in it good—so we need you to."

"Just a minute. I need to find out what happens to Clay Basket."

"Huh?"

"The Indian girl I'm reading about."

"When are you gonna be done?"

"In a minute. Just wait."

A minute went by.

"Daddy! It's been forever!"

"Forever can't be counted, spark. Trust me on that." Knowing he wouldn't be able to read in peace until he assisted his impatient minx, he set aside his phone. "Okay. What shall I write?" he asked, taking out his gold ballpoint pen.

"Uh . . . Feel better soon . . . Love Aleta and Max?"

"Max, do you want to add anything?"

"Um . . . from Trickster and Minx too."

Loki wrote as directed, also writing Lucy's name at the top. "Beautiful! Now put it in your art case, Aleta, we'll give it to her when we get home."

"Dad, we need to fix the tree house," Max stated, his little face serious.

"I know. We probably should rip that one apart and build a brand new one."

"You know how to build a tree house?" Max asked, wide-eyed.

"Your uncles do and they can help me. We'll make a better tree house for you to play in. With built in safety features so this won't happen again," Loki vowed.

The two cheered.

"Can we put a tower in?" Aleta asked.

"I want to put in an elevator," Max said.

Loki's eyebrows rose. "An elevator? Kiddo, this is a tree house, not a hotel."
"Yeah but if we had an elevator, then nobody could get hurt falling from climbing a ladder."

"Hmmm. You do have a point, scamp. I'll think about it."

"Can we put furniture in it?" Aleta asked. "An' a fridge?"

"What do you think this is—the magic tree house? Next thing I know you're going to want a bathroom and a TV."

"Yeah we need that too," Aleta said decisively. "So Max doesn't pee on the tree."

"Shut up! I never did that."

"Vince peed in the rhododendron."

"Hey, no arguing. What do you mean, Vince peed in the rhododendron?"

"That was last year. When the pipes broke and we couldn't use the bathroom," Max answered.

"And I'm only finding out now?" his father groaned.

"See, Daddy? We need a bathroom in the tree house. Cause boys pee like dogs on fire hydrants."

"I do not, Aleta!" Max cried indignantly. "I don't lift my leg when I pee!"

Out in the hallway, all the MA's and nurses burst out laughing.

So did Loki. "Scamps, you two are killing me!" he giggled. "Aleta, where did you hear that um... expression?"

"From Aunt Tasha."

"Ah. That makes sense." Loki coughed.

Before they could discuss the tree house further, the door opened and Dr. Chamberlain, his aide, and Lucy returned.

Loki hopped off the table and came to see his child and the doctor. "What did the X-rays show?"

"Good news," the doctor said. "Lucy has a torus fracture. This is also called a "buckle" fracture. The topmost layer of bone on one side of the bone is compressed, causing the other side to bend away from the growth plate. This is a stable fracture, meaning that the broken pieces of bone are still in position and have not separated apart. So basically it means we won't need to do any surgery, just put it in a cast and let it heal on its own."

Lucy was awake now, groggy, but she seemed to be calmer and not in as much pain. She reached over with her good hand to grab Loki's and said, "Dad, the doctor says I can have a purple cast."

"A purple cast? I'm sure you'll be the envy of all the girls in your class with that," Loki smiled, relief and love glowing in his emerald eyes. Thank the Norns she didn't need to have surgery.

Lucy nodded happily, but then frowned. "Dad, how can I do my hair with only one arm? I need two to braid it."

"Sunshine, you know that your sisters will be happy to help you. And I know how to braid hair too."
"Sisters?" the pediatrician looked puzzled. "You have more kids?"

Loki chuckled. "Nine, last time I counted. There's six others home. Three girls and three boys."

"You and your wife must have been busy," the doctor laughed.

"Dad's not married," Lucy put in. "We're all adopted."

"You . . . adopted all those children?" gaped Dr. Chamberlain.

The god nodded calmly. "I did. Not all at once, but gradually."

"That's amazing!" said a nurse. "How do you manage all of them?"

Loki looked at her with a straight face and replied, "Mind control."

The adults burst out laughing. "That's a good one!" chortled the physician. "Need to remember that."

Max ran up and said, "Lucy, you're awake! Is your arm fixed?"

"Hey, Max. Not yet but the doctor's gonna put a purple cast on it so it gets better."

"Ooo! I wanna see!" Aleta cried, running over.

"We have to make the cast, honey," explained a nurse.

"How long will she have to wear it, doctor?" Loki queried.

"Around 4-6 weeks," he answered. "Since this wasn't a bad fracture, she doesn't need the full twelve. And she's young, kids her age heal quickly."

"Good to know. When can this cast be put on?"

"Now, actually. We have all the materials here," Chamberlain replied. "If you'll follow me down here . . ."

Loki went to push Lucy in her wheelchair after the doctor, calling, "Max, Aleta follow me."

Aleta started to, then cried, "Dad, I forgot my art case and Minx in the other room!"

"All right. Go hurry up and get it."

"And I left Trickster!" Max realized.

The two scampered back into the room to grab their pets and their art supplies.

When they raced into the hallway, they saw their father, sister, and the doctor entering another room down the hall. "C'mon, Max! I wanna see the purple cast!"

They shoved open the door and saw Lucy surrounded by several nurses. Loki stood off to the side, observing, one hand resting on the back of her wheelchair.

"Daddy, we can't see!" Aleta whined.

"Yeah there's too many legs in the way," Max groused.
"Sorry, but there's not much I can see either," Loki told them. "Why don't you go and play in that corner until they're done?"

Reluctantly they went to the opposite side of the room, and Max muttered, "Trickster says this sucks! We never get to do what we want."

"Minx says it's boring and when can we get to do something fun?" Aleta grumbled.

Max slid his gaze over to where the doctor and the ladies in the white coats were all gathered around Lucy. Their father was now part of the circle, holding their sister's hand and talking softly to her. "Trickster is thirsty," he told Aleta. "Let's find a water cooler."

"Where? There's nothing in here," his sister pointed out.

"Maybe there's one in the hallway."


The two darted around the knot of adults and eased the door open and crept out into the hallway.

"This reminds me of the pinata we made last year for Serena's birthday," Loki recalled, trying to keep Lucy distracted while the team of nurses wrapped her forearm in soft cotton and then a waterproof sleeve while others mixed up a bucket of purple fiberglass and water.

"Remember how you got green and pink dye all over your hands and couldn't get it off for a week?" Lucy giggled.

"Yes, and your uncle said I looked like a Mardi Gras clown," her father chuckled. "But at least I didn't have rainbow hair."

"Rainbow hair?" one of the MA's laughed.

"My brother unwisely allowed my youngest two to give him a makeover while visiting a few weeks ago. He fell asleep while they were braiding his hair and woke up looking like Rainbow Dash from My Little Pony," Loki related gleefully. "Thor's a personal trainer and a bodybuilder, so it was hilarious. I have blackmail pictures."

"Your brother's name is Thor? And isn't your name Loki?"

"Yes, and I know what you're thinking. We're originally from Norway, so they're common names over there. And my parents were mythology professors, so . . ." Loki quickly spun a plausible explanation for his and Thor's names, thinking of the expression on Odin's face if he knew he'd been compared to a mortal professor of made-up stories. It amused his adopted son so much he couldn't stop smirking.

He watched as the doctor and his staff wrapped the purple fiberglass strips around Lucy's arm from wrist to elbow. As Chamberlain did so, he explained that he had left it a bit looser than usual to allow for swelling, since usually a broken arm would have inflammation in the beginning. "This way the cast won't be too tight, and risk cutting off circulation. But it's not loose enough to slide all over once the swelling goes down. You can give her some aspirin or children's Tylenol or Advil if she has pain, and I'd like her to keep the arm elevated on a pillow for the first three days, that will help the swelling."

"Can she get this cast wet?"
"Yes. It's waterproof so she can shower with it and the sleeve we put inside is waterproof too, so no worries there."

Loki looked relieved. "I thought I might have to put a plastic bag over it or something when she went to take a shower or bath."

"With the old ones, you would have. But these new ones are a lot easier to deal with," said a nurse.

They finished putting the strips on and then said they needed to wait about ten minutes for it to dry. The cast gleamed wetly in the light, a shade like spring violets.

Lucy looked at it admiringly. "Can you write on it?"

"Oh, yes. You can draw with markers or stickers and have your friends and family sign it," said the pediatrician.

"Cool!" she said happily. "Hey, Aleta and Max! You can draw stuff on my cast!"

Loki turned to glance across the room where he had seen his youngest children playing a mere ten minutes ago. Only to realize to his alarm that they were nowhere in sight. The art case lay on the floor next to Max's book, but the children were gone.

"Not again!" he groaned. "I swear, I'm going to have to put tracking chips on those two like you do for runaway dogs and cats!"

"Dad, maybe they went to use the potty?" Lucy suggested.

"At the same time? More likely they went on another exploring trip," Loki sighed. "I apologize, but I need to find them before they wreck something."

"Oh, Mr. Laufeyson, I'm sure they haven't gone far," began a nurse. "We can help you look for them. Rebecca, Sara, check the ladies room down the hall."

"I'll go look in the men's room," Loki said. *Maybe I'll get lucky and find Max in there. Oh, who am I kidding? Those two imps are never where you think and always somewhere they shouldn't be.* "Lucy, you wait here until I find your brother and sister."

"Okay, Dad."

Loki started for the door along with Sara and Rebecca. *That's twice in one day!* He thought exasperatedly. *When I find them they're going to get a good talking to and a time out. Hopefully before they break something.*

Just then the door opened and a tall nurse with blond hair came into the room, holding his missing imps by the hands. "Mr. Laufeyson, I found these two down by the rec center having wheelchair races in the hallway," she told him.

"They did what?" he sputtered. He gave Max and Aleta a Disappointed Look. "Okay, where did you get them?"

"A nice grandma in the TV room said I could borrow hers," Aleta defended.

"And the old man with no teeth said I could have his," Max added. "Then he bet his friend in the other chair a dollar if I could beat Aleta down the hallway."
"You have patients running a betting pool?" Loki asked, his mouth twitching in amusement.

The blond nurse just groaned. "Remy and Titus. They're here for physical therapy for their knee replacement. They'll bet on whether the wind will blow a leaf north or south. I think one of them used to be a dealer in a casino. I'm sure they encouraged your children to race each other. And Minnie would have gladly helped, she's recovering from foot surgery and has rehab for two weeks."

"Believe me, these two don't need any encouragement," Loki said. "Well? What do you two have to say for yourselves?"

"We were bored," Max said.

"Yeah there was nothing to do," Aleta cried. "We've been here forever and Minx was thirsty."

"An hour and a half," Loki corrected.

"That's forever, Dad," Max pointed out.

"Nice try, but I'm bored isn't an excuse to wander off looking for trouble," the Asgardian scolded. "You could have gotten lost or kidnapped," he continued, though a part of him was thinking that anyone who kidnapped his two mischief makers would be begging to send them home after two hours. "Do you want someone to take you away?"

"No, sir," Max said, hanging his head.

"No, Daddy," Aleta looked at her sneakers.

"If you keep running off without me that's what's going to happen. And you'll never see me or your brothers or sisters or Uncle Thor again."

"No! We don't want to be taken away to the funny farm!" Aleta yelped.

Loki bit his lip hard. _Don't laugh, Laufeyson._ "No? Well, they're going to come and take me away if you keep this up."

"No way! You're not crazy, Dad." Max objected.

"Not yet, but I will be if you keep disappearing. Is that what you want?"

Both scamps shook their heads. "We'll be good!" Max sniffled remorsefully. "Right, Aleta?"

The little girl's lower lip trembled. "M'sorry!" Then she added, "It was Minx's idea."

"Then Minx can be in time out with you and Max, little miss. Now go and sit against the wall and put your hands in your lap and no talking for four minutes."

"I hate time out!" Max sulked, dragging his feet over to the wall.

"Next time do as you're told," Loki informed him.

Behind him, the young MA who had wanted to date him whispered, "He can put me in time out anytime he likes! As long as I can stare at him instead of a wall."

"Christine!" hissed Sara.

"What? Don't you think he's fine? I think he's the hottest thing since fire was invented."
"Christi-i-ne! Shut up, he'll hear you!"

Loki waited until both children had done as he had ordered before turning around and saying, with a regretful little smile, "Kids! Today they're pushing all my buttons."

"I've been there," laughed the doctor.

"I'd like to push his buttons," purred Christine longingly.

"Christine!"

"I think your cast is dry, sweetie," said Rebecca. She ran a hand down the purple cast. "Perfect!" She uncapped a black Sharpie and handed it to Loki. "Would you like to do the honors, Mr. Laufeyson?"

"Of course." Loki took the marker and knelt beside Lucy. Then he wrote in his elegant flowing script the following message:

\[ \text{Father's glory, burning bright, the shadow fades, from darkness light, always a treasure, my heart's delight ~ Love Dad} \]

Then he drew a stylized sun beneath it.

"I love it!" Lucy squealed and threw her good arm about her father and hugged him.

"Where's that from?" asked Rebecca.

"My head," Loki answered.

"You just made that up?"

"I'm a bit of a wordsmith," he replied modestly.

"A bit? I couldn't write like that if my life depended on it."

"You should read my daughter Belle's work. She's a better writer than I am," Loki said proudly.

"I think you should write books instead of video games," gushed Christine. "Mr. Laufeyson, could I have your autograph?" She held out her notebook.

"My autograph? Have I suddenly become a celebrity?" he teased.

"You invented \textit{Asgardian Quest}. To a gamer like me it's like an English teacher meeting Byron."

"I had no idea." He took her pen and signed his name with his customary flourish.

Christine hugged the notebook as if it were a million dollars, her eyes shining with hero-worship.

Loki gave her a gentle smile, and she nearly passed out at his feet. Once he might have welcomed that utter adoration, but he knew such things didn't last, and if he ever sought a wife, it would be one who stood at his side, as an equal, not a suppliant. Besides, he had three children who needed some dinner and their beds, and he felt as if he had been wrestling with the Hulk.

"Here. This is my business card with the date of my upcoming release of \textit{Asgardian Quest 2}. Give me your address and I'll mail you a test copy before I launch it." He handed her one of his cards, which was a mint green with a gold serpentine border and a stylized runic L for Laufeyson Tech.
"Really? I'll get a copy before it's available to buy?"

"Yes. I need people to test the game and rate it before I start my marketing campaign. You can use
the VR helmet that came with the first game to play this one."

"Oh, Mr. Laufeyson! I think I'm gonna die!"

"Please don't. If you're dead you can't preview my game," he laughed. "Thank you all for taking
such good care of my Lucy."

Then he turned to see what his two imps were doing and saw they were half-asleep. Apparently
all their exploring had exhausted them.

It was definitely time to go home.

After receiving written instructions on how to care for Lucy's arm, he picked up Max and Aleta,
while Sara pushed Lucy down the hall to the hospital entrance, then waited while Loki put his
drowsy scamps into the van and then drove up to get Lucy.

Lucy was delighted with the card Aleta and Max had made for her. Her siblings signed her cast
and drew silly pictures on it while she and Loki ate the shrimp macaroni salad, stuffed clams, and
Caesar salad for dinner. As a treat, he had stopped at Dairy Queen and gotten blizzards for
everyone.

"Your cast looks way cool," Serena said. "That's the color I'd have gotten." One of her favorite
colors was purple. "Does your arm hurt?"

"Not so much. Dad gave me some Advil," her sister told her, admiring the way her cast was
decorated. "I'm going to have to let Uncle Thor and the Avengers sign this too."

"That would be awesome," Nate smiled.

"Dad says we're gonna rebuild the treehouse," Lucy informed them.

"Yes! I have some cool designs I can draw," her brother said excitedly. "I just need some graph
paper."

When the Avengers returned, they all congregated over at the town house. After signing their
niece's cast, they pored over possible models for the tree house, including the one Nate had made
—which had a winding ramp so he could go into it as well. The one they finally ended up
choosing had a peaked roof, and two mini round towers at each end. It sported the ramp with no-
skid treads, plenty of railings and a set of clever stairs that could be raised and lowered at the touch
of a button. Inside there was a table and some chairs, some built in beds and a trunk where they
kept their dress up costumes and items. And in one of the towers was a small magical bathroom
with a toilet that vanished the contents when you flushed it.

That was Loki's contribution. "I had to save my rhododendron," was all he said when asked.

The new and improved Laufeyson tree house was the envy of all the other kids in the
neighborhood. They all wanted to play in it, but the children only allowed the kids who were
well-behaved and hadn't teased or made fun of them do so. If anyone else tried to play in it, they
were repelled by Loki’s KEEP OUT spells, which would firmly propel any trespasser some five
feet away from the tree house, dumping them swiftly on their behinds on the grass. More than one
troublemaker ended up with a sore butt before realizing that the KEEP OUT sign meant what it
said.
About two weeks after the Rapunzel Crash and Burn Incident, which was how Vince referred to it, Bruce pronounced Hunter well enough to come to the mansion and start doing his punishment with Thor's goats. The boy wore his oldest pair of faded jeans, hiking boots, and an old green and gold flannel of Loki's over a white T-shirt. Loki also provided him with a green bandanna.

"What's that for?"

"You're going to need it to keep out the dust and mute some of the smell." His father advised. "You've never lived on a farm, city boy. Oh, and these too." He handed Hunter some sturdy work gloves.

"Gloves? Dad, I'm not shoveling snow."

"No, you're shoveling manure and straw. Which is just as hard on your hands. You want blisters? Your hands aren't used to this kind of work, kid. Put the gloves on. You'll thank me when you don't come home crying over how bad your hands hurt and I need to soak them and put yarrow salve on them."

"Seriously?" Hunter asked in disbelief.

"You don't believe me? Don't wear them and see."

"No thanks! That yarrow salve stings like a mother!"

"It disinfects," Loki explained. "That's why it stings a little."

"It's as bad as peroxide," Hunter shuddered. He would wear the gloves. Loki's Asgardian medicines always worked, but Hunter didn't always like how they did so.

Hunter found Thor waiting at the goat pen, which was situated in the back of the mansion, some twenty-five feet away from the house. The pen was built of sturdy metal bars and had a gate with a lock. "They're clever about escaping," Thor explained. "Like your father, they enjoy causing mischief."

Hunter laughed. The pen was quite large, almost as big as a paddock for a horse, for Thor's goats were magical and larger than normal. Tanngrisnýr and Tanngjóstr were similar in appearance to a long-haired Norwegian goat. Tanngrisnýr was snowy white from horns to fetlocks, a white so dazzling Hunter had to squint when the sun shone directly upon the thick fur. He had large black horns and alert gold eyes. His brother, Tanngjóstr, was spotted a rich cocoa and white, and his horns were the color of old parchment. He had blue eyes. Both goats wore collars with bells and ID tags. Just in case they managed to get out and wander the streets of the city. They were the size of small ponies, and they jostled and bleated as they came up to the fence.

Thor scratched them both between their horns. "They want to see who I've brought to them. Let me introduce you." He unlatched the pen and let Hunter inside. "Give them this," he handed him two carrots.

Then he had each goat approach his nephew and smell the boy, Hunter petted him, then gave him a carrot, and Thor praised the animal for not eating any of their clothes.

"Do they understand English and not just Norse?" Hunter asked.

"They do. Remember, if they ever get out, just grab a bucket with some carrots and lettuce and call, "Tanngjóstr, dinner, and they should come running."

Tanngrisnýr butted Hunter's hand and bleated.
"What's he want?"

"What he always does. Food."

"What do they eat?"

"Anything, really. But they love green vegetables and sugar, which is why I make sure they can't escape and ravage the vegetable garden. Pepper would have my head for a trophy if they got in there and ate up everything. I have special pellets for them in this feed bin." He showed Hunter around the barn. "When you're done cleaning the pen, you can feed and brush them. Tanngnjóstr is vain and loves to look pretty. Tanngrisnr will let you, but he also will nibble you."

"I'll watch my shirt. But this's why I wore what I did. Dad gave me gloves and a bandanna."

"Loki was right to do that. But your hands will toughen up the more you work."

Thor showed him where the shovels and wheelbarrow was kept. "Once you have cleaned out the pen, spread the manure on the pile, then fill the barrow with straw and put it down for them. That's what they sleep on."

Hunter saw two piles of dirty straw in the pen. "Okay." This didn't sound too difficult.

Thor clapped him on the shoulder. "You're ready, Hunter. Do this task well and afterwards we can go for pizza and ice cream."

"You're the best, Uncle Thor."

Thor grinned, and held open the pen, so Hunter could push the wheelbarrow an shovel through the gate. "Tanngnjóstr, stay!" he ordered when the inquisitive animal would have walked out of the pen. "Tanngrisnr, stay!"

Hunter breathed a sigh of relief when the gate latched behind him. Then he went to take the shovel out.

After ten minutes, Hunter knew the reason Loki had told him to use gloves. Shoveling manure was hard work. He also was grateful for the bandanna, which did keep out a lot of the dust and some of the odor of the dung and the smell of goat. He paused to wipe his brow and Tanngrisnr trotted up and nudged him, looking for Thor.

"It's only me, fella," Hunter said, and gave the snowy goat a pat and a scratch between the horns.

Thor had warned him not to bend over, for the goats found a backside a tempting target to not only rip the pants right off of, but to head butt. "They've done that to me more times than I can count. But they mean no harm. They are just being goats."

"Don't you bite me," he warned the goat who was eyeing him thoughtfully. "I don't want to have to walk home with a hole in my pants."

The snowy goat made an odd snickering noise.

Hunter gently pushed his muzzle away. "Go play! And like Peter Rabbit's mom said, "Stay out of Mr. MacGregor's garden and don't get into mischief!"

Tanngrisnr bleated and Hunter snorted. "Yeah, who am I kidding? Asking a goat to behave is like asking the ocean to be calm. They do what they want, like cats and my little sister and brother. Well, till they get in trouble."
He went to shovel the dirty straw into the barrow when he felt something butt his thigh. Turning, he saw Tanngnjóstr, with a naughty gleam in his blue eyes.

"Oh no you don't!" Hunter scolded. "I don't need a sore butt to go with my sore ribs, billy goat. Before I was Loki's son, I had too much of that. Mr. Grimes the orphanage manager used to wallop us boys with a paddle." He pushed the soft nose away from his sleeve. "S'why I ran off and went with Fenris. Got tired of not being able to sit down."

Tanngnjóstr nickered in sympathy and Hunter petted the sleek coat.

Life had been hard on the streets, but better than being Grimes's whipping boy. Although Hunter hadn't had it as bad as poor Max, whose own mother had abused him until she OD'd one night and they had sent the boy to Second Chance. Hunter shook his head, sending the bad memories back to sleep.

Then he resumed shoveling, wincing as his back protested. The two goats followed him, occasionally pushing and butting each other playfully.

Hunter paused to watch, and said softly, "Don't know how Uncle Thor could kill you and eat you for dinner, even if you did come back to life the next morning. Dad says that part of the myth is true." The boy wrinkled his nose. "I could never do that. Even if I was starving."

Tanngnjóstr jumped over his brother, and they chased each other around the pen, making Hunter laugh. The goats reminded him of how he wrestled with Vince and Max.

He finished cleaning out the pen, then went to dump the wheelbarrow, grimacing at the stench. He had to chase the goats away from the gate upon his return with the straw and the buckets of feed, and Tanngrisnr climbed on top of the straw in the barrow and brayed.

"Hey! Get off of there!" Hunter ordered.

The white goat ignored him.

"Get, brat! Or else no supper!" he commanded in his best you'd-better-do-as-you're-told Loki voice.

Tanngrisnr gave him a startled look from his gold eyes "Mmmnyyaah?"

"Yeah, you heard me. Down, mister!" Hunter pointed to the ground.

Tanngnjóstr trotted up and let out an amused sound, as if he was taunting his brother.

Tanngrisnr bared his teeth. "Nyyaaah!"

Hunter rolled his eyes. "Man, you two are like Max and Aleta with fur!" He repeated his command, adding, "Don't make me start counting." By the Nine, I sound like Dad! I'm so glad nobody can hear me.

Tanngrisnr gave him a pathetic look from his slit pupiled eyes then jumped off the straw stack, landing nimbly on the ground. He bleated, his ears lowered.

"Okay, you're sorry. All's forgiven," Hunter coughed and scratched him between his ebony horns.

The snowy goat suddenly put out a long sticky pink tongue and licked Hunter's face.

"Ugh! Goat breath!" the boy cried.
Tanngrisnr made a sound remarkably like laugh. Then he went and knocked his brother down.

Hunter wiped his cheek with his sleeve. "Goat slobber. Yuck!" Then he resumed spreading the straw down, making two cozy beds.

He then grabbed the feed buckets, which contained a mixture of goat pellets, lettuce, carrots, and beets.

As soon as he did so, the two goats quit battering each other and ran at the boy.

"Hey! HEY!" Hunter yelled just as Tanngnjóstr slid to a stop and sideswiped him in his haste to bury his face in the bucket on the left.

"Oww! Thanks, you greedy pigs!" he scolded. "You almost trampled me."

Tanngnjóstr lifted his muzzle, strings of beets dangling from his jaws, and made a guilty snort. Then he nuzzled Hunter's shoulder.

"Sure, now you're sorry," the boy grumbled. "Silly goat!"

Tanngrisnr continued eating, oblivious.

Hunter climbed to his feet, dusted himself off and said, "Phew! I stink!"

Tanngnjóstr gave an insulted bleat.

"I'm not a goat," Hunter said. "Guess I'd better groom you now."

To his delight, the brown and white goat squared up, and Hunter found it very easy to comb the thick coat, taking out all the dust, burrs, and knots until Tanngnjóstr had smooth and shiny fur.

Hunter could have sworn the goat preened afterwards.

His brother gave him a long suffering look from his gold eyes when the boy approached with the brush, making Hunter smile. "You look like Max when he doesn't want to take a bath when Dad told him." He tugged gently on the snowy beard. "Be good, okay?"

Tanngrisnr heaved a sigh and then submitted, allowing Hunter to remove all the prickers and dirt from the beautiful snowy coat.

Hunter stepped back, examining the goat. "You're good, buddy. You look like you could be in a parade."

Tanngnjóstr snorted, as if to say yeah right.

That's when Tanngrisnr bit him, and the two scuffled playfully.

"There goes your makeover," sighed Hunter. Then he shrugged. "Okay, boys, it's time for me to go eat pizza. But I need a shower first and I'm glad I brought extra clothes cause these smell like I was rolling in roadkill."

He waved and unlatched the gate, slowly pushing the wheelbarrow out and then made sure the latch locked behind him. The goats quite playing and ran to stand on the bars, bleating sadly.
"Sorry, fellas. Gotta go, but I'll be back tomorrow."

Hunter took off his boots before he entered the mansion, as well as his gloves. His hands were sore and red, but thanks to the gloves, no worse.

He shuddered to think what they would have looked like without them, and silently thanked Loki for making him wear them.

After his shower, Hunter found Thor waiting for him downstairs. "So, nephew, how did you find your first day as a goat keeper?"

"It was kind of . . . fun," Hunter admitted. "Hard, but the goats are funny." He told Thor about all their antics.

Then the Thunder God asked, "Are you hungry?"

"I could eat a whole pepperoni pie!"

"Then let's go get some." His uncle said. "But first, let me see your hands." He examined them. "Hmm, they're sore but you'll live. Tomorrow will be better." He clapped Hunter on the shoulder gently.

They walked to Tony's Trattoria and ordered three large pies. One pepperoni, one extra cheese and bacon, and one with the works. They devoured them down to the last crumbs, along with huge sodas. The waitress nearly passed out from shock.

"Mmm! That was great but I can't believe I ate the whole thing!" Hunter said, rubbing his stomach.

"Hard work builds up an appetite," Thor chuckled. "Let's go for a walk and then we'll get you some ice cream."

"Sure!"

By the time they had eaten their ice cream, Hunter was feeling sleepy and yawning uncontrollably. So when they returned to the mansion, Thor told him to lie down.

"But . . . don't I have other chores to do?" the boy asked, not wanting to renege on their deal.

"You do, but not today. You're still recovering, nephew, and your father would have my head on a plate if I overworked you. So go take a nap."

Hunter didn't need to be told twice.

When Loki came to pick him up, he was still asleep. "I guess those goats really tired him out, huh?"

Thor looked down at the sleeping boy fondly. "He'll get used to it. I took him out for pizza and ice cream so he won't be hungry for supper."

Loki chuckled. "Hunter is always hungry, Thor. Did he do a good job?"

"He did. Tanngrisnr and Tanngnjóstr like him. And he seems to like them."

"Good. He needs to get out more," Loki was pleased. He bent to shake his son awake. "Hey, wolfling, time to wake up."
Hunter moaned and huddled into the couch cushion. "Mmmm . . . five more minutes, Dad . . ."

Loki shook his head. "C'mon, son. I have to get home. Before Max and Aleta touch something else." He gently blew in his son's ear.

"Da-a-d!" the boy groaned. "M'tired!"

"Oh, all right." The sorcerer sighed. "Good thing I can 'port me and another person." Then he bent and picked up his son, cradling him in his arms.

Hunter snuggled into him, still mostly asleep.

"We'll be back tomorrow, Thor," Loki promised, then he teleported back home, his son snoozing on his shoulder.

Thor was right, Hunter did adjust after about three days, and then besides keeping the goats, he added using the manure to mulch the flowerbeds about the grounds as part of Hunter's duties. That the boy didn't like half as much, but he knew it was a fair punishment and anyone else would have thrown him in juvie for what he had done.

By the second week, Hunter was as comfortable around Tanngrisnr and Tanngnjóstr as he would have been the family dog, and the goats ran to meet him when he arrived in the morning and bleated unhappily when he went home. That Saturday, Vince asked if he could see the goats, and Loki agreed, after telling Hunter to watch that his brother didn't try anything crazy.

Vince was Loki's daredevil, the one who wasn't afraid of anything, probably because he could see and speak with ghosts. He was the reason Loki had their pediatrician, Dr. Mickelson, on speed dial on his phone. As Loki often lamented, "If somebody dared Vince to jump off the Brooklyn Bridge, he'd not only agree, he'd ask if he could do it backwards with his eyes shut." And yet for all his reckless ways, Vince was one of the top students in his class. And he had a fondness for animals, especially ones that no one wanted because they were ugly, or old, or had some kind of defect.

So he was quite excited to help Hunter with the goats, though his brother kept telling him it was not his job to care for Tanngrisnr and Tanngnjóstr. "It's mine. You know why," Hunter sighed.

"I know it's supposed to be a punishment, but can't I at least feed them?" Vince begged. The seven-year-old was walking on the top of the fence and the two goats were running alongside.

"All right. Now get down from there. If you fall and break your neck, Dad will beat me."

"Dad's never beaten any of us," Vince rolled his eyes. "And I can walk this with my eyes closed. You forget I used to climb all over the roof back at the orphanage?"

"No. You almost gave Nasty Nan a heart attack," Hunter grinned.

His brother smirked, his deep blue eyes dancing. Then he jumped down into the pen, showing no fear when the two goats came over to sniff and brush against him. "Hey, guys. What's up?" The little boy patted Tanngrisnr on the head, laughing when the goat licked him. Then he scratched Tanngnjóstr on the chin and the brown and white goat ate it up, practically flopping over at Vince's feet.

"You sure you can't talk to animals as well as spirits?" Hunter asked.

"I'm sure. Animals just like me. You think Dad will let me go with you to the shelter when you volunteer?"
"Maybe. Right now though I gotta clean the pen."

Vince raced around with the goats while Hunter worked.

Hunter had just finished removing the old straw and happened to glance over to see what Vince and the goats were doing. The shovel fell out of his hand. "Vince Laufeyson! You get off those goats!"

His little brother was standing up bareback, one foot on each goat's back, holding on with a rope he had tied around Tanngrisnir's horns. "Whee! Look at me, Hunter! I'm a goat rider!" The goats were running side by side, devilment gleaming in their eyes.

"Vince! Get down, I mean it! You promised you'd behave."

"Aww Hunter! I am behaving. I'm not hurting them."

"They're not ponies, Vince. Now get down before I get you down," Hunter ordered.

"Okay! Okay! Chill, bro." Vince stopped the goats and jumped off. "You'd have thought I robbed a bank."

"Do me a favor. Try and keep your feet on the ground," Hunter admonished.

"Can I feed them?"

"Yes, here's some treats for them," Hunter said, showing Vince how to feed a goat without getting bitten.

He began to spread the straw about and then pushed the wheelbarrow out of the pen. As he did so, Vince held out his hands for the goats to lick.

The gate swung open for a moment longer than usual. Tanngrisnir saw and like a quarterback diving for the ball in the fourth quarter, sprinted toward the partially open gate.

"Hunter, close the gate," Vince warned.

But Hunter was busy trying to pull the wheelbarrow and didn't hear him.

Tanngrisnir shot through the gap, followed by Tanngrisnir.

Vince followed waving his hand and yelling, "Hunter, the goats are out!"

"Oh Sugar Honey Iced Tea!" Hunter swore. "We gotta get them back."

But the goats were like kids who were released from school early for vacation.

Hunter picked up a bucket and put treats in it and yelled, "Tanngrisnir, dinner!"

The goats however paid no attention. They ran all over the yard, trampling the freshly mulched beds, rolling in a puddle, and nibbling on the laundry that was hanging on the line to dry.

Vince grabbed another bucket and did the same but by this time the goats were too busy exploring to pay attention to the boys.

They called and chased the goats all over, but the magical animals were very quick and fast. They could turn on a dime, and when Vince went to put himself in front of them, they darted around
him, up the stairs, and right into the house.

"Hunter! We have a really big problem!" Vince yelped. "They're in the house!"

Hunter went white as a ghost. "NO! Oh no! Oh no!" He ran into the house as fast as he could.

No sign of the goats. "Tanngrisnir? Tanngnjóstr? C'mere, goats!"

"Here boys! We have treats!" Vince warbled.

Then they heard a loud CRASH from the armory room, which was a room where Tony kept all kinds of suits of armor.

"In there!" Vince yelled and raced down the hall, Hunter hot on his heels.

Vince skidded to a stop before open door of the armory room. Most of the armor was displayed upon stands, some was behind glass. There were all kinds of armor, from chainmail hauberks to scale mail to samurai armor, plate mail and shields, even one that looked like a futuristic one with a bug shaped helmet. Dim lighting illuminated all the armor.

"Um . . . Hunter . . . we're so dead!" He pointed to where the goats had knocked one of Tony's prototype new Iron Man suits off the stand and were atop it, happily crunching and tearing into the chest plate.

The boys stared at each other in horror. Then looked back at the goats who were eating strips of the red and gold suit like they were at an all you can eat buffet.

Hunter buried his face in his hands.

"Dad's gonna kill us!" whimpered Vince.

"Forget Dad!" Hunter cried. "Uncle Tony's gonna rearrange us!"
Chapter Summary

Tony flips out because the goats ate his suit and Loki takes him aside to clarify a few misconceptions.

Discipline should never involve fear. Then you've lost the battle and the trust of your child, and won only enmity. ~ Loki

"What's going on here, guys?"

The two boys turned guiltily to see Steve behind them dressed in jeans, sneakers, and a flag pullover. Vince nearly wilted in relief. "Uncle Steve, we have a problem."

"Anything I can do to help?"

"Not unless you can speak goat," Hunter declared. "Or fix broken suits."

Steve looked puzzled. "Hunter, did something happen with Thor's goats?"

"Yeah. Look in there and you'll see."

Cap did and immediately said, "How did that happen?"

"It wasn't on purpose," Hunter began. "We were feeding them and I was pushing the wheelbarrow out the gate when the goats got out."

"We tried to catch them with food and all but they were too fast," Vince went on. "Then they got in the house and umm .. they ate Uncle Tony's suit."

"Uh, okay. Let's get your Uncle Thor to help us corral those goats, then we'll figure out what to do about Tony's suit." Steve began calmly. "You stay here and keep trying to call them. I'll be right back with Thor."

This made sense, so the boys tried again to get Tanngrisnr and Tanngjostr to come to them.

The snow white goat looked up with a piece of red metal dangling from his mouth, and despite the seriousness of the situation, Vince couldn't help giggling at him.

"My God! What the hell is going on here? My armor!" Tony bellowed. "You bloody goats!" He spun on the two brothers. "Weren't you supposed to be watching them, Hunter? Were you playing instead of doing your work? Is that how they got out of the pen?"

Hunter shrank away from the angry man. "No, they just got out, Uncle Tony."
"It wasn't our fault! They escaped when Hunter was pushing the wheelbarrow out," Vince defended. "We didn't mean to let them escape and eat your suit." He bit his lip to keep from crying.

"You didn't mean to? Do you have any idea how much money just went down the throat of that goat because of your irresponsibility?" Tony was so mad he was practically spitting.

"I'm sorry," Hunter began miserably.

"Yeah well sorry doesn't fix what you broke, boy."

"Don't yell at him!" Vince cried. "It was an accident!"

"You watch your mouth, you little brat! I saw you laughing as that goat ate my suit. I oughta -!

Hunter shoved Vince behind him. "If you wanna hit somebody, hit me. I was in charge -!

"Man of Iron, do not raise your voice at my nephews," Thor ordered, striding into the hallway.

"Thor, your goats ate my new suit and these kids let them out and think it's a big joke -!

"Tony, calm down," Steve began, ever the peacemaker.

While the argument raged, Vince grabbed Hunter's phone from his pocket and crept into the den, where he sent a text to Loki.

Seconds later, the God of Mischief appeared in the den. "It's okay. I'm here."

Vince ran and threw his arms around Loki's waist. "Dad, Uncle Tony's real mad and the goats got out by mistake, and ate his suit . . . ."

Loki knelt and hugged his frightened child while Vince told him what happened. "You're not in trouble, son. I'm going to take you home and then I'll deal with your uncle." Loki's voice was soft but there was steel beneath the velvet.

Loki teleported back home with Vince, saying, "I'll be back with your brother. Go and eat a snack."

Then he vanished, arriving back at the mansion and heading towards the source of the shouting.

His temper spiked when he saw Hunter cringing against a wall while Thor and Steve stood in front of him arguing with Tony, who was flushed with anger.

"Dad?" Hunter said, startled. "The goats, umm . . . ."

"I know, wolfing. I'll fix it." Loki reassured him, then he sidestepped the three Avengers and entered the armory. "Tanngrisnir, Tanngnjostir, come!" He ordered in Norse, using a tone that nothing, not even a pair of stubborn mischievous goats, would disobey.

Tanngrisnir and Tanngnjostir immediately trotted over to him, bleating in recognition. Loki scratched their heads then said, "You haven't forgotten me, have you? Now be good and go home," he opened a portal to their pen and they obediently went through it.

Then he moved over to the ruined suit of armor and drew a few magical runes over it, spoke a Word of Power and the suit was mended. He waved a hand and put it back on it's stand.
He turned and strode over to where Tony was still haranguing his teammates, and spoke in a quiet derisive tone, "By the Nine, Stark, quit acting like some emo teenager who lost his boyfriend. All this fuss over some metal and wires."

"Loki! This is all your kids' fault! If they had been more responsible instead of playing around-"

"Stark, you're out of line," Loki growled. "Your precious suit is no longer damaged. I fixed it, so you can quit the dramatics. No harm done."

"No harm? Those kids need discipline, Master Mischief, something I know you're not a great example of-"

"Man of Iron, you wrong my brother with your words-" Thor interrupted.

"Thor, I can fight my own battles," Loki snapped in Norse. "Look after Hunter. We need to have this discussion in private." His temper skyrocketing, the Asgardian reached out and snagged Tony's sleeve, then teleported them into the kitchen. Waving a hand, he warded the room so no one could hear what was said.

"Listen, Loki, I know you think you ought to be your kids friends but-"

"No, you listen, Stark. I know you think I let my children get away with mischief, but you couldn't be more wrong. I might not fit your idea of a stern disciplinarian, and that's by choice, because I refuse to treat my kids the way I was treated growing up. You want to know why? Because I grew up in a society that believed the way you teach right from wrong is to beat it out of you."

"Laufeyson, no kid ever died from a spanking."

"Stark, I'm not talking about a whack on the backside. I'm talking about being hit with a switch till it left marks. Marks I bear to this day. My father, my tutors, they all thought the answer was to beat the insolence and mischief out of me. But those methods failed. All they taught me was to not get caught, and if I was to lie my way out of it. I learned to fear those in authority, and worse to distrust that they ever cared for me at all. Because their so called caring left me bruised and bleeding, my trust broken, betrayed by the ones who were supposed to protect me." His emerald eyes flashed with bitter gall, like wormwood.

"Loki, I always thought-"

"What? That I was some cosseted spoiled brat? Think again. I was never my father's favorite son. Thor was always his pride and joy, while I was the son he adopted out of pity and some sense of obligation. Oh, he'd claim otherwise, but the proof is written in my flesh. It's not something I can ever forget. And that is why you will never see me raise a hand to any of my children. Because I know it doesn't work. Not on me and not on them. The orphanage manager thought as you did, and his so-called discipline caused Hunter to run away to Fenris, Vince to develop claustrophobia, and Max to develop PTSD so bad he spent the first three months with me hiding under a bed, flinching every time I touched him, and having nightmares. Discipline through fear is wrong. It just breeds enmity. And once you break your child's trust that way, you need to move heaven and Earth to get it back again-if you even can. My father never did. That ought to tell you something."

Tony looked suddenly ashamed. "Loki, I never knew about you or the kids . . ."

"Now you do," he replied in an even tone. "That's also why I don't raise my voice. Because it triggers memories best left sleeping. Also I don't need to shout to get my children to obey. I just need to listen and make sure they understand that even when they're bad I still love them. That they aren't unworthy of being loved and they don't have to earn my love. It will always be there. I
will always be there, the way my parents almost never were. I learned from living here that there are other ways to discipline besides a switch, or tearing apart self-esteem, ways that don't leave marks.

"Yeah, but your kids still get in trouble," Tony coughed.

"They're kids. It's expected. It's also how you learn. I don't demand perfection, Tony. That way I'm never disappointed. I do ask for respect and for them to try not to repeat mistakes they've made. But if they do, then I correct it, gently, until the lesson sticks. It works, not perfectly, but we deal with it."

"I shouldn't have assumed anything. I'm sorry. I think I scared Vince with my screaming."

"You did, a little. It was why he called me. I sent him home." He smirked at the astonishment on the others face. "What you thought I magically divined I should come over? I'm good but not that good."

"Uh, sort of."

"You learn something new everyday," Loki chuckled.

Tony coughed uncomfortably. "I'm sorry I misjudged you. I promise I won't tell anyone what you told me, not even your brother."

"Thor knows. "Loki told him. "I never would have told you if I didn't trust you to keep my secret. Just don't betray me," he warned. "The consequences would not be pleasant."

"You have my word." He reached out and clasped the other's hand. "Friends?"

"Indeed. Now, I think I need to take Hunter home for lunch. I don't like leaving Sam in charge for too long since Max and Aleta could drive an angel to drink."

Tony smiled. "Those two are like monkeys on crack."

Loki giggled. "Too true."

He rose from the chair and together they made their way back to the den, where they found Hunter drinking some soda and listening to Thor tell an amusing tale about the time he went to Jotunheim.

Tony approached Hunter and said, "Hey, Hunter. I just wanted to apologize for overreacting about my suit. Your dad was right, it was an accident. I didn't mean to scare you, sometimes I get loud and obnoxious when I'm upset."

"That's okay, Uncle Tony. I'd been freaking out if Tanngnjóstr had eaten my XBox." His stomach rumbled audibly.

"Sounds like you're ready for lunch, wolfing," Loki observed.

"Yeah. Can we have burgers?"

"With lettuce, cheese, pickles, onions, maple bacon, and special sauce?" Loki teased.

Tony was drooling. "Laufeyson, you make Big Macs?"

"Better. He makes Loki burgers." Hunter licked his lips. "With rosemary sweet potato fries."
"That sounds wonderful. I'll need to try one sometime."

"Why don't you and Uncle Thor come over for lunch?" Hunter suggested.

"Loki, is that okay?"

"Yes"," the Asgardian agreed, though it was a lucky thing he had magic so he could replicate the amount of hamburgers he would need. "Come on, we'd better get home so I can start grilling."

"I can help with that, brother," offered Thor.

Loki gave him a pained look. "Thor, do you remember what happened last time you tried to grill a steak?"

"Oh. Never mind. Tony and I will occupy the kids while you cook, Master Chef."

"Thanks," Loki said, relieved. "At least the fire department won't be paying a visit today."

"Very funny," Thor glared at his brother.

"Just what is in that special sauce, Loki?" Tony wheedled.

"Ah ah, Stark." Loki shook a reproving finger at the Avenger. "That's for me to know and never ever tell."

"Aww! Not even a hint?"

"What good would a secret recipe be if I told what ingredients were in it?"

"May as well give up, Man of Iron. My brother keeps secrets forever."

"Like his chocolate chip cookies," Hunter added. "That recipe is locked up tighter than the treasure vault of Fafnir."

"Seriously? What is so secret about a chocolate chip recipe?" Tony asked, puzzled.

"Nobody bakes chocolate chip cookies like Dad " Hunter boasted. "And there's a secret ingredient in them only he knows."

"You need to taste them, Tony," Thor said. "I could eat two dozen."


"Are you making them too?"

Loki heaved a sigh. "Very well. I'll make the dough and Hunter and Samantha can bake them."

Everyone cheered.

While his older kids baked, Loki made the special sauce, cut up everything else, and made sweet potato fries. He fired up the grill and began cooking burgers, first seasoning them with his own blend of herbs and spices. Once all the burgers were cooked he put the fixings on them and went to call the kids and their uncles to the table.

Only to find Thor and Tony tied with bungee cords and duct tape to chairs.

"By the Nine! How did this happen?"
"Mmmhph!" Thor muttered through the gag.

Loki took the tape off. "What's going on?"

"Uh we were playing Prisoner," Thor told him, flushing.

Loki struggled not to bust out laughing.

"Only you, brother."

He undid the restraints and duct tape.

Then he called the children in for lunch.

They stampeded into the kitchen like a herd of starving buffalo and fell upon the food like locusts.

Soon there remained nothing but scraps on the platters. Then Loki brought out the chocolate chip cookies and they too were devoured.

Loki leaned back in his recliner, munching a handful of cookies and drinking a glass of chocolate milk while the kids cleaned up the kitchen. He felt a pleasant lassitude steal over him. All's well that ends well, he thought drowsily.

Until Thor shook him awake. "Loki, we have a problem."

"What? You eat too many cookies? There's peppermint tea in the cabinet."

"No. Mjolnir's missing."

"Nine Hells, Thor! Not again!"
Where in the World is Mjolnir?

Chapter Summary

Mjolnir is missing again and Loki and Thor must figure out where it is and who has it. But a most unusual visitor shed some light on its whereabouts.

It's an unwritten law of the universe that socks, mittens, and hammers get sucked into forgotten folds of the galaxy—Loki

"Where did you have it last?" a rather irritated Loki demanded, thinking, Norns have mercy, I feel like I'm dealing with Serena or Vince and not a two thousand year old god!

"I put it right down beside the coat rack," Thor answered. "And now it's gone."

Loki rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. "Yggdrasil's Roots, Thor! No one's supposed to be able to handle the darn thing but you, so how is it that it keeps going missing?"

His brother shrugged. "I don't know. You're the one with all the clever answers, Loki, you tell me."

The Master of Mischief sighed and grumbled, "Nine Hells, I'm not Mimir. All right, let's start with the obvious. . . ." he rose gracefully to his feet and called softly, "Maximus, Aleta come here please!"

His two imps promptly tackled him about the knees, yelling, "Dad, you wanna play hide and seek?"

"Maybe later, but I need to ask you an important question," he said, kneeling so he was at eye level with his twin troublemakers.

"What kind of question?" Max wanted to know.

"Do you or Aleta know where Mjolnir is?"

"Uncle Thor put it by the hat rack," the little boy answered promptly.

"Okay . . . did you decorate Mjolnir?"

This time Aleta answered. "No. I need more pink glitter an' we were playing Prisoner 'stead of beauty salon."

"Are you sure?" Loki persisted, though he already knew the two scamps were not lying.

"Well, Mjolnir's playing hide and seek," Loki told him. "And we're trying to find it."

"We can help!" the two chorused.

"You certainly can," their father agreed. "I need you two to go and get all your brothers and sisters and tell them to meet here for a family meeting. Are you big enough to do that?"

The two scamps yelled an affirmative, then dashed off to find their siblings.

Soon the seven other Laufeysons congregated in the den.

Tony stared. "That's incredible. You didn't even need to yell."

"Dad hardly ever does," Belle said. "But we all know to come when he calls a family meeting."

"What's going on?" Samantha asked. "Is this about our family vacation?"

"No, this is about Mjolnir being missing,' Loki told them. I wish this was about our family vacation. "Did any of you notice where Mjolnir was after your uncles got here?"

All of them recalled seeing it by the hat rack, but none of them remembered him moving it.

"This is crazy," Tony muttered. "If Thor's the only one here able to move it, then how could it disappear?"

"That's the sixty-four thousand dollar question, Stark," Loki said sarcastically. Actually, Thor wasn't the only one capable of wielding the hammer. Since his rebirth, Loki could also lift it, but he had no desire to do so. His magic was quite enough power for him to handle, and since his resurrection had grown exponentially. He wasn't entirely sure why, but suspected that the Powers That Be had deliberately increased his magical capacity and control so he could safeguard the nine children he had adopted, as well as the mortals of Earth. However, that fact was to be kept secret from all save the one Loki had chosen as his Keeper. Not even Odin realized just how powerful his adopted son was now, but even so here on Midgard, his power had limits. He spot-checked his ward sigils about the house and found them undisturbed. "Nothing living crossed my threshold and entered the house."

Suddenly a draft of frost rimed wind swirled through the den, making several of his children shiver and grab for blankets.

"Dad, what the heck is that?" Samantha cried, shivering uncontrollably.

"Nothing living," Vince spoke up, seemingly unaffected by the plummeting temperature. His normally deep blue eyes now glowed silver. "Dad, there's a ghost here that wants to talk to you."

"Did this spirit take Mjolnir?" demanded Thor, clenching a fist.

The air swirled in a frantic dance and papers and the remote were blown off the coffee table.

Max and Aleta screamed and ran to their father, who clasped them protectively in his arms.

"Stop it!" Vince commanded in a sharp tone. 'You might want to talk but you don't wreck my house, got it? Now show yourself!'"

The swirling air coalesced into the transparent form of a young woman wearing what looked like a tattered evening gown.
"I am Saskia that was," the ghost spoke through Vince in an eerie high pitched tone.

"Why are you here?" Loki demanded.

"Once I was a stealer of magical artifacts, a witch of no small ability, but my partner betrayed me and thus I died. I could not rest, until my murderer was brought to justice, but I could find none to help me... until now."

"Did you take my hammer, dark spirit?" thundered Thor.

"And if I did? There is naught you can do about it, Odinson!" Saskia taunted.

"How?" Loki demanded, while simultaneously patting the frightened Max and Aleta on the back.

"I have ways, Trickster God." Saskia smiled. "If you wish your precious Mjolnir returned, you will listen to my bargain."

"I bargain with no evil Hel-spawn!" Thor blustered.

"Quiet, brother!" Loki snapped. "Saskia, what terms do you propose?"

"Just this. You find my murderer and give that one justice in my name and I shall release Mjolnir to you."

"How do we know you'll keep your word?" Loki asked suspiciously.

"I will be in your debt. And I pay my debts, Mischief Maker."

"Swear upon your immortal soul, that when we find your murderer, you will return the hammer to us." Loki ordered.

"I so swear. Bring me justice, Crafty One! Only then will Mjolnir return to the Thunder God's hand."

"Nephew, can you not command this spirit to return my hammer?" Thor asked Vince.

"No. She sent it away, through a fold in space and time, Uncle Thor." Vince explained. "She can only bring it back when the bargain is kept."

"We have no choice, Thor," Loki sighed. "Very well, Saskia. We will seek out your murderer. Who was it? Your partner?"

"I know not. I could not see who it was. They blindfolded me before pushing me over a cliff. But I believe my partner has something to do with it. Find my murderer, Laufeyson."

"Where did you die?" Loki asked.

"Atop a mountain I met my doom, beside a river of frost and flume, near a temple where the tunnelers dwell, where stone meets sky, there I fell."

"Riddles?" Thor growled. "You toy with us, spirit!"

"Hush, Thor. Of course she won't make it easy," Loki shook his head.

"I like it not, these games."

Suddenly the ghost vanished and Vince's eyes returned to normal. "Dad, she's gone." He rubbed
his forehead. "My head hurts."

Loki set Aleta and Max down. "It's okay now," he reassured them. "The ghost is gone." He walked over and placed a cool hand on Vince's forehead. "You're running a fever too. You overspent yourself, buddy."

"M'tired," the young Ghost Speaker whined.

"What's wrong with him?" Tony asked.

"Magical drain," Loki replied. "He was in contact with her as a medium too long. It takes it out of you, especially at this age. C'mere, son." He picked up the sleepy and aching Ghost Speaker and 'ported up to Vince's room, which he shared with Nathan. He swiftly put pajamas on the boy, then summoned a spoon, a dark red potion, and a container of honey. By then the child was half asleep.

'C'mon, buddy," Loki shook him awake.

"Noo! Dad, lemme alone," his son whimpered.

"Sorry, but you need to take this. It'll help your head and your fever," Loki coaxed, gently sitting his son on his lap.

Vince buried his face in his father's shirt. "Don't want it!"

The Asgardian heaved a long-suffering sigh. It was going to be one of those days. "Hey, are you my brave boy or are you a baby?"

His son swiveled his head about slightly. "M' not a baby!"

"Then show me how brave you are and take this medicine," Loki persuaded. Reluctantly, the seven-year-old opened his mouth and Loki popped the spoon with the red potion in.

"Swallow!" he ordered.

"Blech!"

Sticky droplets of red potion ended up all over the God of Mischief.

Loki cast his eyes heavenward. "All right. Let's try this again."

Vince shook his head mutely, his blue eyes gleaming rebelliously.

"Listen, I know this tastes pretty bad, but it's the only thing that will help you. If you don't take this you'll end up too sick to get out of bed and miss your soccer game. Is that what you want?"

"No," came the muffled response.

"Okay. Then stop fighting and swallow this."

"It's gross!"

"I know. But you still need to take it."

"You're mean!"
"I know, I'm meaner than a fire giant. Now open up."

Sniffling, the child obeyed, scrunching his eyes shut.

Loki quickly popped the spoonful in, then just as quickly tilted the boy's head back, and put a hand under his chin, stroking his throat, which caused an involuntary swallowing reaction. "That's my brave boy," he praised. "Here, have some honey to take the bitterness away."

Vince happily swallowed the teaspoon of honey.

"Better?"

"Uh huh. Dad, are you gonna get Mjolnir back?"

"Sure we are. I'm not going to let a third-rate spook get the better of me," Loki reassured him. "How about you lie down now?"

He tucked the covers around the boy's skinny frame, then began humming his standard lullaby, and between one blink and the next, his son fell asleep.

"Thank the Norns!"

He turned upon hearing Thor's tread enter the room.

His brother stared at him for two seconds, then snickered. "Looks like you got into a fight with a jam jar, Loki . . . and the jam won!"

"Vince took exception to the way my potion tasted," he replied wryly, wiping his face with a towel.

"Can't say I blame the boy. Most of your elixirs taste like horse piss," Thor said feelingly. "How come you don't just make magic pills?"

"Because, Thor, liquids are absorbed quicker by your body and more effective." Loki waved a hand over his clothing, restoring it to its former clean state. "If medicine tasted good, we'd have an epidemic of sick kids." He glanced back at his son. "He ought to sleep for several hours. That will give me time to try and figure out this riddle and time to see if one of the Avengers can babysit while you and I go try and trace a murderer."

"Tony is here," Thor pointed out. "I'll see if Steve or Tasha can come over too."

"Thanks," Loki said gratefully. He came and rested a hand on his brother's shoulder. "Quit worrying. We'll get it back. We always have before."

"I feel like I'm missing a limb." Thor said mournfully. "Loki, how is it possible a spirit could take Mjolnir?"

"Magic, Thor. It's disappeared where all the lost socks, mittens, and underwear go. It could be tangled up in some woman's panties," Loki joked.

"This isn't funny, Loki!" growled the Thunder God.

"Thor, you really need to lighten up a little. Before you develop an ulcer." He shook his head. "You really are in a mood if you can't laugh at my jokes. All right. Something tells me that Saskia wasn't working alone."
"You think one of our enemies aided her?"

"That's exactly what I think," Loki said. "The question is which one of them is behind this."

Both siblings knew it could be a myriad of villains, for both had made many adversaries over the course of their long lives.

"I shall ponder that while you figure out the riddle," Thor declared.

"Let me just reassure my children their brother will be all right, and put Lucy, Max, and Aleta to bed." Loki said quietly.

"Would you like me to help?"

"If you don't mind telling Lucy a bedtime story," Loki smiled. He knew his sunny daughter would be quite happy to be tucked into bed by her uncle, and not attempt any hijinks, unlike her younger siblings.

They went downstairs, where Loki reassured everyone that Vince would be fine with rest. That done, he took Max and Aleta upstairs and had them get ready for bed. While he was doing that, Thor picked up Lucy and put her on his shoulders.

"Thor, be careful. She's got a broken arm," Tony called.

"It's okay, Uncle Tony," Lucy waved. "Uncle Thor would never let me fall."

"Never, little Valkyrie," Thor assured her. He carefully mounted the stairs, Lucy giggling at how high she was, and in a twinkling Thor had her in her room.

After helping her with her pajamas, Thor carried her to bed. "What story would you like to hear, Lucy?"

"Tell about how you and Dad rescued Freya from the Frost Giants."

"Very well little niece," Thor said. "Once upon a time Freya was flying with her falcon cloak. By mistake she flew too close to Jotunheim and the giant Thrym spied her. He took eagle shape and chased Freya across the sky..."

Lucy listened raptly as Thor went on to tell how Thrym captured Freya and Odin sent Thor and Loki go rescue her.

By the time Thor got to the part where they ended up spending the night in a giant's glove, unknown to them, Lucy had fallen asleep holding his hand. He gently extricated his hand, then leaned down and placed a kiss on her forehead. "Sleep well, little Valkyrie."

Loki, observing from the hallway under an invisibility charm, thought fondly Brother, you need one of your own.

He then moved on to check on Vince. The boy was still sleeping, and a single touch on the forehead revealed his fever had abated. He turned however to see Tony tucking Nate into bed across the room, where instead of a bedtime story, they were discussing electronic fields and mechanical equations.

"Ahem! Tony, this is bedtime," he reminded, reappearing by the Avenger's side.

"Yeah, Laufeyson, we're getting to that."
"Lights out in five." He warned, thinking *Stark, thank Yggdrasil I put Max and Aleta to bed myself because we're getting there would have resulted in my house being destroyed!*

His older children had a slightly different ritual, where he bid them good night, and set spelled dreamcatchers in their room to soothe any nightmares they might have from anxiety. These four tended to stress over him when he left on missions, and this night would be no exception. He made sure Serena's dreamcatcher glowed in the dark, since that was a phobia of hers, tucked her in with a kiss, then moved over to Belle, who had her nose in a book. *Research later, little raven.* He hugged her and kissed her goodnight.

"Watch your back, Dad."

"Always."

Hunter was listening to his iPod but put it away when his father appeared in the room. "Dad, I'll make sure everybody behaves for Uncle Tony and Uncle Steve or whoever's babysitting."

"Including yourself?" Loki teased.

His son gave him a mischievous grin. "Aww! I'm not allowed to have a little fun?"

"Within reason, wolfing."

"Okay. Find that murderer so you can bring Mjolnir back."

"I fully intend to be home in three days. So no worries."

"Until moonrise," he said, and gave Loki a fist bump. That used to be the farewell used by Fenris, but Hunter used it now for his family, because he hated goodbyes.

"Sleep well, wolfing." Loki returned.

He came to Samantha last, and found the fifteen-year-old hastily polishing her collectible Highlander MacLeod katana. "Hon, I don't think you're going to need that anytime soon."

Samantha looked up, the sword across her knees. "You never know, Dad. What if something or someone does manage to come in here? At least I'm prepared."

Her father nodded. "Forewarned is forearmed. Just please make sure you put that where your curious brothers and Aleta can't touch it."

"I will." She put her rag down and sheathed the blade, returning it to its glass case on the wall and locking it with her key. The key was on a chain about her neck. "Dad how long do you think it'll take to find Mjolnir?"

"I'm not entirely sure, but once I figure out the riddle, which isn't hard for someone who deals in them, I think it won't take us long to find this murderer and bring him to jail. I figured three days. Think you can hold down the fort till then?"

"Yeah. If Hunter and Uncle Tony help."

"They will." He pulled out his wallet and counted out several bills. "Here. This is money for take out or anything you need at the store. Keep it safe."

"Dad, this is like a thousand dollars!" his daughter exclaimed.
"Don't spend it all in one place," he teased.

"Aww, you mean I can't take all my friends clubbing and to see Ariana Grande?" Samantha made a face.

"Well, you could," Loki drawled. "If you want to end up grounded for life when I find out about it. And I *always* find out."

"Tell me about it. I can't even hide a bad quiz grade from you."

"You have all the emergency numbers in your phone, right? The doctor, all the Avengers, the school . . . Don't forget to charge your phone."

"Yes, Mom," she rolled her eyes.

Loki blurred into his female form, a classy lady with long curly hair and a soft velvet dress with gold heels. 'Don't sass your mama, girl," she mock-scolded, her green eyes dancing.

"A little sass never hurt anything," the teenager returned.

"With me, no. But mind your attitude around your uncles," Lady Loki reminded.

"Yeah, they're old, they can't handle it," Samantha joked. Then abruptly she turned serious. "Be careful. That ghost . . . I don't like this . . . it feels wrong . . ." She wrapped her arms about her mother. "I'm sorry . . . I just have a bad feeling about this."

"That ghost really scared you, huh?" she crooned, stroking the spiky pink-tipped hair. "Sweetie, I promise I'll come home to you. And I always keep my promises."

Her fingers tightened about the slender frame. "I know." She drew back and dashed a hand over her eyes. "Okay, I'm done being an emotional disaster."

Lady Loki rested her hands on her daughter's shoulders. "Feel free to cry all over me, darling. Frost giants don't melt."

Samantha shook her head. "I'm good. Really."

"You sure?"

She gave a single decisive nod. "Take care of you."

"Take care of you," her mother repeated. Then her form blurred into Arnold Schwarzenegger. "I'll be back."

Samantha giggled. "Dad, you're so nutty."

"Me?" Arnold gestured at himself, then blurred into a giant squirrel. "I eat nuts for breakfast!" squeaked Loki.

His daughter grinned. "Totally."

Loki shifted back into his original shape. 'But I made you laugh."

"Thanks, Dad." He always knew how to make her feel better.

"Get some sleep. Your Uncle Thor and I will leave as soon as I solve this riddle, so if I'm gone before you wake up, don't worry."
"Okay. Night, Dad."

"Night, butterfly." He kissed the top of her head.

Despite a nagging headache, Loki went into his workroom to gather a few extra potions, his daggers, and an enchanted axe made of dwarven steel to give to Thor in place of Mjolnir. It was an Axe of Sharpness and could cut through any material like a hot knife through butter. Then he settled down upon his soft green foam mat and began to meditate upon the riddle Saskia had given him. He had feeling deep inside that wherever the witch had died, it wasn't so simple as to be located here on Midgard-despite the fact that her ghost wandered this realm. He knew that if a spirit returned to Earth, unable to move on, their soul was tethered to the realm of their birth.

"Atop a mountain I met my doom, beside a river of frost and flume, near a temple where the tunnelers dwell, where stone meets sky, there I fell."

The riddle echoed in his head repeatedly as he turned his brilliant mind into figuring out just where Saskia had met her end. Some twenty minutes later he blinked and came out of his trance. Then he went to his seeing globe and cupped it in his hands. "Show me!" he commanded.

The mists receded and Loki found himself looking down at a mountain that dropped sharply down to a bubbling river that tossed up spray, and close beside the river was the crumbling ruin of a cairn of stones.

Ah ha! As I thought. For this is no place on Midgard, but the border between Niflheim and Asgard. An inbetween place, neither land nor river, nor sky. There was where the quest to find Saskia's murderer would begin.
Detective Loki

Chapter Summary

Loki and Thor's quest takes them to Niflheim and an unexpected villain. Can they solve Saskia's murder to win back Mjolnir?

11

Detective Loki

In order to catch a criminal, you have to think like one. - Loki

"How are we supposed to find this murderer?" Thor wanted to know. "Surely whoever did this deed is long gone from here." He stood atop the cliff where Saskia had met her doom, the wind ruffling his blonde locks. He was dressed conservatively-for him-in a blue-gray woolen cape and his armor and helm had been disguised by illusion to look like that of an ordinary Asgardian mercenary, not Thor, Prince of Asgard.

Loki had also disguised his own distinctive green and gold scale mail, again making it appear ordinary and had shifted into a nondescript man with rust colored hair, gray eyes and a face that was totally unremarkable. "Yes, and if we were mortal police officers, we'd never be able to solve this. Luckily, though, we have the advantage of magic. And the fact that the trees remember everything.'

"Trees? What good is that?" Thor asked, puzzled.

"Because, my literal minded brother, the trees recall anything that has happened in their lifetime. That and the fact that the murder itself leaves a rather large footprint in the astral plane."

Thor looked totally perplexed. "Loki, I don't understand what you're talking about."

Loki spread his hands. "Okay, let me explain this another way." He paused, trying to come up with an explanation that would make sense to an uninitiated non-magician. "You know how the astral is another plane of existence, right? Think of it as the spirit plane versus this material one. Well, we magicians can see into that plane and project our own spirits and walk it. Also any kind of violent deed resonates into the astral, think of it like dropping a rock into a pool of water and watching the ripples. So Saskia's murder echoes in the astral, and leaves a trail that a mage can sense and feel. Got it?"

"I think so. You're telling me you can sense where this murder happened?"

"We know where. But I can sense when through the astral footprint. I can't tell who, not yet, but by reading the auras, I can eventually figure out who was involved. However, that would take weeks if I had to scan every person's aura here. So I'm going to rely instead upon the memories of trees. The trees saw what happened here and it doesn't matter to them how long ago it was. Time for them travels at the speed of molasses."
"Then you'd best start talking to them, brother."

Loki concentrated, and a pale green glow enveloped him. Then he moved over to the nearest tree and laid his palm against it. His magical probe made contact with the sleepy consciousness of the tree and he asked permission to view the memories within. Once the connection had been established, Loki was able to scroll through the memories until he finally found one that looked promising. He examined the memory from beginning to end, noting that Saskia had not lied about the manner of her death. She had indeed been tied and blindfolded and shoved off the precipice. Those who had killed her the trees recalled one as being a dwarf, a Dark Dwarf, and the other was taller, clearly either Aesir or Vanir, wearing a black cloak that covered his or her face. It had been springtime when this had occurred, the tree recalled growing new leaves and the sap starting to run swiftly in its veins.

Loki withdrew, thanked the oak for its assistance, then opened his eyes and turned to Thor, who was looking supremely bored, leaning against the trunk of an ash tree.

"Did you find out what we need to know?" Thor queried. "You were speaking to that tree for almost an hour."

"Trees don't hurry, Thor. They see no need," Loki told him. "But yes, I found out that the murder took place in the spring, and it was done by two people. One was a Dark Dwarf the other was someone in a black cloak."

"That's it?" the Thunder God said, dismayed.

'What do you mean, that's it?' Loki scowled. 'That's a starting point. What, did you think I would just divine the identities of the suspects and that would be it? They were under cover of darkness, and at least one of them was hidden by a hooded cloak."

"Could you recognize the dwarf?"

Loki sighed. "The tree didn't get a very good look at his face, and most dwarves look alike to non-dwarves. However, his aura will be tainted by the murder, and I can confirm his identity that way."

Thor rose and stretched. "Great! Then let us be off!"

"Hold it!" snapped his brother. "You might be all raring to go, but I'm the one who spent the better part of an hour rifling through memories. I need a minute to rest and eat something."

"But-" Thor protested, then gave in when Loki shot him a death glare.

Loki pulled a package of peanut butter chocolate protein balls out of his satchel along with a bottle of coconut water and sat down on a boulder to eat the snack. He had learned long ago that certain types of magical spells drained away energy quicker than others and it was important to replace it before it made too much of an impact on your body. The quickest way to do that was to eat and drink something, preferably something with protein, and to rest for a brief while.

He paused while chewing a protein ball to see Thor eyeing his satchel wistfully. "Don't tell me you forgot to pack some food?"

"I was in a hurry after you told me you had found where the spirit had been killed," Thor admitted, flushing.

"It's a good thing I don't rely on you for these things, because we'd both starve," Loki grumbled. He rummaged in his satchel and tossed the Thunder God a large oatmeal raisin power bar and a
"Thanks. I just thought you could conjure food up whenever you wanted," his brother said, biting into the snack.

Loki rolled his eyes. *Norns grant me patience!* "Conjured food tastes like cardboard and has no nutritional value whatsoever." He popped another handful of protein balls in his mouth. "Besides, I don't want to waste my power doing so when it's easier to carry food with us."

"What else have you got in there?"

"Enough for a few days worth of meals . . . provided you aren't a bottomless pit," Loki lectured. "By the Nine, Father should have named you Svangr instead of Thor."

"Loki, you are a pain in the ass."

"Be careful how you insult me," the frost giant warned. "I'm the one with the food."

"Until I beat you up and take it," Thor threatened.

"How old are you again? Twelve or two thousand?" Loki countered. "Quit thinking about your stomach and start thinking about where in Niflheim is this dwarf."

Thor subsided, muttering under his breath about cold-hearted brothers who starved their siblings. "Mayhap we ought to go look in a mead hall."

Loki hit himself in the forehead. "Thor, we're here to catch a murderer, not play One Hundred Bottles of Beer On the Wall."

"I'm serious! If you were a criminal, where would you hang out?"

"Hmm. You do have a point. All right. Let me locate the nearest hall and we'll go there. To talk not to drink," he admonished.

"Killjoy," Thor grunted.

Loki ground his back teeth together. "Are you here to find Mjolnir or to drink yourself senseless? Because you could have done that at home and saved the trip!"

"How are we gonna blend in if we don't drink?" Thor pointed out. "That's what you do in a mead hall."

"Fine. One drink. But if you get drunk and pass out, I'm leaving you there. I want this quest done so I can go home."

"What are you, an old woman?"

"No I'm a parent of nine."

"You were a lot more fun before you were reborn."

Loki ignored that. "If any dwarf asks your name, you're Donald Blake. And I'm Lars."

"So what will you be doing while I'm talking and drinking with these dwarves?"

"Being invisible and scanning the patrons for that one whose aura is tainted. When or if I find him I'll kick the back of your chair two times. If the dwarf isn't the one we were looking for, I'll tap
"Then we take him outside and get him to confess," Thor said, smacking a fist into his hand with relish.

"Thor, beating the dwarf to a pulp isn't going to help us get Mjolnir back quicker. Remember, he wasn't alone. So we need to find out who he was with and where they are. And that won't happen if you break his jaw. So if we find him let me do the talking."

"Fine. But once you have the information I'm bringing him before a tribunal."

"That's fair. Hopefully we can find the second person and bring them to justice."

"We have to. I need Mjolnir back."

"Then make sure you keep that in mind once we reach the hall." Loki said. He stood up and offered his hand to his brother. "I found what we are looking for. Let's go."

Thor took it and Loki teleported them to a mead hall deep in Niflheim.

Thor strode into the mead hall like he owned the place, not the least intimidated by the fact he was outnumbered by Dwarves and Svartalfar. Loki was a bit more circumspect, turning invisible as soon as they crossed the threshold. Thor headed to the bar to get a horn of mead, then found a table and sat down, calmly sipping the alcoholic beverage. A few minutes later, a dwarf approached his brother with his own drink.

Loki leaned against the wall, and after a brief mantra to focus his power began seeing the auras surrounding all the patrons. None stood out. The dwarf talking to Thor was not who they were searching for. He glided over behind the wooden chair where Thor was talking and tapped the back of the chair.

Thor calmly stood and went back to the bar to fetch another drink. While he did that, Loki planted a mental suggestion in the dwarf's head that he needed to go home. When Thor returned, the table was empty. This pattern was followed for seven other dwarves until Thor was growing anxious.

Loki felt the shift in the astral as soon as the burly dwarf with the black curly beard and hair entered the mead hall. It wasn't that this dwarf looked any different from the hundreds of others seen coming and going from the hall. In fact, he looked distressingly normal. He was wearing a simple tunic of pewter with runic designs, trews, and laced up boots.

He carried no weapons save an eating knife, and nothing in his outward appearance suggested anything even remotely dangerous.

But Loki's astral sense began warbling a warning at him as soon as he saw the dwarf walk up to the bar. He noted how the barkeep seemed rather frightened by this newcomer and promptly served him a horn that was near to overflowing. Other patrons cast looks of fear in his direction or discreetly rose and left. It reminded Loki of a covey of quail when they see a hawk circling. Clearly here was a dangerous predator. He knew Thor sensed it too, for his brother sat up straight and fingered his axe.

Loki dipped into the astral, and sure enough he found the newcomers aura dark with spilled blood and death. This dwarf had killed before. Had made a profession of it.

The dwarf turned and spotted Thor at the table. "Well met, stranger. What brings you to Ragnald's?"
"I needed a drink," Thor replied laconically, his words slightly slurred.

"That we can give you." The dwarf strolled over to Thor and sat across from him. "I didn't catch your name."

"Blake," Thor belched.

"Volskar." The dwarf drank his own horn, wiping foam from his beard. "So what brings a warrior like you to Niflheim?" he queried casually, but Loki sensed the question was anything but. Volskar was uneasy and fishing for answers.

"My brother and I are here to make our fortune," Thor lied smoothly.

"Your brother?"

"He's sleeping off last night."

While Thor chatted, Loki scanned the other's aura, curling his lip in disgust at the slimy feel as he read myriad deaths caused by this dwarf in his career. But at last he located the aura of Saskia's murder, and he thought, *You're going down, yellow snake!*

He stealthily approached Thor and kicked the back of his chair twice.

Thor acknowledged the signal by bobbing his head then taking a quick drink. "So would you happen to have any work for us?" he asked Volskar casually. "You mentioned a sapphire and diamond mine?"

Volskar grinned, his teeth showing eerily white in his black beard, like shards of bone peering out from a carcass. "Yes. My partner and I have a mine in the Darkfang Mountains. We could always use more guards."

Thor nodded. "I shall have to speak with my brother. But I think we can come to an agreement."

_The only agreement we'll come to is us agreeing to bring you to trial, assassin_, Loki thought. There was a nagging feeling, however, that Volskar was not the brains behind this outfit, but the hired dagger in the dark. This unnamed partner was probably the mastermind.

"If your brother agrees, meet me here tomorrow noon. We'll discuss wages and duties and I'll take you to the mine to meet my partner," Volskar told him.

"I shall," Thor nodded, drained his horn, tossed a coin on the table, then sauntered from the hall.

Loki followed soundlessly. Once they were outside, the Mischief God tugged Thor into a deserted alley between the hall and some ramshackle storefronts. He muttered a quick spell that enclosed them in a bubble of silence and invisibility, then reappeared in front of his brother. "Volskar is the Dark Dwarf. From the amount of blood staining his aura, I'd say he was a professional assassin. Saskia's partner probably hired him to kill her."

Thor's brow beetled. "Then let's arrest him and be done with it."

"Thor, quit thinking with your biceps," Loki said exasperatedly. "We need to find his partner. I have a feeling that's the other one in this equation."

"Then you want us to meet him tomorrow and pretend he's hiring us?"

"We could . . . but that would be a more elaborate charade than necessary. No, we are going to
follow him tonight. I'm assuming he'll return to the mine."

"So we're just going to hang around this armpit until Volskar leaves?"

"Not here. Outside of here. I'll know when Volskar leaves. I put a magical trace on him."

"Good." Thor was pleased.

Together they walked down the village and into the wild lands that bordered it. They set up camp in the lee of a large rock, and Loki heated up some cans of Spam, spinach, and beans using his magic along with flatbread. As they ate, Thor lamented, "I wish we had a nice haunch of ox. With gravy." He eyed his spinach in distaste. "This is food for rabbits."

"Oh, quit complaining. You sound like Max whining about eating vegetables," Loki put in. "Be glad you're not eating jerky and trail mix." He cut his Spam into small pieces and mixed them in his bowl with the baked beans and spinach. "This tastes better than the K-rations Steve had to eat in the Army." He ate his supper quickly and neatly, mopping up the juice with his bread. After they had finished eating supper he made peppermint tea in their collapsible travel mugs and served it along with chocolate chip cookies. Thor had no complaints over them, and ate half a dozen.

"We ought to go on a camping trip in the summer with the kids," Loki mused. "Up in the Catskills."

"All nine of them?"

"No, I thought I'd leave some of them home alone," his brother snapped sarcastically.

"Who else is coming?"

"I thought it would just be us and them. Unless you think you can't handle it," Loki taunted.

"I never said that," Thor objected. "It will be interesting."

"I have no doubt about that," chuckled the God of Mischief. Then he sat up straight from his half-prone position. "Our little bird has flown the coop. He's moving at a fairly quick rate out of town. On a small pack lizard."

"Are you sure you can follow him?" Thor asked doubtfully.

"Yes. But not in this shape," the magician answered. Then his form blurred into a magnificent emerald and gold dragon with long horns arching over his head. Loki-dragon was equipped with a special saddle with all his gear attached to it. "Get on, Thor!" he hissed. "We can catch up easy now."

He held out his foreleg for Thor to climb and his brother swung up into the saddle and strapped himself in. "Go, Loki!"

The dragon swiveled his head about and gave the Thunder God a mischievous smirk. "As you wish!"

Then Loki-Dragon spread his bejewelled wings and sprang into the air. His wings caught an updraft and he gave two hard thrusts and was airborne. His tail lashed behind him and the wind whistled blowing Thor's hair in his eyes.

Thor soon discovered riding a dragon wasn't at all like riding a horse. Loki-Dragon undulated like a serpent, and his back moved constantly underneath Thor. The wind snagged Thor's hair and
tugged on his helmet. His cloak blew about his head, almost blinding him.

Abruptly the emerald and gold dragon dove, like a brightly colored torpedo, and Thor's stomach plummeted like a rock. "Loki! What the Hel are you doing?"

"Flying!" replied Loki-Dragon.

He snapped his wings open, spun out of his dive, then did three corkscrews across the sky, his brilliant green eyes whirling in delight.

"Loki!" Thor yelled. "I think I'm gonna be sick!"

The dragon chuckled wickedly. Then he shot off to the west, and Thor felt his stomach lurch.

"Are you crazy?!"

"What's wrong, Thor? You ought to be used to flying by now."

"Not upside down!"

"You mean that little trick I did before? Don't you find it exhilarating?"

"I'm going to ask you that after I puke all over you."

The dragon peered at his passenger, his eyes twinkling with merriment. "Oh very well. Guess you'd never have made a good fighter pilot."

"You are dangerous!" Thor accused.

The dragon shook with laughter. "Got that right, brother of mine."

He gave an insolent flick of his tail before homing in once more on their lizard riding quarry, and shifting into stealth mode, flew in a silent yet deadly arc through the heavens, using the clouds as cover.

They emerged from the cloud bank above a large mountain, whose upper reaches were swathed in fog but at the base was a huge mining camp, with a warren of tunnels deep within the earth. Loki-Dragon shuddered at the thought of abandoning the freedom of the sky and sun for the subterranean depths. Having once been bound for over fifty years in a cave, Loki was a touch claustrophobic, and detested anywhere he couldn't make a quick exit from. Yet into the depths they must go if Mjolnir were to be regained.

Hissing in distaste, the dragon landed far enough away to be unremarked by the miners. Thor quickly dismounted, muttering something to the effect of "next time I'm flying", causing the glittering dragon to bare his fangs in a toothy smile before shifting back into human form.

"Ready, Thor?"

"A moment, brother. That flight jarred my insides to jelly."

"Oh, come on! I wasn't that bad!"

Thor just shot him a Look.

Loki paced while Thor waited for his stomach to settle, taking advantage of the fresh air. Five minutes passed and then Thor rose and said, "Let's put an end to these wicked schemes once and for all."
Loki waved a hand and their disguises were resumed along with the invisibility spell. Then they descended the knoll and approached the mining camp, Loki following the tracking beacon which led them to a stone house at the edge of the sluices. Dodging carts pulled by huge lizards, which the dwarves used like ponies, and miners sorting through baskets of ore, the two brothers came up to the stone house.

Pitching his voice so it only carried to Thor's ears, Loki muttered, "Keep watch while I scout. I'm better at walking unseen than you."

Thor just grunted in agreement and unsheathed the axe strapped across his back. In matters of subterfuge, Loki had no equal in all the realms.

Indeed, his brother blurred into the form of a horsefly, thus relinquishing his invisibility spell, and flew through an open window. Loki-fly buzzed annoyingly about the heads of two servants scrubbing the floor and followed the tug of the tracking spell to a study lit by brightly colored mageglobes, shelves of runic spell books, and the grisly trophy of a unicorn's head upon the wall. Had he been in his own skin, Loki would have worn an expression of utter disgust upon his face. As a shapeshifter he abhorred those who hunted for sport and for any reason other than food. The trophy upon the wall represented all he detested about civilized society, as there was no need to kill a unicorn except for sport, not even to gather magical apparatus like hair, blood, or pieces of horn, since all those components could be obtained from a living animal.

Volskar stood with his hands on his hips, speaking to a tall figure dressed in a midnight blue robe covered in magical sigils. At the moment the figure was turned away from Volskar, prompting Loki to fly across the room to have a look at the mysterious figure's face.

He buzzed annoyingly about the other's head, causing a hand to emerge from a sleeve to bat at him.

But he had seen enough to recognize the face beneath the hood and inwardly he groaned.

*Nine Hells! I should have known whenever there's mayhem my wretched little niece is right in the middle of it!* 

For the figure in the midnight cloak was none other than Jorunne Baldersdottir, the sorceress offspring of his brother Balder the Brave and Karnilla, Queen of Nornheim. Jorunne was a princess by birth, a sorceress by inclination, a huntress who boasted a kill of almost every creature in the Nine Realms, and a scheming brat who caused misery anytime she appeared in Asgard. Cosseted and spoiled by her parents, Jorunne grew up with an inflated sense of her own importance, and believed anything she wished was hers by divine right. She possessed her mother's lush beauty, inheriting her ebony hair and her father's blue eyes, and used it to benefit herself alone.

Loki couldn't stand her, his animosity going back to an incident when she had been his apprentice for a brief interval of a few months, to learn spells of illusion. Back then she had been a haughty sixteen-year-old convinced she would be the greatest sorceress in Asgard. Loki had agreed to tutor her as a favor to Balder, and he regretted it ever after. Jorunne was the kind of student who thought she could dictate rules to her mentor and while Loki was unusually tolerant of pranks, tricks, a certain amount of sass and impudence, Jorunne pushed him beyond tolerance.

Unlike his nine scamps, Jorunne possessed a cruel streak that made her pranks humiliating and hurtful instead of harmless fun and was an entitled bully. Loki had caught her on more than one occasion magically tormenting some helpless creature, but even his firm chastisement had no effect upon her. And neither of her parents wanted to hear that their perfect princess was
becoming a serious problem.

But the final straw came when she attempted to use magic to seduce him into allowing her to attend the Summer Festival, which he had banned her from after discovering she had stolen several rare potion ingredients from him to purchase two Asgardian wraith cats to put in a cage match to the death against a yeti, and ran a betting pool to collect on the outcome. Not only were such sports against Asgardian law, wraith cats were an endangered magical species. Furious at his attempt at discipline, she had schemed to get off her punishment by drugging his hot cocoa with an aphrodisiac, figuring if she could get him in her bed he would do whatever she wished.

Luckily as a frost giant he was immune to many potions of that sort, and utterly appalled by her depravity, he sent her back to Nornkeep in disgrace, but she managed to persuade her doting mother it was all Loki's fault, and so he was persona non grata to Karnilla and Balder to this day. That had been twenty years ago, and Loki had prayed to the Norns to keep her far from him.

Apparently they hadn't been listening.

For here she was, consorting with a known murderer, running what he strongly suspected was an illegal mining operation, and her aura was drenched in the blood of several people, one of whom was Saskia.

Loki swore colorfully in several tongues in his head then shifted into a wasp and stung Jorunne hard on the backside.

The sorceress screeched and clapped a hand to her behind, while Volskar gaped and asked, "Your Highness, what's the matter?"

"I've been stung by a bloody bee!" she howled. "Quick, where's my potion case? Bring it to me, imbecile before I start swelling up like a balloon!"

For Jorunne was oddly allergic to wasps and bees, a fact Loki knew quite well.

Unlike a mortal, her allergy wasn't life threatening, but it would make her extremely uncomfortable and worse unattractive.

Volskar stomped off to fetch the case while Jorunne was swearing and clutching her backside. "Hurry, dirt grubber! It's already swelling! Oowww!" she wailed as an irate Loki stung her opposite cheek.

Jorunne snatched a paperweight off the desk and flung it at the buzzing wasp.

Loki dodged easily then flew swiftly out the window.

Thor was going to blow a gasket when he found out.
Flirting With Darkness

Chapter Summary

In order to garner a confession, Loki becomes a poltergeist.

12

Flirting With Darkness

There are ghosts and then there are ghosts. Be afraid. Be very afraid!~ Loki

“Jorunne! Our niece is behind this theft?” Thor looked ready to burst into the stone house and start breaking heads.

“Well, she was the cause of Mjolnir being stolen,” Loki corrected. “And she needs, like Volskar, to be made to answer for her crimes.”

“Balder and Karnilla won’t be too pleased with that,” Thor pointed out.

Loki snorted. “If Balder and Karnilla hadn’t spoiled the girl past redemption this might not have happened. They are partially to blame. But most of the choice to do evil is an individual’s. I remember that as my apprentice I caught her more than once doing horrible things to helpless animals—both magical and non-magical. And when I expressed my displeasure she responded with who cares they’re only pathetic creatures put on this earth to be our prey. It chilled the blood in my veins, Thor. So it’s not surprising to me that she has graduated from pathetic creatures to killing people. Others’ lives are insignificant to her.”

“They have a name for ones like her on Midgard.”

“Yes. They are sociopaths. Or serial killers.” Loki said gravely. “Not the kind of person you want running about unchecked.”

“We must bring both before a tribunal,” Thor said. “Or Father. Since Jorunne is his granddaughter he has the right to give judgment.”

“Yes, but will he be fair and impartial? You and I both know Balder is one of his favorites, and even marrying Karnilla hasn’t changed that. And Jorunne is fiendishly smart—she knows how to play the poor wronged baby girl to the hilt. It’s how she’s manipulated both parents. Who’s to say she won’t try it with Father?”

“Father never fell for that with you,” Thor reminded.
“Brother, I was never a girl who was the daughter of his favorite son. It makes a difference. Father can be blind sometimes to the faults of those he cares about.”

“We will warn him then,” Thor declared. “I believe that Jorunne did this deed specifically so she could get her little fingers on Mjolnir. Like her mother, she has always wished to rule Asgard.”

Loki nodded. “By putting her father on the throne instead of you. Karnilla taught her well.” His mouth twisted into a grim line. “We will need a confession though. As the mortals say, the more evidence the better.”

“But you said you already have evidence with their aura.”

“I do. However, it would take another magician to confirm it and my word hasn’t always been reliable,” he admitted. “But if we can get a spoken confession that would be wonderful.”

“How? I could beat it out of that scummy Black Dwarf, but our niece . . .?”

“Confession under torture isn’t reliable,” Loki shook his head. “No, brother. This calls for brains not brawn.”

“Meaning you have a trick up your sleeve.”

Loki grinned. “Don’t I always? I think it’s time little Jorunne got haunted by her past misdeeds.”

“You’re going to summon Saskia?” Thor guessed.

“No, Thor. I’m going to be Saskia,” corrected the frost giant.

“And play upon her guilty conscience.”

“Thor, Jorunne doesn’t have a conscience, guilty or otherwise. I guarantee she feels no remorse for killing Saskia. Saskia’s murder was to her like stepping on an ant. No, what I’m going to do is sort of like reverse psychology. I’m going to haunt her so much that in the end she will be forced to confess to get rid of me.” The emerald eyes glinted with mischievous glee.

“I should have brought popcorn,” Thor lamented. “This is going to be fun!”

He gave Loki a high five.

“You have no idea!” The Master of Mischief chuckled wickedly. It had been a long time since he had let his imp come out to play and he was going to enjoy every moment. Then he reached into his satchel and produced a large bucket of popcorn and a cup of Coke. “For your viewing pleasure.”

Thor gaped at him. “What is that bag? Some kind of wishing fabric?”

“A good mage never gives away his secrets,” was all Loki replied. He rubbed his hands together. “Now let’s make some mischief!”

Loki set Thor up with one of his special Seeing globes so he could watch the show. However, this globe would not only let you see what went on, but also record what was spoken—it was like a magical video recorder—something Loki had worked on all night to perfect so he could get Jorunne’s confession. He activated it with a single word of magic then told his brother, “Now sit back and watch. Don’t touch it, just watch.”
They were in a rundown room in the little mining town. Said town was called Darkholme, and they had rented the room for a few nights because Loki needed a base of operations with which to work from when he wasn’t busy haunting Jorunne. Besides watching the show, Thor had also agreed to try and find out as much as he could about Volskar, but Loki cautioned him to be circumspect. They didn’t want word getting back to the burly assassin and risk him becoming suspicious and either running or coming after them. Thor promised to be careful.

“You’d better be. If I find out you tipped that pondslime off, I’m kicking your butt,” Loki growled.

Thor chuckled, incredulous. “You and what army?”

“The one you don’t know I have,” his brother returned laconically. “Thor, please don’t screw this up. This whole plan is like a house of cards, one tap and it’ll crumble. Just ask a few questions of some locals to get a better idea of what Volskar is like, what the mine is like, and then come back here and watch the globe. It’ll be better than Poltergeist.”

“What is that?”

“By the Nine, you really need to brush up on pop culture,” Loki cast his eyes heavenward.

“Poltergeist is a scary movie made sometime in the 1980’s. It’s about a house that was haunted by ghosts. Very nasty ones. Hunter thought he could sneak it past me without my approving it and downloaded it on his phone one night. Then he watched it and so did Max, because Max was in his room and saw it so Hunter allowed him to watch because he didn’t want Max blabbing about it to me. Well, to make a long story short, they watched it and got scared to death. Next thing I know I was woken up by the two of them jumping into my bed with me. Well, Max jumped, Hunter kind of crawled under the covers on the other side. I took his phone away for a week for that little stunt, and while I had it, I watched it. It’s what inspired me to do this.”

“Perhaps I should watch this movie,” Thor mused.

“Be my guest. I’m sure Tony or Clint has it. Just don’t get terrified and jump into bed with Tasha. You might end up dead when she stabs you out of a sound sleep,” Loki joked.

“A silly mortal movie won’t scare me,” Thor blustered.

“Famous last words,” Loki snickered. “It’s showtime!” he announced. “Watch the globe for further developments.”

Just before he teleported to the stone house to begin his haunting spree, Thor called, “Loki, be careful. Don’t get caught.”

“No worries, big brother. Jorunne doesn’t have the magic or the intelligence to beat me at this game. See you later.”

Inter~*~*~*~Mission

Jorunne had just entered her house, preparing to tell her maid to start supper, when an icy wind reminiscent of winter’s heart whipped through the entryway. The sorceress whirled about, to see if she had left the door open or the servants a window. But everything was shut tight. Shivering, she wrapped her arms about herself and prepared to berate her maid for not lighting a fire in the sitting room when the icy chill suddenly crept up the walls, causing the stone to form a slick coating of frost and tendrils of fog to appear out of thin air.

“What in Hel?” she cried, and then she heard it, a high-pitched wailing coming from everywhere
and nowhere at once.

“I’m he-e-e-re!”

Jorunne lit her palm with eldritch fire. “Who said that?”

“Don’t you know? You should! I’m ba-a-a-ck!”

The dark-haired sorceress spun about in a circle, trying to see where the voice was coming from. “Show yourself!”

More cold followed and some insane laughter that chilled the blood in her veins.

Furious, she threw the fire at the wall, and it made a scorch mark upon the stone wall.

“Your Highness, what is wrong?” asked Illyria, her housekeeper.

“Something was here. But I drove it away.” Jorunne snapped. “Now clean up this mess!” she indicated the scorch mark.

“Aye, milady,” Illyria curtsied. Privately, the housekeeper thought her mistress might have been drinking, for no one was in the room save them and the door was locked. She clapped her hands and a maid appeared with a bucket of soapy water and a scrub brush.

Jorunne went upstairs to take a hot bath, hoping her maid Asha had drawn the water in the huge sunken tub already. She kicked off her shoes once she was in her room, and Asha silently picked them up and put them alongside the armoire. The bedroom was actually a combination of a sitting room, sleeping chamber, and bathroom. It had thick tapestries and furs hung on the walls from Jorunne’s kills to keep out the chill of the Niflheim evening.

“Is my bath ready?”

“Yes, Highness,” Asha curtsied, and helped her mistress take off her robes, pants and undergarments. She went to pick out some soft night clothes and lay them out upon the bed.

Jorunne swept past her and into the bathroom, looking forward to soaking in the jasmine scented water. She slipped into the tub, sinking up to her neck in the hot water filled with sweet oils and frothy bubbles. As she leaned back in the water, she caught a glimpse of the mirror that ran the full length of the wall and noticed it had some peculiar red streaks across it.

Frowning she sat up and saw the streaks were words.

*I know you killed her. Her blood shall never be washed away.*

Then the letters began to weep tears of blood, dripping in a red swath upon the tile.

Jorunne’s mouth gaped open. Then she noticed that her bath water was becoming uncomfortably cold—like a frost-rimed stream and the jasmine scent was replaced by the foul coppery smell of old blood. As she stared down at the water it changed color—becoming deep red like blood spurting from a death wound.

Smothering a scream, the sorceress bolted from the bath, and began scrubbing frantically at herself with a towel.

*What is happening here? Am I under attack by a rival?*

Frightened, she scanned the room with her magic for anything threatening and found nothing.
In the corner, Loki smirked, rendered undetectable by his magic, for he had shifted into a wraith cat and gone into phantom form. *Scared yet, my wayward niece? I truly hope so! But if not... there’s more to come!*

Jorunne waved a hand and the water in the tub surged up and splashed all over the mirror, erasing the incriminating words. She shivered as all the warmth seemed to have deserted the room. *No one must know about Saskia’s murder.* She had spread the rumor that her partner in the mine had died in a freak hiking accident, and her body being found at the bottom of the precipice bore that out. No one questioned it. After all, the woman was Midgardian, and fragile as all mortals were.

It wasn’t that Jorunne felt guilty for killing her. Both she and Volskar had agreed the irritating witch had to go after she had refused to put the miners on notice that they were going to increase production and make them work fifteen hour shifts and not eight the way Saskia had insisted in the beginning. Saskia had also insisted she be equal partners with Jorunne, and that meant getting the same pay as the Asgardian royal. Which was something Jorunne could not abide. A mere mortal should have been grateful Jorunne allowed her to be a partner at all, never mind splitting the profit equally. Then too, while Saskia hadn’t been adverse to running scams at cards or dice in the mine tavern, she had refused to participate in Jorunne’s little hunts—where her quarry, whether magical, animal, dwarven, elven, or Aesir—died at the end. Saskia had called them barbaric and seemed revolted by the sport. So between her partner’s scruples and sense of overinflated importance, Jorunne had decided to get rid of her permanently. Because otherwise she ran the risk that Saskia might speak to authorities and have the operation shut down or investigated. And she wanted no one in her family to know of her hunts, for she knew they would meet with disapproval.

None of them understood her need to shed blood, that it satisfied some deep desire within her. Even her doting parents would not be happy if they found out. But Jorunne intended that they never would. Or her grandfather. Odin was as bad as her Uncle Loki when it came to feeling pity for dumb animals. Or stupid people who ought not to have been born in the first place.

“Asha!” she yelled. “Get in here and clean this mess up! And make sure you do a good job or else you’ll feel the lash across your back.”

“Yes, Highness! At once, Highness!” the simpering maid scurried into the bathroom with towels and a mop. “Milady, did you fall?”

“No, idiot!” Jorunne snapped. “No more questions. Help me dry off, oil me and then I shall put my night clothes on.”

Asha simply nodded, her face impassive. Then she drew a towel from the rack and set about drying her mistress’ lithe body. Once that was done, she *used some fancy oil that smelled like Asgardian lilies and massaged it all over her.* Then she dried her dark tresses and combed more oil through them.

Jorunne rose after those ablutions and strode into the bedroom, where she drew on her night clothes.

Then she rang for Illyria to bring her a light supper of fruit, bread with honey, and smoked salmon.

Suddenly she heard footsteps behind her. Jorunne whirled around, ready to blast her impudent servant, but found no one was there. Angrily, she shook her head. Now she was hearing things. She walked back to where Asha was scrubbing the mirror and glared at the maid’s back, but saw nothing over which she could vent her anger on the servant for.
As she walked back to her chair, she heard the footsteps again.

Again she glanced behind her and no one was there.

Swearing, she sat down, and felt the back of her neck prickle as if she were being watched. It felt as though she were being stared at right through her clothes.

But she refused to look behind her.

*It's your imagination, Jorunne!* she scolded herself.

Asha finished cleaning and Illyria came in with her supper on a covered tray.

“Your supper, milady,” Illyria bowed and withdrew.

Jorunne inhaled the aroma of fresh bread, fruit, and salmon, licking her lips.

As she reached for a piece of fruit she heard a soft voice in her ear, ‘*I know what you did . . . and you will pay . . .*”

The voice sounded just like Saskia’s.

“Shut up!” she snarled, but there was no one there.

Shaken, Jorunne went to bite into a pear and as her lips met the fruit she saw it was rotten and crawling with maggots.

“Ahh! Disgusting!” she shrieked and threw the fruit down.

She went to eat another, vowing to strip the hide off the cook for serving her rotten produce, when she saw that all the food on the tray was rotten and worms were crawling in and out of the stinking black salmon and maggots on the bread.

Jorunne threw the entire tray against the wall and howled, “Illyria!”

In the shadows, Loki covered his mouth with his hand to stifle his giggling.

By the time the housekeeper had cleaned up the spilled food, giving her mistress odd looks when Jorunne’s back was turned, the princess of Asgard was in a foul temper. She dismissed her servants, brewed a cup of tea, and prepared to go to sleep.

Her bed was a thick mattress stuffed with thousands of goose feathers with an eiderdown quilt and fluffy pillows all done in shades of crimson and ebony. Jorunne sank into her bed with a sigh and closed her eyes. Perhaps sleep would erase these silly jitters.

But no sooner had she closed her eyes then she heard Saskia’s voice again in her ear.

“I’m Henry VIII I am, Henry VIII I am, I am

*I was married to the widow next door,*

*She was married seven times before*

*I’m Henry VIII I am, Henry VIII I am, I am . . . “*

Jorunne shot up in bed, her hair standing on end. There, by the foot of her bed, stood a glowing putrescent form. It was Saskia, her gown in tatters, her face chewed half off, her eyes glowing
hellish red.

And she was singing that annoying song over and over.

“Shut up! Shut up! SHUT UP!”

She threw a fireball at the mocking draugr, but the fire did no damage whatsoever and the spirit continued singing that stupid tune.

She put her hands over her ears to block out the singing, but soon discovered that only made Saskia sing louder—and the singing penetrated right through her.

Spitting curses, Jorunne began throwing everything she could lay her hands on at the ghost.

To no avail.

The calamity brought all her servants to see what was wrong, but to her dismay, none of them could see or hear the draugr tormenting her.

 Needless to say Jorunne got precious little sleep that night.

**Inter~*~*~*~Mission**

Thor ate some more buttered popcorn and nearly spit soda all over the seeing globe as he watched Jorunne go crazy trying to stop what she thought was a spirit but was actually one of Loki’s well-crafted illusions. He had never enjoyed seeing a prank executed more.

“Oh brother, you got her good!” he chortled, and nearly wet himself laughing at the scene in the tub. “I know you killed her! Ahhahhaa!”

The best part though was the servants, who though clearly afraid of their volatile vicious mistress, were also sure she was imagining things and overreacting. None of them could see what Loki cast, for the illusions were for Jorunne only, and so her screaming and throwing her perfectly good food on the floor was totally disturbing.

“I hope one of you reports her to some healer . . . for insanity!” Thor whooped, and almost spilled his popcorn all over.

When the nightmare bed scene happened, he did totally lose it and popcorn went everywhere as he doubled over with laughter.

“Oh, Hel!” he muttered when he had regained control long enough to see the mess he had made. “Loki’s gonna have a fit.”

“Glad to see you’re enjoying yourself,” came his brother’s voice as he appeared out of the air.

“You were right,” Thor admitted, wiping his eyes. “This was hysterical.”

“It’ll only get better tomorrow,” Loki vowed. He covered a yawn with a hand. “But right now I need some sleep.” He glanced at the popcorn on the floor. “Clean that up before tomorrow. I don’t want bugs invading here.”

“I knew you’d say that,” Thor coughed, too amused to be annoyed by his brother’s neat freak ways.
Loki yawned again and tugged off his boots, undressing, and slipping beneath his Got Mischief blanket in a matter of moments. He was asleep seconds later, his breathing soft and rhythmic.

Thor gave him a quick concerned glance before using his powers to form a wind to gather the scattered popcorn and put it back in its bowl. Then he finished off his soda and went to bed as well.

By the second day, Jorunne was starting to crack. At breakfast her bowl of oatmeal kept moving away from her everytime she reached for it. Then it fell off the table and ended up on the floor, and she had to wait for a replacement. All her sandals were tied in crazy knots and she had to wear her old brogues to her meeting with her shareholders.

She was sure that leaving the house would rid her of the pesky draugr, but found out the hard way that wasn’t so.

Right in the middle of one of her shareholder’s speeches she felt icy fingers grab her backside and pinch it—hard.

“Yeeoow!” she yelped and jumped out of her chair.

The other dwarves stared at her. Finally one ventured, “Your Highness, is something the matter?”

“Something bit me!” she cried.

“Like a bug?” guessed one.

“More like a rat,” she grumbled. Then she sat down gingerly.

*Saskia, you bloody witch! I wish you weren’t dead so I could kill you all over again.*

Two more times during the meeting she felt icy cold hands grabbing her, once they groped her breast, making her gasp and almost choke upon her tea during the break. The other time they yanked her hair, making her eyes water.

As the meeting drew to a close, Jorunne was hasty to get away, but uneasy and a bit frightened to go home. Suppose the draugr was waiting for her?

Irritated, Jorunne slapped herself. Dwarves and Dokkalfar stared at her but she haughtily ignored them all. Now that she had slapped herself back to sense she would go home. She refused to be driven out of her home by some carping Midgardian spirit!

As she hurried down the street, once again she felt a cold draft and heard footsteps echoing behind her.

“Go away!” she hissed, then shook her fist at the draugr, wherever it was.

An icy hand trailed down her spine causing her to break out in goosebumps and shiver.

“Oooh! Go find someone else to cry to!”

But as before the ghost still managed to find a way inside.

The temperature plummeted until frost crystals formed on her teacup, her pastries became frozen, and the fire in the grate turned icy blue and gave off no warmth.
“Mistress,” chattered Illyria. “I fear we need a priest. This house is being haunted by an evil draugr!”

“D-don’t be ridiculous!” Jorunne shuddered. “Why would a draugr haunt me?”

“Mayhap it’s some who died in the mine collapse last month,” the housekeeper whimpered. “The unquiet dead bring cold like the Fimbul Winter.”

*Or a severely pissed off frost giant*, Loki thought. He was immune to his frost conjuring, as well as his illusion casting.

“Superstitious peasant nonsense!” Jorunne laughed weakly.

“Mistress, please!” Illyria made the sign to avert bad luck. “The draugr doesn’t like to be mocked.”

“I don’t give a damn!” Jorunne cried petulantly. “I’m the princess around here, not some two-bit ghost!”

*You wicked brat, you’re the princess all right—the princess of spoiled brats who need a good kick in backside!* Loki sneered silently. *Consider this all the spankings you never had but always deserved from me. I’m going to make you beg on your knees for this torment to end. But it will only end when you admit what you did.*

Illyria curtsied mechanically, but Loki could tell the woman was frightened by her mistress’ intransigence. “Do you wish anything else, milady?”

“No, leave,” Jorunne waved her away. “I’m going to read.”

As soon as the housekeeper had left, Loki transformed into Saskia again, and hissed in his niece’s ear, “What are you reading? A manual about how to get away with murder? I know what you did, you naughty girl! And one day you’ll pay!”

“Get out! Out!” Jorunne bellowed, as if the volume of her command would make the ghost depart. Several objects fell off the shelf and broke on the floor.

The book was ripped from her hands and thrown through the air.

Jorunne went to retrieve it and something tripped her. When she tried to get to her feet, a ghostly foot kicked her in the backside.

“When I catch you I’m going to kill you!” she spat, her eyes shimmering with rage.

“But I’m already dead!” taunted Saskia-Loki. “Don’t you mean I’m going to kill you again, Jorunne?”

Jorunne stamped her foot. “Just shut the Hel up! You’re giving me a headache!”

Mocking laughter echoed about the study, and Jorunne fled, barricading herself in the bedroom. Head throbbing, she went to lie down and screamed in horror.

Her bed was now a casket with grave dirt inside.

“Oh my dear! You’re not dressed! Where is your shroud?”
“Begone, ghost!’ she ordered with a shaking voice. “You have no reason to be here.”

“Liar! You killed me and I cannot rest! That’s why I’m he-e-e-re!”

“Leave me alone, Saskia!” Jorunne sobbed and ran into the bathroom.

She peered into the mirror and gasped.

“That’s—that’s not me! No-o-o-o!”

Her face in the mirror was that of an old hag, wrinkled and spotted, with rotting teeth and rheumy eyes and hair that was whiter than snow.

“My you look so haggard, dear! See what happens when you do bad things? They come back to haunt you!”

With a low cry, Jorunne smashed her hand through the mirror.

Maniacal laughter exploded all over the room and the servants ran into the bathroom to find their mistress with her hands over her ears and a shattered mirror all over the tile floor.

Several servants clasped protective amulets and prayed, others ran away that very night, not willing to risk their soul staying with a mistress who had incurred the wrath of a draugr.

**Inter~*~*~*~Mission**

“One more night should finish it,” Loki said wearily when he returned to the room. “How did your day go?”

Thor cleared his throat. “From what I was able to learn, that snake Volskar came here recently, about a month ago, and none of the dwarves like him. They call him Evil One behind his back. No one really cares for Jorunne either, but she’s tolerated because of her royalty. Which is why Volskar teamed up with her.”

“That’s good. Anything else?”

“One of the miners mentioned something about wages being cut. And their hours increased. He said they’re being worked to an early grave. Some have quit, but all are angry over the mistreatment. But they do nothing because Volskar has threatened to kill them.”

“Not surprised. Neither of them know how to run a birthday party much less a mining franchise.” Loki snorted. He took the power bar and soft drink Thor handed him and scarfed them down. Then he opened his satchel and took out a sandwich of peanut butter and lingonberry jam and ate it also.

“I need to watch what went on today,” Thor said gleefully. “This is better than WWF.”

Loki gave a weary smile. “I aim to please. One more night ought to finish it. She’s already stretched thin and scared.”

“You look tired, little brother. You should go to bed.”

The frost giant laughed hollowly. “This haunting business is a lot more work than I realized.” *And something I never would have been able to do before my rebirth.*
He waved a hand and his clothes were transmuted into simple boxers. “Well, I’m off to bed. Try not to laugh so much and wake me up, okay?”

“Aye, you need your beauty sleep,” Thor teased.

Loki threw a pillow at Thor’s head. “Shut up, lamebrain.” He shook his head. “Hel, I’m too tired to even insult you properly.”

“Just go to bed!”

Loki burst out laughing.

“What’s so funny?”

“What you said. It’s the name of a Little Critter by Maurice Sendak. I read it every other night to Aleta and Max. And you quoted it and didn’t even know it.”

“You and your books,” Thor rolled his eyes.

“Reading broadens the mind. You ought to try it sometime,” Loki said loftily.

“I’ll leave that to you, Master Wizard, and just stick with breaking heads.”

“You’re right. Maybe that’s safer. A little knowledge is too dangerous for you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing,” Loki replied innocently.

“Methinks I’ve been insulted.”

“Would I do that?”

“Is that a trick question?”

Loki smirked. “Okay, I really do need some sleep for my final performance tomorrow.”

“Night, Master Mischief.”

“Night, Thunderer.”

The next day:

Loki spent the early morning after breakfast making a small doll out of simple scraps of fabric and a few feathers and some yarn with a few strands of real hair wound about it. He made a mouth, nose, and eyes with a magic marker he produced from his satchel, which seemed to hold an unlimited amount of useful articles.

Thor watched, his brow creased. “Loki, why are you making a doll for Aleta to play with?”

“It’s not for Aleta. This is a voodoo doll. Otherwise known on Midgard as sympathetic magic. Whatever I do to this doll, will reflect back on Jorunne. This doll represents her, you see, and so long as I have her hair, I can make her feel awfully uncomfortable, so much so that it could make her fear for her life and confess to the murder.”
“All that from some scraps and yarn?” Thor asked incredulously.

“It’s amazing what you can do with a few household items,” the master magician smiled. Then he tucked the voodoo doll in his belt. “Stay tuned for the finale.”

Then he teleported one last time to the stone house.

Jorunne assumed the ghost was gone when nothing happened that morning with her breakfast or her toilettte. She breathed a sigh of relief. Finally the pesky draugr had given up the ghost! *I knew I could best that stupid slut! No draugr can win against Jorunne Baldersdottir the princess of Nornheim and Asgard!* She continued patting herself on the back as she got dressed to hunt. Her bloodlust was coming to the fore and she was eager to begin the hunt today.

She bent to lace up her boot when a sharp pain stabbed her in the back of the thigh.

“Ohw!” she rubbed at it, puzzled. “How can I have a cramp when I haven’t even ridden out yet?”

She straightened and went to grab her bow and quiver off the wall. As she stretched to reach it, she felt another sharp burning pain in her shoulder and neck.

“Ahhh! Ohh!” she moaned. She wasn’t used to being in severe pain, since like most immortals she healed from injuries swiftly.

She managed to get the quiver down from the wall before another pain ripped through her abdomen.

“Ohwww!” she wailed, clutching her belly. “What is this? I feel like I’m in labor! And I’m not even with child.”

More stabbing pains followed, so much so that she nearly couldn’t catch her breath. Tears trickled down her cheeks. “Make it stop!” she sobbed.

When she went to climb to her feet to ring the bell to summon her servants, her leg collapsed beneath her like a crumpled paper.

She landed hard on her bottom, fear etching her face like a carnival mask.

She tried again to get to her feet, only to discover she couldn’t.

“I can’t walk! What’s wrong with me? Help me!”

But no one seemed to hear her.

“No one hears you screaming... no one ever will... because your voice is silenced forever...” hissed Saskia’s voice eerily in her head. “*How does it feel— murderer? Are you scared now, Jorunne? Are you?*

useless legs.

“I can’t. Thanks to you I can never rest.”

“Nooo! Just leave! Move on—whatever you draugr do.”

“I can’t. I’m stuck here forever. Unless...”

“Unless what?”
“Unless you admit that you killed me.”

“And you’ll go away and leave me alone?”

“Yes. You’ll never see me again.”

“All right. I killed Saskia Norvald. There! ‘Tis done!” Jorunne cried triumphantly. “Now get thee hence, foul ghost!”

The room erupted with mocking laughter.

Seconds later the laughter ceased and there was a knock on the door and then it opened to reveal three police officers.

“What’s the meaning of this invasion, peasants!” demanded Jorunne haughtily.

“You are under arrest for the murder Saskia Norlund,’” One officer intoned.

“What? Why officer, surely you can’t be serious!” The sorceress protested. “I’d never hurt anyone!”

“Don’t lie, madame,” scolded another, this one looked like a lieutenant. We all heard that confession.”

“What confession? I was just doing a bit of play practice.”

“You killed Saskia Norlund,” one officer, a tall thin one with green eyes accused.

He came forward with a pair of cuffs and after ordering her to put her hands behind her back.

“You can’t arrest me! I’m a princess of Asgard!”

“Hands behind your back and don’t make me repeat myself,” the officer ordered firmly.

“This is a mistake! When my father hears about this--!”

“I’m sure he’ll be very disappointed,” mocked the officer, and then slapped the cuffs on her. They glowed blue and neutralized her magic.

“Come along, niece,” commanded the taller officer. “You have some explaining to do.”

Jorunne gaped. “Uncle Thor?”

“It’s two for one day, princess,” drawled another familiar voice, and the officer who had placed the cuffs on her suddenly shifted into her former mage master.

“Uncle Loki? You’re supposed to be dead!”

“Surprise! I got better.” Loki growled. Then he prodded her with a hand. “Start walking, princess. You can do your explaining to the Allfather.”

One down and one to go.
Jorunne is brought to face the Justice of Odin, but Loki is betrayed by a member of his family

"I’m not going anywhere with you!" Jorunne snarled. "You have no right to arrest me."

"On the contrary," Loki refuted. "I have a sworn confession from your own mouth condemning you for a murder."

"I never confessed to you, Uncle Loki," she spat.

"Ah, but you did, little niece. You simply didn’t know it. I heard every word, and I have recorded it here." He patted his satchel.

"It is most disgraceful, Jorunne, that you have brought such shame upon our family," Thor scolded.

"You’re a fine one to talk,” she snorted. “Consorting and living with mortals, and scheming with my black sheep uncle whom everyone in the family hates.”

"My mortal friends display more honor and nobility than you, and my brother is a hero, no longer the black sheep, as you say,” Thor defended. "Nor is Loki hated by everyone in the family. Hold your poison tongue, niece! You are going to answer for your misdeeds today.”

Jorunne set her jaw. “I’m not going anywhere with you, Uncle Thor! And you can’t make me!”

Loki just shook his head. “If you won’t move on your own two feet, girl, I’ll toss you over a shoulder like a misbehaving child and bring you to the palace that way. I won’t care who sees you humiliated that way.”

"Nor I," Thor asserted.

Jorunne gasped. “I am a princess of Asgard, not a sack of grain!”

“Then start acting like it, or else!” warned her uncle.
“Go to Hel, Loki!” she spat.

“Not before you,” Loki smirked. He crossed his arms over his chest. “So what will it be? Walk or be carried?”

She spun and abruptly tried to make a break for it, but Loki was prepared for it and before she had gone three steps he caught her. She attempted to bite and kick him, but he simply lowered his shoulder and thrust it into her midsection, grabbed her about the knees, and heaved her over his shoulder.

Furious, she called him every name she could think of, kicking and squirming like a hooked fish.

“Enough!” her uncle exclaimed. “You chose this.”

“Stop fighting, brat,” Thor ordered, coming up beside Loki.

Jorunne promptly spat in his face.

Then she yelped as the Thunder God’s hand smacked her upturned backside.

“Behave, young lady!” he ordered. “Or else there’s more where that came from.”

“I hate you! I hate both of you!” she cried.

“The feeling’s mutual,” Loki grunted. Then he began to walk towards the village square, which was where the sheriff had his office.

Mindful of Thor’s hand and the whispers, stares, and snickers of the villagers, Jorunne sulked the entire way.

Upon reaching the sheriff’s office, they asked if they could place their prisoner in one of temporary holding cells.

“We need to bring in her accomplice,” explained Loki. “He’s also wanted for murder.”

The sheriff quickly locked Jorunne in a cell, promising no visitors until Loki and Thor returned.

“Who else are you looking for?”

“Volskar,” Loki replied.

“Volskar? He’s a nasty one. Watch yourselves.”

“We shall.” Thor said. “Would you happen to know where he may be?”

“At this time of day he’s doubtless at the mine, probably in one of the shafts watching the production.”

Loki flinched and whispered, “Nine Hells! I was afraid you’d say that.”

“Then we shall go to the mines,” Thor said decisively.

Loki coughed. “Brilliant!” he said sarcastically. “Watch Jorunne closely. But don’t let her be alone with anyone. No visitors. And try to avoid speaking to her if you can. She’s a champion manipulator. In fact—” he gestured sharply. “There! Now she is silent and you’ll be safe from her carping tongue.”

“What did you do, Loki?” Thor queried.
“Just a simple silence charm,” the frost giant replied. “I don’t want to return and find she’s escaped.”

“That’s clever thinking. Now let’s go catch us a dark dwarf.”

“Oh joy!” Loki was distinctly unhappy.

As they approached the shaft where the lift was located, Loki fought a sudden wave of panic. He had developed claustrophobia from being a prisoner in a cave for fifty years, another one of Odin’s crazy punishments, and even though it had been very long ago, the frost giant had never quite conquered that phobia. But it was something he battled alone, not wishing to reveal his weakness to anyone.

“Come, brother. Let us descend and capture our last foe,” Thor urged.

“Hold on,” Loki ordered. “Give me a second to check our supplies.” He pretended to be rummaging in his satchel. In reality he was reciting several calming mantras and doing some deep breathing. *Get hold of yourself, Laufeyson. You aren’t going to be trapped under the ground. You’re just going to apprehend a criminal. Now relax!*

But his heart raced at the mere thought of entering that cage like lift and he decided then it would be easier if he shifted forms. “Thor, I’m going to become a badger. I can travel faster and smell better in that form. I’ll be able to smell where Volskar is,” he quickly made up a plausible reason.

He handed his brother his satchel, saying, “There’s an extra pair of cuffs in there. So unless you knock him out, use them.”

Then he blurred into a huge badger with iron gray fur, black stripes and white around the muzzle and eyes. His eyes were, as usual, his own emerald green. He could disguise them with a spell, but normally didn’t bother. Most people didn’t look too closely at an animal to determine whether or not their eyes were an unusual shade.

Badger-Loki sniffled up to Thor, moving with a quick sort of shuffle, his long claws digging furrows in the earth.

Thor nodded, and then pressed the button that summoned the lift from the depths.

It creaked, squeaked, and groaned as it came to the top of the shaft.

Thor opened the door. Then he bent and picked up Badger-Loki, saying, “It’s better if I carry you in here. That way you won’t have your brains jostled too much.’

Badger-Loki made a chuffing noise and settled into the crook of Thor’s muscled bicep, peering out nervously.

Thor stepped inside the lift, pulled the door shut, and pushed the button to descend.

As the lift rattled its way down, Badger-Loki shut his eyes, wincing at the horrendous noise assaulting his tender eardrums. Badgers had amazing hearing, which more than made up for their poor eyesight. He could still feel his heart beat a little rapidly, but it was not the full blown panic it would have been if he were still in his natural form. The badger nature, which was genetically made to tunnel and burrow beneath the earth, did not comprehend fear of small spaces, and so Loki allowed it to come to the fore more strongly than he would have otherwise. He did not relinquish control to the badger, but he did allow it to blanket his subconscious, and allow him to repel the claustrophobia.
As soon as the lift hit the ground, Badger-Loki was ready to jump out of Thor’s arms.

“Loki, calm down!’ his brother grunted. “Your claws are gonna scratch me to pieces!”

Badger-Loki quit struggling and Thor set him down.

The badger began to sniff along the ground. He smelled mold and dirt and then a familiar tang of sweat, blood, and iron. He scored the dirt with his back claws then began to run rapidly along the shaft.

Thor thudded along behind him, his footsteps making the ground tremble slightly.

The Thunder God lit a lantern to see by, but Badger-Loki needed nothing save his own eyes, which could see fairly well in the dim tunnels. But the most powerful sense Badger-Loki possessed was his keen sense of smell. Volskar gave off a distinct odor that Badger-Loki recognized from being near the dwarf at the mead hall.

With the foul odor stinging in his nostrils, Badger-Loki galloped through the dank mine, so focused upon finding his quarry that he forgot about being afraid in the subterranean depths.

He slowed as the ringing of pick axes and shovels echoed to his sensitive ears. Thor stopped too, and unslung his axe from its sheath over his shoulder. “They seem like they’re just around the bend.”

Badger-Loki made an odd grunting cough, as if disagreeing, then shook his head no.

He continued padding down the shaft, then took an abrupt right and led Thor deeper into the mine.

Soon they came to a large area where much digging had been done and whatever bounty the earth held extracted. Badger-Loki never slowed, but galloped straight through the area and into a tunnel going due north.

Thor was panting slightly behind him. Lugging around all that armor and his axe was slowing him down. Then too, Badger-Loki could run quite fast when he wished, and he did so now because he wanted this mission done and over with.

Finally they heard more pickaxes and shovels and the sound of gravelly dwarven voices speaking their own tongue, which both Asgardians understood.

“Why do we have to keep digging in this same spot? The vein is played out over here.”

“Just shut your pie hole and do as your told, before you bring Overseer Volskar down on us and he lays our backs open with his lash.”

“If he hadn’t bought us like thralls to work here, we’d never be treated like this!” muttered the first dwarf.

“Hush! Or he’ll hear you and then you’ll regret it.”

Badger-Loki drew up short as a third set of footsteps was heard. “How is the progress here?”

Volskar.

Badger-Loki’s nose wrinkled and he bared his dagger sharp teeth.
Thor came up beside him, his face hard. “Let’s get that pondslime.”

Thor was no longer disguised, so when his blonde head poked around the corner of the shaft, all the miners quit working to gape at him.

Volskar turned and bowed smoothly. “Lord Thor! Have you come to inspect the mine?” He sounded delighted.

Thor’s lip curled. “If by inspect you mean to fix what has gone wrong, then aye, verily I am here.”

“But nothing has gone wrong,” Volskar protested. “Our yield is higher than ever.”

“I am not here to discuss how many rocks you pull out of the ground. I’m here to arrest you for the murder of your partner, Saskia Norlund.”

Volskar went pale beneath his swarthy skin and black beard. “There must be some mistake. I am a humble overseer. Why would I kill a powerful woman who was also a witch?”

“I have no interest in debating words with a guilty dwarf. Your partner, Jorunne, has confessed all,” Thor spat. “On your knees, hands behind your back!”

Volskar obeyed, but when Thor turned to pull the cuffs from the satchel, the devious dwarf sprang to his feet and darted away down a side tunnel.

“Mimir’s balls!” Thor swore. “He’s getting away!”

Badger-Loki began running full speed down the tunnel intent upon biting his target and holding him at bay.

Unfortunately he hadn’t reckoned with Thor’s over enthusiasm.

The Thunder God saw only that their quarry was escaping and he forgot the weapon he held was an Axe of Sharpness and not Mjolnir.

He spun the axe and threw it hard at the stone entryway.

The axe sliced through the rock like a knife through butter.

It slammed into rock so hard it buried itself up to the hilt.

Meanwhile, Badger-Loki had taken a chunk out of Volskar’s thigh, growling and snarling like a rabid thing.

Volskar was afraid of the odd animal and he tried to kick Badger-Loki all the way home.

But the badger was too quick, dodging it, his fur on end, neatly avoiding the booted foot.

Growling viciously, Badger-Loki attacked again, and Volskar drew a long knife and lunged at the stocky animal, preparing to stab it through the back.

But he hadn’t reckoned on how quickly a badger could bite and then release.

The medium-sized carnivore twisted away, like a fox dodging a pack of hounds, and Volskar’s thrust missed.

Just as Thor’s axe thudded into the wall of the small shaft’s entrance, Badger-Loki felt the sudden shift within the earth and stone and drew back, all his fur standing on end.
Volskar looked up when he heard a roar and saw the roof of the tunnel beginning to collapse.

He threw himself towards the mouth of the tunnel, but Badger-Loki reared up and slashed him across the face with his long claws.

Volskar screamed and threw up his hand to protect his face, blood streaming through his fingers.

Badger-Loki ran into the large cavern just as the earth rumbled and shook and then the entire tunnel collapsed on top of Volskar.

Panicked, Badger-Loki transformed into his ordinary shape, grabbed his brother in a head lock, and teleported to the surface. Buried alive, you were nearly buried alive . . . sheer terror nearly caused him to hyperventilate right there. He coughed and spat out dust.

“What the Hel were you thinking, Thor?” Loki screamed in the other god’s ear. “You collapsed the ceiling on top of Volskar and me, you idiot!”

“Forgive me, brother, but I didn’t know throwing the axe would cause such a thing. I guess it’s not really like throwing Mjolnir.”

“Is that all you have to say?” Loki panted, his voice gritty.

“Loki, I’m sorry. But at least we got Volskar.” Thor pointed out cheerfully.

“Oh yes, we got him all right. Under forty tons of solid rock.”

“Dead or alive, he had been brought to justice,” coughed Thor.

Loki was still trembling from the aftermath of nearly being buried alive and he abruptly released his brother only to draw back his fist and slam Thor one on the jaw. “That’s for almost killing me!”

Thor rocked back on his heels, his cerulean eyes wide. Loki rarely resorted to physical violence, so he had to have truly angered the Jotun. He rubbed his jaw, which ached like Nine Hells, and gave his brother an apologetic lopsided grin.

“Loki, I really am sorry—”

“Forget it. I forgive you,” the other sighed, and shook out his hand. He scanned the astral for Volskar’s aura and found none, meaning the dwarf was truly dead, for even nearly dead individuals still had auras. “He’s dead. Which means we’ve fulfilled our part of the bargain. Saskia, now fulfill yours!” he ordered.

There came a whirlwind of dust and greenish sparks and Saskia appeared before them. She seemed more solid than before and this time she spoke and both could hear her without the aid of Vince.

“You have indeed, Crafty One. For this you have my eternal gratitude.”

“What about Mjolnir?” Thor demanded.

The ghost spread her hands, and a bar of light appeared between them. Then the lost hammer appeared.

Thor caught it before it could fall to the ground. His eyes gleamed and his lips curved in a relieved smile. Everything was right with his world again.
Saskia bowed then began to fade away into smaller and smaller sparks of light until she was gone.

Loki brushed dust from his clothes. “Okay, Thor. Now we drop off Jorunne and let Father deal with her, then I need to go home. I promised Samantha I’d only be gone three days and that’s probably how much time has passed on Midgard since I left.”

Thor patted his shoulder. “Quit worrying, Loki. Your little zoo is fine.”

“How about Tony and Steve?” Loki challenged. “We might come home and find them staked out in the back yard because the kids were playing Comanches again.”

His brother laughed. “I’d be sure and take pictures.”

“So would I. Now let’s go rid ourselves of our problem child,” Loki urged. Then he took Thor’s arm and teleported back to the holding cell where Jorunne was bound.

After collecting their niece, who glared daggers at both her uncles, Loki opened a portal to Asgard. Loki and Thor frog marched their royal captive to the palace, making sure all the citizens got a good look as they did so.

“The princess has been arrested!”

“I wonder what she did?”

“It’s Prince Thor and Prince Loki!”

“Wasn’t Loki dead?”

At that comment, Loki turned and said in his best imitation of Sherlock, “Rumors of my death have been greatly exaggerated.”

That caused another sensation to run through the crowd, but soon enough they went back to discussing what trouble Jorunne could have gotten arrested for. Rumors flew from illegal poaching, to seducing another woman’s husband, to sacrificing children at the dark of the moon. Jorunne, despite her status, was clearly unpopular with the people of her own realm.

Some of the bolder ones came and spat at her as she passed, a few threw rotten fruit and vegetables and jeered.

Jorunne looked like she wanted to murder them all.

Loki removed the silence spell because he knew she would need to talk in Odin’s presence, and the captive snarled, “This is how you allow those peasants to treat a princess of the blood?”

“You’re a prisoner,” Loki pointed out roughly. “Get used to it.”

He had been treated much the same long ago and so held no sympathy for her.

By the time they reached the palace proper, Jorunne had lost much of her haughty airs, as it was hard to be arrogant when you were covered in refuse. The guards on duty at the entrance saluted the two princes, their eyes widening at the prisoner between them.

“Is the Allfather in residence, Dagobar?” Loki queried formally of the guard he recognized.

“Indeed, Prince Loki. He awaits you and Prince Thor in the throne room.”
Thor wrinkled his nose. “Loki, we need to clean her up a bit. Father won’t want his throne room smelling like a dung heap.”

Loki heaved a sigh and twitched a hand. The garbage clinging to Jorunne vanished, but some stains still clung to her dress and shoes. They processed into the palace.

Loki noticed that not much had changed since the last time he had been here. The palace still sprawled over the grounds like a monstrous brooding Jotun. Built of golden blocks of stone quarried from Niflheim which reflected and caught the sun, it gleamed brilliant gold. The tiles were silver and prettily worked tapestries of different heroic feats, battles, and quiet everyday scenes decorated the halls along with the carvings of ravens, wolves, horses, and cats. The entryway was guarded by yet another guard pair, these rotated every couple of hours. A spiral grand staircase led to the upper halls of the palace, a red carpet led to the huge carved doors of Odin's throne room to the right, while to the left was Valhalla and the great feast hall.

From the sound of things, another feast was already underway with some of the Einherjeri and Valkyries in attendance.

The guards saluted Thor and Loki and a herald in brown and gold colors announced them when the great doors to the throne room swung open. Some petitioners waited on benches outside to be admitted to ask Odin for favors or petition him about a matter, and they watched curiously as Jorunne was led inside with Thor and Loki flanking her. Loki was sure that in five seconds flat rumors would be flying all over Valhalla.

The throne room proper was filled with milling courtiers in small groups lounging on the window seats of the picturesque bay windows or on stools and benches. On a raised dais was Odin's magical throne from which he could see into all the Nine Realms called Hlidskjalf. The throne was draped with a snow white fur of a yeti and beside it lay Geri and Freki, his huge gray wolves. Perched on the back were two giant ravens, Huninn and Muninn. Huninn cawed when they entered, whispering loudly, "Odin, your sons have come home!"

Odin lifted a hand to stroke the raven, who preened at the god's touch. Odin was wearing his customary blue and gold robe with magical runic designs sewed by Frigga, soft gray trousers, dragonhide boots and his black eyepatch was of crushed velvet. Upon his head was a simple jeweled circlet. His iron gray hair flowed down past his shoulders and he watched his sons approach with his granddaughter in tow keenly, saying nothing.

As they neared the dais, Thor saluted with a fist to his heart and went to one knee. Loki did the same, but Jorunne remained in her feet until Loki hissed in outrage, "Kneel before your king, you impudent child!' and he tugged the chain fastened to her manacles, forcing the young woman to drop to the her knees or end up sprawled on the floor.

"Father, we have come to bring before you a matter of grave importance," Thor began.

"Rise, my sons, and welcome home," Odin greeted, a faint smile playing over his lips. "What brings you here with my granddaughter in chains like a common criminal?"

As they all rose, Jorunne gave Odin a pleading glance and cried, "Grandfather, it's all lies! Everything Loki says is a lie!"

Loki's jaw clenched. But he said nothing, simply released the chain to remove his Seeing globe from his satchel.

"You have not been accused of anything, granddaughter, yet you automatically claim your uncle has played you false?" Odin frowned.
"Father, that's not so," Thor spoke up. "She forgets, I was there too."

"And what is this matter that causes you to bind my granddaughter thus?"

"She murdered her partner, a woman named Saskia Norland," Loki replied. "The first we knew of it was when Saskia came to my house on Midgard and demanded we search for her murderers and bring them to justice and she would return Mjolnir to us."

Odin glanced at Thor and saw the hammer hanging in its usual place. "Mjolnir was missing?"

"Not now, Father, but yes. The ghost took it as ransom so we would search for her murderers."

"Which we did and found our niece Jorunne up to her neck in intrigue and murder along with her new partner Volskar, a Dark Dwarf."

"He lies! Volskar was the one who did everything," Jorunne interrupted. Huge tears gathered at the corners of her brilliant blue eyes and she cried woefully, "I tried to tell them that, Grandfather, but Loki insisted on clapping me in these restraints and dragging me here like a criminal. You ought to punish him for treating a princess of Asgard like a thrall."

"My daughter is correct," Karnilla stated coldly, sweeping in from a side door reserved only for family to join them in front of the dais. "Loki, remove those manacles at once!"

Loki glared at her. "No. Jorunne has broken the law and as such we have brought her to judgment. The manacles are to prevent her using magic to escape."

"My daughter is innocent, Lie-Smith!" Karnilla spat. "This is just more of your mischief."

"Believe me, sister darling, if I had a choice, I wouldn't be here!" Loki snapped. "I have far better things to do than run around cleaning up messes your daughter caused."

"Really?" Karnilla drew herself to her full height, which was impressive, her dark hair sweeping behind her, held up by a jeweled headband. She wore a tight-fitting cobalt blue gown that shimmered like starlight and was slit up the side, revealing her shapely legs. Her feet were encased in gold bejeweled sandals. "What's that, Master Mischief? Causing more mayhem down on Midgard? Raising those misfit brats that nobody else wanted?"

"Shut your mouth, you envious witch!" Loki snarled, clenching his fists. His magic roused and made the tapestries flutter as a cold wind sprang up. "All nine of my children are worth ten times what yours is! At least none of mine are sociopaths that torture helpless animals and murder people."

"Mama, he's spinning some fake story," Jorunne whined, her voice like thick treacle, more fake tears filling her expressive eyes.

"Loki is telling the truth," Thor asserted. "I saw for myself how meanly she treats her servants and she has no repentance in her for murdering her partner."

'You would take his side," Jorunne cried. "Mama, Thor hit me, the great bully."

"You hit my daughter?!" growled Balder, only now joining the rest of his family. He was a slightly smaller version of his more famous sibling, dressed in a sky blue tunic, white trousers and brown boots his blond hair bound back by a silver fillet. "I ought to knock your teeth in!"

Thor scowled. "Balder, I gave her a smack on the backside after she spit in my face. We asked her to return here with us in a dignified manner and she chose to try and run away, so Loki caught her
and put her over his shoulder and she attacked him like a spoiled brat."

"How dare you?" Karnilla cried, her violet eyes sparkling with outrage. "How dare you manhandle my daughter, Loki Lie-Smith?"

"It was either my shoulder or drag her by her hair through the street to jail," answered the Jotun. "Would you have preferred that? No? She behaved like a five-year-old so I treated her like one."

"On whose authority, Loki?" Balder demanded.

"We were acting as local law enforcement tasked with solving a crime," Loki replied smoothly. "Which we did solve. The proof is here." He held out the Seeing globe. "Father, I have here a Seeing globe which I recorded the confession Jorunne made to killing Saskia. But her aura is also dark with spilled blood, you can see it if you look."

"More lies!" Karnilla taunted.

"You're the one who is lying to yourself, sister," Thor reproved. He turned to Balder. "You ought to have taught your daughter manners, brother, then I wouldn't have needed to resort to such measures."

Balder, to his credit, looked embarrassed. "Jorunne, apologize to your Uncle Thor."

"For treating me like a churl?" his daughter wailed. "I won't!"

"Enough!" Odin yelled and everyone froze. He came down from his throne to take the globe from Loki. "Jorunne, cease this unseemly shrieking like a mortal fishwife and do as your father says. You are old enough to show respect for your elders."

"Yes, Grandfather," Jorunne pouted, then murmured an apology to Thor that was totally insincere.

"Now, I shall take this globe into my private audience chamber and view it. Balder, come with me." Then he turned and strode off to a door behind the throne half-hidden by a tapestry.

"Father, a moment," Loki called. Odin turned.

"What is it, Loki?"

"How is Mother?"

"Still in stasis, I'm afraid. The poisoned dagger she took for Jane Foster harmed her greatly and I am still healing her slowly. She woke briefly last week, asked about you, and then I put her back to sleep as she was in great pain."

Loki's eyes shone with repressed emotion. "She asked for me?"

"She asked me to tell you she misses you and wishes for you to come visit when she is well. She wants to meet her Laufeyson grandchildren, as do I."

"I will come as soon as she is well enough," Loki vowed. "Tell her I love her."

Odin nodded. "When she wakes I will do so." Then he spun and walked towards the audience chamber, Balder following.

"How touching!" sneered Karnilla. "But you don't fool me for a moment, Wolf-Father. Your silver tongue says one thing while you do another. You should have remained on Midgard, Loki, because you aren't wanted here!"
"Cease, Karnilla!" Thor snapped. "You are only blaming Loki because you can't bear to blame your own daughter, and your bitterness is only poisoning you. Why are you not with Balder and Father seeing the truth?"

"I don't need to see anything Loki has schemed up." said the Norn Queen. She went then to her daughter and embraced her, her eyes raining down fire upon the two brothers. "Even if she did kill this mortal, I'm sure it was not murder but an accident. Right, precious?" she stroked her daughter's ebony hair.

Jorunne, never one to miss her cue, began sobbing loudly on Karnilla's shoulder.

Loki applauded. "There's an Oscar winning performance right there, eh, Thor?"

Thor just rolled his eyes and looked disgusted.

Karnilla pulled her daughter a few feet closer to the dais and sat upon the stairs with her. She handed her distraught child a silk handkerchief and they leaned their heads together and spoke in soft whispers.

Thor nudged Loki. "I don't understand. How can she fall for that? Even I could tell that was fake."

Loki sighed. "Because she doesn't wish to face the truth. She'd rather spew her venom at me than stare reality in the face. But don't worry. Father will view the truth and hopefully mete out a suitable consequence."

In a way, the God of Mischief felt sorry for Karnilla, for he knew how difficult it was to learn that a child you had raised from an infant was suddenly someone who had thrown aside all your teachings to become someone you couldn't bear to know. At the same time, however, he also knew that the way Karnilla and Balder spoiled the girl had made her personality disorder worse, and by not acknowledging the truth they were only hurting themselves and everyone around them. But he knew nothing he said would be taken well by the angry sorceress and so he kept silent.

Just then the door to the antechamber opened and Balder came out. The shining god looked like he had aged ten years while viewing the globe, his eyes bright with shock and sorrow, his tread heavy.

Karnilla rose and went to him. "Well? What sort of lies has the Sly One cooked up this time?"

Balder shook his head. "Karnilla, he wasn't lying. I saw it. She condemned herself out of her own mouth."

"Papa, what are you saying?" cried Jorunne. She ran up and grabbed him by the arm, tears sparkling all over her cheeks. "Whatever you saw was fake. You know how good Loki is at casting illusions! I never killed anyone."

Balder looked at his only child gravely. "I heard what you said. You admitted your guilt, daughter."

'Balder, what are you saying?" Karnilla gasped. "This was an accident!"

"An accident? No, Karnilla. This was murder, plain and simple. Worse one that was hidden. Now the Allfather will decide your fat, Jorunne."

"No! Papa, you can't let them put me in prison!" Jorunne howled, clinging to him like a barnacle.
"Why don't you believe me?"

Balder glanced away, an expression like he was being stretched on the rack on his face. "Because I've seen the truth, child. Now stop with the crocodile tears, Jorunne. They won't work on me. Face your fate like a princess, not a sniveling baby."

"Balder!" his wife snarled. "You're just going to stand here and let your father pass down judgment without even trying to persuade him otherwise?"

"Karnilla, I saw what I saw." Balder replied heavily. He turned then to Loki, who was standing a little ways from Thor, observing silently. "Forgive me, little brother. I didn't want to believe that my daughter was capable of those things you accused her of all those years ago. I was wrong. I see that now. I'm sorry I ever doubted you. Sometimes the truth is worse than a lie." He walked over to embrace Loki.

A horrified Karnilla followed.

"Balder, are you mad? To believe this-wretched serpent tongued Jotun bastard over your own flesh and blood?"

Balder gave her an icy glance. "Hush, woman! That's my brother you insult!" He hugged a startled Loki.

"Sorcery!" the Norn Queen hissed, her eyes suddenly crazed. "He's enchanted you, husband! And there is only one way to stop his evil."

Balder turned, one arm still about Loki. "Karnilla, the truth is not enchantment. I know it's hard, beloved but you must stop lying to yourself and see that our daughter isn't the sweet innocent child you used to know. She's become a cold hardened killer. I love her, but I can't defend her any longer."

"Treachery!" Karnilla howled. Between one blink and the next, she drew a hidden dagger from her dress and went to lunge at her husband. But at the last moment she ducked under his arm and thrust the vorpal blade home where she had always intended-into Loki's chest.

Loki staggered backwards, the magical dagger sucking away his magic and his life like a vampire draining the blood of its prey. "You-bitch!" he choked, his emerald eyes dilated with shock and pain.

"Die, Jotun coward, as you have lived! On your knees!"

"Karnilla!" Balder roared. "What have you done?"

"Avenged me, Papa," Jorunne said with a sweet smile on her lips.

Loki found himself falling, unable to remain on his feet, only to be caught in familiar pair of arms.

"Loki!" Thor screamed. "No, not again!"

"Get the healers!" cried one courtier.

Another woman screamed and fainted.

Thor cradled his brother in his arms and sobbed, "Loki, please! Don't go! The healers will fix you." His eyes lifted to Balder, who held a dazed Karnilla by an arm. "Corral that treacherous bitch, brother, before I kill her!"
"Thor . . ." Loki plucked weakly at his sleeve. "Take me home . . . promised . . ."

"Loki, that's not possible . . ."

Loki coughed. "Do it! By the love you bear me . . . take me home . . ." The emerald eyes glittered fiercely.

He could feel his life force slipping away like a guttered candle. His head lolled back and his hand groped for the emerald cabochon he wore about his neck. He closed his bloodstained hand about it and hissed, "Blood of my blood . . ."

Then the cabochon activated and Thor and Loki were whisked away back to Midgard, to the Avengers mansion, while in Greenwich Village, his Lorekeeper daughter jerked awake from a sound sleep screaming into her pillow.

An instant later she sprang from her bed and heedless of the chill on her bare feet, raced into her father's bedroom and threw open the wardrobe. Pushing a stud, the entire panel slid open and Belle raced down the stairs to the secret workroom, praying she would be in time.

"BRUCE!" Thor bellowed in a voice that could have been heard in Australia, cradling a bleeding and broken Loki in his arms.

Loki smiled. Then he surrendered to the darkness.
Chapter Summary

Can Belle save Loki with the Ritual of Renewal?

14

All the Bright Pieces

*I am all the promises of my youth fulfilled, all the bright pieces regained, born anew from fire and sorrow.* ~ Loki

Belle's feet pattered across the flagstones in Loki's magical workroom, a place only she and he could enter. She knew upon receiving the spirit message from her dying father that he needed her to perform the Ritual of Renewal, and thus she had come to gather what she needed to do so. Her feet froze upon the stones, and as soon as she spotted Loki's Seven League boots sitting beside his table, she stepped into them. They shrank to fit her small feet and then she bounded across the workroom to the secret compartment hidden in the wall.

She made a circular motion with a hand, drew the rune for revealing in the air, then spoke the command word in Old Norse, "Open!"

A glowing section of the wall slid away to reveal a simple ashwood box. The box was carved from some branches of Yggdrasil, the World Tree, and they contained what she needed to perform the ritual. Belle set her hand upon the box, which was keyed to recognize her magical aura and Loki's and would open for no one else.

The box's lid clicked and she opened it to reveal nine crystals blazing with lambent starfire. She carefully removed a crystal from its velvet bed, slipping it inside a special bag which was also inside the box. It would prevent the crystal's emanations from being seen by other magic practitioners. This she put around her neck. Then she closed the box and restored the wall. Next she ran to another shelf and removed two vials of potions which she shoved into a potion satchel that hung upon the wall. The satchel had small padded niches to cradle the bottles so they didn’t break during transport. It also contained a pair of dragonhide gloves. The satchel went over her shoulder. That done she snatched an athame from a rack and stuck it into the satchel's side pocket.

*Hurry, Belle! Hurry!* She urged herself, sensing that more time was passing than she liked. She bolted up the stairs, through the wardrobe, and then paused to slide the back panel into place. There was no telling what could happen if she forgot to shut the workroom door. The whole house might have blown up if any of her younger siblings had gone down there and played with the magical apparatus inside.

She brushed against one of Loki's green and black coats as she exited the wardrobe and on impulse she put it on, tears blinding her for a moment as she smelled his familiar scent of peppermint and aftershave. She buttoned the coat about her, muttering a spell to keep it from dragging on the floor.
Then she ran to the window and opened it. She glanced back once to make sure the door was shut and the only light came from the fire spark spell in her hand. Then she threw her leg over the sill and with the aid of the Seven League boots walked down the side of the house.

Once on the ground the boots allowed her to leap in huge bounds, like a giant would walk, and she raced down the street towards the Avengers mansion, knowing without being told that was where her father was.

All the lights in the mansion were on as Belle sprang up the drive. She threw open the door on the side which she and her siblings usually used to come and go in the house, and then she cocked her head and concentrated. She could feel her father's aura, flickering and fading, but still strong enough to enable her to track him.

Not that she wouldn't have been able to figure out where he was by simple deduction. Her uncle would have brought him to Dr. Banner in the medical bay.

No sooner had she thought of her destination than the boots pulled her right down the corridor and in two strides she was outside the door. Inside she could hear Bruce's measured tones and Thor's stricken one, pleading with the doctor to save Loki's life.

"He wanted me to bring him home, I don't know why when we have healers on Asgard who could have helped him," Thor said, totally puzzled.

"Thor, buddy, he may have wanted to come home to . . . well . . ." he trailed off meaningfully.

Belle turned the knob and came in, a slight figure in her borrowed coat, boots, and nightie, her hair frizzing wildly from her magical transportation.

"He's not going to die, Uncle Bruce," she said with as much authority as she could muster. "Not while I can save him."

The two men turned from where Bruce had Loki lying upon a stainless steel operating table to gape at the Lorekeeper.

"Belle! What are you doing here?" Bruce sputtered, trying to draw a sheet over Loki.

"Little raven, you shouldn't be here," Thor began, his face ravaged with grief. "Your father wouldn't want you to see him this way."

Belle gave him a sad smile. "Uncle Thor, he called me and told me to come to him." She gave Bruce a searching look. "Have you taken the dagger out, Uncle Bruce?"

"How the blazes do you know about that?" Bruce gasped.

Belle shrugged. "A Lorekeeper knows many things. Did you?"

"No. Not yet. It's close to an artery and I—"

"Good," she interrupted. "Because that's not for you to do. That's my task."

"What?" Thor cried. "Belle, you ought to be home in bed! You're not a healer, you're a little girl!"

His niece just gave him a single glance from her cocoa brown eyes, then said serenely, "Tonight I'm not just a little girl, uncle. Tonight I am more." Then she lifted her hands and said, "I'm sorry,
but you need to leave now. No one who isn't a mage may see the ritual."

"Now wait just a cotton-picking minute, young lady!" Bruce began.

"Sorry, Uncle Bruce. I don't have a minute. I'll explain later." She put the tips of her thumbs together and spread her hands out in a fan like pattern.

Magical energy exploded from her hands and propelled both men out the door of the med bay and into the hallway. Then the door closed and locked, and a glowing magical ward sprang up around it, preventing anyone from entering.

Belle approached the table where Loki lay, gently pulling back the sheet to reveal her father's still form. She could see he barely breathed. His skin was waxy pale and blood stained his entire torso. Swallowing hard, she peered at the dagger sticking up obscenely from his chest, its handle a cold black metal twist, shoved into her father almost up to the tang. Nausea threatened to overwhelm her.

*Stop it, Belle! You can throw up later! Now you need to do what you came here for.*

Taking a deep breath, Belle removed the gloves from the satchel and pulled them on, Loki's warning about handling vorpal blades echoing in her head.

*Never ever EVER touch a vorpal blade with your bare hands. Or else it will drain your magic and your life force.*

Vorpal blades were sometimes called vampire blades among the magical community, and were one of the ways a non-mage used to kill a mage. A vorpal blade did tremendous damage not just physically, but to a mage's magical core. Which was why she needed to remove it as soon as possible.

Taking a deep breath she leaned over and grasped the hilt of the blade with her gloved hands. The dragonhide protected her from coming into direct contact but also gave her a sturdy grip. Gritting her teeth, she tugged hard on the blade, praying it wasn't one of those horrible serrated ones which would do more damage coming out than going in.

Loki didn't stir, but Belle had tears streaming down her cheeks as she pulled the horrible weapon free and threw it on the floor. Blood pumped sluggishly from the gaping hole in Loki's chest. *I'm sorry, Dad! I'm sorry!*

Behind her she heard her uncles outside the door yelling, "Belle! Belle Laufeyson, let us in there right now!"

"What in Hel is she doing in there?"

"How should I know? All I know is whatever she did is preventing us from getting in there."

"I could try and smash it with Mjolnir," Thor said.

"I could become the Hulk and do the same, but . . . somehow I don't think that would be a good idea,' Bruce said.

"My brother is dying in there!" Thor shouted.

"I know, buddy, but that's her dad in there. If she can save him we ought to let her try."

*Like you can stop me, Uncle Bruce,* Belle thought matter-of-factly. She grabbed some towels and
put pressure on the wound for a minute, then she removed them and began using the sorcerer's sand in the first vial in the satchel to draw a circle about the table and herself.

*A circle to contain the magic within,* she recited. Once the circle was closed with the rune for eternity, she began to draw the four other runes she needed—runes for fire, ice, rebirth, and magical healing. Each rune she drew with the sand glowed with a steady blue light. Then she capped the vial of sand and withdrew the crystal from the pouch about her neck.

Holding it carefully, she placed it upon Loki's chest, near the wound.

She took several deep breaths, centering herself, then she doused her hand with yarrow wash in the second vial and poured some into the wound. Taking the athame from the satchel, she clenched her jaw and quickly cut the center of her palm.

Then she went and placed her bloody hand over the crystal and chanted in the language of magic, "Blood of my blood, bone of my bone, flesh that was rended, now mend whole. True heart to true heart, mind speaks to mind, may the bond that was broken, now be restored!"

The crystal soaked up the sacrifice she had offered, then began to glow stridently, like a star gone nova.

Belle felt it heat between her hands, almost too hot to hold, it healed the cut on her palm in a searing flash, but she recalled her father's instructions and didn't let go. The magic of the crystal exploded outward, healing the gaping wound in Loki's chest, seamlessly without a scar. But then it went deeper, the light flowing through his injured magical core and renewing and restoring it as well as his life energy in one great pulse.

As it did so, Belle experienced what Loki had during the last few moments he had been conscious before using his amulet to teleport back to the mansion. She felt all of his terror and pain, and his last whispered command, which he sent to her through the link.

She screamed soundlessly as waves of emotion battered her fragile psyche. Tears spilled from her eyes in an endless stream of salt water to fall upon Loki's upturned face. *Hold on, hold on, hold on. This will be over soon. This is the price required—blood calls to blood, spirit to spirit, all the bright pieces rejoined anew.*

She felt the magic of the crystal drawing on her own, using it to help restore her father's magic and energy. Now it was gentle, soothing, lapping at her like a cat's tongue, renewing her even though she gave herself away. Warmth pooled beneath her fingers, spreading outward until it was if she stood directly in a stream of sunlight.

Last was her task to call back his dying spirit, and this she did by drawing upon the link that bound the pieces of her spirit and his together. *Come home, Loki Laufeyson. Come home to me. Follow my light and come back to me.*

Her spirit was a brief flicker in the ocean of darkness of the Void between and betwixt all realities, yet like a beacon it summoned the bright pieces of Loki's spirit, shining unmistakably for the lost to find their way home.

*I'm coming!*

She heard the whisper in the deep and her soul sang with joy as their spirits rejoined, weaving seamlessly back together.

Then it was finished and the light flickered and died, the crystal ceased to glow, its magic spent. Belle carefully picked it up and placed it back in its pouch. As she did so, her hand brushed
against the newly healed skin of Loki's chest.

His hand came up and slender fingers wrapped about her wrist. Then he was sitting up, his brilliant emerald eyes staring at her. "Belle," he whispered, his voice soft as midnight. "I'm back."

"It worked," she said, incredulous despite the proof before her eyes. Then she threw her arms about her father and hugged him so tightly he feared she would break open his newly healed wound. "I thought . . . I almost wasn't in time . . . but . . ." She pressed her face into his shoulder, breathing in his familiar scent, feeling the warmth of his living flesh beneath her fingers, his heartbeat thundering in her ears. Alive. Alive. Death has no hold upon him anymore. Born anew from sorrow and fire.

"It's okay, little raven. I'm here," he murmured, carding her flyaway hair.

"You almost died!" she sobbed. "I felt it . . .!" Abruptly she was crying all over him, harsh wracking sobs that shook her slender frame like a rowan in a windstorm.

"Shh . . . shhh . . . alskling . . ." he crooned, holding her against him. He rocked her back and forth, his own eyes wet. The spirit link that bound them was always there, but now, given the great magic which had been worked between them, it was active and he could feel her emotions just as she had his. "Poor baby, I'm so sorry, I wish I could take this from you . . ."

He hated the fact that the magic required this from her, but the ritual always carried a high price, for the magic to be effective you had to go to the gates of death to bring back the soul of the dying, and that was never without a cost. And she was the only mage he trusted to perform this spell for him, since they were spirit linked, and her innate magic lent itself to such spells.

"Magic's price . . ." she whispered, struggling to stop crying. " . . . not your fault . . ."

"I know . . . but when you hurt so do I, little Spirit Keeper," he said hoarsely, calling her by the secret name only the two of them knew. He wept into her hair, her pain like a raw throbbing wound between them.

For it had been no coincidence that when her magic awakened it had drawn him to her. His rebirth had not been a seamless one, and some of the bright pieces of his soul had been scattered before the Powers That Be had brought him back. They had for some unknown reason latched onto her nascent aura and she had absorbed them when her magic awakened. They were now a part of her, like blood and bone, never to be separated. It created an unbreakable link between them, and an uncanny understanding that no one else in the universe shared with him.

Since part of his spirit resided in her, she became his Spirit Keeper, as close as an identical twin, who knew him like no other could. She alone of his children knew about his rebirth and the price of his redemption. She alone was his trusted apprentice, advocate, and the one able to perform the ritual that would bring him back from Hel's cold embrace. But even with all that responsibility on her shoulders, she was also still his little girl, and his heart shattered into a million pieces for the pain he had caused her.

For long moments they clung to each other, lost in a world of shared grief and pain, until the repeated bashing of the door by Bruce and Thor intruded and brought them back to reality.

"Something's happening in there!" Thor yelled frantically. "Belle! Belle, please, let me in! What's happened to your father?"

"Darling, did you lock them out?" Loki queried gently.

His daughter nodded against his shoulder, still leaking tears. " . . . had to . . . couldn't let them see ."
"I know. But now it's time to let them back in, little raven," he murmured. He lifted a hand and removed the spell over the door.

Thor was just about to beat on the door again when the glowing shield vanished and the door swung open. The god bounded into the room. "Belle? Is—is he—?" he choked up, unable to finish his sentence.

So Loki did it for him.

"I'm not dead yet. I don't want to go on the cart," he said in a flawless British accent.

"Loki!" Thor roared in delight and then he nearly smothered both father and daughter in a bear hug.

"Umm . . . Thor? It would be nice if you'd let me breathe . . .!" Loki squeaked. "And you're squishing Belle."

Thor slowly loosened his hold, saying softly, "Sorry . . . it's just . . . I thought you were dead, you were bleeding all over in my arms . . ."

"That was chicken blood," Loki joked, his eyes sparkling.

"How can you joke about this?" his brother demanded.

"Because I've already spent the past ten minutes crying my eyes out and I've had enough of being sad. I'm here, I'm healed, and it's time to be happy." His hand rubbed Belle's back. "You okay, alskling?"

Belle nodded against his shoulder, then slowly raised her head and gave her uncle a tremulous smile. "I'm sorry I had to lock you out, Uncle Thor. But the ritual requires me to cast it alone, no distractions."

Thor gently patted her shoulder. "I understand, little raven. As your father used to tell me—magic is mage's business and that's all you need to know. But when I heard you crying, I feared that . . ."

"I know. I was just upset."

Loki snorted. "Upset? You were shell shocked, little raven. She felt what I did when I was stabbed."

Thor gaped at them like a half-wit. "Name of Yggdrasil, Loki! How could you let her feel that?"

"It's not like he had a choice, Uncle Thor," Belle put in. "The magic chooses the price required. In order to restore someone you need to feel exactly what they are feeling so you can fix it. It's okay. I'll be fine after awhile."

"And if you aren't, you come tell me," her father ordered.

"Always," she promised, squeezing his hand. "Uh, I borrowed your coat and your Seven League boots, Dad."

"I thought I recognized that outfit," he chuckled. He eyed her thoughtfully. "Looks good on you, darling. Maybe you ought to keep the coat. But I do need my boots back."

Shifting slightly, he looked around. "Where's my shirt?"
"Bruce had to cut it off you," Thor said. He glanced down and saw the dagger beside his foot. "Is this what Karnilla stabbed you with?"

"Yes. Don't touch it. It's evidence." Loki explained. "It's also deadly for most people to touch." He removed the gloves from Belle and then picked up the dagger and put it in the satchel.

"Well, look who's rejoined the land of the living." Bruce remarked with a wide smile as he entered the room, having lingered in the hallway to give the siblings some privacy for their reunion. "You look amazing for having been half dead just a few hours ago." He eyed Belle speculatively. "What did you do, young lady?"

"Magic, Uncle Bruce. A spell Dad taught me," she told him. It was true, but there was so much more to it than that.

Bruce's eyebrow climbed into his hair. "You know spells to bring back the dead now, Loki?"

"I wasn't dead yet, Bruce. Belle brought me back using a restorative crystal," Loki explained glibly. For the uninitiated that was enough. The ritual was only part of the process, the other half was the fact that Belle was his Spirit Keeper. He placed a kiss on his daughter's forehead, their eyes meeting in a shared understanding. *Between me and thee, little raven, forever and always.* "Got a shirt I can borrow, Thor? We really ought to be getting home, Belle is exhausted and I've been mostly dead all day."

Despite her still raw emotions, his daughter immediately giggled at the reference.

Bruce too grinned, saying, "If you're cracking jokes already, Master Mischief, you're fine."

Thor's brow wrinkled. "What joke?" he asked totally missing it. "What he said was true."

"Uncle Thor, you need to watch The Princess Bride," Belle told him.

"Is that another of those pop movies?"

Belle and Loki both giggled at that, their laughter blending harmoniously with each other in a glorious symphony of joy.

"We'll have movie night on Friday," Loki said. "Now, about that shirt, brother?"

Thor departed to fetch it, and Loki said to Bruce, "I don't think I need to tell you, Dr. Banner, to keep my miraculous revival confidential, do I?"

"No, Loki. Mages and their secrets," he just shook his head. "I'm not entirely sure what you did but I know I'll never make rational sense out of it."

"Actually, the laws of magic are pretty rational," the master mage argued. "But we can debate that another time. Just don't mention this to anyone else—not my kids or the rest of the team."

"I won't. But what about Thor?"

"My brother knows to keep quiet," Loki replied. "He's not quite as thick as a castle wall as he seems."

Thor returned with the shirt, Loki pulled it on, it was too big but better than going through the streets of New York half naked and causing a riot, the Jotun thought wryly.
Belle pulled off the Seven League boots and handed them to Loki.

They enlarged and he put them on over his other ones, picked up the satchel, then clucked at his daughter standing there in her bare feet. "Forgot to wear your sleep socks again, didn't you?"

He snatched the blanket off a cot, wrapped it around her, then scooped her into his arms. "Goodnight. Thor, I'll see you tomorrow. I'm sure you'll be receiving a message from Father soon."

Then he took three great strides and was outside the mansion and down the street in the flicker of an instant.

He used the Seven League boots to climb back into his bedroom window, first putting Belle inside and then following. After closing and locking the window, he turned on the lights and said, "Since it's so late-or early in the morning-" a glance at his clock radio revealed it to be one in the morning-"you can sleep with me tonight, okay? That way if you have nightmares or are sick I can take care of you."

Belle simply nodded from within the wrapped blanket, exhaustion suddenly sapping her energy. Abruptly she was freezing and she went and crawled into Loki's king sized bed with the velvet green comforter. She felt cold to the marrow of her bones, yet at the same time strangely hot. "Dad, I don't feel good."

He took one look at her and knew instantly what was the matter. "Fever, chills, exhaustion, muscle aches," he recited while summoning two dark red potions and honey with two spoons. "Magical drain. The second price of magic, sweetie."

He handed her one vial.

"Dad, why are there two?"

"One for each of us," he replied, sitting on the edge of the bed. "The crystal restored the magic that was drained from me, but it costs me too. It's not hit me quite yet, because I'm older and stronger but when it does it'll knock me on my butt." He clinked their vials together. "Ready? Down the hatch!"

They both drank the potion down together and then made the same identical grimace.

"Ugh! Darn aftertaste! Feels like I've been drinking water out of an old boot," Loki coughed, then swallowed a spoonful of honey.

Belle did the same, then yawned sleepily. She placed the empty vial and spoon on the nightstand and snuggled beneath the ultra soft comforter. She felt her eyes shut, but as soon as they closed, she recalled the way she had first seen her father bleeding on that metal table and they popped open again. Shivering, she forced herself to remain awake, counting the stars drawn on the ceiling while Loki undressed in the bathroom.

Emerging in a green T-shirt and his plaid pajama bottoms, he climbed into bed and noticed his daughter was wide awake, her brown eyes wide and frightened. He didn't need to ask why, he simply cuddled close to her. "Listen to my voice and it'll chase the nightmares away," he whispered, and then began to sing his lullaby, the soothing melody and words combined with his velvety voice ensuring that she would sleep without dreams.

Only when he was assured she was truly asleep did he allow himself to succumb as well, falling into a deep healing sleep, where he dreamed the following vivid dream.
Asgard, Odin's throne room:

In the chaos that followed Thor's departure with the critically injured Loki, Jorunne would have tried to escape but Balder grabbed both her and her mother by the arms, his face a mask of anger and horror, holding them fast. "Don't try anything!" he snarled.

"Papa, you're hurting me!" Jorunne whimpered, frightened of the terrible anger emanating from her normally calm and easygoing parent.

"Be silent!" he ordered. "This is your doing, all of it! You used your persuasion to incite your mother into stabbing my brother. Did you really think killing Loki was going to somehow mitigate your sentence, you idiotic child? All you've done is brought the Allfather's wrath down upon you ten times worse! And right now I cannot even begin to care because you have shamed me past bearing."

"No! Papa, it was Loki-"

Balder shook her hard. "Loki may be dead because of you! He did nothing wrong. It was you who broke every law of kinship I ever taught you." He shook his head. "How sharper than a serpent's tooth is a thankless disobedient child!"

"Balder, husband, I...I only wished to protect our daughter," Karnilla stammered, slowly emerging from the fog of persuasive magic Jorunne had spun in her mind.

"Protect her from what?" Balder demanded harshly. "Odin's rightful punishment? The consequences of her actions? No, Karnilla, I'm done with covering her misdeeds and excusing them. This isn't some childish prank. She turned you into her personal assassin, Karnilla! Doesn't that bother you?"

His wife shrugged. "My daughter means more to me than your adopted Jotun kin. It's just Loki, the worst lying troublemaker in all the Nine. You ought to thank me for ridding your house of the wretched black sheep."

"Thank you?" Balder repeated incredulously. 'You hypocritical she-wolf! It was not so long ago that you were the enemy of Asgard yourself, O Queen of Nornheim! On trial for crimes against this realm! Your sentence was mitigated because of me, wife! Because I asked out of love for you. Yet you presume to judge my brother? You disgust me! You and your daughter-both venomous harpies I've cast my shield over, who have betrayed me and harmed my family."

"What-what are you saying?" Karnilla squeaked in alarm.

"I'm saying that I'm done with protecting you and Jorunne. You shall face the wrath of my father on your own, I'll not intercede for either of you. I've been played for a fool for the last time," Balder said, his jaw hard as stone.

Terrified, Karnilla clung to his arm, whimpering, "Please husband! I have ever been faithful to you! Don't abandon me!"

Balder curled his lip. "Still thinking of yourself, when my brother could be dead and in the ground! Yet not one apology falls from your lips. Or hers!"

The door to the audience chamber opened and Odin strode out, power crackling about him that shook the rafters. "YOU!" he bellowed, pointing at Karnilla, who tried to hide behind Balder.

Balder shoved her in front of him. "Father, she-"
"I know, my son. Release them, they shall not escape my wrath!"

Balder let go and backed away, watching impassively, his blue eyes bleak.

Odin stalked up to the two miscreants, his face thunderous. Power haloed him like a miniature sun. "You dare to bring a weapon into MY hall and harm my son, Karnilla of Nornheim?"

Karnilla opened her mouth but no sound came out.

"You have broken my peace and inflicted grievous harm upon my child, who did naught to deserve it save bring the misdeeds of my granddaughter to my attention. Who do you think you are to try and avenge a deed that was lawful to begin with? This is MY realm, Norn Queen, and I will decide who gets punished here!"

Karnilla fell face down on the floor. "Mercy, Allfather! I beg of thee!"

Odin glowered down at her. "Mercy? When you cared naught for anyone but your selfish daughter and yourself? Now you cry me mercy? The one reason you are not a smear under my boot is because your attack failed. Loki lives-I know not how, only that he does. That is the only mercy you shall have of me! Oathbreaker, outcast, I name you and your child!" he boomed, his voice shaking the throne room. "You are to leave Asgard and never return upon pain of death. Furthermore, your magic I shall take, and your immortality. But you shall wander the Nine, compelled to tell your wretched misdeeds to any you meet, that all may know of your wickedness, until your life's thread is cut. This is my judgment upon you, Karnilla, former Queen of Nornkeep and wife of Balder."

His hand outstretched and a bolt of red fire encased the cowering Karnilla. She screamed in agony as her powers and her immortality were stripped from her. When the light faded, crouched upon the marble floor was a middle-aged woman with lank hair and sagging skin, no longer beautiful for she had aged.

"Get thee hence, oathbreaker!"

Karnilla scurried out of the room, sneers and catcalls in her wake.

Then Odin turned to Jorunne and said, "Jorunne Baldersdottir, you are also outcast and oathbreaker, your magic is forfeit, but you shall live the rest of your days as a monster, your outward form reflecting your inner one, in the Prison at the Edge of Forever! Thus I have spoken and thus shall it be!"

Another bolt of transforming fire struck Jorunne and her body began to writhe and change into a hideous creature with the face of a troll, the body of a serpent, paws of a wolf and the tail of a scorpion. Its voice was the shriek of a thousand cats in heat, no longer able to persuade anyone, and then she vanished, sent to dwell in the Prison on the Edge of Forever, where she would spend the rest of her life trapped in that form behind a forcefield being gawked at by the scum of the galaxy.

His temper dying, Odin turned to Balder and gave him a sad smile. "Balder-

"Father, it was just. I am only sorry I couldn't prevent it."

"You cannot prevent the sun from rising. Any more than you could this."

Balder nodded heavily. "I'm glad that Loki is alive. Yet you don't know how?"
Odin shook his grizzled head. "Even I am not omniscient, my son. Loki has many tricks up his sleeve and some of his magics are unknown to me. Perhaps he will tell me next time we see him. That is his choice. Come, walk with me," he put his arm around Balder, and together they left the hall, having given the gossip mill of Asgard plenty of fodder for the next year or two.

New York

Laufeyson townhouse:

Loki opened his eyes and squinted at the morning sunshine pouring in the window. He made an irritated gesture and the drapes shut, blocking the light and he put his head down on the pillow. Last night I had the strangest dream, he thought, recalling it vividly. Then he smiled. Thank you, Father.

His eyes closed again and he slept, renewing the energy he had lost, both he and Belle sleeping until well past breakfast until Max and Aleta woke them by jumping on the bed, then yelling to wake the neighborhood that "Dad's home!"

Loki opened one eye, groaned and buried his head beneath his pillow. By the Nine, did I really miss this? he wondered grumpily. Then he smiled in spite of himself. You know the answer to that, Laufeyson.
Loki wakes up and finds that something has been going on in his absence.

“Belle, go back to sleep,” Loki told his Lorekeeper daughter, knowing that she needed her rest. He wished he could go back to sleep, and perhaps he would after he said hello to his other children and talked with Tony and Steve. Rubbing his eyes, he sat up and caught Max and Aleta in a bear hug.

“What’s this?” he chuckled. “Looks like I caught two little imps!” He playfully tickled them, making them giggle hysterically. “You look delicious,” he said in a high squeaky voice. “I wanna eat you all up!”

“No, we ain’t food!” Aleta squealed.

“You’re not?” he pretended to look terribly disappointed.

“I taste gross!” Max added, grinning. “Like liver and lime JELLO.”

Loki made a face. “Yuck!” then he turned to Aleta and said, “But you look sweet as sugar, pretty girl!” Then he began to kiss her face and her neck, making her squeal with laughter. “Mmmm! I love you!”

“Love you more!” Aleta crowed.

“How much?”

“To infinity and beyond!” Max yelled, not to be outdone.

“Have I captured Buzz Lightyear?” teased his father.

Max shook his head. “Nope! I’m Captain Max Laufeyson.”

“And I’m Princess Aleta of Asgard,” Aleta announced.
“I’m honored to have two Very Important Children to play with.” Loki said. Then he stood up, a child hanging upside down from each arm, and said, “Uh oh! Looks like gravity reversed itself. Now we all need to walk on our hands and see upside down!”

His two troublemakers shrieked with laughter as he carried them out of the room, leaving Belle to sleep for as long as she needed.

As far as he was concerned, the joy he felt upon seeing his children again sparkled through him like fine wine and chased away any lingering tiredness.

“Daddy! Let’s play Ride A Frost Giant!” Aleta cried.

“Yes! Yes!” Max agreed.

Giggling, Loki shifted into his blue Jotun form, and tossed his little scamps upon his shoulders. Curls of frost floated up from his skin, and Max and Aleta’s faces were wreathed in icy splendor.

Aleta grabbed his hair and shook it, saying, “Giddap!”

Loki made a funny growling neigh, and galloped down the hallway.

The resulting noise brought Steve and Tony to investigate. “Hey! Who are you and what do you think you’re doing with those kids?” Tony demanded, training a plasma gun on the frost giant.

“Uncle Tony, don’t shoot Dad!” Max shouted.

“Loki?” Steve asked, gaping.

“Huh?” Tony looked flummoxed.

Loki shifted back to his Aesir form. “Sorry, did I scare you?” he queried, his eyes glittering with mischief.

“Loki, for Godsake!” Tony groaned. “I nearly shot you.”

“What was that?” Steve asked.

“That was my Jotun form,” Loki explained.

“We were playing Ride a Frost Giant,” Aleta put in from her perch upon her father’s shoulders.

“That’s a new one,” Steve chuckled. “When did you get back?”

“Last night, fairly late,” Loki replied. “Belle’s asleep in my room. She wasn’t feeling well, woke me up for some of my potions.”

“You think she’s coming down with the flu?” Tony asked worriedly.

“No. It’s probably one of those viruses,” Loki reassured him. “I’m sure she’ll be fine in a day or two.”

“That’s good to know,” Tony said with a sigh of relief. “It would be terrible if all your kids were sick at the same time.”

“I might have to hire some help,” Loki replied. “So I’m glad it’s only one sick right now.”

They went downstairs, where the kids were eating breakfast. Sam had made English muffins with
peanut butter and lingonberry jam, and there was also oatmeal and cereal.

Loki greeted the remainder of his children, then helped himself to an English muffin and also a bowl of oatmeal with cinnamon, bananas, and brown sugar.

As he ate, he filled the children and the two other Avengers in on his Quest to find Mjolnir, telling them everything except the fact that he had nearly died from Karnilla’s attack. He looked around as he ate, saying, “Well, the house looks like it’s still in one piece.” Then his eye was caught by a medium sized hole just to the side of his bay window. “Ahem . . . maybe not. How’d that happen?”

Nate squirmed guiltily. “Uh . . . we were testing out a new prototype arm Uncle Tony made on my chair. It needs work. The propulsion system was a little too strong.”

“I’m sure my wall would agree with you,” Loki replied with a sigh.

“We’ll fix it, Dad.”

“I know you will,” he agreed, and waved a hand. A can of paint, spackle, and some quick set dry wall appeared beside the window. “Do a good job, you two.”

“Don’t get your shorts in a knot, Mischief Maker,” Tony rolled his eyes. “You won’t even be able to tell when we’re done.”

“I’ll hold you to that, O Knight of Antiquated Armor,” Loki drawled. “Okay, now did anything else get broken while I was gone? Tell me now and I won’t be mad. Hide it and if I find it you’ll all be in trouble.”

“Uh . . . Max and I broke a vase playing gladiators,” Vince said honestly.

“What one?”

“Uh . . . it was that one that looked like somebody threw up glass on it,” answered the Ghost Speaker.

“It was an accident!” Max said. “Vince knocked my shield into it.”

“I didn’t like that vase anyway. My Aunt Gritha gave it to me. You did me a favor. Now I don’t have to make up an excuse why I don’t use it,” the god smirked. Then he asked, “Something wrong with the backyard to play in?”

“No, but . . . it was dark out when we were playing,” Vince admitted.

“Meaning you were playing when it was bedtime,” their father surmised.

“Dad, I told them three times to go to sleep,” Sam told him.

“We weren’t tired!” Vince muttered. “It was only half-an-hour past our usual bedtime anyway.”

“Enough,” Loki said softly, and they quit quarreling. “Vince and Max, next time I’m away and Sam is in charge, you do what he says. He’s me until I get home. Clear?”

Both his sons nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Loki finished his breakfast, then took Sam aside and said, “Looks like you did a good job while I was gone.”
“Here’s the money back,” his son handed him the remainder of the money Loki had given him. “I only used about $150 dollars. We had Chinese one night and Italian the other night.”

Loki took the bills, then counted out $300 and handed it back. “That’s for you. Go and buy a ticket for you and a friend to see that concert you wanted.”

“Thanks, Dad!” he hugged his parent. “I’m gonna text Tildy and see what she wants to go see.”

“Have fun,” Loki said, and pocketed the rest of the money.

Since it was a Sunday, that was laundry day at the Laufeyson house, as well as vacuuming and sweeping. Serena ran the vacuum downstairs and the Roomba upstairs, while Vince swept the porch and Sam swept the kitchen and den. Loki redid the chore chart, making sure all the chores rotated.

Then he went to collect the laundry hampers located in each bedroom. He transported those who were out of their rooms down to the washer. He tapped at Hunter’s door, then called, “Laundry day!”

“Here, Dad,” Hunter opened up the door just enough to slide the basket through.

Just then Loki thought he heard something fall onto the floor. Followed by a quiet little meow.

“What was that?”

“My TV,” Hunter answered. “Cat food commercial.”

“You might want to lower the volume,” his father suggested, then took the basket and closed the door. He sent it down to the washer with a wave of a hand, then went to check on Belle, who was still asleep.

He felt her forehead, relieved that no fever was present, meaning her magical core had begun to repair itself, then sent the vial and spoon down to his workroom to soak in the sink and went down to secure the vorpal blade in one of his unbreakable and untouchable magic cases. Then he headed back upstairs to start the endless pile of laundry that always awaited him on Sunday.

Upstairs in Hunter’s room, the boy shook a finger at the unknown visitor and hissed, “You almost got us caught! Next time no jumping!”

His visitor simply gave him an insolent look, hopped up on his bed, and fell asleep.

Hunter sighed. “Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea. But if I hadn’t taken you they were gonna send you off to a science lab. Like us, nobody wanted you.”

There came a soft tap on his door. “Hunter? It’s Vince.”

“Come in,” his brother whispered.

Vince slipped into the room. “How’s she doing?”

“Sleeping. But she jumped off the bed before and Dad heard.”

“Hunter, maybe we ought to just tell him.”

“Tell him we snuck a pet into the house? Yeah, that’ll go over real well.”

“Ya know he’ll find out eventually. He always does.” His little brother predicted.
“He’s busy, he just got home. Now go play with your skateboard or something. It’ll look weird if
you’re up here so much.”

“Can I pet her?”

“Yeah, just don’t wake her up.”

Vince stayed a few moments to stroke the velvety soft fur, then left. It was nearly impossible to
keep something like this a secret in this house. But so far only Hunter, Serena, and himself knew
about Hunter’s small visitor.

He grabbed his board from his room, a green snakeskin one with the words Mischief Squared on
it in fiery letters, and hopped on it and skated down the stairs. Too late he saw his father crossing
the entryway, going to answer the door, and he managed to stop before he crashed into him.

“Uh, hi, Dad!” he said sheepishly.

“No skating down the stairs, daredevil,” Loki scolded. “You know better.”

“It was fun.”

“Uh huh. We’ll see how fun you think it is when you’re going over those stairs with some
sandpaper to get those skid marks out.”

“Sorry,” Vince said, then picked up his board and raced out the door. He pulled the ramp halfway
down the driveway and began to do tricks off it. He was in the middle of a short spin when he felt
his green safety helmet suddenly appear on his head.

“Forgot that,” Loki called.

“Thanks, Dad,” his son waved.

Loki picked up the package on the porch, pleased to note the chocolates had come in for the
Easter baskets. Easter in his house wasn’t the holiday celebrated by Christians, but rather the old
Rite of Spring the Viking and Germanic people used to celebrate. The holiday was for rebirth and
renewal, and the Easter bunny legend came from it. Loki celebrated it on Sunday, and filled
baskets with colored chocolate eggs with surprises in them, flower crowns for the girls, and new
ties for the boys. There was also a riddle egg hunt, a race the Easter hare contest—said hare
played by a certain shapeshifter, and a special Easter feast with delicacies like lamb stew, shrimp
and scallop pie, carrot casserole, pastries filled with jam and chocolate, cinnamon raisin rice
pudding, and Easter bread filled with chopped nuts and dried fruit glazed with sugar. Thor would
bring wildflower honey mead, a milder form of the drink of Asgard, and it would be served during
dinner and everyone would have a small taste of it to toast the coming of spring. His Avenger
family would come also, along with any current girlfriends, and after dinner would be dancing and
silly party games like charades, darts, and Kiss and Tell.

Tucking the package from Gertrude Hawk under an arm, the Master of Mischief returned inside,
running upstairs to hide the package in his armoire. The first year he had adopted the children he
had made the mistake of leaving the package out and the kids had opened it and eaten all the
candy, and he ended up with no candy, half the kids with sugar highs and the other half with
stomachaches. That was one mistake he would never make again.

“Hiding the Easter candy?” Belle asked sleepily from where she was sitting up in bed.

Loki turned from locking the armoire and gave her a signature smirk. “Smart girl. How do you
feel?”
“Better. And hungry,” she answered.

“How does grilled cheese with maple bacon and tomato soup sound?”

“Delicious!” She threw back the covers. “Gonna take a shower and I’ll be down in flash.”

“It’ll be waiting,” Loki promised.

He decided that was what lunch would be today, and while everyone was otherwise occupied, began making sandwiches and soup. His tomato soup was homemade, and all he needed to do was open several of the jars he had canned months previously and heat them.

As he grilled the sandwiches, the irresistible smell of cheese and maple bacon brought his children into the kitchen.

“I smell bacon,” Hunter declared. “What’re you making?”

He spotted the grilled cheese sandwich upon a paper plate and reached for it.

“Get!” Loki ordered, and swatted his son’s hand with his spatula. “That’s not for you, it’s Belle’s.”

“Aww! But I’m starving!” Hunter pleaded.

“Wait three minutes and you’ll have one,” his father continued flipping sandwiches.

Hunter gave an impatient sigh and tapped his foot.

The back door banged and in trooped Serena, Nate, Lucy, Max and Aleta.

“Grilled cheese and bacon!” they cheered. “And tomato soup.”

They all ran to sit down at the table where a pitcher of iced tea was

When the sandwiches were done, Loki served each child one and a bowl of soup.

It was while he was sitting and eating his own soup and sandwich that he felt something run over his foot.

*What the—don’t tell me we have mice?*

He immediately peered beneath the table.

And saw a tiny bewhiskered green-eyed midnight kitten with a crescent moon on its face and huge ears staring up at him.

His heart turned to mush. But he knew what was expected of him. He gently picked up the little feline, which fit in his hand, and stood. “Okay. Now who was going to tell me about this?”

“Oh no! Mischief!” Serena cried.

“Vince, you forgot to shut the door!” Hunter groaned.

Serena studied her father, trying to determine if he were angry. He wore one of his Disappointed Looks, but she sensed he wasn’t as annoyed as he seemed. “Isn’t she cute, Dad? Look, she likes you.”
The kitten had reared up and put both paws on Loki’s chest and was licking his chin.

“Aww!” gushed the girls.

“Hey! What’s this? Do I taste like chicken?” Loki fought to keep from smiling. “Kitty, you’re ruining my whole I’m Very Disappointed act,” he hissed at the tiny creature.

He gently stroked the plush fur with a finger, and the kitten curled up in his arm and began to purr loudly.

“Ahem! So, who wants to explain how this kitten came to be here?”

“I had no idea it was in the house,” Sam spoke up. “But now it’s here, can we keep it?”

“Her,” Hunter corrected. “She’s a girl.”

“Hunter and I rescued her from the shelter,” Vince admitted.

“Rescued her? You adopted her?” Loki clarified. “Who signed the adoption form?”

“No one,” Hunter said, looking ashamed. “We kinda just . . . took her.”

“Hunter, you stole her from the shelter?” Lucy gasped.

“No, not exactly.”

“Define, not exactly, Hunter Laufeyson,” Loki asked sternly.

“See, she was gonna be sent to a science lab, Dad. They wanted to use her for experiments cause her ears are so big, like a bat’s. Nobody wanted to adopt her cause she was weird looking. So they put her in a carrier and were gonna ship her out and—”

“—and we couldn’t let ‘em do it, Dad!” Vince cried. “So I distracted the people by letting some of the dogs out while Hunter grabbed the carrier and hid it in the bushes. Then we brought her home.”

“And you all knew about this?”


“I suppose they’re looking for her down at the shelter,” Loki surmised.

“Not real hard,” Hunter argued. “I left the carrier inside and put her in my pocket to bring home.”

“And when was I going to know about this?”

“We were gonna tell you tonight,” Serena answered. “I was going to ask you for a kitten for my birthday.”

“Let me guess. Then the kitten was going to magically appear on the porch in a box labeled Free To A Good Home,” her father raised an eyebrow.

“Umm . . . how’d you know?” his math whiz asked.

“I wasn’t born yesterday, moon pi,” he frowned.

“C’mon, Serena,” Sam rolled his eyes. “He’s the Trickster. He invented every trick in the book.”
“Not every trick. Coyote gets credit for some,” Loki said modestly. He glanced down at the kitten, who was now snoozing in the crook of his arm, her adorably large ears flatten against her head. Recalling what Hunter had told him made him ill. “What they wanted to do with her is disgusting,” he acknowledged.

“So we can keep her?” all of them chorused, giving him puppydog eyes.

“I didn’t say that,” he began, thinking Loki, just give up. You know damn well you’re doomed when they all look at you like that. Plus you’ve always wanted a cat.

“Plee—aasे!”

He covered his face with his hand. By the Nine, it’s not fair!

“Daddy, her name is Mischief!” Aleta announced.

“You gave her a name?”

“I named her,” Serena said. “I couldn’t just keep calling her kitty.”

Doomed, Laufeyson! He shook his head and dropped his hand. “All right. She can stay—on one condition. She’s your responsibility. That means you feed her, brush her, and change her litter box. I’ll take care of the vet bills and buying her food. But Serena, Hunter, and Vince are all going to pay the adoption fee from your allowance. We’ll send it as a donation.”

He was suddenly surrounded by his little zoo, who were all hugging him and thanking him. “Okay, stop. You’re scaring her,” he said, as the kitten woke and climbed up to sit on his shoulder. “Mischief, huh? Yeah you’ll fit right in here.”

“Dad, we need to go to Petco,” Serena said. “We’ve been feeding her tuna, but she needs more vitamins and stuff.”

“Make a list. I’ll pick everything up. Put your allowance in an envelope. I’ll bring it by tomorrow,” he ordered. Then he sat back down to eat his lunch, reheating everything with a spell.

He was just about to bite into his grilled cheese when a tiny nose nudged him and mewed in his ear.

“No, sweetheart. Bacon and cheese aren’t good for kittens.” He stroked her ears. “Don’t feed her our food, kids. She’s too little, her tummy can’t handle it. You’ll make her sick.”

“Like she’ll throw up?” asked Max.

“Yes. That or have diarrhea. So don’t do it.”

“Eeww!” Lucy made a face.

“When you’re sliding into first and you feel something burst—diarrhea!” Vince and Max sang. “Guys, shut up!” Serena groaned.

They kept right on singing.

“Great!” Loki looked at the kitten on his shoulder exasperatedly. “See what you’ve started?”

Mischief began grooming her tail.
“Dad! Make them stop!” Lucy cried.

“Maximus, Vincent, did I hear you just volunteer to clean the litterbox?” Loki queried loudly.

“No!” his boys yelped.

“Then stop teasing your sisters and let us eat in peace.”

“Daddy, where’s Mischief gonna sleep?” asked Aleta. “I want her in my room.”

“What? No way! She sleeps with me!” Hunter argued.

“You had her sleep with you for two nights, it’s my turn,” Serena argued.

“I’m the oldest, she should sleep with me,” Sam stated.

“We want a turn!” Nate said.

“Stop!” Loki held up a hand. “Mischief is a cat, darlings, and if there’s one thing I know about cats, it’s that they do what they want. So we’re going to let her decide who she feels like sleeping with.”

“How?” Max wanted to know.

“You can all leave your bedroom doors open and see which one she chooses. And no whining and crying about it if she chooses one of your siblings. Agreed?”

Reluctantly, they all nodded.

When lunch was finally over, Loki went to the Petco to get the cat items they needed. He then added **Feed Mischief and Clean Litter** to the chore chart, giving those duties first to Hunter and Serena.

All the children went to bed without griping or complaining that night, which was nearly unheard of except on Christmas Eve. Loki tucked them all into bed and said goodnight, leaving all the doors ajar. Mischief was playing with a toy mouse in the hallway, and showed no interest in going to sleep yet.

*Choose well, kitten. Now I’m going to bed.*

He crawled beneath his covers and shut the light. All was calm, all was silent. He quickly fell into a doze.

Until he was woken up by a little body walking on his and settling down on his chest.

“Oh no! You *didn’t*!” he groaned, and flicked a finger. A tiny fire spark spell illuminated his bed, and the miniature feline on top of him, her green eyes wide and scared. “You really aren’t gonna stay here, are you?”

Mischief gave a pitiful mew.

“Poor baby,” he crooned. “Bet you miss your mama.” He stroked the ebony fur.

Then he had a flash of insight. “Maybe you’ll feel better if I do this.”

Then he blurred into a large black tomcat, and curled up around the kitten. *Hello. I’m Loki.* He purred and began to groom his new daughter.
Mischief curled up between his paws and yawned. *Night, Papa!*

*Night, sweetheart,* Loki purred and continued to groom the kitten until he too fell asleep.

The next morning both cats were snoozing when Aleta crept into her father’s bedroom. “Daddy, do you know where Mischief slept—oh!” Her gray eyes widened. “Max! Max, c’mere!”

Max came running in. “What?” Then he slid to a stop in front of the bed. “Cool! Now we have *two* kitties!”

Loki opened one eye lazily, winked, then sauntered over and rubbed against Aleta’s hand. *Good morning, spark!*
"As You Wish"

Chapter Summary

Movie night with Uncle Thor! Lots of laughs!

16

“As You Wish”

“Death cannot stop true love, only delay it for awhile” One of the best movie quotes ever! ~ Loki

“Belle!” Max yelled as he saw his older sister come out of her room. “Come quick! Now we gots two kitties!”

“What?” Belle gave him a startled look, dressed in her standard soft pullover blue sweater and white jeans. “We don’t have two cats, Max.”

“Uh huh! Come and see!” he grabbed Belle’s hand and dragged her down the hall to Loki’s room. “Look!” One chubby finger pointed at Mischief sitting on the bed and Aleta petting a large black cat that purred and rubbed against her.

Belle bit back a laugh. “Max! That’s Dad, silly! He shifted into cat form.”

Her brother frowned. “How do you know?”

“Because I always know Dad’s shift form,” Belle replied. “It’s part of my magic.” Which was true, but it wasn’t a Lorekeeper skill. It was because she was spirit bound to Loki, and no matter what skin he wore, she would always know him.

Max heaved a disappointed sigh. “Aww! I wanted to have two kitties.”

“Well, we kind of do,” his sister pointed out.

“How come Dad’s a cat?”

“Why don’t you ask him?” Belle suggested kindly. “I gotta get ready for school. Morning, Dad!” she called to the cat and then ran downstairs to get some breakfast.

Max walked up to where the large black cat with familiar emerald eyes was rubbing against his sister. “Dad, why are you a cat now?”

He held out a hand and Loki rubbed his head along his son’s palm. As he did so, Mischief came
and pounced on his tail.

*Hey, kit! Quit biting me!* He ordered, turning and gently swatting the playful kitten away from his tail.

Mischief jumped on him and for a moment the two wrestled playfully across the bed. The little kitten climbed on Loki’s back and mewed triumphantly. *I am the queen of cats! Mrreeow!*

*Okay, queen of cats, now I have to go and see to the rest of my children. So get down.*

Mischief jumped off, then looked at Loki curiously. *Papa, why do you have fur and the others don’t?*

*I have magic to change my form, but they don’t. So sometimes I’m a cat and other times a Tall One. If you ever need to speak to me, just meow like this and I’ll change shape.* He gave a certain warbling meow.

*I’ll remember,* Mischief said earnestly. *I’m hungry!*

*Yes, so am I. Come downstairs and we’ll feed you.* Loki told her, and then between one breath and the next he changed back into his Asgardian form.

“Daddy! That was you?” Aleta exclaimed, her gray eyes wide.

“Yes, spark.”

“How come?” Max repeated his question,

“Because last night Mischief came to me and she was scared. This is a strange house and she missed her mama. So I changed to make her feel safe and help her sleep. It worked.” Loki grinned. “Come on, let’s go and have breakfast.”

While Mischief ate her food and drank her cat milk, Loki made sure everyone’s lunch was packed and their homework initialed. Today was banana nut muffins and cut up strawberries for breakfast, Loki had coffee and the children milk. After his older kids had gone to catch the bus, the master mage had his little ones help put their dishes in the dishwasher and wash down the table.

Then they went upstairs and made the beds for the day. Max and Aleta liked this chore, since they almost always ended up having a pillow fight with Loki at the end of it in his room. Today was no exception, and Max snatched a pillow that was nearly his size off the bed, and whacked his father in the knees with it.

“Gotcha!”

“Oh! That was a mighty blow!” Loki yelped, and pretended to fall to the carpet.

“Max, you hurt Dad, you idiot!” Aleta yelled, then she attacked her brother with another pillow.

“Hey, spark, no name calling,” their father ordered. “I’m fine, it’s only feathers.”

He picked up the third pillow off his bed and bopped Max over the head. “He shoots, he scores!”

Max hit Aleta in the face with his pillow, yelling, “I’ll get you, my pretty! And your little kitty too!”

“Max, that ain’t right!” Aleta objected. “Dorothy had a dog, not a cat.”
“Well, we don’t. We got a cat,” said her brother. “So the wicked witch would say that.”

“I guess,” Aleta agreed. Then she tackled her brother onto the bed. “Hiya! I am a ninja warrior!”

As soon as they were both on the bed, the two scamps decided to play trampoline, and were soon bouncing and jumping on the bed, singing, “Five little monkeys jumpin’ on the bed . . . One fell off and bumped his head . . . Daddy called the doctor and the doctor said—”

“No more monkeys jumping on the bed!” Loki finished the song. “Okay you two, that’s enough acrobatics for today. You don’t want to fall and hit your head, do you?”

“No!” both said, they promptly jumped on Loki’s back, giggling like demented hyenas.

Max clung to his back like the monkey he’d been singing of. Aleta rode on his shoulders. Then his three-year-old began to sing, “To market to market to buy a fat hog, home again home again jiggety jog!”

Max recited, “Hey diddle diddle the cat and the fiddle, the cow jumped over the moon, the little dog laughed to see such a sport and the dish ran off with the spoon.”

“Your turn, Dad!” Aleta shrilled.

“Pussycat, pussycat where have you been? I’ve been to London to visit the queen. Pussycat, pussycat what did you there? I frightened a little mouse under a chair,” Loki sang.

After a few more nursery rhymes, he asked Max to recite the alphabet, and Aleta to count to twenty. Once they had done so to his satisfaction, he gave them their Leap Frog tablets and had them play educational games for half an hour. In this way they had lessons the same as if they’d been in preschool, but both children thought them mere games, and were always happy to play with their father.

Loki found this method of teaching seemed more effective with his active toddlers than simply sitting down and memorizing work sheets. Both Max and Aleta were highly intelligent and would grow bored with standard teaching methods. Much as he had grown bored as a child. And a bored child was a recipe for mischief, as he well knew.

“Dad, why do cats have tails?” asked Max, as Mischief ran past him batting at a toy mouse, her tail wagging.

“Well, a cat’s tail helps her balance,” explained their father.

“Then how come we don’t have them?”

“Because we don’t need them. We only have two feet, son.”

“I wish I could become a cat,” Max said wistfully.

“Me too!” Aleta agreed. “A little gray cat with a pink bow.”

“I don’t wanna bow!” Max looked disgusted. “That’s for girls.”

“What does a cat have that you don’t, Aleta?” Loki queried.

“Uh, cats have fur and tails.”

“Very good! What else, Max?”
“Claws and sharp teeth. And eyes that see in the dark.”

“Big ears,” Aleta added, pointing at Mischief.

“And a tongue like sandpaper,” Max added.

“That’s right. Now what do you have that a cat doesn’t?”

“Hands!” Max cried.

“Clothes,” Aleta added.

“Homework,” Max replied.

Loki chuckled. “Why don’t cats have homework?”

“Cause they can’t read and write, Dad,” Aleta said.

“Right you are,” Loki grinned.

“I wish I could be a cat for a day,” Max announced.

“A day? How about an hour?” the Asgardian asked.

Aleta was jumping up and down. “Yes! I wanna be a kitty! And play with Mischief!”

“Dad, can you magic us into cats?” Max asked, his green eyes serious and pleading.

“I can. But just for an hour, Max,” the shapeshifter cautioned. An hour was a safe time for a non-mage to be transformed. There would be no danger of the children succumbing to the cat mind in such a short time.

“Yes!” he clapped excitedly. “Okay, I’m ready!”

Loki pointed his hand at the little boy. The spell took hold slowly. First Max’s hair became fur, then his ears grew pointed and shaggy. Whiskers popped out of his cheeks and eyebrows and a slim black tail as well. As fur grew, Max’s hands became soft paws until finally a black and white kitten crouched on the rug. Like Mischief, Max had green eyes.

Then Aleta transformed as well, into a dark gray kitten with white feet and chest wearing a velvet pink bow, her eyes were golden.

Mischief came around a corner and skidded to a halt, a confused meow emerging from her throat. Max and Aleta meowed back and the cats went and sniffed each other.

Mischief tagged Aleta with a paw, and the three kittens took off, running all over the den.

At first the two shifted kittens were slower than Mischief, since they needed time to get used to having four paws and a tail. But all too quickly they adapted to their new form and were jumping and racing like they had inhaled catnip.

Max jumped onto the coffee table and batted at the game controller on it. Aleta jumped on back of the recliner, crouching and peering around to see where her midnight sister had gone. Mischief crouched, then exploded into movement, pouncing on Max and knocking him off the table.
The two kittens rolled about on the floor, tussling playfully. Loki at first was alarmed when his kitten son was knocked down, but then seeing that Max wasn’t hurt by it, relaxed and went back to folding the laundry which seemed to grow in increments like grass every time he washed. Well, except for socks—those seemed to disappear in the wormhole in his dryer.

Aleta soon joined the two on the rug, and as their father sorted laundry and folded, went exploring through the house. Thirsty, she wandered into the bathroom to get a drink, and nearly fell into the toilet bowl when she lapped up some water.

Shaking her head to get the water off, she rubbed her wet chin on the toilet paper roll. When it moved and paper snaked onto the ground, she delightedly began to bat it with her tiny claws. More paper rolled onto the floor and Aleta happily jumped into it, her lightning quick paws soon shredding it until a blizzard was spawned right there in the house.

Then she became distracted by the motes of sunlight dancing across the floor, and raced into the hallway to jump at them, bounding all over as if she had springs, but never managing to catch any.

She was soon joined by her brother and fur-sister, and the three had a glorious time running in and out of the rooms, jumping on beds, chairs, and dressers and playing with anything that caught their attention. Lucy hair ribbons, the empty package from a candy wrapper on Hunter's floor, Samantha's earrings, Nate's extra cord for his gaming console, Belle's bookmark dangling out of a book, and Vince’s bungee cord hanging over his chair. They gleefully played tug-o-war with Loki's tie in his closet, leaving frayed edges and tiny claw marks in the gold Ferragamo. Plus a blizzard of cat hair all over his Armani suits.

Aleta found Minx and dragged her out to play, and the three kittens took turns jumping over the lokitty until they tired of that game. Then Max said in catspeak, *Let's go see what's in the kitchen.*

*Last one down the stairs is a dog's butt!* Mischief yowled.

The next thing Loki heard was the sound of kitten paws stampeding down the stairs and then galloping through the den into the kitchen. The god raised a raven brow in amusement. *Guess they haven’t mastered the stealth approach yet.*

He glanced at his phone, noting there was about forty minutes left before he would transform Max and Aleta back.

Meanwhile in the kitchen, Mischief had poked a hole in a bag of confectioners sugar and it had spilled all over the counter and onto the floor. The kitten promptly walked in it and made little cat paw prints all over.

Then she sat down to clean her paws and discovered the white stuff actually tasted good.

Max and Aleta followed suit, and soon there were myriad paw prints everywhere—the counters, the table, the chairs, and all over the floor. Then they too licked the remainder of the sugar off their paws and got a sugar rush.

Max leaped up and pawed at the latch to the screen door, which led into the backyard. On this nice sunny morning, Loki had left the back door open, and just latched the screen so bugs wouldn’t come in. Max’s clever paws soon managed to press down on the latch and the screen door swung open with a gust of wind. *C'mon Aleta and Mischief! Let's go play outside!*

The three intrepid felines raced out the door. Mischief stood trembling on the porch. *It's so BIG out here!*

*It's just the backyard,* Aleta purred, licking the other kitten comfortingly. *It's safe. Nothing will
hurt you.

Max bounded off the porch and into the yard. His kitten senses were overwhelmed at first with all the interesting smells and sounds. So for a moment he stood still trying to absorb it all. Then he spotted a dragonfly and sprang at it. He nearly caught the insect, but at the last minute the dragonfly moved and Max ended up catching nothing but air.

The black and white kitten stalked a bug through the grass, soon coming to a medium-sized ash tree about twelve feet high. The beetle quickly climbed the tree and Max, in hot pursuit, swiftly followed.

Max! What're you doing up there? Aleta meowed.

Catching this beetle!

You're so high! Better come down before you fall.

Aww, shut up, Miss Bossypants! Max meowed back, his little claws stuck in the bark. I nearly got him.

Let's chase the butterflies! Mischief suggested, and she and Aleta ran after a few colorful specimens fluttering about the flowers planted in the beds beside the house.

Just then Max lost the beetle as it crawled in a hole in the bark. He lifted a paw to poke at the hole and just then the wind blew hard and caused the ash to sway. Terrified, Max clung to the tree with all four sets of claws, meowing. Help, Aleta! I'm being blown away!

Aleta looked up and her fur bushed out when she saw how high her brother was and how the tree was swaying. Max, climb down!

I can't! It's too high!

We need Papa! Mischief cried.

Aleta raced up the stairs and tried to claw open the screen door, but she hadn't master the art of making the latch open like her brother. Frantic, she ran and climbed the fence and ran through the bushes of the front yard. Her gray fur became damp as the bushes were still wet from last night's rain, but she managed to make it to the porch and after several failed tries, managed to jump up and ring the doorbell.

A few moments later, she heard Loki's quiet footsteps then the door was opened. The Asgardian looked about for a package and instead spotted the gray and white kitten. "What the Hel? Aleta!" He opened the door and his daughter darted inside. "How did you get outside, spark?"

Aleta began meowing, and Loki quickly shifted into cat form so he could understand her. What happened, spark? Where's your brother and sister?

In the backyard, Dad! Max is stuck in a tree and I couldn't get in the house to call you.

Oh, Nine Hells! Show me!

Together, the two cats raced through the kitchen and Loki used his telekinesis to open the screen door. Once in the yard, he went directly to the tree where a terrified black and white kitten was clinging for dear life. Max!

Dad! Help! I'm stuck!
Loki rapidly shinnied up the tree, saying, *Son can you move your paws a little? Just a bit at a time?*

*No! Dad, I'm scared!* his son wailed.

*Okay, relax! I'm gonna pick you up. Now let go when I tell you.*

*No! I'll fall!*

*Max, trust me, son. I won't let you fall.* Loki purred. Then he climbed slightly above the petrified kitten and leaned down and closed his mouth over Max's scruff. *Let go, son!*

The kitten slowly retracted his claws, allowing Loki to grasp him firmly and carry him in his jaws. Then foot by foot Loki slowly climbed down the tree, his claws leaving marks in the ash gray bark. Finally he was on the ground, Max dangling securely from his jaws. *You're okay now,* the black tom purred softly, then began to lick his frazzled kitten.

Max flattened his ears and whined, *Aww, Dad! I don't wanna bath!*

*Hush, kit!* His father ordered and put his paw on his son to hold him in place while he thoroughly licked him from nose to tail, ignoring the tiny cat's protests. *Next time don't be climbing trees. And who said you could go outside?*

*Umm . . . we just wanted to play . . .* his son mewed guiltily.

Once the impromptu bath was over, Loki shifted his son and daughter back to their human forms, and then changed back himself. "All right. That's enough adventures as kittens for one day. Let's go inside."

"Dad, we wanna play in the treehouse," Aleta protested, only then recalling the disaster in the kitchen.

"Later. Right now I think you both need a nap," Loki said firmly. Then he picked up both toddlers and let Mischief ride his shoulder.

Entering the kitchen, Loki stopped dead. "By the Nine, what have you done?"

"The sugar spilled," Max announced, burying his head in his dad's shoulder.

"And we walked in it," Aleta said.

"The sugar spilled," Max announced, burying his head in his dad's shoulder.

"And we walked in it," Aleta said.

Loki just shook his head. *What the Hel was I thinking? I must have been out of my mind!* "Well, now you have some cleaning to do." he snapped his fingers and a large bucket of water, a mop, and several soft cloths appeared. He set his two mischief makers down and handed each of them a wet cloth. "Okay, you two. Start washing the chairs."

"Dad, I'm tired!" his son whined.

"You can take a nap after you help clean up this mess, Maximus."

"That'll take forever!" the boy sulked.

"Start washing." Loki ordered, dipping the mop into the pail. He could have easily used magic to clean up this mess, but then his children wouldn't learn about consequences.

Aleta groaned and began washing a chair.
Max stood there pouting with the cloth dangling from his hand.

His father raised his head from mopping the floor and said evenly, "Max, must I start counting?"

"Noo!" the little boy wailed. "I don't wanna time out."

"Then start cleaning."

The child shuffled over to a chair and began to wash it, sniffling.

When the chairs were clean, Loki had them wash the table and the counters, while he finished mopping the floor.

By the time that was done, his imps were half-asleep and he carried them to the couch and curled up with a child on either side, snuggled under the Got Mischief? blanket. The children fell asleep almost immediately, worn out by the morning's adventures, and Loki began nodding off as well, with Mischief cuddled on his lap, kneading his thigh and purring happily.

They all slept for three hours, until their stomachs woke them for lunch, and after some ham and cheese sandwiches with pickles and chips, Loki discovered the rest of the mess around the house, and the three of them spent the rest of the afternoon fixing everything before the rest of the zoo came home and saw. This was so not one of your better ideas, Laufeyson, Loki thought ruefully. Then he thanked the Norns he only had one cat.

That Friday was movie night, and it was decided they would watch The Princess Bride because Thor was coming over and had never seen it. The movie was a favorite in the Laufeyson house, so nobody objected to seeing it again for the fiftieth time. Loki made appetizers for dinner-cocktail franks, pizza bites, mac and cheese bites, spanikopita, mini egg rolls, cheeseburger sliders and chicken barbecue puffs. There was a cranberry apple walnut salad with his own raspberry viniagrette dressing which even Thor who normally turned up his nose at Loki's "rabbit food" loved. Then there was popcorn, diet gingerale, Coke, and Reeses pieces to eat during the show.

The Laufeysons owned a huge flat screen TV with surround sound, not just to watch TV but for Loki to test his video games. It was state of the art tech, and perfect to watch movies.

All the kids did their homework early so they could get into pajamas and eat dinner before Thor arrived. Not surprisingly, Loki made extra appetizers, because his brother was perpetually hungry, like Hunter.

"These are really good, Loki," Thor said, happily munching on a new tray of appetizers.

"Glad you like them, Thor. But could you not eat them all? I haven't had a chance to eat anything since I was busy setting up everything," Loki told him.

"I'll save you a few, brother," the Thunder God said magnanimously.

"Gee, that's mighty nice of you," Loki drawled sarcastically. "Especially considering it's my house and my food." He grabbed several kinds of appetizers and some salad before all the rest disappeared down Thor's throat.

"Uncle Thor, are you almost ready to watch?" Aleta wanted to know. Tonight she was wearing a pretty velvet red nightgown and had her Loki's Princess helmet on.

"Just a minute, Princess," Thor replied. "That's a very pretty dress you have."

Aleta beamed. "It's red like Buttercup's in the movie."
"Go sit down on the couch, spark," Loki told her.

Aleta scurried into the den.

Thor was eating the last cocktail frank when he saw Mischief trot into the kitchen. "Loki, you have a cat?"

"She's a recent adoption," Loki chuckled. He told Thor the story of how the kitten came to stay. "The kids call her Mischief."

Thor grinned. "How very fitting!"

Mischief came to sniff Thor's hand and ended up purring in the god's lap.

"If you're done stuffing yourself like a Thanksgiving turkey, Thor, let's go in the den." Loki urged.

"Do you have anymore of that salad?"

Loki rolled his eyes. "No. Come on, I have popcorn, soda, and candy."

Thor followed him into the den, and sat down next to Loki one one side and Samantha on the other. Samantha handed him the extra large size of popcorn and a huge Coke.

"Now don't eat it before the movie starts," Loki admonished.

Thor gave him an annoyed look. "Quit your grousing, Loki."

Hunter pressed the button on the Blue Ray and the disk began to play.

As the movie opened with Fred Savage sick in bed playing video games, Hunter remarked, "I'd never have gotten away with that. If I'm too sick to go to school Dad takes my Xbox outta my room."

"And why do I do that?" Loki asked.

"Because if you're sick you need rest!" his children chorused.

"He must not be that sick then," Thor observed.

He reached in his bowl and ate some popcorn, becoming so engrossed in the movie that he ate all of his without realizing it.

Then he looked over at Loki and saw his brother still had some and went to take a handful.

Loki smacked his hand. "Get your hands out of my bowl, Thor!"

"Ow! Loki, why can't you share?"

"Your definition of sharing, brother, means you eat it all, and leave me with a few kernels," growled the God of Mischief. "Now wait till the intermission and I'll have Samantha make more."

"You're evil!"

"Shut up and deal!"

Several of the kids snickered at this exchange. "They sound like us," Nate whispered to Hunter.
"Whaddaya expect?" his older brother snorted. "They're brothers."

Just when Humperdinck stated that he had the wedding all planned out, Aleta interrupted with, "Uh oh! Daddy, Max spilled his ginger ale!"

Loki winced as soda suddenly seeped into his black jeans. "Yeah, I kind of guessed."

"M'sorry! Aleta banged my arm!" Max whimpered.

Loki stood up, and summoned a towel to mop up the spill on the couch, and muttered a spell to dry his leg. "It's okay, imp. It was an accident."

While his brother was otherwise occupied, Thor stole a handful of popcorn from Loki's bowl.

"Thor!" Loki snapped without turning around.

Thor immediately gulped down the handful and then muttered, "Do you have eyes in the back of your head?"

"YES!" chorused the younger Laufeysons.

Loki sat back down and shook a finger at his brother. "Next time your hand goes where it shouldn't, it's gonna get zapped."

At that moment on screen Vicini was exclaiming, "Inconceivable!" and Inigo responded with, "You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it does."

"That little guy reminds me a lot of you, Loki," Thor needled.

Max cried, "No way! Dad's not a bald idiot, Uncle Thor! Dad's the Man in Black!"

Thor suddenly found himself the recipient of nine pairs of death glares. "I was kidding!" he said hastily, thinking that if looks could kill he would have died nine times already. He had forgotten that Loki's children didn't allow anyone to disparage their father in their hearing. His brother was ironically quite well defended by his little army.

Loki simply sat back and smirked, a warm glow in the vicinity of his chest.

The movie progressed with Westley proclaiming that Dread Pirate Roberts always told him, "Good night, Westley. I'll most likely kill you in the morning." for five years.

Thor nudged Loki. "Hey, I used to say that almost every night to you, Loki, when we were growing up."

"That certainly put a damper on our relationship!" his brother growled, and socked him in the shoulder.

"Shh!" Aleta hissed with a finger to her lips. "I can't hear the good part."

Soon the kids were shouting out their favorite lines.

"No more rhyming now, I mean it!" Loki said in Inigo's voice.

"Anybody want a peanut?" the children responded.

"Do we have to hear the kissing part?" Vince exclaimed.
When Humperdinck came on they all threw wadded up spitballs and shot rubber bands at the screen and yelled "Boo!"

Then, right before the Fire Swamp part, Loki paused the movie. "Samantha, go and make more popcorn, won't you? Mr. Popcorn Thief over here is drooling all over my shoulder."

"Loki!" Thor objected.

"Hurry, darling. Before I have to get a raincoat," Loki twitted with a wicked grin.

The children giggled.

“Just wait, Loki. I’m getting you a shirt that says Good Night Loki, I’ll Most Likely Kill You in the Morning.” Thor threatened.

“You mean you’ll have Tony get it for you,” Loki corrected.

“So, Uncle Thor, what part do you like best so far?” Nate asked.

“The swordfights were the best,” Thor said.

“I knew you’d say that,” Loki remarked. “But the best swordfight is yet to come.”

“Does Inigo fight the six-fingered man?”

“You’ll see.”

“And the Fire Swamp is next,” cried Vince excitedly. “That’s my favorite part.”

“Me too,” said Samantha, carrying a huge bowl of popcorn into the den. “This one’s yours, Uncle Thor.”

“What about the rest of us?” Serena cried.

“Keep your shirt on, moon pi,” her big sister laughed. “There’s another bowl just like it in the kitchen. Bring your bowls in here and fill ‘em up!”

When everyone had gotten more popcorn, soda, and used the bathroom, Loki restarted the movie.

Thor crunched his popcorn loudly while watching Westley and Buttercup navigate the perils of the Fire Swamp.

Loki muttered about conjuring a pair of earmuffs.

“This Fire Swamp doesn’t seem too bad. Svartalfheim was worse,” Thor remarked.

Just as Buttercup said, “What about the ROUS’s?”

“Rodents of Unusual Size? I don’t think they exist,” Westley laughed.

Then the gigantic rat appeared and attacked him with a loud roar.

Aleta and Max screamed and jumped into Loki’s lap.

Thor was so surprised he spilled half his popcorn and grabbed Loki.

Loki gave his brother an incredulous stare. “Nine Hells, brother!” Then he cracked up.
So did all his children.

Flushing, Thor let go of Loki’s arm. “I wasn’t scared. I was just . . . surprised.”

Aleta reached over and patted her uncle’s hand. “S’okay, Uncle Thor. I always need Daddy to hold me when that scary part comes on. I don’t like rats.”

“You want to hold my hand?” Loki queried, still snickering.

Thor just glared at him.

The rest of the movie proceeded apace, and with the appearance of Miracle Max, Thor declared he wanted an MLT.

“Go kill a sheep,” Loki coughed.

“Eeew!” Lucy, Aleta, and Serena chorused.

“Shut up! The good part’s coming!” Hunter ordered.

“The swordfight?” Thor wanted to know.

“Have fun storming the castle!” cheered Samantha.

Everyone laughed hysterically at the bishop and his rendition of “Mawagge”, and Thor muttered to Loki, “I ever had that one try and marry me, I’d wet myself before I spoke my vows.”

“And your bride would run screaming out of Valhalla,” Loki quipped.

During the swordfight between Inigo and Count Rugen, the children, Loki, and Thor all chanted, “Hello, my name is Inigo Montoya! You killed my father! Prepare to die!”

They all cheered when Inigo won. Then Thor asked, “When does Westley chop off Humperdinck’s head?”

“Uh, he doesn’t,” Loki coughed.

“What? What do you mean he doesn’t? What kind of revenge is this?” Thor objected.

“Shush and watch the movie,” his brother ordered irritably.

Thor grunted at the final resolution and muttered, “Clever trick, just like yours, brother. But I would have preferred his head on a plate.”

Loki poked Thor in the arm. “Quiet! This is my favorite part!”

Then he spoke the line along with Westley in response to Buttercup declaring she thought he was dead.

“Death cannot stop true love. All it can do is delay it for awhile.”

Then they kissed and the girls cheered.

“Gross!” Vince made a face.

As the end credits rolled, everyone cheered and clapped.
“Well, how did you like it?” Loki asked his brother.

“Can we watch it again tomorrow?” Thor asked.

“Dad, I think we have another convert,” Samantha laughed.

“Only if you promise not to eat my popcorn,” Loki mock-scolded.

“Deal,” Thor agreed. He would have to speak with Tony about ordering a certain shirt.

Around a week later a package arrived at the Avengers mansion. “Thor, this has your name on it,” said JARVIS.

Thor opened the box, and removed a white envelope from the top. Inside was a card that read, “Dear Popcorn Thief, here’s something to wear on your next movie night. LOL! Loki.”

Thor unwrapped the item inside to reveal a very large T-shirt with the words ROUSES I Don’t Think They Exist and a picture of a huge rat baring its teeth and looking like it was coming out of the T-shirt.

Thor let out a roar of laughter. “Good one, brother! I hope you like my surprise.”

At almost the exact same time at the Laufeyson house, the UPS man dropped off a package for Loki.

Inside was a card which read, “To Loki, I’ll most likely kill you in the morning. Love, Thor” Inside was a green T-shirt with the words “Death cannot stop true love—all it can do is delay it for awhile.”

“Wow! Cool shirt, Dad!” Nate said upon seeing it. “Who’s it from?”

“Your uncle,” Loki said, and he grinned from ear to ear.
“Snow day! Snow day!” Loki could hear the chants of the children as they came off the school bus even before they came stampeding like a herd of wild goats through the front door. He had known hours before that the snow would be coming, and that despite the first gentle flakes, it would soon grow to become a swift and glorious storm, causing school to be cancelled. The snow was in his blood, and he could always tell when snow fell how long it would last and how much it would accumulate, better than any weather bureau on Midgard.

The weather forecast had called for eight to ten inches of snow in New York City but Loki knew that was wrong. They would end up with twelve to fifteen inches of dry snow, perfect for playing in. He had been watching the snow falling for two hours now, while Max and Aleta napped with Mischief on the couch. The kitten was unimpressed by the snowflakes falling outside the window, much preferring to curl up in between the two tots and slumber away the afternoon.

In contrast, the snow excited Loki, and he succumbed to temptation and slipped out the back door to stand in the yard and catch snowflakes on his tongue, unmindful of the swirling wind that dusted him with fresh snow and made his ebony hair glitter with ice crystals.

He didn’t bother with any cold weather gear, he needed none, for his frost giant physiology was unaffected by the cold. He stood outside in his new green Princess Bride shirt, jeans, and a pair of moccasins, grinning and already planning how to turn the mounds of snow they would be getting into a winter wonderland for the children and himself to play in. The kids loved the snow, though Loki would have to convert Nate’s wheelchair into a snow ski one so the little boy could join his siblings in their games.

While his neighbors complained and cursed the winter weather because they had to dig out cars and shovel driveways and sidewalks, Loki just laughed. In the first place, his van was in the garage, safe from the snow, and the second place Loki could easily send the snow from the driveway and sidewalk to the backyard, thus negating any need to shovel it.

Most of his neighbors relied on the city crews to help them clear driveways and sidewalks, or were young enough to do so themselves. But eighty-year-old Mandy MacAllister would need
help. The old woman would never ask outright, but Loki would send Samantha, Hunter, Belle, Serena, and Vince over with enchanted snow shovels to clear her walk and drive. Mandy lived alone except for her small Pomeranian Mystic, and she loved when the children came by to visit.

Loki quickly put together a bacon mac n’ cheese casserole to send over with the kids when the snow quit falling. Hopefully there would be no power outages with this storm. But Mandy had a generator, so she would be okay. Loki’s own house was warded to prevent such occurrences, ever since his pipes had frozen the first year the kids had come to stay and resulted in no water for a day until he mended them.

He made two other casseroles, one bacon mac n’ cheese and the other a shepherd’s pie. All the kids liked them and that together with a salad would be fine for dinner. For dessert he made s’more icebox cake, another favorite.

He had just finished all the prep and had to bake them for thirty minutes when his older kids arrived home, all psyched to be out of school.

“Dad, the school closed early and we’re probably not gonna be open tomorrow cause it’s gonna be a blizzard!” Nate announced.

“I figured as much, racer,” Loki said, his green eyes twinkling. “We’re going to get about a foot and a half of snow this time.”

“A foot and a half!” Serena exclaimed. “But the weather reports all said we’d only get ten inches.”

“The weather reports are often wrong,” Loki said confidently.

“Serena, I’d take Dad’s word any day over a meteorologist,” Belle insisted. “He’d know, he’s a frost giant.”

“Cool! That means we might not have school for two days!” cheered Vince.

“You know what this means, don’t ya, daredevil?” Hunter asked gleefully.

“Laufeyson Snow Wars!” they all chanted.

“Shuddap! M’ tryin’ to sleep!” a cross little voice yelled from the den.

“Sorry, Aleta,” Lucy said contritely.

But Vince scowled and said, “You oughta sleep in your bed, then you wouldn’t get woken up!”

Max came into the kitchen, rubbing his eyes. “Why’re you home from school, Vince?”

“School was cancelled cause of the blizzard,” his brother replied.

“It’s still snowing?”

“Yup! Look outside!”

Max ran to the bay window and peered out. “Whoa! So much snow! We can build a snowman!”

“Max, we can build a whole army of snowmen, buddy,” laughed Hunter.

Max cheered, then ran in to tell Aleta. But his little sister was quite annoyed at being woken up before she was ready and cried, “Maximus, go’ way an’ lemme alone!”
“But Aleta, you gotta see the snow . . .”

“No! Daddy! Max won’t leave me to rest!” the little girl wailed.

“Max, leave Aleta alone,” Loki called. “She’s cranky and you know what she’s like when she doesn’t get her beauty sleep.”


“Keep it down, guys,” their father ordered. “Go play video games or something. I don’t need to deal with a tantrum today.” Aleta could not only give a firecracker noise lessons, she could out scream a banshee when she got into a mood. Loki hoped that as she grew older she would outgrow her tendency for tantrums when she was overtired, stressed, or upset. So far she had gone a record of four days without a meltdown and he wanted to keep it that way.

Max padded back into the kitchen. “Dad, can we build a snowman?”

“Yes, but after the snow stops. It’s too wet right now. Why don’t you paint a picture for the art wall in your new paint by number book?”

Max agreed, and went to get the new watercolor book Loki had bought him when they were out shopping yesterday. It had lots of mythical heroes in it, and Max always enjoyed painting.

Belle went to write in her journal, Serena had a math puzzle book she could do, Hunter and Nate went to play Xbox, Samantha had a sewing project she was trying to finish, and Vince wanted to work on his Star Wars Legos. Lucy went to watch cartoons in her room.

With his little zoo occupied, Loki took advantage of the quiet to sit down in his recliner and read. Mischief came and sat upon his lap, purring and nudging his hand until he petted her. The Asgardian made his tablet hover so he could pet the kitten and turn the pages at the same time.

Half-an-hour later his little spark woke up in a much better mood, and asked for peanut butter and apples for a snack. Loki had small packages of sliced Honeycrisp apples and mini containers of peanut butter, he gave this to Aleta with a small glass of milk.

“Thanks,” she said and ate two slices hungrily while watching Sofia the First.

He was just about to read the next chapter of Centennial when Aleta came up to him and shoved an apple slice coated in peanut butter in his mouth. “Mfffff!”

“Here, Daddy. I’ll share with you,” his baby girl declared.

“Mffmhh,” he managed a garbled word since the peanut butter was now sticking to the roof of his mouth.

He quickly summoned his glass of iced tea and hastily drank it down. When he could talk again, he said, “Spark, next time ask me before you shove something down my throat.”

“But I was sharing!”

“That was wonderful, but you also nearly choked me, honey,” he remonstrated.

“Don’tcha like apples n’ peanut butter?”

“Yes, but I can eat them myself. Next time just hand it to me, okay?”

“But you were busy,” she argued.
“Not that busy. Go wash your hands if you’re finished eating,” he reminded her.

“Kay. You want the rest?” she asked, gesturing to the remaining three apple slices and container of peanut butter.

“Yes. Can you bring them here, please? I can’t move, I’ve got feline paralysis,” he joked, indicating the sleeping kitten on his knee.

Totally missing the joke, Aleta ran and brought him the rest of her snack, then trotted into the kitchen to wash her hands, using the stepstool to reach the sink.

There was a lull in the storm around dinner time, and the kids devoured the casseroles and dessert then kept watch out the windows to guess the snow totals.

“Dad, how long will it keep snowing?” Lucy asked. “It’s already up to the windows!”

“A few more hours,” he replied. “Then it’ll stop, but the wind will blow and drift the snow.”

“When can we build the snowman army?” Max wanted to know.

“Tomorrow,” answered Hunter. “Snow’ll be dry then. Good for building and stuff.”

“Aww!” Max looked put out. “What are we gonna do till then?”

“Why don’t we play Monopoly?” suggested Samantha.

“But Aleta and I can’t read or count like you,” Max objected.

“No, but I can, and you can be on my team,” Loki offered.

“Okay, who’s playing?” Hunter asked.

“I am,” Samantha said.

“Me too,” said Serena.

“I’m in,” Hunter reminded.

“Vince and I will be a team,” Nate declared. “Speed Racers.”

“And Lucy and me,” Belle said. “Bookworms.”

“Dad and us are the Imps of the Frost team,” Max announced.

Samantha got the Monopoly out of the closet and they all chose a piece.

There followed a rather good-natured, teasing, yet cut-throat game, with each of them trying to out-do the other. In the beginning, Hunter was ahead, but Loki’s team soon caught up and surpassed him when they bought the Boardwalk and Park Place.

“Oh my gosh, Dad, you’re killing me!” groaned Samantha every time she went down that side of the board. “I always land on you and you have four hotels on the property!”

“Yeah it’s like horror street!” Serena remarked, though she owned half the property on the other side.
“Yay! We’re winning!” Aleta clapped her hands.

“Not yet. Game’s not over,” Hunter disagreed.

“And I have three railroads,” Belle reminded.

“Yeah tell me about it,” Nate grumbled. “I pay every time I land on one.”

Loki rolled the dice. Then he said, “Max, pick a card from the Community Chest. The orange one.”

“I got this one, Dad,” Max showed him it.

“The Get Out of Jail Free card! That’s the best card, scamp! Gimme five!”

Max slapped his palm.

“How much you want for it?” Vince asked.

“Nice try,” laughed the frost giant. “Get your own.”

The game continued, until it was down to Serena and Loki’s team for the win.

Hunter just shook his head. “You might as well give up, moon pi,” he said. “Good as you are, even you can’t beat Dad.”

“Wolfling, don’t discourage her,” chided Loki. “This game is pretty close.”

“It’s not over till the fat lady sings,” Serena stated.

“The fat lady’s singing,” Vince yodeled.

“This could go on all night,” observed Samantha.

“Who cares? No school tomorrow,” Serena reminded. She passed Go and collected two hundred dollars.

But finally it was nine-thirty, and Loki saw his three youngest were falling asleep in their chairs. “Okay, moon pi. Time to wrap it up. Let’s count up our bank accounts.”

Serena counted hers first, adding rapidly in her head. “I have almost $5,000.”

“Here. Count mine,” Loki said, and handed her all of his money.

Serena did so, then said, “You won. By $10.”

“See? I told you,” Hunter gloated. “Not even Uncle Tony can beat Dad in Monopoly.”

“But you almost did, and that’s more than I can say for your uncles,” Loki said. “That was fun, but now I have to put these three to bed.”

Belle helped Lucy upstairs and Loki picked up both of his little ones and climbed rapidly upstairs.

“I’ll help you,” Samantha offered, and followed.

Loki handed her Aleta to change while he put a sleeping Max into Buzz Lightyear pajamas. He tucked his small son into bed then crossed the hallway to see if Samantha needed help.
“She’s out like a light,” his eldest said. Then she yawned. “I think I’d better get to bed too. Gotta get my sleep for the Snow Wars.”

“Night, butterfly.” Loki hugged her and kissed her forehead.

Soon all the kids went to bed until the only ones stirring were Loki and Mischief, who was normally up and prowling at night.

Loki remained awake watching the snow fall, feeling in his blood the snow would end in about half an hour. When it did, he too sought his bed, sleeping soundly until the dawn.

By then the storm had blown itself out, and as predicted, the snow had drifted during the night, until the house was nearly obscured by huge mountains of snow. Waking before anyone in the house, and before any of his neighbors, Loki went outside and used his magic to remove the snow from his porch, walk, and driveway, transporting it to the backyard, where he used it to make a few snow sculptures and a pretty castle and made hills and valleys so the kids would have plenty of places to play. He made a large hill on one side of the yard so they could sled or toboggan down it.

He used his icy affinity to create cool lattice icicles along the roof and a lacy ice fence around the porch.

He cleared the snow off the tree house, knowing that it and the ice castle he’d made could serve as snow forts for each side. He already knew that half of his team would be composed of Aleta, Max, and Lucy, because he didn’t trust his older kids to watch properly so they didn’t get harmed or in trouble during the Snow Wars. He knew that Hunter or Sam, he had a feeling Samantha would change to Sam for this activity, would be the captain of the other team, and Belle would be on their side because she could even things up with her magic against his own. The rest of the children would choose a side.

Of course, he would limit his magic to mild illusions and elementary ice spells, otherwise it wouldn’t be any fun. But any pranks, magic or otherwise, were fair game. Oh yes, they were going to have a glorious time! Then he had an even better idea, and texted Thor, asking if his brother, Tony, Tasha, and Clint wanted to come over and join them.

Thor texted back, asking about a time, and Loki replied he’d let them know, they were still asleep and he needed to help out Mrs. MacAllister.

_"I will await your summons, brother."_

_Now there’s a first! _He texted back, thinking that he had to play this great prank on Thor once he arrived, but he would have to get him to leave his phone unattended. But that shouldn’t be too hard, no one wanted their phone to fall in the snow and risk getting damaged. He would suggest everyone, including himself and his kids, leave their phones on the kitchen counter.

But first there was breakfast and snow shovels to enchant and his kids to awaken.

Loki quickly cast the simple charms of lightness and sharpness over the shovels, to ensure that the snow could be easily picked up and also would be light as a feather when the children shoveled as he didn’t want any strained muscles or too much exertion.

Breakfast was cinnamon raison oatmeal with bananas, quick, easy, and filling. He set the pot on the stove with a warming spell on it, made coffee, and drank his usual two cups while meditating before going to wake up his brood.
He found Belle awake, no surprise there, the girl was never one to laze about in bed, even on a day with no school. “You’re up early, morning glory,” he teased, noting she had her flannels and sheepskin-lined boots on.

“Who could sleep when we can play in the snow?” she responded, smiling. “Never mind, Serena could sleep through a hurricane.” She gave him a kiss on the cheek, then asked, “What’s for breakfast?”

“My cinnamon raisin oatmeal with bananas,” he replied. “It’s warming in the pot, help yourself.”

“Yum! Looks like it snowed just as much as you said. So we gotta dig out Missus Mandy,” his thoughtful daughter remarked.

“You will, after breakfast. Now let’s see who else I can wake up,” her father said gleefully.

“You might need a Frost Giant Freeze to wake up the number cruncher, Dad. Either that or a fog horn,” Belle giggled.

Her sister was famous for sleeping till noon—if Loki would allow her to.

Belle skipped downstairs, a wicked smirk on her face as she heard he father begin to sing his standard wake-up song at the top of his lungs.

“It’s time to rise and shine, rise and shine, and say hello to Mr. Sun!”

Doors slammed and the sound of several voices raised in protest echoed through the house.

“Aww, Dad!”

“No school, so why’re we getting woken up at the crack of dawn?”

“Five more minutes!”

“No, an hour!”

“Hurry up, Max! I gotta go potty!” Aleta shrilled, banging on the bathroom door down the hall.

“Me too, so keep your crown on!” her brother yelled back.

“I can’t wait that long!” the three-year-old sobbed, crossing her legs.

“C’mere, spark!” Hunter picked her up. “You can use Dad’s bathroom.” He ran down the hall to Loki’s room, which had its own master bath. “The last thing Dad needs is to clean up a puddle on the rug.”

“Thank you, wolfling,” Loki said to his eldest boy when Hunter emerged from the master suite.

“No problem, Dad. Gonna go downstairs and use the other one. And feed Mischief,” he added as the kitten meowed and wound around his ankles. “C’mon, kitty! Race ya!”

As they thundered down the stairs, Loki slipped like a ghost into Serena’s room. His Elsa-look-alike still slumbered, her head beneath her comforter, like a bear in hibernation. But not for long, her father chuckled wickedly.

He yanked off all the covers and opened the window, letting a gust of wintery air flow into the room.
Serena groaned and whimpered. “Cold!” she groped for the covers, and not finding them, sat up, a scowl riding her face. “Where did my covers go? Belle, I’m gonna beat your butt with your book! Or whoever did this! M’ freezing!”

“Hello, darling!” Loki greeted.

“Dad! *You* did this!” she accused, tossing her platinum hair out of her eyes. “You’re terrible!” She opened her mouth to say something than closed it.

He giggled, clearly amused. “Let me guess. You wish you could beat me for waking you up, Miss Sourpuss.”

“No fair,” she grumbled. “I ought to be able to sleep past sunrise.”

“Look out the window, moon pi and you’ll see the sun was up long ago. It’s nine AM, my little vampire,” he pointed out and began singing his wake-up song.

“No-o-o!” Serena grabbed her pillow and put it over her head. “Dad, stop!”

“Not till you get out of bed, sleepyhead!”

“Ahhh! D-a-a-d!”

“You can sleep later, Miss Grouchy-pants,” he argued.

She turned her back on him, her head still covered. “You’re evil!”

Then she yelped as his ice-cold fingers tickled the backs of her knees.

“Did you just call me evil? Guess I’ll have to prove you right, huh?” he twitted, and then he tickled the back of her neck and ribs.

She shrieked, but there was nowhere she could hide from his lightning quick hands.

Until she rolled over and jumped out of bed.

“There! Was that so hard?”

She glared at him. “I hate mornings!”

“Get dressed and come eat breakfast,” he laughed. “I’ll be back up here in five minutes and if I catch you sleeping, sweetheart, I have a Frost Giant Freeze waiting for you.”

“No!” she yelped in horror.

That was his threat of last resort, and it was a pail of icy water that drenched you from head to toe. He’d only used it once on his reluctant risers and none of them ever wanted him to repeat it.

He teleported downstairs to find Belle, Hunter, Lucy, Sam, and Aleta already at the table eating.

“She never learns,” Sam just shook his head.

“Serena’s like Sleeping Beauty,” Lucy put in. “She could sleep for a hundred years.”

Belle made a face. “Not me. Think of everything you’d miss being asleep for that long.”

“Daddy, can I have more cinnamon in my oatmeal?” Aleta asked.
“Of course, spark.” He sprinkled some extra cinnamon over her cereal and added some cream because he sensed it might be too hot for her to eat. “How’s that?”

“Mmm! Your oatmeal’s better than the Quaker guy’s,” his toddler declared.

“I hope so. I’ve been making it a lot longer,” the frost giant told her.

“Yeah like millennia,” Hunter remarked.

Soon the rest of his children came and ate, then afterwards, he had Sam, Hunter, Belle, and Vince take their enchanted shovels and head over to the MacAllister house next door. While the kids shoveled, Loki brought the casserole he’d made over, once the walk had been cleared, taking Aleta and Max with him. He wore a black coat, gloves, and a hat, though they were for show, though his children’s weren’t.

He knocked on the door, calling, “Mandy, darling, it’s your friendly neighbor snow patrol.”

He heard Mystic bark in welcome, then the door was pulled open and a spry little old woman with her silver hair in a bun wearing a blue cable-knit Arran sweater and gray pants with pink sheepskin scuffs greeted him, her sharp dark eyes sparkling. “Hello, Loki, dearie! Come in, don’t stand out on the porch and freeze, boy!” She ordered Mystic, her black Pom, to stay and allowed Loki and the two little ones to come inside.

“Why, look who’s come to visit, Mystic!” she cried happily.

“Hi, Missus Mandy!” the two imps chorused and gave the old woman hugs.

“Take off your coats and stay awhile, dearies!” she invited. “Loki, you sit down and have a cuppa while your little ones play with Mystic.”

“Hang your coats on the coat rack,” Loki instructed his children, doing so himself. “And no touching anything!”

“We know, Dad!” Max said with the air of having heard the same instructions ten thousand times.

“Oh, pish tosh, Loki! I don’t have anything they can hurt,” Mandy said. “This house and whatever’s in it is old, like me, so no worries.”

“I hope you have insurance,” he joked as the kids went to pet Mystic, who jumped up and licked their faces.

“Smart mouth!” she scolded. “Go sit down, boy. There’s nothing your two littles have done that I haven’t seen before.”

“Wanna bet?” he teased.

“Oh hush, you imp!” she scolded. “Don’t make me get my cane.”

Loki roared with laughter. “Yes, ma’am!” He held out the casserole. “Where shall I put this?”

“What did you bring?”

“Just a bacon mac n’ cheese casserole. This way you can just heat it and eat it.”

“Loki, you shouldn’t have, dearie!” she shook her finger at him.
“Why? I had extra, so I didn’t want it to go to waste,” he returned.

“Liar!” she snorted, and gave him a gentle whack on the behind. “Boy, you don’t fool me for an instant.”

“Wasn’t trying to,” he grinned. Then he put it on the counter. “Just pop it in the microwave for a minute. Oh, and my kids are shoveling your driveway and walk.”

“That will earn them about ten dollars each,” Mandy said, going to put the kettle on.

“You are not paying them,” Loki argued.

“Loki Laufeyson, I most certainly am!” she insisted. “I’d have to pay someone to do it, so I might as well pay your kids.”

“Mandy, they don’t need money,” he objected.

“Payment for services rendered, dearie,” she said firmly.

“You’re impossible, Lady MacAllister! We’re just being neighborly.”

“So am I. Now, do you still drink your tea with honey and a splash of milk?”

“You know me too well,” he smiled, allowing her this small victory. Mandy MacAllister treated him and his children like the grandkids she no longer saw since the rest of her family was all the way across the country, and she had refused to move with them, saying she had been born here in this house and would never leave it.

She served him his tea, and then herself, also putting a plate of Scotch shortbreads out.

“Max, Aleta, would you like a cookie?”

The two scamps ran into the kitchen to receive their cookies.

“What do you say?” Loki prompted.

“Thank you, Missus Mandy,” they said.

“Can Mystic have a cookie?” Aleta wanted to know.

“She can have a dog biscuit, dearie,” Mandy said, and pointed to the box of them on the small shelf on her baker’s rack.

Aleta went and got two, handed one to Max, and then had Mystic sit up, shake hands, and dance for her treats.

While the two played with the little dog, Loki and Mandy drank their tea and ate their cookies, and Mandy asked Loki how his business was doing.

“It’s coming along. My new game will be ready to launch before summer. Have you heard from your daughter-in-law and son? Are they going to come here for Easter?”

Mandy shrugged. “Well . . . Sean said he was busy and didn’t know if he could fly out, he’s an accountant, you know and this is tax time . . .”

“Is he going to send you a ticket at least?”
“I don’t know. You know, I don’t want to impose, dearie. Tracie is always so busy with her projects and what in the world would I do rattling about in that big house in California?”

“You're his mother!” Loki snapped. “His only family and you ought to be with them for the holiday. How can—”

Her hand closed over his. “Loki, dearie, no need to get all steamed. ‘Tis the way they’ve always been. I don’t want to be a burden on them, and we’ve never really seen eye to eye, my daughter-in-law and I. She thinks I speak my mind too much and maybe I do.”

“I’d like to give them a piece of my mind!” he said angrily.

“No, dearie. That would only give them more fuel for the fire. They want me to give up this house and move into an old folks home, but that isn’t happening till I’ve gone to Jesus. I might not be as fit as I used to, but that doesn’t mean I’m ready to be stuck in some room and forgotten!”

“I’d never let that happen. I’d sue the ass off them first,” he declared, his eyes flashing.

“Language, dearie!” she scolded. “Little pitchers,” she indicated the two toddlers, who were blissfully petting the dog on the floor.

“Sorry, but I meant what I said,” he told her.

“You’ve a good heart, boy. Your mama raised you right,” she said approvingly.

“I’m adopted, you know that.”

“So? Adopted or no, your mama did a good job.”

“Well, she tried, I’ll give her that,” laughed the God of Mischief. “If things don’t work out with your relatives, you’re coming to my house for Easter,” he told her firmly.

“Loki, you have your own family—” she began.

“Who would be quite happy to have you with us,” he argued. “You’re like their grandmother.”

“You’re sweet, dearie!” she smiled at him. “And if I were forty years younger I’d be getting you to put a ring on my finger.”

He laughed again. “Don’t let my brother hear you say that. I’m the family black sheep, you know.”

“Humph! I’ve always liked a bit of a rogue, dearie! And so would any woman with eyes in her head and brains to go with them.”

“Hey, don’t you be matchmaking!” he coughed. “A woman would have to be crazy to take me and nine kids.”

“Oh she’s out there, my boy! You just haven’t met her yet, dearie!”

“Because she doesn’t exist, Mandy.”

“Don’t be sassing me, boy! You might be a big video game designer, but in this one area I know more than you, Mr. Laufeyson. When it’s time, you’ll meet the right one, and she won’t care if you come with nine hundred kids, she’ll love you and them forever.”

“Mandy, you’re an incurable romantic.”
“You’ll see,” she vowed.

Just then, the older Laufeysons knocked on the door, to tell their father they were done, and Mandy gave them cookies, tea, and a ten dollar bill apiece, even though the kids tried to refuse.

“Missus Mandy, Dad says we’re not supposed to get paid—” Hunter began.

“I’ve already talked it over with your dad, dearie, and it’s okay,” the old woman said firmly.

“She twisted my arm,” Loki drawled.

“Loki, behave!” Mandy ordered, and he laughingly dipped his head in acquiescence.

The children thanked her and giggled at how she could make their indomitable father listen. Then they headed back home, and Mandy waved through her screen door as they departed.

Loki texted Thor and soon his brother, Tony, Tasha, and Clint showed up at the house ready to start the Snow Wars.

Loki appointed himself captain of one team, and Tony volunteered to be captain of the other, then Loki picked Lucy for his army. Tony picked Nate, and Loki chose Tasha, while Tony picked Clint. Loki chose Aleta and Max, then Tony chose Belle and Thor. Vince joined Loki’s army, Serena was on Tony’s team, probably planning some mischief against her dad for waking her up early. Sam was on Loki’s team and Hunter on Tony’s.

Loki’s team tied green sashes on their arms and Tony’s red ones. The rules of the war were simple —three hits with a snowball and you were out for five minutes, only mild illusions and ice spells allowed, and fun pranks. Nine hits with a snowball or prank and you were eliminated. Special consideration was given to Lucy, Max, and Aleta due to age and injury.

Loki transformed Nate’s chair into a ski chair so he could participate easily in the games. The war would last until one side was defeated, or until dinner time, whichever came first.

“Now let the third annual Laufeyson Snow Wars begin!” Loki chanted, and shot off a blue sparkling streak of energy.

“Rock, paper, scissors, shoot!” called Tony, and he and Loki chose to determine who went first.

The Asgardian chose paper, which beat Tony’s rock, so his team went first.

And the first thing he did was conjure a snowball and smash it right in Tony’s face. “Think fast, Iron Drawers!”

“Loki, you—” Tony sputtered.

“Score one for our side!” cheered Sam.

Loki beckoned his team into the ice castle, which would be their base of operations. “Start making some ammo, darlings,” he told his older children. “Lucy, here’s a special weapon for you.” He handed her a silvery metal gun with a large opening.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“Snowball gun,” he answered. “You can fire it one handed, and it’ll fire one, three, or six snowballs at a time before it needs a minute to make more.”
“Cool, Dad!” her sea-green eyes glittered.

“Do we get one too?” Vince wanted to know.

Loki shook his head. “No, only Lucy, ‘cause she’s injured. You all can use your two hands and your eyes.” Then he beckoned to Max and Aleta. “My Mischief Making Imps, c’mere and let me enchant your boots so you can walk on the snow so I don’t lose you in a drift.”

He promptly cast a spell that let the two glide like they had skis on top of the snow.

Then he had them begin making snowballs too, and those his kids had already made he multiplied with a simple increase spell.

“Is that permitted?” Tasha asked.

“Of course. Belle’s doing the same on her side,” Loki said with a sly grin. “That’s one of the advantages of being a mage, darling. We don’t need to rely on brute force.”

“What are these?” Vince asked upon seeing several blue sacks along the walls of the ice castle.

“Snowball holders. There’s one for each of us except Lucy. Start filling them,” Loki ordered, then followed suit.

Once they all had their sacks filled with snowballs, Loki, Tasha, and Sam plotted their strategy.

It was decided they would send out Max and Aleta first as a decoy, because Tasha said Tony would be reluctant to hit them since they were so little. “He’ll hold back.”

“My kids won’t,” Loki predicted. “But we can cover them, and with that enchantment, they can run really quickly.”

“And while they’re busy trying to hit Aleta and Max, the other half can sneak up behind them and hit them right where it hurts.” Tasha grinned.

They all slapped palms. “Let’s do it!”

“Okay, scamps, you know what you gotta do, right?” Sam asked his little siblings.

“Uh huh!” Aleta nodded.

“Yup! We’re gonna ‘stract them so Daddy n’ you can hit ‘em in the butt!” Max asserted.

“That’s my boy,” Loki praised. “And don’t forget to run if you see a snowball coming.”

They split up, with Tasha, Sam, and Vince covering Max and Aleta, while Loki and Lucy crept around the back of the ice castle and silently through the ice “forest” until they reached the tree house.

As predicted, Tony held off trying to hit the two babies, though Serena, Nate, and Hunter opened fire, using gentle tosses.

Max and Aleta ran about yelling like banshees, Clint taunted Tasha to come out and fight like a girl, and Thor yelled to Loki that he had better quit hiding like a wimp.

Thus distracted, the others were unprepared for Loki and Lucy to use the back ramp to sneak into the tree house. Lucy cut loose with a barrage from her snowball gun, scoring hits on Nate, Belle, Serena, Tony, and Clint. Hunter ducked and she missed him, but Loki slipped up behind Thor and
gleefully shoved a snowball down his pants.

“It’s a snow wedgie!” he crowed.

“**LOKI!**” Thor bellowed. “By the Nine, when I get my hands on you, you little sneak--!”

“You *always* fell for that!” the Master of Mischief whooped, then he drew his cloak about Lucy and they vanished from view, enabling them to escape from the treehouse despite the missiles aimed at them.

For now, Loki’s Slippery Serpents, as they had called themselves, was winning against Tony’s Crimson Tigers. The Laufeyson Snow Wars was off to a brilliant start.
Tony managed to rally his troops, and together with Thor and Nate, sent return volleys of snowballs across the yard. Several of Loki’s team was hit, but no one was forced to sit out, and the snowball fight continued, with Loki and company sometimes in retreat to their ice palace and other times participating in sneak attacks.

“Dad, I’m cold,” Max whined, his nose was red from the frost.

Loki heated up his hands and set them against his son’s cheeks, making him toasty. “How’s that? Better?”

“Yeah. Thanks!”

“Me too!” Aleta cried and Loki did the same to her. “How about you, sunshine?” he asked Lucy.

“I’m a little chilly,” she admitted, and Loki warmed her too, paying special attention to her injured arm.

“Anybody else? Sam? Tasha?”

“I’m good,” Sam said.

“I come from Russia. I’m used to the cold,” Tashe replied.

“I’m warm from running,” Vince said.

Then they went slipping about the side of the castle and into the “ice forest”, which Loki had formed using ice crystals. Tasha pretended to fall and lay on the snow, calling, “Help! Help! I’ve fallen and I can’t get up!”
Immediately, Serena, Nate, and Belle came out to investigate.

“Are you okay, Aunt Tasha?” called the Lorekeeper, though she was almost certain it was a trick, she couldn’t afford to let her aunt freeze.

Tasha made a show of examining her ankle, and as the three children crept closer, snowballs in hand. When they got close enough, she reached into the blue bag and flung a snowball into Belle’s face.

Then Loki, Vince, Lucy, and Max came out from behind the trees and pelted them with snowballs.

“Victory!” Vince cheered. “All of you are wiped out!”

The Serpents all exchanged high fives.

Tony groaned. “I can’t believe they fell for that!”

“We can even it up,” Thor argued. Then he held Mjolnir in the air and thunder boomed across the yard.

Max and Aleta screamed and clung to Loki, who hugged them and murmured, “It’s okay. It’s just thundersnow.”

“What’s that?” asked Aleta, hugging him about the neck.

“Your uncle being a showoff,” his father soothed.

He ignored the rumbling thunder, knowing that Thor was just trying to psych them out.

Then he waited until the remainder of the Tigers showed themselves and used his magic to kamikaze them with a barrage of snowballs.

When the powder settled, Thor, Clint, and Tony were buried up to their neck in a pile of snowballs. He burst out laughing and so did the rest of his team.

“Uh, Loki!” Clint called. “I think I’m turning into an icicle.”

“I think we won the snowball fight,” Loki called. He waved his hand and the snow was removed. “Now we’ll move onto the next contest—the most creative snowman.”

“Yes!” Max cheered. “Aleta, wanna build a snowman?”

“Yes! We can make a snow princess,” his sister declared. “With a crown like mine!”

They began to roll the snow into three large balls. The adults helped with the large base, and the kids did the middle and the head.

Tasha helped smooth the three balls into one large shape and helped mold a face out of snow.

“What about hair?” Aleta asked.

“I know! I have some yarn we can use!” Samantha said. “And a couple of other things.” She ran in the house to grab her sewing basket.

Soon she returned with some brown yarn for hair, and plastic gemstones for eyes and had a long
scrap of silvery material for a scarf and another green drape for a skirt.

“That looks sooo cool!” Aleta was jumping up and down. “But what about her helmet?”

“I can do that,” Loki assured her.

Then he flexed his fingers and the snow swirled about in a white and blue glittery cyclone. When the wind settled there was a perfectly sculpted horned helmet with shiny ice jewels in the middle of it.

“Well, spark? Do you like it?”

“Daddy, it’s beautiful!” Aleta cheered. “I want one!”

Loki laughed. “Aleta, you’d freeze your brains wearing this. Better stick to the one I gave you before.” Then he set the helmet on the snow princess’ head. “Hmm . . . we need one more thing.”

He used his magic again and created a scepter. Then he formed arms and attached them to the body and then attached the staff to one hand.

“I think she’s ready,” Loki said happily.

“I think we won!” Max yelled.

They looked over to where the Tigers were building their snowman.

Only it wasn’t a snowman they were building, but a snow robot, using odd cables and square snow and metal blocks, springs, and funny googly eyes. Loki recognized Nate’s hand in this, and most likely Tony’s also.

“Wow! A snow bot!” Vince cried.

“That’s really neat!” Lucy said.

“Yeah it is clever,” agreed Sam.

“I like my princess better,” Aleta insisted.

“So do I,” Tasha said, hugging the little girl.

“I like both of them,” Max said.

Aleta glared at him.

He scowled back. “Don’t look at me like that, Aleta! I can like what I want!”

“You aren’t s’post to like their snowman, Maximus! They’re the Other Team!” the three-year-old snapped.

“I do what I want!” Max yelled back, his face inches from his sister’s.

“Get outta my face, Maximus!” Aleta growled.

“Make me, Aleta!”

“Enough, you two!” Loki ordered, his voice steel sheathed in velvet. “No fighting.”
“But Daddy, Max said—” Aleta began.

Loki held up a hand. “What’d I say, Aleta Lenore?”

She bit her lip and pouted. “No fighting.”

“What also means no tattling,” he explained. “Now, everyone is allowed to like whatever they want. No matter whose team made it. Got it? This is supposed to be fun.”

When both snowmen were finished, the other team voted on what their rivals had made. Since both the princess and the snow bot were quite creative, a tie was declared and Loki pinned blue ribbons on each of them.

“Now what?” asked Tony.

“Now we have the toboggan race,” answered the God of Mischief. “Hunter, go get the toboggans and the sled out of the garage. Vince, go help.”

The two boys raced off hollering. They loved the toboggan race. That was one of their favorite winter activities, and Loki often had to go and drag them inside after a snowstorm, because they would keep sliding until they were nearly frozen. They brought back all nine toboggans and a sled also. The sled was Loki’s, a sleek racing model, but he would allow the children to use it when they asked. The rules for the toboggan race was simple. First one to the bottom of the hill won.

Aleta, Max, and Lucy would ride down with Loki, and because of this they would race Thor and Tony, because they would be the only ones able to give the frost giant a good race. Nate would use his ski chair to race, and would race Sam. Vince would race Serena, Belle would race Loki, Hunter would also race Vince, and Tasha would race Clint.

Once the race pairs were drawn, they all ran up the hill, except for Loki and Tony, who would be at the bottom to call the winner.

Hunter and Vince went first, both running at full speed to the edge and then jumping on the toboggan as it slipped down the hill, screaming like maniacs. Once on the toboggan, all they needed to do was steer with their hands and feet, the snow was perfectly slick and the toboggans slid like a dream over the white surface.

Their teams cheered the boys on, and in two minutes they had reached the bottom of the hill.

Hunter won by a few seconds. He hopped off the toboggan and clapped Vince on the shoulder. “Good try, bro.”

“I’ll beat you next time,” the Ghost Speaker grinned. “And I’ll be sure to beat moon pi.”

“Yup,” Hunter agreed. Vince was far better at tobogganing than the mathematically inclined Serena.

Tasha and Clint went next, and were exchanging good-natured insults on the way down when Clint’s toboggan hit a patch of slick snow and skidded off the hill and into the frost forest.

“Oh, bad luck!” Tony cried.

Thor frowned. “Loki, did you do that?”
Loki shook his head. “I don’t need to do anything, Thor. I’ll beat you without using tricks down that hill. And the same goes for any of my teammates.”

Clint stopped the toboggan and brushed himself off, “Aww, I can’t believe something that dumb happened!”

“Don’t worry, buddy. We’re tied. But we can win the next one,” consoled Iron Man.

Nate and Sam went next. Sam eyed his brother then said, “Think you can catch me, Racer?”

“I can not only catch you, butterfly, I can beat your butt!” He adjusted the controls on his chair.

“Go Sam!” Aleta, Lucy, and Max cheered.

Then the race was on, and for half of it Sam was slightly ahead. But then Nate did something and his ski chair suddenly shot forward like a rocket, and he reached the bottom first.

Tony cheered and gave him a high five. “Attaboy, Nate!”

“Wow, Uncle Tony, that new propulsion jet really worked. Didja see me, Dad! It was almost like flying!” Nate ginger hair glittered with snow crystals.

“You were great, buddy!” Loki said.

“Real slick, Racer,” Sam said, congratulating his brother.

“Now we’re winning!” Serena crowed.

Thor smiled at the platinum-haired girl. “As you Midgardians say, don’t count your chickens before they hatch. We still have more racers to go.”

Serena smiled confidently. “I can beat Vince.”

“You wish, number cruncher!” her brother responded. “You’re gonna crash and burn!”

She stuck her tongue out at him. “That’s your line, daredevil! You’re always crashing something.”

Thor clapped his hands. “All right, you two. Let’s settle it.”

Serena gave Vince a challenging look before jumping on her toboggan and pushing off.

“Show ‘em, Serena!” Clint yelled.

But Vince threw himself down on his belly and used both hands and feet to shove off. Then he careened down the hill at a reckless speed.

“Holy crap!” Sam gaped. “Look at how fast he’s going!”

Tony gasped. “Loki, did you see that? He did a corkscrew in the air!”

“I saw it,” the Asgardian said, his heart pounding. “Vince, quit the tricks and just slide, son!”

Serena was behind but she was catching up.

Vince darted a glance back, then concentrated on finding the smoothest path down the hill. His familiarity with the hill stood him in good stead, and he reached the bottom a full three seconds before his sister.
Then, because it was hard to stop, he simply rolled off his toboggan and into the snow.

Tony looked worried. “Are you okay, Vince?”

“He’s fine,” Loki said, and sure enough, the little boy stood up seconds later, shaking snow from his hair.

“Whoo hoo! I think I was faster now than last time,” he grinned.

“You were crazier than last time,” Loki said ruefully.

“But it was fun!” his son giggled. “And now we’re tied.”

“That’ll change,” his father smirked. “It’s my turn now.” He teleported up the hill and called, “C’mon, sunshine, let’s make your Uncle Thor eat snow!”

Lucy raced over to him. “You think we can win? We’ll have two on the toboggan, Dad.”

He laughed. “Of course. Because I’ll be the one steering.” He helped his daughter on the toboggan, carefully sitting her before him. “Are you ready, Thunderer?”

“Ready, brother!” Thor sat on the other toboggan, and prayed it wouldn’t collapse, it felt so flimsy beneath him.

Then they shoved off. For the first few feet they were neck and neck.

But then Loki guided his slider down a path that seemed totally insane, yet had the most slickness, enabling them to slide down at a terrific speed.

His arm was like an iron band about his daughter, but she laughed as the wind blew her hair all over. “Faster, Dad!” she yelled.

“Faster?” he smirked. “Hold on!” He made a minute adjustment with his left boot, and the toboggan practically flew over the hill.

Thor used his super strength to try and catch up, but he was no match for the frost giant, who was in his element on the snowy terrain.


“No magic, Stark. I’m just really good at this,” Loki replied modestly. And his frost giant senses allowed him to pick the quickest route through the snow.

“Dad, can we do that again?” Lucy asked, her eyes shining.

“Maybe later, little Valkyrie,” Thor told her. “That was a good contest. But I want to know how you did that, Loki.”

Loki shrugged. “Like I told Stark, I’m really good at this. I’ve done it since I was a kid like Vince. While you were off hunting with your friends, I was playing in the snow.”

“Our turn! Our turn!” Max and Aleta jumped up and down like jack-in-the-boxes.

“Win it, Man of Iron! This time my brother can’t win, no matter how good he is. He has three and you’re only one.”
“Let’s do it, Mischief Maker!” Tony grinned.

“Okay. But I use my sled this time. It’s the only thing that can hold three people,” Loki smirked.

“You think you can beat me with that?” Tony shook his head.

“Watch and learn,” the frost giant replied, a glint in his emerald eyes.

He got Max and Aleta situated on the sled, telling them to hold on tight, and used his magic to make sure they stayed on the sled. Then he stood behind it, like a dog musher, and when Thor called “Go!” sprinted for the edge of the hill.

Beside him Tony did the same, but Loki managed to jump on the sled and the sled shot down the hill at breakneck speed, the kids screaming in delight.

“You two okay?” Loki called as the wind whipped his hair into his face. “You’re not scared, are you?”

“No way!” Max shrieked.

“See ya, wouldn’t want to be ya, Uncle Tony!” Aleta hooted.

Once again the sled seemed to fly over the snow, finding the hard packed surface ideal for skimming over the ground like a bird. Loki made more minute corrections, making the sled become a silvery blur.

“Yeee-haa!” they all screamed as they came over the final stretch of the hill.

Tony couldn’t believe how quickly the sled flew, he was good with his toboggan, but despite the lighter weight on his slider, he couldn’t seem to catch the flying trio.

“Da-a-mn!” he whistled, as the sled came to a halt at the bottom of the hill before him.

“Oh, what a rush!” Loki hollered. “How are you, scamps?”

“More, Daddy! More!” they begged.

“Well, you won that round,” Thor conceded. “Let’s do it again!”

This time Belle raced Loki, and she used her magic to keep her toboggan straight on course, and she nearly beat her father. “Darn! I ran outta hill!”

“You might have caught me otherwise,” Loki acknowledged.

“Let’s do a few runs for fun,” Thor said.

So they all slid down the hill again, and their laughter echoed merrily in the air.

After a small rest and a break to use the bathroom in the treehouse, the next contest was called. “Okay, this is the best snow angel contest. You each pick a person to be your representative and we’ll see which one makes the best and most unique angel!” Loki called.

“I’ve got this, Dad,” Sam volunteered.

On the other side, Tony and Thor were flummoxed. “Thor, I’m no good at this kind of thing.”
“I don’t even know how to make one,” Thor admitted.

“I can do it, Uncle Thor!” Serena called.

“Okay, then you’re our chosen one,” Thor said, “Good luck, little niece.”

Loki smoothed the snow out, making it soft yet firm enough to hold a good imprint.

“It’s too bad Steve and Bruce can’t be here,” he said to Tasha.

“I know. But they had to go help the Fantastic Four. They left before you texted us, or they would have been here,” Black Widow said.

“We’ll do this again before winter is over,” Loki decided. “Serena and Sam, are you ready?”

Both shouted a yes, and then chose a piece of virgin snow.

Then they fell backwards into it and began moving their arms and legs like pistons.

When they were done, two snow angels had been born.

“Okay, let’s see how you did,” Tony called, and the children rose and stepped out of their angels.

Serena’s angel was perfect—except for some of her flyaway hair that had been sticking up. It formed a weird little half circle about the angel head.

“Look, a halo!” Aleta pointed.

“I like that!” Clint said.

Then they looked at Sam’s angel, whose skirt had the most interesting rosettes along it.

“How’d you do that, Sam?” asked Hunter.

“Uh . . . I’m not sure,” Sam muttered.

“Look at your boots, darling,” Loki urged, and when Sam did he saw his boots, which had small rosette studs on the top, were how that pattern had been created.

“Oh!” gasped his son.

“That’s really amazing,” Belle said.

“It is,” Serena agreed.

Everyone else did also and Sam was declared the winner of that contest.

There was also a contest called Hit the Icicle, and you had to hit three icicles in a row. Clint won that game easily, his excellent eyesight and aim defeating Natasha despite her spy training.

“We need a tie breaker,” Tony said.

“I have one,” Loki offered. “Let’s play Truth or Dare, Thor. You ask me a question and I can either answer it or I can choose to take a dare instead. Then I ask you a question and you can choose to answer it or to take my dare instead.”

“Any question?” Thor queried.
“Any question suitable for kids to hear,” Loki specified.

Thor smirked. “Okay, brother. Here’s my question. What prank did you pull that Father never found out about?”

“Truth,” Loki chuckled. “Remember that time the delegation of Dark Elves from Svartalfheim came to the palace? And how they all suddenly came down with sniffles and sneezing? I put crushed mistweed in all their sheets, and as you know, Dark Elves are allergic to mistweed. Father never knew about it because mistweed absorbs into the skin on contact, so there was no residue to been seen. And those snots that looked down their upstart noses at us ended up dripping into their handkerchiefs and braying like donkeys.”

Thor erupted with laughter. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Loki shrugged. “You can ask that? I was sure you were going to go tell Father and I’d be in trouble. I’ve never liked those arrogant Dark Elves. They called me frosty midget, among other things.” He frowned. “My turn. If you could call Father a nickname, what would it be?”

“Truth.” Thor said. “I’d call him a Cyclops. Because he only has one eye and his rage can destroy worlds.”

“Not bad. I had a few other things in mind, but . . . your turn.”

Thor thought for a moment, than said with a grin, “Have you ever fallen in love with anyone?”

“What? No way am I answering that!” Loki sputtered. “Dare!”

“Make it good, Thor!” Tony hooted.

An icicle dripped on the god’s head. He plucked it from the roof and said, “I dare you to lick this icicle five times! We’ll see how clever your tongue is then!”

Loki held out a hand. “Okay.” He took the icicle and began licking it. “One. Two. Three . . .” he counted, while Thor waited to see his tongue turn blue as had happened on a TV show he’d seen.

But he was disappointed because Loki’s tongue remained normal. And the icicle didn’t even melt in his hand.

“That was refreshing!” his brother stated. “My turn. When are you going to marry Sif?” he queried, his eyes dancing.

Thor gaped at him. “That’s none of your business, Loki!”

“Aww, come on! We wanna know!” Tasha urged.

Thor went red. “That’s between me and my betrothed. Dare!”

“Okay. I dare you to lick my flagpole,” Loki returned with a mischievous smirk.

Thor frowned. “Surely you can think of a harder challenge than that.”

“Uncle Thor, don’t do it!” Serena called.

“Yeah, didn’t you ever see A Christmas Story?” Nate added.

Thor looked at his niece and nephew. “No, but it’s a simple thing, why are you all concerned?”
“Oh my God!” Tony exclaimed. “Thor, for the love of Pete, don’t do it! You can refuse. And he’ll have to find another dare.”

The blonde god started laughing. “I can do this--it’s a stupid dare and I’m a god! What is so hard about licking a pole? Loki licked an icicle.”

“Yeah, you’re a god, but HE...” Tony began.

Thor scowled. “Silence, Man of Iron!”

“You aren’t . . . afraid are you, Thor? I triple dog dare you, brother!” Loki chanted, going in for the kill.

All his kids went, “Ooooooooooooo!”

Aleta tugged on Sam’s sleeve. “What's that mean?”

Sam turned to his small sister. “It means that if Uncle Thor doesn’t do the dare he’s like the biggest wimp in the universe.”

Loki bit back a snicker. Accurate, butterfly!

Thor looked insulted. “I am no wimp.” Then he leaned down and asked Tony, “I know not this term. What is a wimp?”

Tony coughed. “Uh . . . it’s a coward and a weakling. Somebody who's afraid of everything and everybody and gets beaten up on a daily basis. Like I used to.”

Clint’s jaw dropped. “YOU got beat up in school?”

Tony flushed. “Yes. I USED to. Cause my old man was rich and I was a science geek.”

“That sucks!” Nate muttered.

Thor made up his mind. “I accept your challenge, brother!”

“Nooo!” the Laufeysons on his team cried.

But Thor would not be swayed.

He marched over to the flagpole in the center of the yard. It was normally in the front yard, but Loki had moved it magically just for this contest.

“Just do it!” Loki urged.

Thor placed his tongue to the cold metal.
At first it wasn't so bad, but then he felt his tongue go numb. Frantic, he tried to pull away only to realize to his horror he was stuck fast!

“LOFI!”

“Are you stuck, brother?” inquired his imp of a brother with wicked smirk.

“Yeth!” the god was trying to get free, but couldn’t risk pulling too hard on his tender appendage.

Serena groaned. “Uncle Thor, we TOLD you not to do it!”

Hunter pointed out, “Serena, he HAD to. Dad Triple Dog Dared him.”

Serena rolled her eyes. “If Dad dared him to jump off the Brooklyn Bridge would he?”

“Duh, moon pi! Uncle Thor can fly!”

Clint was laughing into his hand. “I need to take a photo! Steve and Bruce will bust a gut!” He pulled out his phone.

“I think I'm gonna pee my pants!” Tasha giggled uncontrollably.

“Bawton, don' y’dare!” Thor ordered.

“Do it! Then post it to your Facebook!” encouraged Loki, nearly doubled over with laughter. “By the Nine! This is better than the time I told you there was gold in the Mud Marsh and you went and dug a hole looking for buried treasure and got trapped in the middle of the swamp!”

Now everyone else was howling with laughter too.

“I thear I will haff m'revenge!” Thor vowed.

“Whatever you say, Tweety!” Tony quipped.

“Good one, Tony!” Loki whooped. “Oh blessed Yggdrasil! I think I’m gonna die!” He was laughing so much he had tears in his eyes.

“Daddy, I peed my pants!” Max announced, sniffling.

Belle grimaced. “Eew, yellow snow!”
“Don't eat it!” Hunter warned, giggling.

Sam made a face. “That's just gross!”

“The snowman's left side is saggin'

There's a little puddle right below

Yellow snow, yellow snow, yellow snow

Yellow snow, yellow snow . . .” Vince sang.

“Eeew!” Aleta cried.

“Nine Hells! Okay, let's get changed.” He picked up his son, grimacing slightly. “C’mon, buddy. Excuse us.” He teleported back to the house, not truly shocked for this had happened before.

“So, Big Guy, I guess there is only one way to get you unstuck,” Tony stated, then whistled and one of his gauntlets appeared.

“NO!” Thor bellowed.

Serena frowned. “What's that gonna do?”

Nate snickered. “You'll see.”

Tony powered up the gauntlet to emit a warm wave of heat and aimed the gauntlet at Thor.

The Thunder God began to sweat and slowly the pole his tongue was stuck on began to warm.

Aleta began to sing a song she had heard. “Looking for some Hot Stuff baby this evening . . . I want some Hot Stuff, baby, tonight . . .”

Belle gasped. “Aleta! How do you know that song?”

“Daddy had it on the radio when we went shopping,” she replied, while Vince, Lucy, and Hunter started laughing.

*Phew! I thought she heard me watching the Fully Monty the other night.* Sam thought, relieved.
“I'm recording this on my phone! This is hysterical!” Clint managed to say inbetween bouts of laughter.

Thor’s tongue becomes unstuck, but it is still numb.

"Fank you, Stawk."

Loki returned with Max and Thor glared at him.

“Lofi!”

“Yes, Thor-frost?” Loki couldn’t resist, his eyes gleaming merrily.

Thor pressed his lips together, looking like he was going to explode, then burst out laughing. “Do you haff anyfing for a numb tongue?”

“A tongue depressor?” his brother joked. The kids went off into gales of laughter again.

“Seriously, a cup of my hot cocoa will warm it up.” He summoned some in a mug that read I Do What I Want.

Thor took the mug. “Fank you.” He sipped slowly, letting the hot liquid remain in his mouth to soothe his tongue back to normal.

Belle licked her lips. “Daddy, can we have hot cocoa?!”

“Yes, I'm cold!” Vince shivered.

“I want mini marshmallows in mine!” Aleta demanded.

“Yes, let’s all go inside and warm up.” Loki suggested.

Thor’s tongue finally was back to normal after he had drank the entire mug of cocoa. “Loki, why didn't your tongue freeze when you licked the icicle?”
Loki grinned slyly. “Because, brother mine, I am a frost giant. The cold never bothered me anyway.”

Tony coughed. “So, you cheated?”

“No. He challenged me to lick an icicle. I did. It's not my fault ice has no effect on me.”

“It was still funny!” giggled Stark. He held his hand up and Loki high-fived him.

“It was the best! You haven’t lost your touch, Master Mischief!” applauded Tasha.

“And I got it all right here!” Hawkeye patted his pocket.

“Thank you.” He gave a little bow.

“We keep him in practice,” Belle informed them.

Loki reached out and tugged her hair playfully. “You sure do, little raven!”

Clint gaped. “You mean you prank your dad?”

Belle nodded fearlessly. “All the time.”

“Uh huh! He doesn't care.” Vince explained, grinning. “Well . . . except for the time I super glued his office chair and he went to get up to show some visitor around Laufeyson Tech and um . . . his pants ripped.”

Thor guffawed. “What goes around comes around, Loki!”

Tony looked like a leprechaun who had found a pot of gold. “I think I heard about that. You were wearing green briefs with little pink hearts on them.”

Loki blushed. “Shut up. Stark! Before I erase your memory!”

“I bought him those for Daddy's Day!” announced his baby girl.

Thor cracked up. "Oh Norns . . ."
Clint burst out laughing.

“Spark, did you *have* to say that?” Loki groaned and put a hand over his face.

“Sorry.” Aleta sniffed and tears appeared in her eyes.

Loki was immediately contrite. “Oh, spark. I'm not angry!” He quickly picked her up for a hug.

“You're not?”

“No, I'm not.” Loki smiled. “What kind of Trickster would I be if I can't laugh at myself, huh?”

Belle smirked. “A really bad one.”

“You weren't laughing when you got home.” Vince reminded.

Loki sighed. “I was still mad at you.”

Vince nodded. “Yeah.”

“But you didn't get in trouble, now did you?”

“Well . . . you did make me weed the garden.”

“That wasn’t a punishment, that was part of your chores,” Loki reminded. “I stopped being mad once I realized I would have done the same thing. In fact I did only I glued Balder to a chair during dinner.”

“Lord, if I'd done that to *my* dad . . . I wouldn't have been able to sit down for a day.” Tony remarked.
“Stark, I never raise a hand to my children! You can ask them,” Loki defended.

“Nop, he just lectures us about what we did wrong and gives us extra chores to do. Or, in my case, make me do community service.” Hunter pointed out.

Max added, “He puts us in time out! I hate time out! It's so boring!”

“Yeah!” his small sister agreed.

“But you get a hug afterwards.” Loki reminded.

“You would have spent most of your life in time out, brother,” Thor smiled.

“It would have been better than what Odin usually ended up doing.” Loki grimaced.

Thor winced. “Brother, let's not go there.”

“No, let's not.” Loki muttered, shivering slightly as he shoved the dark memories back to sleep.

“Daddy, I want my hot cocoa, please.” Aleta reminded, her gray eyes pleading.

“As you wish, princess. Race you to the back porch!”

“Yay!” He set her down and she bolted.

An indulgent Loki allowed her a head start and then ran very slowly behind her.

Aleta reached the back porch. “I win!”

“I must be getting old.” Loki pretended to be tired.

“If you're getting old, brother, I must be ancient,” Thor laughed, his cerulean eyes glinting.
“Yeah you're gonna be pushing up daisies soon . . . if you were human that is!” Serena giggled.

Max frowned. “What does that mean?”

“Never mind. Let's go inside.” Loki said quickly. He gave Serena a slightly angry look.

Serena hung her head. “Sorry, Daddy.”

“That's alright. Just be more careful, moon pi.”

“Loki, I have a question for you,” Tasha said softly.

“Okay, let's have it.” And it better not be about my love life, Romanov!

“Can you adopt me?”

“W-what?” he giggled. Then he realized she was serious and said, “Okay. You can be my little sister. I always wanted one.”

“Can you adopt me too?” asked Clint wistfully.

“You already have a family.” Natasha reminded him.

Clint stuck his tongue out at her.

“But our family's the best. Right?” Belle said loyaly.

“Yep!” the archer said, and he meant it. He had never had so much fun in his life.

They all entered the kitchen, and Loki went to make more hot cocoa while the kids took off their snow gear and put them in the little alcove. “Auntie Tasha. Uncle Clint. Do you want to meet our kitty?!" Aleta asked.
“What kitty?” Tony asked, almost sitting on Mischief, who was lying on a kitchen chair.

“Tony, watch out! C’mere, sweet thing! Oh, she’s darling!” cooed Tasha. She picked up Mischief.

Mischief mewed at Loki, *Papa! The human nearly sat on me!*

Loki shifted into his black cat form. *It's okay, kit. He didn't see you there. Humans are blind. Not like cats.*

*pffft. They are so silly.*

*True. Cats are smarter. But you knew that.*

“Give her to me. I'm good with cats.” Tony said. “I would never hurt her.”

Tasha handed Mischief to him and Tony rubbed behind Mischief's large ears. “Look at those ears. Where did you get her?”

“We rescued her from a shelter that was going to sell her for experiments.” Hunter explained. “I was volunteering there.”

Tasha was horrified. “That is DISGUSTING!”

Tony ground his teeth together. “Do you have the name of the shelter?”

“Yeah” He wrote down Claws and Paws on a piece of paper.

“Don't worry. I’ll make sure it's shut down and the animals find good homes.” Tony assured him.

Mischief meowed at Loki. *Papa, what is he saying?*

*He said he is going to free your friends from the shelter and make the humans running it pay for what they did.*
I like this human. He gives good ear scratches. Mischief purred.

Loki switched back to his own shape. “Stark, you have just made a friend for life.”

“You know, the mansion needs a cat. Maybe two cats.” Tasha said thoughtfully.

‘I'll think about it.” Tony said.

They have lots of kits there, Papa. My sister and brother are still there. Nobody wanted them cause they're black cats and humans think we're bad.

Loki blurred into cat form. I will tell him, kit.

Then he shifted back. “Stark, Mischief has a brother and sister who needs to be adopted. What do you say?”

Tony looked at Mischief. “If they are as cute as her, I'd say sure.”

Mischief got the gist of what he meant. They are cuter! They don't have my ears.

“She says the are cuter than she is because they don't have her ears,” translated the magician.

“What does her ears have to do with anything?! She's adorable!”

“I agree! Her ears are a noble feature!” Thor asserted.

“Her ears make her special,” Tasha added.

See, daughter, they all love your ears. Just like I do. Loki purred, returning to his cat shape.

And I like them, Papa.

Mischief stood up with her paws on Tony's chest and rubbed her head under his chin.
“Awwww!” Tony felt his heart become total mush.

Loki gave a soft meow. *What did I tell you?*

*Not to do that?* The kitten looked crestfallen.

*No, that’s okay. But he doesn't know what that means.*

*Will you tell him? I do not wish to offend.*

*No. He wouldn't understand about how we mark them as ours so other cats know not to claim them.*

*True. Sorry, Papa.*

*That is alright, Mischief.*

*Maybe my brother and sister will not be upset because it is my mark. It will tell them I am alright,* mused the kitten.

*I never thought about that. But they might want to know where you are.*

*He could bring them here.*

*That would be a great idea. But, first, he will need to adopt them.*

*I hope he does it soon. It's not safe in that place. Sometimes cats and dogs disappear through a door and never come back.* The ebony kitten shivered with fear.

Loki hissed. *By the Norns!* He quickly shifted back. “Stark, I think we need to go to that shelter now!”

“But the snow!”

“Hang the snow! They're putting the animals to sleep over there!”
“What!? Ok! Avengers Assemble!”

“Does that mean you're gonna go kick their butts?” Max wanted to know.

“You bet, little buddy!”

“Can we watch?” Hunter queried eagerly.

“Better still. You can help!” His father informed him.

Aleta caught on immediately. “We can let the doggies and kitties out?”

Vince looked like Christmas came early. "Yeah! Let's go---"

“--make some mischief!” his siblings chorused. They all put their hands on top of each other. “Tricksters rule!”

Loki watched proudly. Then he said, “Sam, go start the van.” He tossed the keys to his eldest.

On the way to the shelter, Who Let the Dogs Out came on and they all sang along.

That's what the idiots who run this killing factory are going to be asking when we’re done with them! Loki thought grimly. He just hoped they would be in time to save the animals still alive.
Loki, his Trickster brood, and the Avengers go to rescue the animals at the shelter

You have never known unconditional love until you have looked into the eyes of a dog or a cat ~
Loki

As they pulled up at the shelter, which was empty except for the cars owned by the employees, Loki said to his children, “Now you all know what to do, right?”

“Yeah, Dad. I’ll take everybody except Lucy and Sam through the back door and say we’re volunteering or something. Then when we’re not being watched, I’ll start picking locks to the cages.”

“Good. Lucy and Sam, you ready to play Uncle Thor’s Depressed and Drunk Again?” Loki asked his other two children.

Sam started laughing. “Yeah! I just pray I won’t start laughing at the wrong time.”

“Just pretend he’s the relative you wish you never had,” Loki chuckled.

They all got out of the van, and the Avengers car, a big blue Cadillac Seville, parked next to them.

Tony and Clint came up to Loki and said, “Okay, Master Mischief—let’s get into costume.”

Loki cast a seeming on them, making their clothes look like uniforms from the Board of Health. They went with the kids towards the back of the shelter. So did Tasha, for she was part of the release plan end of things.

Thor got out of the car, he was wearing his ROUS shirt and jeans and a red leather jacket and boots. His hair was caught back in a ponytail. “Loki, are you sure this will work?”

“It sure as hell will. Those people aren’t the brightest crayons in the box.” His brother assured him. “Here. Let me get you ready.” He cast another seeming, this one designed to make Thor
appear hung over and sort of scruffy. “Ready, brother?”

Thor nodded, grinning. “Let’s do this!” He slapped palms with Loki.

Then they entered the shelter, which was a long low building with some dying shrubs and a cracked sidewalk, but boasted a large sign that read *Paws and Claws Animal Shelter—where every dog and cat is treated like family!* Below that were the shelter times and phone number.

Loki scowled. “Treated like family my butt! Only if you’ve got a thing for killing family members. Maybe this place was run by someone related to Lizzie Borden.”

They entered the building.

A mousy girl seated at the reception desk, appearing about twenty years old, looked up from texting on her phone and smiled at them. “Hi! How may I help you?”

Thor pretended to stumble a little and Loki caught his shoulder. “Hello. I am here to adopt a dog,” he said in a slurred thick Norwegian accent.

“Okay. What kind of dog are you looking for?”

“We want one that’s calm and good with being in a house,” Loki interjected.

“But strong enough to protect my home from criminals,” Thor interrupted. “You know they are out to get me, brother!”

Loki patted Thor’s shoulder. “That was last week, Thor? Remember? This week you want a dog to keep you company.”

Thor nodded, exhaling and alcoholic fumes drenched the air. “Right, right. I need a dog to luff me. Remember the dog we had when I was boy? He was so cute! He followed me everywhere!”

“The one that almost bit my arm off?” Loki muttered. “Yeah he was real sweet!”

"Do you have a breed of dog in mind?"

"Something big! Something strong!" Thor half-shouted. "Something I can lift over my head and toss at my enemies!"

"Uh...."

"He's kidding," Loki said as he pulled Thor closer. "Tone it down a bit, okay?"

"Right," Thor said and gave the receptionist a smile. "I would like a large dog."

"Like a shepherd? We have a few mixes here. Or maybe a husky?"

"How about a St. Bernard?" suggested Sam.

"Uh . . . I don't think we have those," the girl said, shuffling through some papers.

"Okay. Then will you tell us what you do have?" Loki said impatiently.

Thor held his head in his hands. “Don’t shout, brother! My head!”

Lucy tugged on Thor’s jacket. “Uncle Thor, maybe you shouldn’t have drunk that other Guinness.”
“Is he drunk?” asked the receptionist.

“Not now,” Loki informed her. “So what kind of dogs do you have?”

“We have a German Shepherd mix. He's two years old and is a real sweetie.”

“How did he end up in a shelter?” Lucy asked.

“His owner left him chained up to a tree and he barely had food or water.”

“By the Norns,” Loki whispered as he thought about how cruel some humans could be.

“We rescued him and the owner was arrested.” "Good," Sam said, nodding.

“Yes, that is the dog I want!” Thor said, half-tossing himself against Loki and nearly knocking him over.

"Hey, buddy! Now calm down!” Loki began, holding out his hands. "Uh, don't mind him. He gets like this sometimes."

"Please, brother, let's get that one!"

"We haven't heard what other dogs they have. Calm down."

"But I WANT that one!” Thor said, almost on the verge of tears.

"He was in the war," Sam explained. "Iraq. It kinda messed him up."

“Sometimes he takes little blue happy pills,” Lucy told the receptionist innocently. “But I think today . . . he forgot . . .”

"I don't like them!” Thor said with a frown. "They make me sleepy."

"We know that, brother,” Loki said when Thor saw a poster on the wall with puppies on it and his eyes went wide.

"Puppies! I want a puppy!” Thor said as he pointed to the poster and slapped Loki on the back.

"Yes, that is why we're here. To get you a dog."

"No! I want a puppy!” Thor said, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Uh oh!” Lucy said to Sam. “It’s one of those days!”

“What do you mean?” the receptionist asked, looking nervous.

"He needs to get his way or he'll ... he'll start singing!” Sam said.

"He starts...singing?!!"

Thor looked at them when he thought about a mortal song he heard once and a large grin spread across his face.

"No, Thor!” Loki said frantically. "You're not singing that again!"

"Please, Uncle Thor! Not that!” Lucy said.
Sam put his hands over his ears. "Oh God! I can't take it!"

"What is he going to sing?" the receptionist asked and wondered if she should call security. Then she remembered the security guard had the day off and Thor smiled.

“Don’t ask!” Loki moaned.

"Too late, Dad!" Lucy cried.

Thor checked to see if the couch could support his weight then stood on the cushions and held his arms out.

“Thor, please . . . please don’t embarrass me like this!” Loki begged.

"Here we go again!" Lucy sighed.

Thor ignored his brother then he leaned his head back a bit and started singing.

“O lutefisk, O lutefisk, how fragrant your aroma,
O lutefisk, O lutefisk, you put me in a coma
You smell so strong, you look like glue
You taste just like an overshoe
But lutefisk, come Saturday,
I tink I eat you any-vay!” Thor sang.

The receptionist just stared while Loki and Sam ran to catch Thor when he tried to take a bow and Lucy noticed the receptionist was reaching for the phone. "No! Don't call the police!" Lucy said.

"I swear, he harmless," Loki cried. "Thor, get down off that couch this instant, young man!"

"Are you going to get me a puppy?" Thor asked while Sam helped him off the couch.

"Yes, we'll get you a puppy."

“But you gotta behave,” Lucy shook a finger at him. “Or else Dad will be Very Disappointed.”

"No! I don't want Dad mad at me!" Thor said with a frightened look on his face. "He'll beat me!"

"Not our father, Thor. She means me," Loki said.

"I don't want to disappoint you, brother. I'll behave."

Lucy turned away and bit her lip. It was hard not to laugh as she reminded herself they were here for a reason and she took a few deep breathes to calm down.

"Lucy, what's wrong?" Sam asked.

"Uh . . . asthma," Lucy adlibbed.

Thor clutched Loki’s sleeve. “I'll be good, Loki. Cross my heart and hope to die!” he babbled. He
hugged Loki, nearly crushing him, tears running down his face.


Nodding, Thor wiped the tears away on the back of his hand and the receptionist watched Thor walking toward the desk.

"Okay . . . would you like a German shepherd puppy?" she queried, thinking frantically, *This guy's crazier than Froot Loops!*

"Yes, please," Thor said and the receptionist puffed out the breath of air she didn't know she was holding.

"Would you like a male or female?"

"Either one will be fine," Loki said.

"We have a four-month-old black and tan shepherd here. Has a black ring about one eye so we called him Odin," the receptionist said, reading the computer file.

Loki did a double take. "Seriously?"

"Yes. Is that a problem?"

"Ah, no, it's fine," Loki said as he and Thor tried hard not laugh.

"Can we get that one?" Thor asked with a pleading look.

"Dad, it's perfect!" Sam struggled not to crack up. "Get him!"

"Please!" Lucy said and Loki sighed.

"Fine. We'll get that one," Loki said and they headed for the door to the room where the puppies and kittens were kept.

The receptionist opened the door while they walked in the room and Loki was shocked to see the tiny cages filled with puppies and kittens and the smell was overwhelming. "By the Norns," Loki thought and covered his mouth with his hand.

Lucy held her nose.

Sam cupped his mouth and nose and Thor glared at the back of the receptionist’s head. "Brother, this place is an abomination," Thor whispered and Loki nodded.

"That is why we're going to shut it down," Loki whispered.

The receptionist stopped at the small cage where Odin was being kept and the puppy looked at them with such sad eyes that Loki fought hard not explode in anger. His old self would have razed the shelter to the ground and turned the people working there into slugs, but that wasn't who he was anymore and he looked at the receptionist.

"We'll take him," Loki said immediately. He could see the puppy was skinny and malnourished. Probably had fleas too, but he was adorable with black all over his back, tan chest, legs, and feet and a black eye patch over one eye and some black on his muzzle.

His ears were pricked and he gave a sort of whine when he saw them, his tail wagging against the
side of the cage.

"Are you sure?" the receptionist asked.

"Yes!" Loki said and she opened the door to the cage.

Odin raised his head when she reached in to take hold of him, but he moved to the back of the cage and Loki saw the fear in Odin's eyes. "Allow me."

Odin saw something in Loki's eyes when he moved closer and Loki gently slid the puppy out of the cage.

"Hey, little guy," the Asgardian crooned, gently cradling the puppy in one arm. "You're gonna come home with us." He could feel the puppy trembling slightly, and he stroked his head.

"May I hold him, Brother?" Thor asked and Loki handed the puppy to him. Odin shivered as Thor wrapped his strong arms around him and held the puppy to his chest. "Easy now. No one is going to hurt you."

Odin snuggled against Thor's chest as he sighed and draped his paws over Thor's lower arms.

"He's really cute!" Lucy said, reaching up to pat Odin's head and the tail quickly wagged back and forth.

"Dad, what about the others?" Sam hissed in Loki's ear.

"We'll make sure they get good homes, Butterfly," he whispered then looked at the receptionist. "Tell me something. What happens to the animals who are not adopted?" Loki asked and the receptionist's eyes widened.

"Uh... We keep them until they are adopted," she said.

"Liar!" Loki thought, but gave her a nod.

Lucy was looking around at the other cages when her heart sank and she ran to her dad, pulling on his hand.

"Dad, those kittens in that cage are...," she whispered, but couldn't continue and he placed his hand on her shoulder. He had noticed the dead kittens in the cage and the receptionist noticed the anger in his eyes.

"Is there something wrong?" the receptionist asked.

"No," Loki said, shaking his head.

"Then, if you will follow me," she said and they headed out of the room.

Loki signed the papers, bought some puppy food, a collar and some puppy toiletries as he looked at the door leading to the back of the shelter and wondered how the others were doing.

"Dad, I forgot my inhaler in the car," Lucy spoke up. She wanted to see how her siblings were doing. And to tell Tony and Clint to arrest the horrible people who let kittens die.

"Here, sunshine," he handed her the remote. "Go check on your brothers and sisters and tell your uncles to get their butts in gear," he whispered.

Nodding, Lucy headed outside and went around to the other side of the building.
"Do you know where we can get a crate?’’ he asked, stalling for time.

"Yes, we have some over here,’’ the receptionist said and led them over to where the crates were stored.

Thor put the new collar and lead on Odin. ’I’m going to take him for a walk,’ he told Loki, and hurried outside before he lost his temper.

’I’ll come with you, Uncle Thor,’ Sam said and hurried to catch up with him.

Meanwhile in the back of the shelter, Vince, Hunter, and the rest of the Laufeysons were busy picking locks, freeing dogs and cats, and causing chaos. Tasha was putting the cats into carriers and the dogs on leashes and leading them out to the car. Dogs barked loudly and cats meowed excitedly as they sensed their deliverance was at hand.

’Who let the dogs out?! Woof! Woof! Woof!’ Hunter, Clint and Vince sang and the other kids started laughing.

’We did!’ chanted Max and Aleta. ’C’mon, doggies! Jailbreak!’

’Careful with this one, Tash,’ Clint said as he led an Irish Wolfhound to her. ’He’s blind.’

’Oh, poor guy,’ Natasha said, placing the lead on the dog.

’What’s his name, Uncle Clint?’ Belle asked.

’His name is Samson,’ Clint said.

’I read a story about him being blinded after someone cut his hair.’

’Do you think he was born blind?’ Vince asked.

’Maybe,’ Clint said and looked at the dog. He knew his kids had been begging for a dog, and they had a lot of room for him on the farm, but he wasn’t sure his wife would want a blind dog.

’You like him, don’t you?’ Natasha asked and he nodded.

’Do you think Loki could heal him?’ Clint asked.

’I think he can,’ she said and Clint lightly patted the dog’s side.

Belle saw some black kittens in a cage together. ’Uncle Tony! I think I found Mischief’s brother and sister!’ she called.

’Good going, kiddo!’ Tony said as he brought over a carrier and looked in the cage. ’Hey, kittens!’

The kittens mewed in fear as he sighed then opened the cage and removed the closer of the kittens. The kitten hissed and growled as he held the tiny feline up to his chin and the kitten sniffed a familiar scent. The ebony kit gave him a confused look when Tony smiled and nodded his head. He put the kitten in the carrier when he picked up the other one and she purred after smelling that familiar scent.

’It’s them alright. They recognize Mischief’s scent,’ he said and the kids cheered.

Just then Lucy dashed into the back room. “Guys, we gotta hurry! Dad and Uncle Thor adopted a
puppy and Dad says Uncle Tony and Uncle Clint need to go up front and make sure this place is shut down! We—we saw dead kittens in a cage in the room with the little puppies and kittens.”

Her sea green eyes filled with tears.

Belle came and hugged her. “That’s terrible! But we’re gonna fix it, Lucy.”

“How can you fix dead kittens?”

“We can’t. But we can give them a funeral and make sure no other animals die,” her sister soothed. “Wanna hold a kitten?”

She went to a cage and unlocked it with her magic, gently picking up a small Ragdoll kitty inside. She had long fur and was cream colored with dark brown on her face, ears, tail, and paws like a Siamese and white above the brown points on her legs. “Here, Luce,” she handed Lucy the cat. “She’s a Ragdoll so she likes laps.”

The cat flopped over bonelessly in Lucy arm, lying calmly across Lucy’s cast and purring loudly.

Lucy smiled and wiped away her tears. “She’s beautiful!” Then she recalled she had Loki’s key. “Here, Belle, Dad gave me the key so we can unlock the van and put some of the animals in it.”

Belle ran to unlock the van.

At the same time, Clint and Tony in their uniforms went up to the front room and began causing a ruckus, stating the shelter wasn’t up to code for New York City Animal Control, and it was a disgrace that the animals weren’t being treated properly.

“We found clear violations for cleanliness, inadequate room for the dogs and cats in their cages, the animals are in poor condition, no vet has been by to look at them, and we also found a room where it looks like euthanasia is done. This is supposed to be a no-kill shelter. It’s overcrowded and understaffed too.” Tony yelled, incensed.

“Please, sir, let me just get my boss,” the receptionist shivered and went to call her boss. She knew an inspection by the Board of Health was bad and wondered who had told them to come looking about here.

“Sir, I think you need to see this,” Loki interrupted Tony’s tirade, and led him to the room where they had gotten Odin, so Tony and Clint could see the dead kittens in the cage.

Tony hit the roof. “Make me some official documents, Laufeyson,” he hissed. “Pronto!”

Loki did so and handed them to him.

“I’ll come back with real official ones but for now these will do,” Tony said, his mouth a grim line.

Clint said, “Loki, I need you to take a look at one of the dogs. It’s an Irish Wolfhound named Samson and he’s blind.”

“Blind? By birth or did he develop it?”

“I don’t know. But I’d like to adopt him only I don’t know if my wife would want a blind dog on our farm. So I thought . . . maybe . . . you could cure him?”

Loki sighed. “That depends. On if it was a condition developed or if he was born that way. The
first I can heal, the other . . . well . . . it might not be possible. But let me see him.”

“Tony, can you handle this?” Clint asked his partner.

“Go, Barton. The day I can’t handle a petty bureaucrat is the day they can put me in a mental hospital,” Tony waved them off.

“C’mon. He’s probably with Tasha by the van,” Clint led Loki outside.

As predicted, Samson was on a lead with Natasha holding the end of it. The Laufeysons were putting cat carriers into both the van and the Avengers Caddy, and some of the smaller dogs in cages also.

Clint indicated the huge gray dog, who was sitting calmly beside Natasha.

Loki approached and knelt on one knee, holding out a hand so Samson could smell him. “Hey, big guy. I’m a friend.” He reached a hand out and stroked the wiry head, analyzing the dog’s condition with that simple gesture.

To his relief, the condition was reversible and had developed due to a poor diet and improper medical care. “Okay, boy. Now hold still, this won’t hurt but it might feel a bit odd.”

He concentrated, calling upon his healing magic. It came in a warm wave of golden light that washed over the dog’s head, repairing what had been damaged. Samson never stirred.

In seconds the healing was done, and Loki removed his hands.

Samson blinked, his eyes no longer cloudy but bright and clear. The wolfhound gazed at Loki and gave a soft bark, then licked the Asgardian’s face.

“You’re welcome!” Loki laughed, and ruffled the dog’s fur.

The frost giant rose and looked around, seeing most of his kids holding one or more dogs on leashes and Nate was holding a large cat on his lap with Lucy walking beside him.

“Dad, Lucy says we adopted a dog!” Serena cried.

“We, uh, kind of did,” Loki said. “It’s a German shepherd puppy. He’s with your Uncle Thor.”

“Dad, we found Mischief’s siblings!” Belle told him excitedly.

“Daddy, Max and I helped free all the doggies and kitties from jail!” Aleta ran up to him and hugged him about the knees.

Max followed. “Dad, all the dogs were sad. Can we keep one?”

“Well, scamp, we already did adopt one. You’ll meet him soon. Where’s Vince and Hunter?”

“They were getting the last doggies free,” Aleta informed him.

“Good. Stay here, imps, I have to make a phone call so these dogs and cats can get brought to somewhere they can find good homes.” He pulled out his phone and dialed Angel Haven Rescue Center, which was run by Derek Magnusson’s wife Melina.

She answered on the third ring. “Hello, Angel Haven Rescue, how may I help you?”

“Melina, this is Loki Laufeyson. I have a situation here you might be interested in.” He quickly
explained about the Paws and Claws shelter and how they were being shut down by Animal Control because of their heinous practices towards the dogs and cats. “So I figured you could help us out by taking some of these poor animals . . .”

“Say no more. I’m on my way with a crew.” Melina said, then hung up.

Inside the shelter, Tony was tearing strips off of the director, and issuing him a notice of immediate termination and also threatening to take him to court for animal abuse. The director was pale and shaking, no match for the angry billionaire.

“I’ll see to it that you never run so much as a dog walking business again!” Tony growled before storming out.

Hunter appeared carrying the carrier with the two black kittens. “Uncle Tony, I have your cats.”

“Thanks, kiddo.” He took the carrier. “I’ll have to think of good names for them.” He turned to Loki. “So what are we gonna do now? I just issued a notice to close down, but what will we do in the meantime with all these dogs and cats?”

“I called a friend who owns a rescue center close by,” Loki said. “She’s coming to pick them up.”

“Great work,” Tony approved.

Just then Thor and Sam walked up, Thor carrying Odin, who was licking his face. “Stop! I already took a bath,” the Thunder God laughed.

“This is the puppy?” Serena exclaimed, running over to pet the black and tan dog. “Aww! He’s so cute! What’s his name?”

“His name is Odin,” Thor told her.

Serena’s mouth hung open. “No way!”

“That’s the name he came with,” Loki said. “Because of the black ring about one eye.” He indicated the marking.

“Cool dog, Uncle Thor,” Hunter said admiringly. “He must be new, I never saw him when I worked here.”

He went to pet the shepherd, and Odin licked his hand, tail wagging furiously. “Who’s a good dog?”

As the rest of the Trickster brood gathered around Thor and the new puppy, Lucy came and leaned against Loki, still upset about what she had seen earlier.

He hugged the child and said softly, “I’m sorry we couldn’t save all of them, sunshine. But . . . at least we can give them a proper burial.”

“Where, Dad?”

“Uh . . . we can bury them on the mansion’s grounds. Your uncles will understand,” he said, knowing that was true. He stroked her golden hair.

“It’s not fair, Dad,” she wept into his shirt. “They were so little and helpless. . . .”

“I know. It shouldn’t have happened,” he murmured, petting her back. “But they’re no longer in pain or afraid, sweetheart.”
“You think they’re in heaven?”

“Sure they are. They went right over Bifrost and are in cat heaven where they can play all day in the sun and eat lots of tuna and chicken, climb trees, hunt, and be happy.” He hugged her, wishing he could protect her from this harsh lesson, but he knew he couldn’t. *Everything dies, even gods.* He kissed the top of her head. “Why don’t you go and play with Odin? It might make you feel better.”

“Okay,” she agreed, and accepted the tissue he handed her, wiping her eyes. Then she joined her siblings.

Loki returned to the shelter, and placed the deceased kittens in a conjured coffin. “Rest well, little ones, and peace be upon thee.” His emerald eyes shimmered with tears. “I will see those who did this to you never have the chance to harm another cat or dog again. For you who are voiceless, I speak for you.”

He lifted a hand and wove several runes in the air. They shimmered with rainbow light and then vanished. His Guilt Spell would ensure that the ones responsible were riddled with guilt and remorse for killing the helpless animals under their care and would never be allowed to work with animals ever again.

He tucked the box under his arm and left the shelter for the last time. He placed the box in the back of his van, then waited until Melina arrived with two vans to pick up all the dogs and cats except for Samson, the two black kittens Tony had adopted, and Odin.

When everyone was inside the van, including Thor with Odin in his crate, Loki drove back to the Avengers mansion to keep his promise to Lucy. Once that was done, they headed home, their mission a success, and Loki hoped Mischief would welcome her new friend, the shepherd puppy with the black patch around his eye who was the Allfather’s namesake.
Everyone comes down with the flu and poor Loki goes nuts trying to take care of everyone.

“Daddy! Odin chewed my doll’s head off!” Aleta wailed, and promptly engaged in a tug-o-war over the toy with their new shepherd puppy.

The black-and-tan puppy was adorable, intelligent, and always in trouble. Just like the rest of Loki’s little zoo. He play-growled and shook the doll back and forth, ignoring the child’s attempts to remove it from his mouth.

“No! It’s M-I-I-I-N-E!”

Max covered his ears. “Aleta! Stop!”

Loki fought to keep from doing the same thing.

Mischief hid under the sofa, her fur on end.

“Aleta Lenore!” he said exasperatedly. “Stop howling! Before someone calls the police!” If they haven’t done it yet, Laufeyson, they must be deaf? He teleported into Aleta’s room, where she was fighting with Odin, and gently picked the puppy up by the scruff of the neck. “Odin! No!”

He levered the puppy’s mouth open with firm pressure on the puppy’s lower jaw, removing the doll’s head. He tucked it under one arm, shook his finger in Odin’s face and scolded, “No chewing! Bad puppy!”

Odin yapped angrily and bit Loki, closing his sharp milk teeth on the Asgardian’s hand.

Aleta gasped. “Bad doggie! You don’t bite Daddy!”

Loki freed his hand with a quick twist.

“No biting!” he repeated, then laid the puppy on his back in a submissive pose, and put a hand
over the pup’s exposed throat, and shook him slightly, saying, “You don’t bite your Alpha, puppy!”

Odin immediately whimpered and went limp.

Loki held him like that for a moment more, then released him, saying, “Now behave, okay?”

Odin sprang to his feet, then approached Loki with his head low. Whining, he licked Loki under the chin, a dog version of I’m sorry.

“All’s forgiven, scamp,” the god sighed, and stroked the velvety soft ears.

“Bad puppy!” Aleta scowled. “He ate Brunhilda!”

“I can fix him, Aleta,” Loki said, then used his magic to restore the doll to her former pristine condition. “There, all done. How did Odin get your doll?”

“Uh . . . I left her here when Max and I went to draw,” the three-year-old said.

“Spark, you have to remember not to leave your toys on the floor,” her father remonstrated. “Because Odin thinks they’re his to play with.”

“When he gonna learn not to, Daddy?” Aleta asked.

“He’s a baby, honey. And we’ve only had him two weeks. He’s actually learned quite a lot for only being here that long.” Loki continued to pet the puppy, who tried to chew his hand again, only to be tapped on the nose, told “No!” and given a rawhide chew Loki carried in his pocket instead.

“He chewed Vince’s skateboard and Max’s sneakers and your boots,” Aleta pointed out.

“I know,” sighed Loki. “But puppies chew, because their teeth are coming in and they hurt. Like babies. Only they don’t scream their lungs out. They just rip things to shreds. So we have to remember to pick up stuff on the floor.”

He had done his best to puppy proof his house, but with nine active children it wasn’t always possible to keep up with it. For the first week he had kept Odin in the kitchen behind a baby gate, with his crate and food in a corner and some newspapers on the floor in case of an accident.

He fed the puppy at set times, and took him out almost an hour after he ate, walking him in the yard until he relieved himself. He occasionally shifted into a large black wolf, so he could ‘speak the shepherd and explain what he wished from the puppy.

Odin was bright and eager to please, but like all young things, he had the attention span and memory of a mayfly, and often forgot what he’d been told a few hours afterward. Especially when he became excited.

“Why don’t you and Max go outside with Odin for a bit?” he suggested. “You can run around and have Odin play fetch with you.”

Aleta considered. “Okay! C’mon Max!”

Max paused and called, “Odin, come!”

The puppy looked up from where he was chewing his rawhide and wagged his tail.

Then he dropped the treat and raced after Max, barking excited puppy barks.
Then he dropped the treat and raced after Max, barking excited puppy barks. Kids and dog stampeded down the hallway, the stairs and out the door. Loki waved a hand and the rawhide chew was transported to the puppy crate, then he closed the doors to all the rooms and teleported back downstairs, latching the baby gate at the bottom so Odin wouldn’t be able to get up there unless someone allowed it.

Then he ran the vacuum, because with two pets in the house, the hair needed to be picked up more than once a day.

Mischief shot out from beneath the sofa to hiss at the “carpet monster” as she called the vacuum. Then she jumped on top of the table in the kitchen, her fur on end.

“Sorry, sweetheart,” he called to her. “Just a few more minutes, then I’ll be done and I’ll give you a treat for scaring you.”

No matter how many times he reassured her there was nothing scary about the vacuum, the kitten still was terrified, so he soothed her with hugs and treats afterwards, because he didn’t want her to develop a phobia.

He tended to live mostly like a mortal, only using his magic when he truly needed it or for things which normally would take too much time or effort to do the Midgardian way. Simple household chores and cooking though, he didn’t mind doing, and his magic wasn’t truly geared to performing those tasks anyway. Besides, he needed to be able to teach his children how to do those tasks, and the best way to do that was by example.

After tidying up, he went and cuddled with Mischief for a few minutes, giving her some tuna snacks, and letting the kitten sleep on his chest on the sofa while he drank some Yorkshire Gold tea. The kitten had adjusted rather well to the addition of a puppy in the house, though that was not without its growing pains also.

But Odin learned quickly not to corner Mischief when the kitten clawed his nose, and slowly they were becoming friends. But the cat was totally bewildered by the puppy’s inability to stop relieving himself in the house, and often asked Loki if he were defective.

*Are you sure he’s not missing part of his brain, Papa? Last night he peed on your helmet!*

*I know it seems that way but he’s just being a puppy, Loki chuckled. And puppies don’t mature like cats. So you just have to be patient.*

*Pfft! At least I don’t have to clean up after him. I feel bad for you and the human kits.*

*You take the good with the bad, Mischief. I’d do the same if I had a baby, only for a lot longer.*

*Thank Bastet I’m a cat!*

Loki dozed lightly with the cat curled upon him, only waking when he heard the screen door slam and the kids and Odin running through the kitchen. “What’s going on in there?” he called, unwilling to disturb the napping cat.

“I’m getting cookies from the pantry!” Max informed him.

“Two only for each of you!” he instructed. “And none for Odin. Remember what happened last time you let him eat cookies.”

“Yeah, he threw up on the floor,” Aleta reminded.
“Can I give him a dog treat, Dad?”

“That’s fine,” Loki answered.

“Daddy, I want milk with mine,” his princess called.

“Just a minute,” he sighed. Then he used his magic to open the fridge and send two cartons of milk out to each toddler. It was far easier to do that than pour milk into a cup and worry about it spilling.

“Thanks, Daddy!” Aleta sang.

“You’re welcome,” he replied.

Next thing he knew, his twin troublemakers had come into the den, trailed by Odin, and turned on cartoons to watch while they ate their snack. Odin happily sprawled by Max’s foot, chewing the rawhide he found in his crate.

Loki smiled at the peaceful scene, little did he know this was the calm before the storm.

While he was helping Hunter with his biology homework, a crazy imp entered Odin and the shepherd chased Mischief on top of the drapes in the dining room. The cat clung to the valance, growling and spitting, in a fury, while the silly dog kept barking and jumping, his nails tearing the fabric to ribbons.

“Oh my God!” Belle cried. “No! Bad dog!”

“Dad! We have a situation!” Lucy called.

Loki cast his eyes heavenward. “Nine Hells!” he groaned. “What calamity has that blasted dog caused now?” He turned to his son. “I’ll be back in a bit.”

Hunter shook his head. “Sounds like World War III in there.”

“Once more into the breach,” Loki quoted wryly, then he walked into the dining room to find Belle holding Odin by the collar and Lucy standing on a chair trying to coax Mischief down off the valance while the shredded fabric of his drapes fluttered in the breeze from heating vent.

“Lucy, get down from there before you fall,” were the first words out of his mouth. “You just got that cast off your arm, you don’t want to hurt yourself again, do you?”

“But Dad, what about Mischief?”

“I’ll get her down.” He waited until the sunny-haired girl had climbed off the chair before levitating a foot in the air and making smooching noises at the cat.

Mischief quit hissing and jumped on his shoulder.

_Papa, that dumb mutt tried to bite my tail!_ The kitten mewed.

_I’m not dumb or a mutt and you’re a whiny snitch!_ Odin barked sharply.

Mischief’s tail lashed angrily. _Cats rule and dogs drool!_

_Oh stick your tail up where the sun don’t shine, kitty cat!_ The shepherd whuffed.

“Enough! The pair of you!” Loki snapped. He turned to Lucy. “Here, take Mischief up to your
“Belle, let him go,” ordered Loki. “I’ll deal with him.”

His daughter complied, saying, “Dad, I can fix the drapes.”

Loki blurred into his wolf shape. *Odin Laufeyson! What do you think you were doing?* He stood over the cringing puppy, his ears forward and his tail high.

*Playing, Papa! Only Mischief wouldn’t play fair and she ran up where I couldn’t tag her,* the shepherd defended, his head lowered and his tail tucked between his legs.

*What have I told you about playing in the house?* Loki asked sternly.

*To play nicely, and not chew anything or . . . um . . . I forgot . . .* the puppy whimpered.

*Not to damage anything,* Loki finished. *But look at what you did to my drapes, son!*

*Sorry, Papa!* The puppy belly crawled over to the black wolf and rolled over and showed his throat.

The ebony wolf closed his mouth over the shepherd’s throat and gently held him there. *Remember! And no more chasing Mischief through the house!*

*Yes, sir.*

Loki released him, and Odin licked his chin remorsefully. *Am I in trouble?*

*Yes. Kennel, now!* He herded the puppy into the kitchen and watched as the black and tan canine slunk into his crate and curled up on his green blanket.

Loki shifted back and latched the crate. “You’re in time out, Mister! Five minutes!”

Odin looked at him sadly from woebegone brown eyes.

Loki quickly looked away. Blasted puppydog eyes, he thought, then went to see how Belle was doing with the drapes.

To his surprise, she had mended them so well no one would have known they were damaged. “That looks fantastic!” he praised. “What spell did you use?”

“Uh, I used a reweaving spell,” Belle explained.

“Brilliant,” her father said, then he gave her a hug. “Thanks, little raven.”

“No problem, Dad. I’m gonna go write in my journal.”

“Don’t stay up all night.”

“I won’t,” she laughed and skipped upstairs.

Loki returned to the kitchen, and Hunter looked up from writing classifications and asked, “So what did Odin do now?”

“Chased Mischief on top of my drapes and ripped them to shreds trying to get her,” his father replied.
Hunter just shook his head. “Dad, he’s as bad as Max and Aleta.”


“Maybe Uncle Thor should have adopted him instead,” his son said.

“No. Your uncle wouldn’t have the time to train him properly,” disagreed Loki. “It’s always an adjustment with a new pet, wolfling. But he’s smart, so hopefully he’ll grow out of this phase quickly.”

Before the house became a demolition zone, he thought with a sigh. The timer on his phone beeped, and he went and opened the cage, letting the puppy out.

Odin came and licked his hand, receiving a pat in return.

“I’ll walk him, Dad,” Hunter offered, eager to get away from his homework. He took the leash down from the hook on the wall and clipped it to Odin’s collar. “C’mon, troublemaker!” he whistled and the puppy bounded after him.

“Samantha, are the lunches made?” he asked his eldest, who was in charge of that chore this week.

“Yup. I made chicken salad and tomato sandwiches, Ranch Doritos, carrot sticks, and oatmeal cookies. And Fuzi iced tea to drink.”

“Sounds good. Thanks, butterfly.”

He turned to make himself a cup of coffee, when he heard the patter of feet and turned to see Max behind him. “Hey, scamp. You ready for bed?”

“Dad, I feel icky,” his son said.

Loki knelt down and asked, “What hurts? Your tummy? Your throat?”

Max shook his head. Then he coughed harshly. “My chest feels funny.”

Loki put a hand on his son’s forehead. “Hmm. You feel a little warm. Let me take your temperature.”

He summoned the Cool Touch thermometer and put it against Max’s temple. It beeped and Loki frowned. “101 degrees. You have a little fever. And that cough doesn’t sound good either. Where else do you hurt?”

“I dunno. All over.”

“Oh, let’s get you in pajamas and in bed.” He scooped the child up and carried him upstairs. To his frost giant physiology, Max felt unnaturally warm. He coughed again, leaning against Loki’s shoulder.

Once in Max’s room, Loki summoned two children’s remedies, cherry Vicks, which he rubbed all over the boy’s chest, throat and back, and some Tylenol with a spoon. His son made a face. “Do I hafta take that?”

“You do if you want to get better,” Loki said.

“Okay,” Max agreed and swallowed the medicine. Since it didn’t taste horrible, Loki didn’t end up wearing it.
After dressing his son in his favorite Lion King pajamas, Loki tucked him into bed. “Can you tell me a story, Dad?” his son asked wistfully.

“Sure. Once upon a time, there was a troll that lived under a bridge, and he robbed and scared everyone who tried to cross it, until one day a clever billy goat and his brothers outsmarted him. The three billy goats lived in the meadow below the stream and they needed to get to the mountain pasture above the bridge to eat the sweet clover and grass there. The littlest billy goat was called Jorgy, his middle brother was Olaf, and the biggest brother was Leif. And together they thought of a way to get rid of the goat-eating troll under the bridge . . .”

Max lay still in his bed, curled up on his side, one hand clutching Trickster, the other was wrapped about his father’s. He listened quietly as Loki told his own version of “The Three Billy Goats Gruff”. He would normally have pestered Loki with questions, but that night he felt so tired that he couldn’t even think of a question before his eyes shut.

Loki checked his son’s temperature again, relieved to see it had gone down some, and then he simply sat there in the chair watching his son sleep. He dozed himself, but woke when Hunter said, “Dad, why are you sleeping in Max’s room?”

“Oh . . . Max wasn’t feeling well so I gave him some medicine and was telling him a story and I guess we both fell asleep,” Loki said ruefully.

“You oughta go to bed,” Hunter advised. “I put Odin in his kennel for the night. I’ll listen if Max calls or something.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be up with the dog in a few hours,” Loki yawned. “Night, Hunter.”

He bid his other children good night, then headed to bed, knowing he would be up in a few hours.

Sure enough, the alarm on his phone woke him, and he went downstairs to take Odin out. The puppy couldn’t yet sleep through the night without needing to go, and since Loki was the only one in the house who didn’t need as much sleep as his nine mortal children, he was the one who woke up to let the puppy out.

Odin was sleepy and reluctant to go out, so Loki carried him outside and put him in the grass. “Go potty,” he ordered the shepherd.

Odin whimpered.

Cold! Cold!

Sighing, Loki shifted into wolf shape. *Hurry up and pee and your paws won’t be cold.* The black wolf with the white star promptly dug quickly in the snow, until he had formed a square of grass. Then he jumped out of the hole and picked up his son and placed him on the cleared grass space.

*There! Now go!*

*But . . . I don’t need to.*

*Try anyway,* the big wolf said, and then sat neatly on the snow with his tail wrapped about his paws.

Odin whined but obediently went and began sniffing the grass. Abruptly the puppy circled the ground then squatted.

*Good boy!* Loki made a soft half-bark of approval.
The puppy looked up at him and wagged his tail. *Treat now?*

The big wolf jumped down and picked up the shepherd then sprang out of the hole. He set Odin down and licked the puppy about the ears. *No treats now, it’s too late, you’ll get a bellyache. Come, let’s go back inside.*

The shepherd jauntily trotted beside his wolf father, who pushed the latch on the door to let them inside. Odin wagged his tail and went to jump on Loki, yipping, *Play tag now?*

*No, pup. Sleep now,* the wolf said firmly.

*Aww!* Odin sprang at Loki’s paws, trying to bite them.

The big wolf promptly moved like lightning and avoided the puppy’s clumsy strike, then picked up the furball and carried him back to the crate. *Sleep, pup! Now!*

Hearing the Alpha command, the puppy obeyed, lying down inside the crate, chewing on the stuffed rabbit beside him.

Loki could not fit inside the crate, being too large, but he did put his head inside and licked the little canine, grooming the fluffy fur and then placing a paw about the puppy.

Odin sighed and curled up against the sleek black paw, falling asleep seconds later.

Loki waited a few moments before withdrawing and shifting back. He locked the crate. “Night, scamp.”

He dimmed the light in the kitchen then teleported back upstairs to check on Max. His son still slept, though he had kicked off his covers.

“Still too hot,” muttered the frost giant, and summoned the Cool Touch. “Damn! The fever’s back.”

He woke up his son to take more Tylenol, then remained beside him, worried. *I hope this isn’t the flu.*

The flu was bad this year, and despite getting vaccinated, children could still get sick.

The next morning more of his children had coughs and he doled out spoonfuls of cough medicine before school and told them if they felt sick to have the school nurse call him and he would pick them up. Hopefully, this was just a winter cold.

That morning, Loki was kept busy taking care of sick Max, making sure Aleta wasn’t sick—so far the little girl showed no signs of being ill—and trying to watch the mischievous puppy.

Mischief seemed to sense that Max was sick, because she curled up on the bed by his feet and purred comfortingly.

“That’s my good girl!” Loki praised. “Odin, down!” he ordered the puppy, who poked his long snout over the edge of the bed and tried to lick the kitten.

Nonplussed, the shepherd trotted from the room.

“Max, do you want some tea or water?” he asked his son.

“Tea, Dad.”
“Okay, I’ll make you some with honey and lemon.”

A few moments later, he was bringing the tea up in a sippy cup when he heard Aleta call, “Daddy! We have a problem!”

“What happened, spark?” he called, wondering what had spilled or broken.

“Odin pooped on the carpet!” his three-year-old bellowed so the entire neighborhood could hear.

“Great! Norns help me!” the Asgardian groaned. He gave the tea to Max, saying, “I’ll be back soon, buddy. I have to go clean up something.”

“Did Odin have an accident again?” his too-smart son queried.

Loki nodded. “Drink that all, buddy.” He teleported downstairs, cleaned up the mess with magic, and took the puppy outside.

When he came back inside, he found Aleta eating cereal and Mischief drinking the milk out of her bowl. “Aleta, what the--?” he bit back what he really wanted to say.

“Mischief and I are sharing,” the little girl said. “Sharing is caring.”

“Yeah but not from the same bowl!” Loki groaned. “You don’t know where her mouth’s been!” Actually he knew quite well where her mouth had been and it shouldn’t be drinking Aleta’s cereal milk. Why me?

Around lunchtime, Loki got a call from the school to come and pick up Serena and Lucy, both of whom were coughing and sneezing so much they were disturbing their classmates.

He texted Thor, but when his brother didn’t respond, called Bruce, explained that he needed him to babysit Max and Aleta while he went to pick up Serena and Lucy.

“No problem, buddy. I’ll be right there.”

Bruce arrived, and Loki said, “I tried texting Thor but I think he forgot to charge his phone because he didn’t answer.”

“Actually, Thor isn’t home,” Bruce said. “Apparently he got a message from your father and he went back to Asgard.”

Loki frowned. “There could be only one reason why my father would want Thor right away. Something to do with my mother.”

“Hopefully good news,” Bruce said, patting Loki on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, I’ll take care of everything.”

“I’ll hurry back,” Loki promised, and grabbed his remote.

An hour later, both Serena and Lucy were tucked in bed, Bruce said they had what looked like the start of a mild flu, and to keep giving them children’s Tylenol, some cough elixir, and lots of liquids. "Pray the rest of your zoo doesn't come down with it too,' Bruce warned. "Stuff like this is contagious as anything and tends to spread like wildfire."

"How can I prevent it?"

"Uh . . . it might already be too late but-most important, wash your hands and have the kids wash
their. Regular soap and water for thirty seconds. Wipe down all your counters and stuff with Lysol wipes and spray some in all the rooms. Unfortunately, there's not too much you can do at this stage. Except wait and see who comes down with it. It's running rampant right now in schools, which is probably where this was picked up."

"Max got sick first and he's not even in school," Loki objected.

"One of the others brought the germs home," Bruce said. "If I were you, buddy, I'd stock up on ginger ale, orange juice, tea, honey, lemons, and whatever kind of soup they like. And more meds too. Unless you think your Asgardian ones will work well."

"Bruce, we don't get sick like this. So most of our medicines are for wounds and infections, because we can get those. But the flu . . . I don't have potions for that." Loki admitted.

"Just keep doing what you've been doing. They've had flu shots, right?"

Loki nodded. "Before school started."

"That'll help then," Bruce said. 'If you want to run to the store now, I can stay here with them."

"Fine. I'll put Odin in his crate and take Aleta with me, that way you only have sick kids to keep an eye on," Loki said.

Thirty minutes later, he was pushing a cart in the grocery store, and having Aleta help pick out what they needed.

"Daddy, when is Max gonna get better? I have no one to play with," she said mournfully.

"Well, hopefully in a few days. In the meantime, you can play with Mischief and Odin."

"It's not the same."

"I know but . . . maybe later I'll play with you for an hour," he offered, thinking _what are you crazy? When are you gonna have time for that?_ But he couldn't help but recall how he had been lonely with no one to play with when Thor began hanging around the other noble sons. His older siblings had no time for him, and neither did his parents. He never wanted any of his children to feel that way, even if it was only temporary. So despite all of the work he had now with sick kids, he would make time to have fun with Aleta.

"Okay. We can play Candy Land. And fashion show."

Loki nodded. "Now let's finish the shopping, spark."

They completed their list in record time and headed home. Bruce reported that the children were sleeping and so far no one else had called home sick.

"I should be all right," Loki remarked.

"Okay but if you need me, call me," Bruce said. "It can be overwhelming with more than one kid sick."

"I will and thanks," the Asgardian said sincerely.

Bruce assisted him in putting the groceries away before leaving, then Loki suggested Aleta come for a walk with him and Odin. They walked down the street, meeting Mandy with Mystic on the way.
“Why, Loki! You didn’t tell me you got a dog!” she exclaimed, while Mystic pulled at her leash.

“Hi, Missus Mandy!” Aleta ran to her for a hug and to pet Mystic. “That’s our new puppy, Odin. Daddy ‘dopted him too.”

“What a lovely shepherd!” Mandy praised. “Hello, boy!”

Odin frisked up to the elderly lady, wagging his tail. She went to pet him and he almost jumped on her.

“Down!” Loki commanded. “Sit, Odin!” He pressed the puppy’s rump to the ground. “Sorry, Mandy. He’s a little wild right now.”

“We all were wild at his age,” Mandy chuckled, petting the puppy. “Such a sweet boy!”

“He’s not always. He ate my doll,” Aleta informed her. “And he pooped on the carpet.”

“Aleta!” Loki sighed. “You don’t need to tell everyone our business.”

Mandy laughed. “That’s okay. Children are honest and forthright.”

“Sometimes too forthright,” Loki said. Odin whined and strained at his leash, trying to sniff Mystic. “Be nice!” he ordered the puppy. “You’re twice her size!”

“Don’t worry about Mystic,” Mandy said, letting the leash out so Mystic could greet the shepherd. “She can hold her own.”

The two dogs wagged tails and smelled each other. Odin crouched with his hind end up in the air and barked, tail wagging.

Mystic danced rings around him, gently licking his face and biting his clumsy paws.

“See? Friends already.” Mandy said. “How are you doing, Loki?”

“Well, I have three sick kids at home. Max got sick last night and Serena and Lucy came home early from school this morning. They’re all asleep. So I figured I’d take Odin for a quick walk before I needed to be in the house.”

“Oh, poor dearie!” Mandy patted his arm. “Maybe I should come over and lend a hand?”

“Oh, no. I don’t want you to get sick,” Loki refused politely.

“Nonsense, Loki! I had my flu shot and Mystic can play with your Odin while I help you. I don’t need to go near the children if you don’t want me to. But I can help you make tea and soup and sandwiches.” Mandy said firmly.

“Really, I can—” he began.

“It never hurts to have help, boy.”

“All right. If you insist.” Loki gave in, sensing Mandy could outstubborn ten mules.

Together they walked back to his town house.

They put Odin and Mystic in the backyard to frolic, and then Loki showed Mandy where he kept his tea, soup, tissues, and children’s cold medicines.
“I think we need a cart, Loki. Like a tea cart. Do you have something like that?” Mandy asked.

“Actually, I do. I bought it at an estate sale.” He went and pulled out the antique tea cart with rolling wheels. “What are we going to use it for?”

“I thought we might set up a cart like they do in the hospital, dearie. With everything you need to treat the children on it. That way you’re not running up and down all the time fetching things.”

“Mandy, that’s brilliant!” Loki smiled. “Okay, what shall we put on it?”

“How about the medicine first, dearie? I can make tea and put a pot on it. Do you have honey and lemon? That’s best for sore throats.”

“Yes, of course. Here’s some tissues and towels. And a pitcher of water.”

“Straws, Loki. It’ll be easier for the wee ones to sip. And plastic cups.”

Loki went and fetched the items from the pantry and placed them all on the cart. “I’ll just take this upstairs.”

“All right, dearie. While you do that, I’ll make some soup. Do you have chicken and stars?”

“I think so. Feel free to look in the pantry.” Loki told her and wheeled the cart from the room. When he reached the stairs he used his magic to transport the cart to the second floor. Then he went up to check on his sick children.

They were all still asleep, though Lucy and Max were coughing slightly as they slept. Loki gently kissed their foreheads and took their temperatures, finding their fevers were slightly better. He straightened their covers and then teleported downstairs to see how Mandy was getting on with the tea and soup.

He found the petite old woman stroking Mischief as she sat at the table. “I put a pot of chicken and stars on, Loki and the tea should be done soon. What a beautiful kitty!”

“That’s Mischief. I adopted her just before I got Odin,” he said. He looked out the window and saw that Aleta was happily throwing sticks for Mystic and Odin to fetch.

“That’s good, dearie. Kids need pets growing up. I always had a kitty or a dog around my house.” Mandy petted the kitten and Mischief jumped in her lap and purred ecstatically.

Mandy observed Loki pacing, seemingly at a loss for what to do next, and she caught his sleeve. “Loki, dearie, sit down. You need to rest while you can. Fretting isn’t going to help those wee ones get better any quicker.”

“I . . . guess so. It’s just . . .” he shook his head. “I’ve had one or two sick before at the same time, but . . . not more than that. My friend Bruce came over and he warned me that since the flu is so contagious this year it could spread to all of them unless I’m really lucky.”

“Then we need to pray your luck holds.”

Loki checked his watch. “It’s two thirty. The other kids ought to be home soon.”

“All the more reason for you to have a cuppa now, while you still can,” urged Mandy.

Loki poured himself a cup of tea and one for Mandy, after he had put a pot to steep for the sick kids upstairs. He knew Mandy was right, and he needed to take advantage of this time while he
could. Because he doubted he’d be getting much sleep the next few days.

“It’s a good thing I made some casseroles and froze them. At least I don’t need to worry about supper tonight,” he recalled, and went to take the hamburger supreme one out.

He popped it into the oven to cook for forty-five minutes.

“Soup’s done. Let’s put it into a tureen,” Mandy said, and took the tureen Loki handed her with a Norse runic pattern on the side and filled it with soup.

Loki had already put bowls and spoons on the cart, so all that was left was to add the soup and tea to the cart. He took them up one at a time, until both were on the tray waiting for the children to wake up.

Then he came back down and found Aleta and the dogs inside. The dogs were tired, however, and Mystic lay under the table and Odin went inside his kennel for a nap. Aleta was happily chattering to Mandy about something she had seen on TV, while sipping some weak tea with lots of cream and honey.

“Hey, spark. How about you take a nap after you finish your tea, huh?” her father suggested, praying the little girl wouldn’t give him a hard time.

To his relief, Aleta agreed. “M’ tired, Daddy.” Yawning, she held out her arms for her father to pick her up.

Loki did so. “Let me just put her upstairs,” he said to his guest.

“Go right ahead, dearie. I’ll just rest my bones here in your lovely kitchen.” Mandy waved him off.

It took Loki one lullaby and a story before Aleta fell asleep, but once he had tucked her in, then Serena woke up, coughing and complaining her throat hurt.

Loki rushed to her side, and gave her some more Tylenol, some cough medicine, and some tea with honey and lemon.

“Dad, I’m hot. Can you rebraid my hair?” his mathematician asked.

“Of course, moon pi.” He found her brush and a purple hair tie and carefully combed and braided her platinum locks. Then he gave her water as well to drink and ran a wet cloth soaked in lavender water around her face and neck to cool her off. “How’s that?”

“It feels good,” she sighed, and relaxed against the pillows. ‘M’gonna go back to sleep.”

“Call if you need me,” he said tenderly. “I need to check on Max and Lucy.”

Max was stirring and woke when Loki felt his forehead. “Dad?” he asked, his throat hoarse.

“Hey, buddy. How do you feel?”

“My throat hurts,” he whimpered, his green eyes bright with fever.

“How about you drink some tea with honey? That’ll make your throat feel better,” Loki coaxed.

“Okay.” Max nodded.

Loki poured some tea into his sippy cup and handed it to him.
The little boy drank thirstily, but then began to cough, and coughed so much he spit tea all over his pajamas. “Noo!” he sobbed. “I threw up on Simba!” He began to cry.

“Shhh . . . it’s okay, son. We can wash Simba,” Loki soothed. He grabbed some tissues and mopped up the stain with them. “Don’t cry. I can fix it.”

But the boy continued sobbing, upset and uncomfortable.

Loki picked him up and rocked him, rubbing his back. “It’s okay. I can wash Simba, scamp, and it’ll be good as new.” He suspected Max wasn’t just crying over the stained pajamas, but because he didn’t feel well, and he continued to reassure and hold the boy, who coughed and sniffled all over him.

When Max was calmer, Loki said, “Let’s get changed, okay?”

He quickly stripped the boy down and ran a wet cloth dipped in lavender water all over him. Loki was about to grab a pair of clean underwear for the child when Max said, “Need the potty,” and ran out of the room starkers.

Loki raised an eyebrow and said, “Good thing none of your sisters or Mandy was here to see that.” Then he summoned something from his bedroom armoire.

When Max returned, he handed the boy his underwear and then put some more Vicks on him and gave him Tylenol and cherry cough syrup. “That’s my brave boy,” he told his son when Max took the medicine without a fuss. “I have something here for you. I was going to save it for Easter but since you need new pajamas . . . I figured you might like these.”

He removed the pair of pajamas from behind his back. They were green with gold stripes on the cuffs and Loki’s symbol in the middle of the shirt. They also came with a gold little cape that attached at the shoulders.

Max’s green eyes went wide. “It’s like your superhero costume, Dad!”

“Do you like it?”

“It’s really cool! I wanna wear them. I’ll be real careful not to wreck them.” He held up his arms so Loki could put the shirt on.

His father did so, then said, “Even if you do get something on them, it can always be washed, son.” He helped Max put on the pants then fastened the cape. “There you go. Feel a bit better?”

Max nodded.

He climbed on the chair while Loki changed his sheets, for the tea had spilled on them too, then he went and crawled into bed as soon as fresh sheets that smelled like lemon were put on. “Wait till Aleta sees these!” he said happily. “She’s a princess, but I’m a superhero.”

Loki tweaked his nose playfully. “You sure are. Now why don’t you drink the rest of your tea? Are you hungry? I have some soup here.”

“Yes, please.”

Loki brought him some soup in a mug, and at Max’s request, fed it to him so he wouldn’t spill any on his new pajamas.
Afterwards the boy was sleepy and drifted off still clutching the sippy cup. Loki took it from him and whispered, “Sleep well, alskling.”

By then Lucy was awake and he gave her the same treatment he had the others. She too ate and drank, then asked if she could sit in his lap while he sang to her. He normally would have sung his standard Norwegian lullaby, but something made him sing another well-known tune instead.

“You are my sunshine, my only sunshine,
You make me happy when skies are gray,
You’ll never know, dear, how much I love you,
So please don’t take my sunshine away . . .”

“I like the sunshine song, Dad,” Lucy yawned, cuddled against his shoulder, her golden hair tickling his chin.

“A pretty song for my pretty girl,” he whispered, and kissed her cheek.

Soon she too slept, then he went downstairs to find Mandy talking to Hunter, Samantha, Nate, and Belle. Vince was petting Mystic under the table.

“Dad, how are Max, Lucy, and Serena doing?” Belle asked as soon as she saw him.

“They have the flu, Belle. But I gave them some soup and tea and they fell asleep again.” He looked over at Mandy. “Mandy, why don’t you stay for dinner? We have plenty.”

“I don’t want to impose, dearie,” she began.

“You’re not. If you want you can consider it payment for service rendered,” he said, giving her the same line she had used when she wanted to pay the kids for shoveling snow.

“Very well, Loki. And thank you.”

After supper, Hunter walked Mandy and Mystic home. Then he came back and did his homework, watched some TV, and went to bed early. He didn’t want to complain, so he took some Tylenol that was on the cart, because his ears and throat ached.

By the next morning, he too was down with the flu. Nate was also showing early symptoms and so was Samantha, and Loki insisted they go to bed and he called the school to tell them he had two more sick.

Now the only ones not sick were his magical children, and Loki suspected that was due to a mage’s constitution, which enabled them to fight off most illnesses when their magic awakened. It was one of the perks of the magic born, like slow aging and faster healing.

Panicking slightly, he texted Bruce, asking if Thor were back yet. Bruce answered no, and then asked what was wrong. Upon hearing that Loki now had three more sick, Bruce came over with Steve to help out.

But even with the two men helping, Loki was kept busy almost every minute, not just tending his sick ones, but keeping an eye on the rambunctious shepherd, and placating Aleta who was upset that Max wasn’t better yet, and tending to the chores the children couldn’t do.

Then, just as it seemed Max was getting well, his other three came down with it too. Just as Bruce
predicted, it had spread like wildfire through the house. Three more days passed in a blur, where Loki hardly could distinguish night from day, because he was awake either way. He slept in brief snatches, like a cat, in chairs beside his children’s bed, and only for an hour in his own room at most, because whenever he closed his eyes, it seemed someone needed him.

If it wasn’t Aleta calling him, it was Vince, or Nate, or Max. Hunter, Sam, and Belle were quiet, but them he had to watch to make sure they didn’t get out of bed and try and help, because they felt guilty for getting sick when their siblings were as well.

“Dad, I feel better,” Hunter argued on the third day of his sickness. “I can help you.”

“Hunter David Laufeyson, get back in that bed this instant,” Loki growled. “You are still sick.”

“I’m fine!” his stubborn son insisted.

“Now! I’ll carry you if I have to. And then I’ll tie you to the bed.”

Hunter saw he was serious, and he reluctantly acquiesced. No sooner had Loki solved that crisis, then another reared its head.

As he was coming upstairs with more tea in the china tea pot, Steve began coughing spasmodically. Loki stared at the Avenger in horror. “Steve—you’re coughing.”

“It’s nothing,” he said dismissively. “Just a tickle in my throat.”

But Loki saw his eyes were unnaturally bright. He walked over and put a hand on the other’s forehead. “You’re burning up! You’ve got it too!”

“No, I’m just warm from going up and down the stairs,” Steve disagreed.

“By the Nine, Rogers, you have the flu. Do you think I don’t know the signs by now?”

Steve sighed gustily. “I thought . . . maybe . . .”

“Bruce, you’d better take Steve home,” Loki instructed.

“Loki, are you sure? I’ll have Tony come over.” Bruce offered.

“Better yet, tell my brother when he gets home,” Loki frowned. He hoped nothing was wrong with Frigga. Then he recalled that time ran differently in Asgard then on Midgard, so that could be why Thor seemed delayed.

Bruce waved as he and Steve left. Loki shut the door and put his head in his hands. Norns, but he was tired! He needed more than three hours of sleep. Even his frost giant physiology could not keep going without proper rest. Rubbing his eyes, he glanced at the newspaper that Bruce had brought in and an ad caught his eye.

*Sunshine Home Health Aides. Will brighten your day as we care for your loved ones.*

Perhaps this was the answer he had been looking for. He pulled out his cell phone and punched in the number.
A Friend in Need

Chapter Summary

Loki hires help for the children but then Mandy becomes deathly ill. Can Loki save her?

Loki waited anxiously for the three home health aides from Sunshine Home Health Agency to arrive. Thankfully, they had enough women looking for extra hours that didn’t mind tending to sick children for a week, or however long it took for them to shake off this virus. Loki knew it was a particularly virulent strain because it had managed to circumvent his magical children’s immune resistance and even Steve’s super soldier serum system had succumbed. Which meant it could be deadly if not treated promptly, or if the person’s immune system was compromised. Loki had heard of it reaching epidemic proportions in certain parts of the city and that some people had already died of it. So despite his own precautions, he was frightened it could claim the lives of one of his children.

One good thing was that Max, who had been the first to fall ill, now seemed to be getting better. His cough was much improved and his fever was abating as well. It was getting harder to keep him in bed now that he was feeling improved, so Loki allowed him to rest on the sofa in the den, where he could watch cartoons, and had his father and both pets to keep him company. Until one of the others called Loki away, that is.

Mandy’s idea of using the tea cart like a hospital cart was brilliant, and Loki had reason to thank the savvy old lady many times for it. When the three home health aides arrived he would show them how to stock the cart and hopefully they would take some of the burden for caring for nine sick kids off his shoulders.

At precisely eight-thirty that morning the doorbell rang, sending Odin into a paroxysm of barking and Mischief scooting under the recliner. Loki quickly locked Odin in the kitchen for the time being, removing the gate across the stairs. Then he went to open the door.

On his front porch stood three women wearing yellow scrub tops and white pants and jackets. One was about thirty with blond upswept hair and bright blue eyes. Her nameplate read Sonya. The other was familiar to him, she was the MA who had asked for his autograph in the hospital when Lucy broke her arm. She was in her twenties with long red hair and brown eyes called Christine. The third woman was older, looking about fifty or so, with short brown hair and hazel eyes called Mikaela.
“Come in, ladies,” he greeted with a relieved smile.

“How do you do, Mr. Laufeyson?” Sonya took the lead and shook his hand as she entered.

“Much better now that you’re here,” he said honestly. “I’ve been nearly run off my feet trying to care for my kids all at once.”

“We’re here to help, Mr. Laufeyson,” Christine said eagerly, eyeing him with concern. “You look kind of . . . tired.”

“I am,” he agreed.

“And no wonder what with nine sick kids!” exclaimed Mikaela.

“Why don’t I introduce you to the children?” Loki suggested. “Then I can show you what I have prepared to help take care of them.” He led the way into the den, where Max was sitting on the sofa watching cartoons with the Got Mischief? Blanket wrapped about him, wearing his Loki pajamas. “This is my youngest son, Maximus. Max for short.”

Christine went up to the little boy. “Hey, Max. Remember me?”

The little boy looked up from watching Superfriends and his green eyes widened. “Uh huh! You were at the hospital with us when Lucy broke her arm.”

“That’s right. My name is Christine and I’m here to help your dad take care of you while you’re sick.”

Max smiled. “I’m not that sick anymore. Will you play with me.”

“Sure! But first let me see your brothers and sisters,” Christine said.

“Max, can you say hi to Miss Mikaela and Miss Sonya?” Loki introduced the other two aides. “They’re also here to help me take care of you.”

“Hi. I’m Max and I’m four,” he held out a hand to shake.

The other two women gently shook it, and Mikaela grinned. “You are a sweetheart! I can see where you get that from,” she indicated Loki. “When he gets older he’s gonna be a real heartthrob, Mr. Laufeyson.”

Loki laughed. “You’re probably right. Max, Christine will be back to play with you in a while.”

“Kay, Dad. M’ gonna watch cartoons.” The child said agreeably.

Loki then introduced the aides to his other children. It was decided that since Christine had already met Lucy, Aleta, and Max she would be in charge of their care. Sonya volunteered to take care of Nate, Serena, and Vince, with Mikaela taking Belle, Hunter, and Samantha. Loki showed them the tea cart turned hospital cart, and they all agreed it was a brilliant idea. After showing the aides around the house, and explaining where everything was, including the fact that he had a puppy and a kitten as well, Loki decided to take a quick shower, and allow the aides time to adjust.

“You go right ahead, Mr. Laufeyson,” Mikaela said, smiling at him. “Take your time. We have everything under control.”

Loki did so, luxuriating in the hot water, which undid all the tense muscles he had developed over the past three days of sleeping in chairs. He exhaled sharply and closed his eyes, allowing the
water to run in warm rivulets down his face. *By the Nine, I needed this. I didn’t even realize how tightly I was wound up until now.*

It felt wonderful to just have time to himself, and not have to worry about hearing one of his children calling or not waking up if one of them needed him during the night. After washing himself with some Mountain Fresh bodywash he just stood there happily marinating his bones in the heat.

Finally he forced himself to get out. He took his time getting dressed, choosing one of his favorite microfiber outfits—forest green pants and a sleek gold shirt. He wore his slippers, tied his hair back with a green hair tie and walked out of his bedroom to see how things were going.

He found everything running smoothly to his shock. The kids were either in bed or sitting in bed reading or watching TV or listening to iPods in Hunter and Samantha’s case. Downstairs he found Sonya cooking breakfast, making scrambled egg, cheese, and sausage burritos. His stomach rumbled as the savory smells wafted to his nostrils. He couldn’t recall the last time he had eaten breakfast that wasn’t a power bar choked down inbetween running inbetween rooms.

Max’s laughter echoed through the room, along with Odin’s soft woof, and when he walked into the den he saw Max playing fetch with the puppy and Christine. “Having fun?” he asked, smiling.

Christine looked up and her eyes went all dreamy. “Hi! Um . . . we let the puppy out so Sonya could cook and Mikaela’s doing your laundry. He’s so cute! I love dogs.” And you, her gaze whispered. “He’s adorable, but he’s also a troublemaker,” Loki warned. “But that’s true of my kids too, so . . .” He flashed her a grateful smile. He pet Odin, who frisked up to him, tag wagging happily. “Are you being good?” he asked the shepherd, who licked his hand and sat at his feet, begging for treats.

“Dad, he wants a treat,” Max stated.

“I can get them, Mr. Laufeyson,” Christine offered.

“I can show ya,” Max said, and dragged her into the kitchen by the hand.

They returned with several Milk Bones, and they all gave Odin one. The shepherd crunched them down in twinkling, then went and lay down under the coffee table.

“Dad, you wanna play too?” Max indicated the game. “We just started.”

“All right,” he agreed, though he felt more like passing out in the recliner.

As they moved their gingerbread pieces around the board, Sonya came out with plates of breakfast burritos. She gave Max a small one and Loki a large one. “I figured you might like a home cooked breakfast, Mr. Laufeyson.”

“I think you read my mind,” he grinned. “I haven’t eaten like this since Max came down with this flu. I just need a cup of coffee.”

“Tell me how you like it,” Sonya said, and listened when Loki told her he liked a bit of cream and two spoonfuls of sugar.

Soon a steaming cup of Dark Magic was by his elbow and he ate and drank the best meal he had had in three days. He thanked Sonya, then found himself yawning in the middle of a turn.
“Sorry, I just . . .” he began.

“You need to lie down,” Mikaela said.

“I’ll just rest my eyes in my recliner,” he said. “Max, you play nicely with Christine, okay?”

His son nodded, too busy trying to beat Christine to worry that his father was no longer playing.

Loki went and curled up in his recliner, pulling a green and gold afghan over himself. He was asleep almost instantly.

Christine looked at him, concerned. “Poor guy must be exhausted!” She tucked the afghan more securely around Loki.

Max peered at his father. “Dad’s tired from taking care of us and Odin.”

“Well, we’ll make sure he rests now that we’re here,” Mikaela said firmly.

“Yeah we don’t want him to get sick too,” Christine said.

“Oh, Dad can’t get sick,” Max began, then stopped talking before he blurted out the secret that only family knew—that Loki was an Asgardian god. “He’s too strong for that.”

“Honey, even a big strong man like your daddy can get sick,” Mikaela said kindly. “But don’t worry. We’ll take care of him so he stays well.”

Max just smiled. “Okay. Christine, it’s your turn. Watch out for the Cherry Pitfalls.”

Loki woke around lunchtime, feeling ten times better for his long nap. He found Mischief on his lap, and stroked the kitten gently. Mischief open one green eye lazily and purred, kneading his thigh. “Hey, baby girl. Have you met our new guests yet? Or were you too shy to say hello?”

Mischief purred in answer and rubbed her head against his hand.

Just then Christine came out of the kitchen with a plate of chili mac and cheese. “You’re awake!” she exclaimed. “Aww! Is that your cat? She’s gorgeous!”

Mischief remained on Loki’s lap as the girl approached.

“This is Mischief. She’s a rescue from the same shelter as Odin.” Loki continued to pet the cat.

Christine held out a hand for the kitty to sniff, then when Mischief accepted her, gently stroked under her chin. “She’s soft like velvet!”

“Yeah, she’s a real charmer, right?” Loki scratched along her back and the kitten arched her back end when he scratched near the base of her tail.

Christine chuckled. “It’s funny to see them do that.”

“They have a sensitive spot there,” Loki explained. “It feels good when you scratch it. There’s also scent glands there and when you pet them, they mark you so another cat knows that you belong to them.”

“Cats really do own their humans, don’t they?” the girl laughed.

“Oh yes. You don’t own a cat. The cat owns you,” Loki stated. His hand continued its rhythmic petting, eliciting more purring. “There’s an old saying that if you become a cat’s friend you have
a companion forever, but make a cat your enemy and you’d best sleep with one eye open forever. Cats don’t forget and they always get even.”

“You know a lot about cats, Mr. Laufeyson.”

“I’ve had several,” he lied, knowing he couldn’t tell her the true reason he knew such things was because he could talk to them and become one himself.

“I’d like one but right now my job has me away too much to take good care of one,” Christine said wistfully.

Loki nodded. “It’s good that you know that and won’t get an animal only to leave it alone all day. Cats become lonely just like people and ones who don’t have a lot of contact with someone become shy and fearful. That’s not good for the cat or for you.”

“How does she get along with your dog?”

“She tolerates him right now. But I think eventually they’ll be friends once he stops thinking she’s his new chew toy and quits drooling on her,” the Asgardian remarked.

“Cats and dogs can be friends?”

“Oh yes. If they wish to.” He glanced around. “How are my children doing?”

“Max was taking a nap on the couch,” she indicated his son curled up in the green blanket. “And Aleta was asking for you, but I told her you were sleeping, and she had me read her a book. Only she said you read better.”

“That’s because I do voices,” Loki said, amused. He inhaled the aroma of chili mac and cheese. “That smells divine.”

“It’s chili mac and cheese. I made some without but I like spicy and cheesy,” Christine said. “Would—would you like some?”

“Yes, please,” he said politely.

She set the plate on the snack table beside him. “Let me just get you a fork and some ginger ale.”

When she returned she had his fork and drink and her own lunch also. She pulled up a hassock and sat down, eating her lunch while stealing glances at her crush through her lashes. She found he was even more hot now than he had been when she saw him in the hospital. And not only was he hot as hell, he was kind too. He didn’t treat her like a servant or a child, despite the fact that she worked for him and he was worth billions.

As Loki ate, he asked questions about each of his children, relieved to note that though they were still sick, they hadn’t gotten any worse and were cooperating with the health aides. He found his phone and texted Bruce, asking how Steve was, and if Thor had come back yet.

Bruce responded that both Steve and Tony were still sick, and Thor wasn’t back yet. He then asked how Loki and the little zoo were faring.

Loki answered that he had hired some women to help care for them, and so far it was working out fine.

“Would you mind feeding Mischief?” he asked Christine. “Her food is in the pantry. She eats on top of the dryer in the laundry room because Odin will steal her food if we don’t put it where he
“Can’t reach it.”

“Sure, Mr. Laufeyson,” Christine said, and she picked up Mischief and carried her into the kitchen, saying, “Are you hungry, girl? Let’s feed you.”

Max stirred and woke, yawned and stretched, then came over to Loki and climbed in his lap. “Dad, I’m done being sleepy,” he told his father.

“I can see that, imp. How are you feeling?”

“Not all that sick anymore,” Max replied. “Miss Sonya still made me take medicine.”

“You need it so you don’t get sick again,” Loki told him. He could tell Max was better because he didn’t have a fever any longer. Just a lingering cough and stuffy nose. He plucked a tissue from the air and held it to his son’s nose. “Blow.”

Max obeyed, then coughed slightly.

“Again,” he ordered. “Good job.”

Max exhaled softly, sounding much better now that he could breathe right. “I beat Christine in Candy Land,” he said to his father.

“I’m not surprised. You beat me in that game. Where’s Odin?”

“In his kennel, sleeping. We played with him so he was tired.”

“That’s good. Why don’t you sit and watch cartoons while I check on your brothers and sisters?”

“Okay! I’m gonna watch Space Ghost!”

Loki rose and headed upstairs to see how the rest of his children fared. First he went to see Samantha, who was awake and sewing something while she leaned against a bunch of pillows.

“What’s up, butterfly?”

“Hey, Dad,” she said hoarsely. “I still croak like a frog, but I’m not wiped out any more. I’m making a bookmark.”

“Very pretty. Looks like a patchwork quilt.”

“It’s cross stitch. But it’s of an old quilt pattern, the Winter Solstice. See the snowflakes and the diamond pattern?”

“I like it a lot. Just remember to rest, okay? And drink lots of liquids.”

“And take my medicine,” she recited, rolling her eyes. “I know, Dad.”

He hugged her. “Feel better, darling.”

She kissed his cheek. “Quit worrying. I’ll be fine in a few days or so.”

“If you need anything, call Mikaela.”

He visited Nate and Vince next, the two boys shared a room, the largest one except Loki’s own in the house, because Vince had claustrophobia and needed a room that was big, and because Nate also needed room for his wheelchair and other apparatus. Neither of the boys minded sharing, they
had been used to it in the orphanage, and both had similar temperaments, though Vince was more active and almost always doing something that made Loki consider going on Prozac.

Currently the two were still confined to bed, or in Nate’s case his chair, and it was a testament to how sick Vince felt that he wasn’t trying to sneak out of bed and go down to Hunter’s room to play his XBox. He lay huddled under his X-Games quilt reading his way through a stack of comic books, and occasionally blowing his nose. A glass with ginger ale and a straw rested on his nightstand.

Nate was in his chair, looking wan but cheerful, putting together a brain teaser puzzle, with his favorite blue blanket draped about him. In his cup holder was a cup of tea with honey and lemon.

Loki was relieved to see the room was neat, the boys had on clean pajamas, and the beds looked like they also had fresh sheets on. The room smelled slightly of lemon Lysol.

“Well, you look like you’re feeling much better, boys,” he greeted his sons.

Nate looked up from his puzzle. “Hey, Dad. Guess what? Sonya showed me a new way to do this puzzle.”

“Wonderful.” He went and felt his forehead. “You don’t have any fever.”

“Not now. Sonya gave me Tylenol,” his son said. “I’m just all stuffy and achy.”

“Do you want to lie down?”

“Nah. Sick of being in bed,” Nate remarked.

Loki noticed that Nate’s bed, which was similar to a hospital one and could be raised and lowered, had the top part raised, so he could sleep half reclining, and not flat on his back, which was a must for a handicapped boy sick with a respiratory infection. “Okay. You tell Sonya if you need to lie down.”

“Oh, okay.” He went back to manipulating something in the puzzle, his green eyes focused on his current project. “When I’m better I’m gonna build a labyrinth, Dad. We learned about them in school before I got sick.”

“Yeah like in the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur,” Vince put in. “Only Nate says his is gonna be able to have marbles shoot down it.”

“That sounds very interesting. But you rest now and worry about that later, Racer.” He ruffled Nate’s mop of curly red hair. “How are you feeling, daredevil?”

Vince shrugged. “I hate being sick. But Hunter gave me his comics to read. They’re pretty cool, but some of the stories are wrong, Dad.”

“What do you mean?” Loki asked, puzzled.

“The myths about you and Uncle Thor.”

“Vince, remember how I told you they were just stories? That’s what you need to remember, son. We know the truth. Personally I think it’s funny to read about what people think happened.”

“Okay.” He looked out of his window and sighed longingly. “I wish I was better so I could go and slide down the hill.”
"You rest and take your medicine and think about getting well and you'll be better in no time," Loki told him.

Vince nodded and continued reading his comics.

Loki visited Aleta next, who was curled up with her lokitty and Brunhilda in her bed. Brunhilda sported a bandage about one arm and Minx had a bandage about her head. Aleta had a small plastic spoon and was pretending to give both her patients medicine. "Now you be good an' take your medicine so's you can get better, Brunhilda."

"Hey, spark," Loki called.

"Daddy, I'm playing hospital with Brunhilda and Minx."

Loki came and sat on the bed, saying, "What happened to them?"

"They got into a fight with some Bad People. I under arrested them though.” She pointed to her clothes hamper, where a blue stuffed Sully and a masked bear were inside. “Now they’re in jail. Brunhilda broke her arm and Minx got hit in the head with a rock.”

"Goodness! They're going to take a lot of TLC to get well." He felt her forehead. "You still have a fever, sweetie. Did Christine give you some Tylenol?"

"Yup. And some cherry stuff too."

"That's good. Keep on resting and soon you'll be well enough to go play outside."

Aleta frowned, her lower lip sticking out. “I wish I was better now. Christine says Max can’t play with me cause I’m too sick. It’s not fair!”

“Being sick isn’t any fun,” Loki agreed, and thanked the Norns he had never been sick like this in his life. “But maybe this will make you smile.” He snapped his fingers and a Cat in the Hat puppet, a fish puppet, and Thing One and Thing Two appeared on the bed. Loki took them and put the Cat and the Fish on one hand and the two Things on the other.

Then he said in a rather silly squeaky voice, and moved the fish puppet’s mouth, “No! No! Make that cat go away! Tell the Cat in the Hat you do NOT want to play!”

“Yes we do!” Aleta cried, clapping her hands.

Loki moved the Cat puppet and did his voice in a deeper one with rolled R’s for purring. “Look at me! Look at me now! It is fun to have but you have to know how!” Loki winked at Aleta and asked in his normal voice, “Do you want to know how?”

“Yes!Yes! Tell me how!”

“A lot of good tricks, I will show them to you,” the Cat said. “Your mother will not mind if I do.” Loki then made the cat bow to Aleta, take off his hat and throw it up in the air.

The Cat caught the hat upside down on his hand and made it spin around, twirling it faster and faster.

Then the fish cried, “He should not be here. He should not be here when your mother is not.”

The Cat laughed, then said to Aleta, “I know you are sick and not feeling well, but see, we can have lots of fun with this bell!” And the Cat produced a small bell that he rang. “Come Thing One
and Thing Two, here they are! My crazy friends to say hello to you!”

Thing One and Thing Two waved and giggled.

Aleta waved back. “Hi!”

“Watch me now, then you’ll see, how much fun you can have, when you can juggle like me!” the Cat said, and then Loki had the Cat juggle three colored plastic mini balls, then a plastic star, a plastic plate, and the fish.

“Put me down!” the fish yelped. “This is no fun at all! Put me down! I do not wish to fall!”

Loki then whispered to his daughter, “Well? Should he put the fish down?”

Aleta nodded. “Yes! The fish is scared!”

“Okay!” and the fish was put down.

Loki continued to parody the book, sometimes using quotes and other times making things up, all done in a silly lighthearted tone that made the sick little girl giggle and laugh.

Aleta wasn’t the only one enthralled by the impromptu performance.

Sonya, Mikaela, and Christine had come up to see what was going on, and they peered about the doorway in astonishment to see the tall handsome video game designer sitting upon a pink canopied bed playing with puppets in such a ridiculously charming manner.

“Oh, but he is soo delicious!” Christine whispered.

“He’s amazing!” Mikaela agreed. “I’m tempted to commit bigamy just from listening to him!”

They lingered in the doorway a few moments more, but then withdrew, fearing their employer would get angry if he caught them loitering when they should be working.

Just as Loki was about to end the puppet show, since he’d accomplished his goal, Aleta’s gray eyes went suddenly unfocused and she said in a soft monotone, “A friend in need lies weak and afraid, death angels gather, Loki she needs your aid! Do not delay, go right away!”

Loki froze with the puppets still on his hands. The Vision was a warning someone he loved was in trouble. And the only “she” he knew besides Natasha was Mandy.

Abruptly Aleta blinked and rubbed her eyes. “Daddy, I Saw something.”

“I know, spark. You saw that Missus Mandy needs my help,” Loki said quickly, pulling the puppets off his hands. “I need to go to her house. Tell Christine or any of the others where I am.”

Fear congealed in his stomach. Aleta never Saw something that didn’t happen, though her talent seemed to pick and choose when and what it Saw. Glancing about, Loki shut the door of the bedroom, then said “I’ll be back soon, Aleta.”

He teleported directly from the room to Mandy’s kitchen. “Mandy?” he called, his voice stiff with terror. “It’s Loki. Mandy?”

Then he heard Mystic barking. Not her usual welcome bark but a rapid frantic staccato of yipping, the kind of sound a dog makes when something is wrong.
He bolted from the kitchen towards the sound, which was coming from the living room. There he saw a scene from a nightmare.

Mystic was standing beside the limp form of Mandy MacAllister, who lay crumpled on the rug next to the recliner. Her phone lay inches from her hand, as if she had tried to call for help.

“No! Oh no! No! Mandy, please!” he found himself pleading as he rushed to kneel beside her. He gently rolled her over, and felt for a pulse, terror surging through him.

There! It was weak and thread but it was there.

“By the Nine, what the Hel happened to you?” he murmured, tears glazing his eyes.

Then he felt a prickle of otherworldly awareness and he recalled Aleta’s prophecy—death angels gather. He jerked his head up and saw hovering in a corner of the room a dark-winged figure.

The Asgardian’s green orbs met the angel’s fiery sapphire ones and Loki spat, “Get thee gone, Reaper! She is not for you!”

“No? I am not your enemy, Asgardian,” the Angel of Death spoke in a soft even tone.

“If you try and take her you will be my enemy,” Loki warned.

“I am Azrael, and it is my duty to claim the souls of the dying,” the angel hissed.

“She isn’t dead,” Loki snapped, choking back the terror that threatened to engulf him.

“But she is near her time. Hence why I am here. I shall make you a bargain, Asgardian. If you can save her, bring her back from the brink, I shall leave. If not, her soul is mine.”

It was then that Loki noticed how hot Mandy’s skin was. It burned like a smith’s forge. Her breath rasped in her throat, barely stirring her chest. “Norns help me, she has the flu! Just like my kids!” Guilt now joined the terror roiling in his stomach. “I’m sorry!” he cried, tears trickling down his cheeks.

‘Death comes for all, Asgardian,” intoned Azrael. “Even you.”

“Shut up, you bloody carping crow!” Loki growled. Then he cast a spell that made his hands icy, and carefully ran them over her head, neck, and down her arms and legs. “This should cool you down, Mandy.”

To his shock, the elderly woman stirred, groaning. “Help . . . me . . . get help . . .”

Mystic whined and licked her mistress’s face.

“I’m here, Mandy. Right here,” Loki said, and kept running his hands over her, cooling her with his frost giant’s touch.

Suddenly her eyelids fluttered and she opened her eyes. “L-Loki?”

“Yeah, it’s me. I found you like this. But don’t worry. I’m going to make you well.”

“Cold . . . so cold . . .”

She shivered and he quit running his hands over her, sensing the dangerously high fever had receded.
He glared at the corner of the room, where the dark-winged angel was. To his shock, he saw the corner was empty and the angel was gone, back to wherever angels go.

Relief sharp as a knife washed through him. Then he quickly dialed 911 on his phone. He quickly rattled off the address and how he had found Mandy collapsed on the floor, sick with the flu. “Please hurry,” he said to the dispatcher.

“An ambulance is on its way, Mr. Laufeyson. Can you stay with Mrs. MacAllister until paramedics arrive?”

“What? Of course! D’you think I was gonna leave her on the floor?”

“How is she doing? Is she conscious? Lucid?”

“She was just a moment ago. She knew me and asked me to get help. But she’s shivering and burning up.”

He grabbed a blanket he found over the chair and wrapped her in it. “I just wrapped her in a blanket.”

“That’s good,” the dispatcher soothed. “Talk to her and reassure her that help is on the way. The ambulance should be there in about ten minutes, sooner if possible.”

“Okay,” he said, cradling the phone in one hand. He clasped Mandy’s hand with his own and said softly, “Mandy, the ambulance is on its way. What happened? Can you tell me?”

“Loki . . . felt sick . . . dizzy . . . tried to call you but . . . I fell . . . must have passed out . . .” She squeezed his hand. “I thought . . . for a moment . . . that I saw an angel come to carry me to glory . . .”

“No . . . no . . . it was a dream,” he whispered, swallowing hard. “There’s no angel here, Mandy. Just me. You’re gonna be okay, y’hear me? We’ll bring you to the hospital and they’ll make you well.”

She clutched his wrist suddenly, gripping hard like the talon of an eagle. “Loki! Promise me . . . if they say I won’t make it . . . bring me home. I don’t want to die among strangers.”

“Mandy, you’re not going to die.”

“Promise me, boy!”

“Okay, okay. I promise.” He said quickly. “But you aren’t dying today. Or any other day.”

She smiled. “And are ye God Almighty, to know the hour of my death, dearie?”

“No, but . . . you aren’t dying anytime soon,” he said passionately. “Trust me.” He gently slipped his arms beneath her and pulled her into his lap. “There, is that better?”

She weighed almost nothing, light as a feather to his Jotun strength. She sighed and leaned her white head against his shoulder. “You’re a good boy, Loki. Do me a favor, dearie?”

“Anything.”

“Take care of Mystic. And call my son. His number is in my phone.”

He quickly texted Christine, telling her where he was and what had happened. He told he needed
her to come over and pick up Mystic, that he would be going in the ambulance with Mandy.

He found Mandy’s phone, luckily it was not dead, and typed the number of her son into his phone. He would call later, once Mandy was out of danger.

Sirens wailed in the distance, growing nearer.

“It’s the ambulance, Mandy darling,” he crooned into her ear.

“Stay with me, Loki,” she whimpered.

“I’m here,” he said, and blinked back tears. *I almost wasn’t in time! If not for Aleta . . . she would have died here all alone . . .* He shuddered instinctively. He didn’t know when it had happened, but somewhere along the way Mandy had ceased to be a mere neighbor and instead become something more. More than a friend, she had become the grandmother he never had and always wanted.

“Don’t leave . . .” she coughed, the spasms shaking her tiny frame.

“I’m not leaving, Bestemor,” he said, calling her the Norwegian for grandmother.

Then the siren blared and red and blue lights flashed in front of the house.

Mystic began going crazy barking.

“Mystic, calm down! They’re here to help,” Loki called to the dog.

He waved a hand and unlocked the door, recalling just in time so the paramedics wouldn’t think anything odd was going on.

The door opened and in walked two paramedics with a stretcher and Christine with a leash.

“Don’t worry about a thing, Mr. Laufeyson,” she said, picking up Mystic. “Me and the other girls will watch the kids till you come home.”

“Thank you, Christine,” he said gratefully. “You just earned a bonus from me.”

The paramedics approached, and he allowed them to examine Mandy and answered what questions he could about how he had found her and what she had told him. “I’m going to go to the hospital too,” he told them. “She lives alone, so I’ll need to go with her to sign forms and stuff.”

“Who are you, sir?”

“I’m her adopted grandson,” Loki lied without batting an eye.

He watched as the paramedics gently placed Mandy on the gurney. “Take care of her. I’m going to follow you in my van.”

He forced himself to walk sedately past the paramedics and out of the house. But once outside he broke into a sprint. He reached the van in the garage in seconds.

He pulled into the hospital parking lot, only then realizing he had left without getting any of Mandy’s ID and insurance cards. *Loki, you dumbass!* He swore at himself. Then he summoned her purse and took it into the emergency room.

The doctors admitted Mandy with an acute case of the flu that was going around, and started her
on an IV drip of fluids and another for pain. They gave her some oxygen and a breathing
treatment, and while they were doing that, Loki went into the hallway and dialed her son Sean
MacAllister.

The phone rang and rang but only the answering machine picked up. Loki left a detailed message
and his cell so Sean could call him back. Then he went back inside the room.

Mandy was sitting up in bed, pale, but looking considerably better than she had two hours ago.
“How are you, Loki, dearie?”

He raised an eyebrow. “I should be asking you that. I left a message on your son’s answering
machine. He should call me back soon.”

“He’s probably still at work. It’s three hours earlier in California.”

“He doesn’t check his messages?” Loki frowned.

“I don’t know,” Mandy admitted. “Sometimes it takes days for him to answer me when I call.”
She indicated the chair beside her bed. “Come sit down. You’re pale as snow, Loki.”

“I’m normally like that,” he joked. He sank down on the chair.

“I’m sorry I scared you, dearie,” Mandy said knowingly, and took his hand in hers. “But how did
you know to come by? And how did you get in? The door was locked.”

“I was just thinking about you and I decided to stop by. Call it a hunch,” he told her. “And I
picked the lock to get in when you didn’t answer the door.”

“Where did you learn that?”

“A talent of my misspent youth. I told you I wasn’t always a nice boy.”

“Wherever you learned it, dearie, you saved my life. I don’t know how I can ever repay you.”

“Mandy, stop. There’s no such thing as debts between friends and family. I hope you don’t mind,
but I told the hospital staff I was your adopted grandson so they would let me stay here with you.”

“Oh, Loki! I would be honored if you were my grandson.”

“You would?” he gaped at her in astonishment.

“Very much so.”

Just then an orderly arrived with some dinner for Mandy.

As the orderly was assisting the elderly woman, Loki’s cell rang. He walked into the hallway to
answer it, because the reception was better. “Hello? Laufeyson speaking.”

“This Sean MacAllister. You left a message about my mother?”

“Yes, I did. I’m her next door neighbor . . .” Loki went on to explain what he had found and how
Mandy was in the hospital with the flu.

“What’s her prognosis?”

“The doctors think if she shows improvement tonight they can release her tomorrow. Otherwise
they’ll keep her here until they’re sure she’s out of danger.”
“That’s good.”

“Would you like to speak with her?”

“All right. Put her on.”

Loki frowned at the brusque tone. If it had been his mother sick and in the hospital he would have sounded far more concerned and not like she had just interrupted a board meeting. “One minute.”

He went back inside. “Mandy, your son would like to speak to you.”

Mandy’s face lit up. She took the phone. “Hello, Sean! It’s so good to hear from you, dearie!”

Though he couldn’t hear the entire conversation, Loki could tell from Mandy’s reaction that it was not going well. When Mandy asked if he would be coming over for Easter, he expected Sean would have started booking a flight immediately. It was only two weeks till the holiday.

But apparently from the way her face fell, something was not right.

“I’ll talk to you later. Bye!” she said, striving to sound cheerful. She handed the phone back to him.

“Well? When is he coming?”

“He . . . he isn’t, dearie,” she said in a small voice.

“What? What do you mean he’s not coming?” Loki sputtered in outrage. “His mother almost dies of the flu and ends up in the ER and he’s not going to come and see how you are? Name of God, why?”

Mandy gave him a sad smile. “He said he was too busy. But he would send me flowers.”

“Send you flowers?” Loki felt a great urge to curse the insensitive arrogant jerk who was Mandy’s blood son. The idiot was just begging to be turned into a jackass. Or a garden gnome birds could poop on. “Forgive me, but he’s a total dumbass! Why do you let him treat you like this?”

“He blames me for his father’s death,” she said softly. “See, Connor was coming home one night from his Knights of Columbus meeting and I asked him to stop and pick up a few groceries. He was on his way home with them when a drunk driver hit him and killed him. Sean believes that if I hadn’t asked him to go to the store, the accident would have been avoided. He has never forgiven me for that. It’s why he took his wife and my granddaughter Rowan and moved across the country. So he wouldn’t have to see the woman who killed his father every day.”

“That’s—that’s crazy! You weren’t the one who was driving drunk and hit him. It was an accident!”

“You and I know that, dearie, but my son . . . my son refuses to face the truth. It’s easier for him to blame me than it is to say an accident took his father’s life and he must move on. Sean was the apple of his father’s eye. And I’m afraid I let Connor spoil him, being his only son and all,” she said ruefully. “Sean has always thought the world owed him for taking his father away when he was almost graduating from NYU. And he’s determined to squeeze every drop of satisfaction he can from it. That includes not seeing me unless he absolutely has to. In other words, dearie, not till I’m in a pine box.”

Loki rose and swore in Old Norse.
Mandy raised an eyebrow. “I don’t know what you said, dearie, but am I right in saying your mama would wash out your mouth for it?”

“Probably,” he sighed. “And if I had your son here I would be tempted to punch him out for treating you this way.”

Mandy’s eyes twinkled. “I daresay I’d be tempted to let you.” Then she asked, “Do you have my phone, dearie?”

“I do. Why?”

“Because I need to talk to my lawyer.”

“Your lawyer? Why?”

“Because if anything happens to me, dearie, I want you to have power-of-attorney to make decisions in my behalf. Medical and legal. I trust you more than I do my son.”

“Mandy, are you sure?”

“Quite sure, dearie. You were here to save my life. My own son can’t even be bothered to visit and see how I am,” her mouth drew down in a sharp line.

“I’m honored, but—this could alienate him further,” Loki warned, at the same time wondering why he cared.

Mandy snorted. “He’s behaved like an alien for years to me. I’m done, dearie. You’d not know it to look at me, but I have quite a bit of money saved up. And I know what my son thinks. He thinks as soon as I die, it all comes to him. Well, he might be surprised to learn otherwise.”

“You don’t mean—”

“That’s why I want you to have power-of-attorney, Loki. Because I know I can trust you to follow my wishes. You have money of your own, you don’t need mine. Your friendship is priceless, boy. Even if your family might not think so.”

Loki gaped at her. “How did you know—?”

“Because you hardly ever speak of your father. Your brother, yes, and your mom, but him almost never. And there’s only two reasons for that. He disappointed and hurt you or you did something like it to him.”

“It’s a little of both. He was never proud of me, because he had Thor to fill that role. My mother was, but eventually I disappointed her too. I was always the misfit in my family. I doubt that will ever change,” Loki said sadly.

“Your brother—is he their natural son?”

“Yes.”

“Ah. That explains a lot. Loki, believe me when I say that sometimes blood does not always mean a loyal and caring son. But then, I’m preaching to the choir, aren’t I boy? You proved that today, didn’t you? And it’s your father’s loss, not yours, if he can’t see that. But my gain, for I think had you felt more at home in Norway, you’d never have come to America and moved next door to me and been there when I needed you. So you see, everything happens for a reason.”
“Mandy, I believe you’re right,” he said, and gave her a heartstopping smile.

The octogenarian laughed. “Oh, Loki! You keep smiling like that and those nurses are gonna come in here wondering why my heart rate is off the charts!”

“You’re exaggerating.”

“I am not! With that smile I’m shocked some enterprising young woman hasn’t snatched you up.”

“Mandy, no enterprising young woman, as you say, wants to put up with me and nine troublemaking children, plus a kitten and a puppy.”

“You just haven’t met her yet.”

“Because there is no such person.”

“I’m going to take great satisfaction in saying I told you so someday, Loki!”

He laughed. “I hope you get the chance. When they release you, I’m taking you home with me. You can stay at my house until you’re recovered.”

“Loki, you don’t have to—”

“I certainly do. Anything could happen—and it did. Besides I enjoy having you in my house. Gives me another adult to talk to.”

“Oh very well, dearie! You could persuade the sun that it was the moon.” Abruptly, she yawned. “I guess I’m more tired than I thought.”

“You need rest and I’m keeping you up,” he said contritely.

“I’ll call you in the morning to see what’s going on,” he promised, then he went and hugged her.

Her fragile arms went around his neck and she hugged him back. “Good night, grandson. Tell the kids hi from me and I hope Mystic behaves herself.”

“I will. Good night, Bestemor. That means “grandma” in Norwegian.” Loki left the hospital smiling, a far cry from how he had entered it. As he drove home, he hoped that things had continued to run smoothly while he was gone.
Who Stole My Loki Charms?

Chapter Summary

When the kids find a box of Loki’s magical cereal tons of mischief occur!

22

Who Stole My Loki Charms?

Bifrosted Loki Charms! They’re mischievously delicious! ~ Loki

Loki picked up Mandy after the doctor released her from the hospital, saying she could recuperate at home, especially since the flu was growing to epidemic proportions at the hospital. He had briefed his children that Mandy would be coming to stay for awhile until she was better, and to try and remember the manners he had taught them.

The doctor recommended she stay in bed and keep hydrated, take a prescription pain pill and Tamiflu, and she should recover within two weeks. Loki drove up to the house and helped Mandy out of the van and into the house. Christine, Sonya, and Mikaela were there taking care of the kids, who seemed to be improving more every day. Especially his magical children, whose immune systems seemed to be able to throw off the virus quicker than his normal ones. Belle was hardly coughing at all after three days, Vince said he felt better after three days also, and Aleta no longer had a fever and was driving everyone crazy asking when she could go outside and play.

Loki carried Mandy’s suitcase upstairs, and placed it in his master suite, having already decided before picking her up where she would stay. He then went downstairs and said, “I figured I would put you in the best room in the house so you could get well quicker.”

“Loki, you’re too kind, dearie,” Mandy smiled at him.

He coughed, slightly embarrassed, then he said, “You don’t mind if I carry you up to your room, do you? There’s a lot of stairs and I don’t want you to exhaust yourself.”

“Loki, I wouldn’t want you to hurt yourself,” protested Mandy.

“You hardly weigh more than a feather,” he chuckled. “No worries.” Then he gently picked her up in his arms and climbed the stairs. “Your room, my lady MacAllister!” he announced.

Mandy gasped when she saw Loki’s master suite. “Oh, Loki! I can’t stay here! This is your room isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is and of course you can stay here. It has the most comfortable bed in the house. And a bathroom right inside here.” He carried Mandy over to the bed and laid her on it.

“But where will you sleep?”
He shrugged. “There’s a pull-out bed on the sofa downstairs. It’ll do.”

Mandy sighed. “Perhaps I should take the pull-out bed, dearie. I don’t want to kick you out of your own bed.”

Loki shook his head. “You aren’t, and my mother would beat me with a switch if she ever found out I let you sleep on a pull-out bed when you’re so sick. No, Bestemor, you are sleeping right here. The better the bed, the better sleep you will have, and sleep is the physician of all pain.”

She squeezed his hand. “I swear, by the time I’m well, I’ll be spoiled beyond belief.”

“You could use some pampering, Bestemor. And that’s exactly what I intend to give you.” He gestured to the bathroom. “There’s a whirlpool hot tub in there as well as a walk-in shower with a built-in seat. Feel free to use them whenever you wish. My three aides, Christine, Sonya, and Mikaela will be happy to assist you with whatever you wish. Just ring this bell.”

He pulled a small wooden handled service bell from his nightstand. Steve had gotten it for him as a joke last Christmas.

“I can manage, Loki. Been doing just fine all these years,” Mandy began stubbornly.

“But that’s the point, darling. You don’t have to manage by yourself. Let me and my aides and even my kids help you.” Loki persuaded. He whistled and a familiar black Pomeranian bounded into view. “Mystic, look your mama’s here!” he told the excited little dog and picked her up and gave her to Mandy.

“Hello, baby girl!” Mandy cooed and Mystic licked her face with her tiny pink tongue.

While Mandy reunited with her furbaby, Loki turned down the bed, plumped up the pillows, and retrieved the remote for the TV and placed it within easy reach on the nightstand.

“Would you like some ice water? Tea?”

“That would be lovely,” Mandy smiled. She scooted up and lay back on the pillows, luxuriating in the softness of the bed. She kicked off her slippers and said to Mystic, “We’re living in high cotton for now, little girl.”

The dog lay on her lap, tail wagging, clearly happy her mistress was with her.

Loki departed to fetch the water and tea, as well as a small sweet roll he had bought at the bakery this morning.

When he returned he found not just Mandy and Mystic on the bed, but Mischief too. The cat was ensconced upon the other pillow on the other side of the bed, purring like a washing machine gone berserk.

“I see you’ve met my cat, Mischief.”

“She’s adorable with those large ears,” Mandy said.

“If she starts to bother you, I’ll take her out and close the door,” he offered.

“Don’t be silly, Loki. I love animals and have no problem with her visiting. Even Mystic doesn’t mind her.”

“She seems to get on well with Mystic,” Loki remarked. “I think because Mystic is older and more
on a size with her so she doesn’t feel threatened the way she does with Odin.”

Mandy reached out to pet Mischief. “She’s a champion purrer, Loki. That will put me to sleep better than anything.”

“If you want to watch TV, here’s the remote. Just ring if you need anything. And I do mean anything.”

He bid her a brief goodbye then went to see how the kids were doing. He planned to send Mikaela in later to unpack her suitcase. He would have done it himself but didn’t want to make Mandy feel awkward.

After checking on each of the children, Loki decided to eat a quick lunch of tuna on honey wheat bread, popcorn, and a small salad. Then he took a brief nap in the recliner.

He woke to find a text from Thor on his phone. **Loki, I just got back from visiting Father and Mother. Need to discuss something with you. Heard all your kids were sick. Nine Hells, brother! Coming over now.**

That had been five minutes ago. Judging by how fast Thor could fly, Loki anticipated he would be here in another five if not sooner. No, it would be five, since Thor didn’t want anyone to see him. So he would land a few blocks away in a deserted alley and walk up to the house.

Sure enough, the doorbell rang five minutes later. Christine answered it and then came into the den. “Mr. Laufeyson, your brother is here.”

“Thanks, Christine.” Loki said, not bothering to rise from his recliner. He suspected Thor had a lot to tell him and it would be best if he were sitting down. “Could you please keep the kids occupied for an hour or two? My brother just got back from a long flight—like to another world—” and we have some private family matters to discuss about our parents.”

“Of course, sir,” Christine said and then she went upstairs along with the other two aides.

Loki cast some privacy wards about the room so that even if someone did happen to hear something, it would be muffled and sound perfectly ordinary. “Hello, Thor. Long time no see.”

“Miss me much?” his brother said, and hugged him.

You look like Hel, brother. Bruce told me about all the children getting sick and then Steve and Tony are sick too. It’s like a plague.”

“Yeah, you could say that. My neighbor Mandy is staying here too. I had to bring her to the hospital yesterday.” He quickly detailed what had gone on while Thor was in Asgard.

“By the Nine, Loki! No wonder you look like you need to sleep for a month,” Thor said feelingly. “I’m sorry I wasn’t here to help, but you know Father. When he calls he doesn’t do so just to say hello and how are you.”

“What did he want?”

“To ask my advice on a treaty with the remaining Dark Elves. He thought you wouldn’t be impartial enough given that Malakith killed you so he called me.”

“How very thoughtful of him!” Loki sneered.
“Brother, he meant to spare you pain,” Thor began.

Loki’s lip curled. “I can handle pain, Thor. Been doing it my whole life. But of course Father wouldn’t think it important enough to have my input on something so vital as a treaty between Asgard and Svartalfheim.”

“Loki, you nearly died last time you came to Asgard!” Thor objected.

“Oh, who gives a damn? What’s done is done. I’m better off here anyway.” My real family is here, he thought but did not say aloud.

“Anyway, Mother woke up while I was there and she was healed finally—”

“Mother is awake and you didn’t think to inform me?” Loki cried, hurt.

“I’m sorry, brother, it all happened so quickly,” a guilty Thor murmured.

“Of course. And Father probably figured why bother sending his Jotun son a message right away after all I’m not on the need to know list,” Loki snapped, anger roiling in his gut.

“Loki, it wasn’t like that,” Thor sighed. Then he said, “But Mother insisted that she come to visit you here on Midgard. So she and Father are going to come here for Easter.”

Loki nearly fell off the recliner. “They’re coming here? To my house?”

Thor nodded. “I suggested it. Because Easter is the time for family and renewal.”

“By the Nine, brother! Now I have to get my house in order not just for my Avenger family but for them too. Oh, Nine Hells!” he groaned.

“Loki, I thought you’d be happy . . .”

“Oh, I’m happy, Thor. So happy I’m spitting rainbows and smiley faces,” the Master of Mischief said sarcastically. “Got any other good news for me?”

“Well, while I was there I visited our old rooms in the palace that we used to have as boys. And look what I found!” He reached into a pocket of his cape, which was magically designed to hold many things, and pulled out a red box of—

“My Loki Charms cereal!” Loki gasped. “I had forgotten all about that!” he took the red box from Thor, and smiled nostalgically at the picture, which was of himself as a thirteen-year-old, gesturing with a flourish to a bowl of cereal with the title Bifrosted Loki Charms. The cereal featured magical marshmallow bits of a scepter, a Tesseract cube, a shield, a horned helmet, Thor’s face, and a growling wolf. The caption beneath read They’re mischievously delicious! And another on the opposite side said fortified with long lasting magical energy!

There was a starburst advertising Free Magical Charm Necklace Inside!

Loki opened the box and saw to his delight that the cereal was still fresh, thanks to the preserving spell, and it still contained a small glowing cube necklace, which he removed. There was only a minor enchantment of protection on it, but still he didn’t want anything with his magical signature falling into the wrong hands. “I cannot believe you found this after all these years,” the Master of Mischief smiled. “I was thirteen when I created this based off some silly Midgardian cereal ad I saw in Father’s seeing globe. It was supposed to give me extra magical energy after I ate it.”

“Did it work?” Thor asked.
“Yes, but not as well as I hoped. The energy boost only lasted for three days and it didn’t magnify my powers the way I’d hoped. So I put it away in the closet and forgot about it,” he recalled.

“Can you still eat it?”

“Yes, it’s preserved with magic so it’s still fresh. It’s made with Asgardian kithra wheat and frost mallows. You remember how we loved frost mallows as kids right?”

Thor grinned. “You always liked them more than I did. They were too airy for me. And I hated kithra porridge. So dry and bland.”

“This isn’t. I added honey to it and coated the pieces,” Loki told him. “So it tastes good. Here, try it.”

He handed Thor some cereal.

The Thunder God munched it. “Hmm. Not bad. I feel stronger already.”

Loki rolled his eyes. “It doesn’t work like that for non-mages, Thor. It’s just cereal for you.” He ate a handful. “But for me, it will briefly increase my magical energy.” He felt the cereal create a warm glow in the pit of his stomach which spread through him like a bubbly wine. “Not bad. But I should have tweaked it a bit more. The energy transfer is a little too quick and leaves me feeling a bit giddy like I’ve drunk too much mead. Oh well. Nice to know Father didn’t tell the servants to throw everything out like it was junk in my room.”

“Mother wouldn’t let him,” Thor said.

“That explains it,” Loki remarked. He clutched the box of cereal tightly. “Guess I’d better put this away. It’s not something I want my kids getting into. Asgardian magic doesn’t react well with mortals.” He rose gracefully to his feet. “Be right back.”

He teleported into his room, luckily Mandy was asleep. He set the cereal box on top of his armoire, intending to open it and put it in his workroom, but then he heard Sonya yelling, “No! Bad dog!”

_**Odin what have you gotten into now?**_

He spun on his heel and left the room, not wanting whatever was going on to disturb Mandy who needed her rest, leaving the box of Loki Charms on the top of his armoire.

The weekend came, and Loki sent the three aides home, saying that he and Thor could handle things for a few days, after paying them a generous bonus and saying he would see them again on Monday. He introduced Thor to Mandy, who told the blonde god how his brother had saved her life, and she had adopted him as her honorary grandson.

“So that’s why he calls you Bestemor,” Thor mused. “I had wondered.”

“I can adopt you too, dearie,” she said with a twinkle in her eye. “A woman can never have too many grandsons.”

Thor smiled. “Thank you. I never knew my grandparents. They were gone before I was born. But you also have all nine of Loki’s children to be great-grandchildren.”

“Such sweet little imps,” Mandy laughed. “I hope they’re all recovering.”
“They seem to be. Thank goodness.” Thor said fervently. “How are you feeling, Bestemor?”

“Oh, it’ll take some time for my old bones to mend. I’m not a spring chicken anymore,” Mandy smiled. “No doubt those kids will be well before I am. But I’m shooting for Easter. I hear your parents are coming from Norway to celebrate it with you.”

“They are,” Thor confirmed. “I fear my brother feels a bit . . . overwhelmed.”

“Having your relatives over can be, but I’m sure Loki will handle it fine. He’s very resourceful.”

“We shall manage it together,” Thor stated. Then, noticing Mandy was growing sleepy said, “I shall take my leave of you now and let you get some sleep. Loki would punch me out if I ruined your recovery.”

Mandy chuckled. “Go on then, boy! I guess I am a wee bit knackered.” Then she closed her eyes and within moments was asleep.

Mystic came and jumped on the bed and curled next to her mistress. Thor left the old woman and the Pom resting and went to see what else Loki needed him to do.

“Just keep an eye on the kids for me for a bit. Right now they’re all sleeping still. I gave them doses of their medicine earlier this morning, so when they wake up they can have some breakfast, nothing too heavy—toast, fruit, oatmeal, or cereal is fine. But I need to take a walk.” He ran his hands through his long hair. “I haven’t been out of this house except to take Mandy to the ER in days. I’m going a little stir crazy.”

Thor recognized the signs and said softly, “Go fly, brother. Take all the time you need. I shall mind the younglings and the animals.”

Loki flashed him a grateful smile, then walked into the backyard. In moments a peregrine falcon soared into the blue vault of the sky and disappeared from view.

Thor found a package of Oreos in the pantry and took it and a container of milk into the den. He turned the TV on and began to watch reruns of Highlander, a favorite show of both his and Loki’s. Soon half a package of Oreos was gone and so was half the gallon of milk. Thor found himself nodding off in the middle of an episode and before he could say “Bifrost” he was snoring, the combination of the snack and the quiet house serving to send him to dreamland.

Max woke and wondered where everyone was, the house was so quiet. He slipped out of bed and attached his gold cape to his Loki pajamas and padded over to Aleta’s room, but she was still asleep, the children’s Tylenol tended to knock her out. Then he wanted to ask his father something, and he went over to Loki’s bedroom and opened the door, forgetting that Mandy was now using it.

“Dad, I’m hungry,” he said, then looked over towards the bed and saw Mandy snoring with Mystic next to her. “Ooops!” he put a hand over his mouth.

As he backed away from the bed, his eye was caught by a red box on top of the wardrobe. His eyes widened when he recognized it was a cereal box. “Maybe Dad forgot to put it away in the kitchen,” he whispered to Mystic. He looked around for something to get it down with, then found one of Mystic’s balls on the floor and threw it at the box, trying to knock it off the armoire.

Max had pretty good aim and the box was right on the edge of the shelf.

The ball hit it and it tumbled down into his arms.
“Yay! New cereal!” the little boy grinned. Holding it in one hand, Max ran out the door and into Aleta’s room, shutting her door as he did so. “Aleta, wake up! It’s morning and we gots new cereal with Dad’s picture on it!”

“Maximus, whaddya want?” growled his sister crossly.

“You gotta see this!”

She scowled. “What is it? M’sleepy!”

He held out the box of Loki Charms. “Lookit!”

She rubbed the sleep from her eyes. “That’s cereal. So?”

“Dad’s on the box.” Max pointed.

Aleta stared. “But he’s little, like Hunter! How come he’s on here?”

“Dunno. Maybe cause they wanted him to be?”

Aleta shook the box. “What kinda cereal is it?”

“One with marshmallows, silly!”

Aleta opened the box. “Mmm! I like how it smells! Let’s eat some!”

“Okay. Lemme get some milk. You got spoons n’ bowls?”

“In my play kitchen,” Aleta said and went to where she had a pretend kitchen set up in the corner of her room with plastic utensils, food, and serving dishes. They were sized for a toddler.

Max headed downstairs to get some milk. He found the container right out on the coffee table and his uncle was snoring on the couch. He grabbed the milk and ran back upstairs with it, happy it wasn’t that heavy.

In her room, Aleta had poured two bowls of cereal and was waiting impatiently for Max to return.

Just as her brother reached the landing, Vince came out of the bathroom and spied him. “Max, what are you doing?”

“Getting milk for my cereal,” the little boy answered.

“What cereal?” Vince queried.

“The one Aleta and I are having,” Max shoved open the door. “Aleta, I gots the milk!”

“Hurry and bring it here, Max. I’m hungry.”

Vince followed saying, “What kind of cereal are you eating? I want some too.”

Then he saw the box on the floor. “Cool! It’s Loki Charms! I think Dad made cereal now! Where’d you get this?”

“It was in Dad’s room. He forgot to put it in the kitchen,” Max replied, pouring milk into his cereal and Aleta’s.

“Neat! Hey, Nate! Look at this!” he took the box and went to show his brother.
Nate wheeled his chair over. “What’s that? It’s Dad on a cereal box! Must be some new campaign thing.” He read the box. “Hey, where’s the magic necklace?”

Vince shrugged. “Aleta and Max say there wasn’t one. Maybe it’s gonna get put in later? Anyway, let’s eat some! I’m hungry.”

“Go get us some bowls.”

Soon Vince returned with some bowls and spoons and retrieved the milk from Aleta’s room. “How’s it taste?” he called to his small siblings.

“Really yummy!” they chorused. “It’s the bestest!”

“Vince, this says fortified with long-lasting magical energy,” Nate remarked. “Could the cereal be enchanted?”

Vince shook his head. “You can’t sell enchanted cereal, Nate. Besides, it won’t do anything to you even if it was... you don’t have magic.” At least he assumed it wouldn’t.

He poured two more bowls. Now half the box remained.

They were just about to eat when the rest of their siblings showed up and asked where the party was and why they hadn’t been invited.

“Hey, share the wealth, bros!” Hunter said, and took the cereal box. “What the heck is this?”

“It’s Dad’s new cereal—Loki Charms!” Nate replied.

“Loki Charms? Must be doing some ad campaign,” Samantha said. “Give it here, Hunter, don’t be a pig.”

“What? I only have one bowl!”

“Hey, we want some too!” protested Serena, Belle, and Lucy.

Luckily there was enough cereal for all nine children to have a bowl, though afterwards the box was empty.

All of them dug into their bowls, enjoying the sweet crunchy taste and the funny shaped colored marshmallows that melted like spun sugar on their tongues.

It was Aleta who first noticed something funny after she had finished her bowl. “Max, I feel kinda warm,” she giggled. “And fizzy.”

Little did she know the enchanted cereal was increasing her magic exponentially.

She felt her magic sparkle through her like ginger ale fizz, then she decided to try something she had always wished to do.

She narrowed her eyes and concentrated, then said to her small army of stuffed animals and dolls, “Tenhut! I command you all to march!”

A glowing ball of light exploded from her fingers and settled over the army of toys. In a twinkling all of the toys stood up and began to march around the room.

“Max! Max!” Aleta yelled excitedly. “I made me dolls n’ animals come alive! Look!”
“Cool!” her brother cried. “Now we can play with ‘em!” But before he could do so, he said, “Aleta, I feel weird.”

“Like sick?” his sister asked.

“No, just . . .” Suddenly a blue light enveloped him and he began shrinking until he was only two inches tall. He was so shocked he tripped over his spoon and landed in his cereal bowl with the milk.

“Help! Help! Aleta!” he shrieked, splashing about in the bowl as if he were in a pool. “I can’t swim!”

“Max!” Aleta yelled. “How come you’re small?”

“How should I know!” her brother squeaked. “Get me outta here!”

Aleta reached in her hand. “Quick climb on my hand! Or should I get Rescue Barbie?”

Max managed to scramble onto Aleta’s hand, which was like a raft to him.

His sister looked humungous to him.

“Max, you’re like the size of a mouse,” Aleta squealed.

Max covered his ears. “Not so loud, Aleta!”

“Sorry!” she whispered, then she set her brother down. “You’re all wet.”

“I know,” he said grumpily. “Got a towel?”

Aleta handed him a tissue. Max took it and rolled about on it until he was dry. “Max, you better be careful, you could get stepped on.”

“I know,” the miniature boy sighed. Suddenly Minx ran up to him. “Hey, can I ride Minx?”

The lokitty nodded and Max jumped on her back. “Yeehah! I’m a cat rider!”

Everybody, follow me!” Aleta ordered, putting on her princess helm and taking her plastic wand in her hand. Then she marched out the door with her entire army following, including Minx and Max.

Across the hall, Belle noticed something occurring with her magic after she had eaten the cereal. She felt suddenly stronger and as if she could run a marathon. “Vince, something’s happening to me. My magic—it’s like overflowing!”

She stared at her hand, which now ran with rivulets of rainbowed light. “By the Nine!” Experimentally, she flicked the rainbowed light just as Mischief ran by.

The light caught the black kitten and made her fly in the air.

“Rrrow!”

“Mischief!” Belle cried, shocked.

The kitten was now running on the air, all her fur on end.

“Belle, get her down!” Samantha cried.
“I . . . I don’t know how!” her sister cried. She flicked her hand again, only this time she felt her own feet leave the ground and she too soared up in the air. “Yggdrasil’s Roots! I’m flying!”

Vince felt something odd happening to him too. “What the—?” He stared at his left hand, which had turned blue and waxy.

Serena screamed. “OMG! Vince, you’re like a zombie—half of you any how!”

“Really? Neat!” He ran in the bathroom to look at himself in the mirror.

What he saw was that half of his body, including his hair, had become blue skinned and dark long hair sprouted from one side of his head. Vertical white stripes cover the blue half of his face, and he whooped in delight. “Serena, you idiot! I’m not a zombie—I’m a frost giant! Well, half a one!”

Just then Max on Minx and Aleta ran into the room.

“OMG. What happened to you?” Serena cried, horrified. “You’re like a mini Lego figure!”

“Max shrank!” Aleta told her. “And I made my dolls come alive!”

Hunter gaped at his siblings. “How is this happening?”

“It’s the Loki Charms!” Vince cried. “Has to be!”

“How come it’s not working on the rest of us?” Lucy asked. “I wanna fly like Belle!”

No sooner had she opened her mouth then huge feathered wings sprouted from her shoulders. “Whoa! I’m a Valkyrie for real!”

Nate frowned. “What’d you do, Lucy?”

His golden-haired sister flapped her cream-colored wings. “I just wished I could fly and this happened!”

“Well, I wish I could walk,” Nate said, and suddenly a thrilling tingling went through his paralyzed lower half and he suddenly pushed himself to his feet.

Everyone gasped.

“Nate, you’re standing on your feet!” Vince cried.

“I . . . know . . .” his brother cried, amazed.

“Take a step,” Hunter encouraged.

“I’ll do better than that!” Nate yelled. He suddenly jumped the entire length of the room and climbed up the wall.

“Look out Spidey! There’s a new wall crawler in town!” hooted his Ghost Speaker brother.

Hunter felt a tingling in his own limbs then suddenly he morphed into a large gangly black wolf with white feet. “I’m a wolf!” he cried, but what came out of his mouth was growls and yelps.

Suddenly, Serena began to cough, and colored bubbles blew out of her mouth. “Hey!” she shrieked and more bubbles flew out.

Hunter barked and jumped at the bubbles.
“Cool!” Lucy cried. “You’re like a bubble machine!” She flew into the air and began popping the bubbles.

Samantha, who had eaten last, was the last one to show the effects of magical cereal. Her hands began to glow and the bedpost she was leaning on turned to spaghetti. “What the heck?” She pulled her hand back and stared at it.

“Touch this!” Vince picked up a tennis ball, and handed it to her, and it became a meatball.

“Wow! Instead of everything I touch turning to gold, it turns to food,” Samantha whistled. “And now I sound like a tea kettle!” She tossed the meatball to Hunter, who devoured it in two seconds.

“When does this wear off?” Serena asked, more bubbles exploding from her mouth.

“Who says we want it to?” Nate said, now walking on the ceiling. He was delighted with his new magical powers.

“Nate, this can’t last,” Belle said, finally managing to get down on the ground. She held Mischief, who was shivering in her arms. “I’m not sure, but I think this is only temporary. So you’d better come down before it wears off.”

“Killjoy!” her brother yelled, then flipped upside down and landed on his feet. “I feel fine!”

“Look what I can do, Nate!” Vince picked up his brother’s bed with his blue frost giant hand. “Super strength!”

“Vince, watch it!” Lucy cried circling her brother in the air. “You might drop it!”

As if that were a premonition, the bed slipped sideways and crashed onto the floor.

“Whoops!”

Mandy woke up. “Lord have mercy! Was that an earthquake?”

The kids glanced at one another in horror. “We can’t let her see us! She doesn’t know about magic.”

Odin rushed upstairs, barking.

“What in Hel is going on?” they heard Thor bellow. He came thundering up the stairs. “Okay what broke?”

"Oh no!" Belle said as they heard Thor's heavy footsteps coming up the stairs.

"We're in trouble now!" Sam said.

Thor stormed down the hallway when he appeared in the doorway and saw the smashed bed. "By the Nines, what happened in here?!

Odin came in behind Thor as he sniffed the floor and headed for the cereal box. "No! Odin! Don't eat that!" Max shouted and Thor turned to look at the cereal box lying on the floor.

"Is that....?! No! Keep it away from the dog!" Thor shouted.

"Get the box!" Aleta yelled to her dolls, who nearly trampled Minx doing as she ordered.
The dolls startled Odin and Thor when they grabbed the cereal box and ran over to Aleta.

"Aleta! Be careful! You nearly knocked Max down!" Belle said. "Sorry," Aleta said, taking the box from the dolls, but Odin was determined to get the sweet smelling treat.

"Give it here!" Nate said as Aleta tossed him the cereal box and Nate started climbing the wall. "Odin's Good Eye, you can use your legs?!" Thor gasped.

"Uh, yeah, I can," Nate said as he watched Odin barking at him and tried to jump up to get hold of the box.

Hunter gave a play growl and jumped on the shepherd and the two wrestled across the floor, knocking Vince's skateboard to the ground.

"Hey! Watch the board, Hunter!" Vince cried.

"Sorry, Bro,' Hunter said and Odin playfully barked and wiggled under Hunter.

"Nephew, you're a wolf?!" Thor exclaimed.

"Uh, yeah," Hunter said with a grin.

"Right. Hand over the cereal. Now!" Thor said with a look Loki gave them when they misbehaved.

"Will someone please tell me what's going on?!" Mandy yelled and Thor looked at the doorway. "Now look what you've done."

"Uncle Thor, you'd better tell her something quick," Samantha whispered. "Before she comes over here." She hid her glowing hands behind her back,

Sighing, Thor left the room then he went to Loki's bedroom and saw the worried look on Mandy's face.

"Thor, what was that noise? I thought the house was hit by an earthquake!"

"No, no. Odin got excited and chased Mischief on top of a . . . err . . . dresser and it tipped over. But everything's fine, Bestemor. I can fix it." He put an arm around the tiny woman. "Now why don't you get back in bed? You'll catch a chill standing here."

"Was anyone hurt, dearie?"

"Oh no. Except the dresser," Thor reassured her, and ushered her back to bed.

"Where's Loki?"

"He went out for a walk," he told her. "Do you need anything? Some tea or soup?"

"Some tea would be wonderful. And one of those scones if you have any more," Mandy said.
"I'll go check." Thor promised and then hurried from the room, shutting the door behind him. Phew! That had been close!

Thor hurried back to the other room as he saw the children trying to keep Odin quiet and he sighed.

"Is Mandy ok, Uncle Thor?" Sam asked.

"Yes, I told her a dresser was knocked over while Odin was chasing Mischief," he said, looking at Odin and Hunter curled on the floor and Odin was sleeping peacefully.

"That was good thinking," Belle remarked, letting the kitten down. Mischief sniffed and looked frazzled.

"I am going to make Mandy some tea. Do I have your word there will be no more surprises?"

"Yes, sir," Vince sighed. "But we didn't know what the cereal would do till after we ate it."

"Why would Daddy allow them to make a magic cereal to begin with?" Belle asked.

"They didn't make the cereal," Thor said then smiled. "He did."

"Daddy made a magic cereal?!!" Max asked.

"Aye. He wanted to make something to briefly increase his magical energy. It didn't work like he wanted and the power only lasted three days."

"I'm going to be able to use my legs for three days?!!" Nate asked with a wide grin.

"That's great for you, but what about me? I'm Samantha the Magic Food Buffet!" his sister moaned. "How am I gonna do anything like this?"

"What are you talking about?" Thor asked and Sam showed him how she can turn anything into food by turning a sock into a slice of pizza.

"And look, every time I talk, I spit bubbles!" Serena wailed.

"And I can make my toys real!" Aleta said, pointing to her dolls and they waved at Thor,

"What about the rest of you?" Thor asked.

They told him what they could do as he sighed and wondered how Loki would react once he came home.

"Where's Dad?" asked Nate.

"He went out flying," Thor explained. "But he ought to be home any minute now."

Loki loved being able to fly when in falcon form. The world was spreading out before him and he was one with the wind. He wondered if this was what it was like when Thor flew and dipped his wings to the left. He soared over the treetops when he noticed an older gentleman sitting on the bench and he was feeding the ducks some seeds. Curious, Loki landed on the top of the bench as
he watched the older gentleman and noticed he was wearing warn clothing, a large brim hat and sunglasses. The older gentleman didn't seem to notice him at first when he smiled and turned to look at him. "Hello, friend," the older man said with a grin. "Are you hungry?" Loki just looked at him when the older gentleman sighed and looked at the ducks.

Carol

“I guess not,” he said and looked at the two ducklings who were fighting over the seeds. “See those two? They remind me of my sons. The large one is always overshadowing the little one and the little one feels like he is worthless. He's not. He has gotten in trouble in the past, but he has also proven he isn’t the villain people thought he was. Not anymore. He has taken on more responsibility than even I could handle and is doing a remarkable job. He is a better father as well. I know I wasn’t the best, but I tried. I just hope he can forgive me at some point for what I’ve done because I do love him.” Loki looked at the older gentleman as he blinked then the older gentleman slowly got to his feet and wiped the seeds off his hands. “I also hope he will welcome me when I come see him over Easter,” the older gentleman said then slowly walked away.

Loki was stunned when the older gentleman vanished in a flash of light then changed back to his normal self and smiled. “You’re always welcome, Father,” he said then turned back into a falcon and flew away.

“Is he going to be angry with us?” Hunter asked.

"Oh, yes, he is going to be angry, but only because you meddled in something you didn't understand," Thor said and Max sniffed while tears appeared in his eyes.

“I shouldn’t have touched the cereal without asking,” the tiny boy wept.

Thor felt sad for the little boy as he picked him up and held him against his chest.

"How was we supposed to know it was bad for us?" Aleta asked, looking upset. "It was good cereal!"

"Yes, but just because something looks good doesn't mean it is," Thor said and Max found comfort in the loud gentle thumping of his uncle's heart.

"Yeah, somethings care really hurt you if you eat it," Hunter said.

'I shoulda known better when I read the box," Vince admitted. "It DID say magical fortifying."

"What do you think Dad will do when he finds out?" Sam asked.

"We're gonna get scolded into next week," Serena hiccupped and rainbow bubbles floated all over the room.

"And be put in time out forever," Aleta said.

"I don't want to be in time out forever!" Max sobbed.
"I'll tell him it was my fault," Vince volunteered. "He can take away my skateboard and ground me to my room."

"No, I'm the oldest," Sam said. "It will be my fault."

"Like that'll ever work," Hunter snorted. "I'm the one usually giving him an attitude, and stuff, so I'll take the blame."

"Guys, you're all forgetting something. None of us can lie to Dad. We all promised not to and--and he'd know anyway." Lucy reminded them.

"Yeah, so I guess we'll just have to hope he...," Belle said.

"I'm home!" Loki called out and they looked at each other.

"Thor, where are you? This tea kettle is boiling over!"

"Coming!" Thor said as he left the room and headed down the stairs.

"Were you making tea and forgot?" his brother queried. "Good thing my tea kettle won't burn. I put a charm on it. How are the kids and Mandy?"

"Mandy is feeling better and that's who I was making the tea for," Thor said as he pouted the water into one of Loki's best tea cups and placed the tea bag in the cup.

"And the kids?"

"They're fine," Thor said and quickly left the room with the tea.

Loki frowned. Something felt wrong here. "Thor, what aren't you telling me?" He hurried up the stairs, wondering if Odin had made a mess on the carpet or something.

He saw Thor go into his room when a cold chill moved through him and he followed. Mandy thanked Thor for the tea when she looked at Loki and smiled. "Hello, dearie," Mandy said.

"Are you alright?" Loki asked.

"Yes, but I did have a scare. There was this loud noise and I thought we were having an earthquake."

"Really?!" Loki said, looking at Thor.

"It turned out Odin was chasing poor Mischief and knocked over the dresser."

"He did?!" Thor now understood what the children were talking about Loki knowing when someone lied and he nodded.

"Well, I'm glad you're feeling better," he said then looked at Thor. "Brother, may I have a word?"

Thor followed Loki into the hallway. "Loki, there's something I need to tell you . . ."

"I'll say. Starting with what in Hel happened here while I was gone?" his brother frowned sharply.

"I just want your word you will not punish them harshly."
"Punish who?"

"The children."

"Why would I punish them?"

"Well, you see, Max found your cereal...."

"He what?!"

"He found your cereal and he and Aleta had some."

"By the Norns!"

"Then the others had some."

"They all ate it?!"

"Aye, and, well, things happened."

"What sort of things?"

"Magical ones. That's why I told Mandy about Odin knocking over the dresser. Because no one except family can know what really went on here."

"I see," Loki said with a nod when something tugged on the cuff of his pants and he looked down to see a two-inch-tall Max.

"By the Nine!"

Loki picked up Max as Max gave him a sad look and tears rolled down his cheeks. "I'm sorry, Daddy," Max said and Loki felt an ache in his heart. He knew he should be angry with his youngest son, but he also hated seeing Max so upset.

"Max, how did you even get my Loki Charms, son? I put them up where you can't even reach," sighed the frost giant.

"I used one of Mystic's balls and knocked it down," Max said.

"Maximus, what have I told you about touching anything in my room?"

"That I'm not supposed to," he said with a sniff.

"And what happens when you do touch something?"

"I get put in time out."

"Then why did you?"

"I was hungry and couldn't find you."

"You could have woken Sam up."

"I almost woke up Missus Mandy."
"And you knew she was sick."

"Yeah," Max said with a nod.

“So now everyone has some sort of magical power and we need to keep her from finding out. She doesn't know we have magic and might not understand."

Would she be scared of us, Daddy?"

"She might."

"I don't want her to be scared of us."

"Neither do I," his father sighed.

"What are you going to do?"

"I want to talk with your brothers and sisters and see if I can't fix this."

"They're all in Vince and Nate's room," Thor coughed.

Nodding, Loki carried Max back to Vince and Nate's room and looked at his miserable children. "Hey, Dad," Hunter asked when Odin woke up and headed for Loki. He sniffed Loki's foot then sat down and panted. "Well, what do you have to say for yourselves?" Loki asked and they looked at their feet. Loki then noticed Nate was standing and his eyes widened.

"Nate, you're standing?"

"Yeah, and I can do this!" Nate said and started climbing the wall.

"Be careful!"

"I am!" Nate said as he climbed along the ceiling then looked down at his dad. "Hi, Dad!"

"Hello. Now please come back down before I have a heart attack," Loki said with a grin. After Nate climbed back down, Loki walked over to him and gave him a hug. For the first time, Loki noticed how tall Nate was and silently wished he didn't have to take this gift away from him.

22

Who Stole My Loki Charms?

Bifrosted Loki Charms! They’re mischievously delicious! ~ Loki

Loki picked up Mandy after the doctor released her from the hospital, saying she could recuperate at home, especially since the flu was growing to epidemic proportions at the hospital. He had briefed his children that Mandy would be coming to stay for awhile until she was better, and to try and remember the manners he had taught them.

The doctor recommended she stay in bed and keep hydrated, take a prescription pain pill and Tamiflu, and she should recover within two weeks. Loki drove up to the house and helped Mandy out of the van and into the house. Christine, Sonya, and Mikaela were there taking care of the
kids, who seemed to be improving more every day. Especially his magical children, whose immune systems seemed to be able to throw off the virus quicker than his normal ones. Belle was hardly coughing at all after three days, Vince said he felt better after three days also, and Aleta no longer had a fever and was driving everyone crazy asking when she could go outside and play.

Loki carried Mandy’s suitcase upstairs, and placed it in his master suite, having already decided before picking her up where she would stay. He then went downstairs and said, “I figured I would put you in the best room in the house so you could get well quicker.”

“Loki, you’re too kind, dearie,” Mandy smiled at him.

He coughed, slightly embarrassed, then he said, “You don’t mind if I carry you up to your room, do you? There’s a lot of stairs and I don’t want you to exhaust yourself.”

“Loki, I wouldn’t want you to hurt yourself,” protested Mandy.

“You hardly weigh more than a feather,” he chuckled. “No worries.” Then he gently picked her up in his arms and climbed the stairs. “Your room, my lady MacAllister!” he announced.

Mandy gasped when she saw Loki’s master suite. “Oh, Loki! I can’t stay here! This is your room isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is and of course you can stay here. It has the most comfortable bed in the house. And a bathroom right inside here.” He carried Mandy over to the bed and laid her on it.

“But where will you sleep?”

He shrugged. “There’s a pull-out bed on the sofa downstairs. It’ll do.”

Mandy sighed. “Perhaps I should take the pull-out bed, dearie. I don’t want to kick you out of your own bed.”

Loki shook his head. “You aren’t, and my mother would beat me with a switch if she ever found out I let you sleep on a pull-out bed when you’re so sick. No, Bestemor, you are sleeping right here. The better the bed, the better sleep you will have, and sleep is the physician of all pain.”

She squeezed his hand. “I swear, by the time I’m well, I’ll be spoiled beyond belief.”

“You could use some pampering, Bestemor. And that’s exactly what I intend to give you.” He gestured to the bathroom. “There’s a whirlpool hot tub in there as well as a walk-in shower with a built-in seat. Feel free to use them whenever you wish. My three aides, Christine, Sonya, and Mikaela will be happy to assist you with whatever you wish. Just ring this bell.”

He pulled a small wooden handled service bell from his nightstand. Steve had gotten it for him as a joke last Christmas.

“I can manage, Loki. Been doing just fine all these years,” Mandy began stubbornly.

“But that’s the point, darling. You don’t have to manage by yourself. Let me and my aides and even my kids help you.” Loki persuaded. He whistled and a familiar black Pomeranian bounded into view. “Mystic, look your mama’s here!” he told the excited little dog and picked her up and gave her to Mandy.

“Hello, baby girl!” Mandy cooed and Mystic licked her face with her tiny pink tongue.

While Mandy reunited with her furbaby, Loki turned down the bed, plumped up the pillows, and
retrieved the remote for the TV and placed it within easy reach on the nightstand.

“Would you like some ice water? Tea?”

“That would be lovely,” Mandy smiled. She scooted up and lay back on the pillows, luxuriating in the softness of the bed. She kicked off her slippers and said to Mystic, “We’re living in high cotton for now, little girl.”

The dog lay on her lap, tail wagging, clearly happy her mistress was with her.

Loki departed to fetch the water and tea, as well as a small sweet roll he had bought at the bakery this morning.

When he returned he found not just Mandy and Mystic on the bed, but Mischief too. The cat was ensconced upon the other pillow on the other side of the bed, purring like a washing machine gone berserk.

“I see you’ve met my cat, Mischief.”

“She’s adorable with those large ears,” Mandy said.

“If she starts to bother you, I’ll take her out and close the door,” he offered.

“Don’t be silly, Loki. I love animals and have no problem with her visiting. Even Mystic doesn’t mind her.”

“She seems to get on well with Mystic,” Loki remarked. “I think because Mystic is older and more on a size with her so she doesn’t feel threatened the way she does with Odin.”

Mandy reached out to pet Mischief. “She’s a champion purrer, Loki. That will put me to sleep better than anything.”

“If you want to watch TV, here’s the remote. Just ring if you need anything. And I do mean anything.”

He bid her a brief goodbye then went to see how the kids were doing. He planned to send Mikaela in later to unpack her suitcase. He would have done it himself but didn’t want to make Mandy feel awkward.

After checking on each of the children, Loki decided to eat a quick lunch of tuna on honey wheat bread, popcorn, and a small salad. Then he took a brief nap in the recliner.

He woke to find a text from Thor on his phone. **Loki, I just got back from visiting Father and Mother. Need to discuss something with you. Heard all your kids were sick. Nine Hells, brother! Coming over now.**

That had been five minutes ago. Judging by how fast Thor could fly, Loki anticipated he would be here in another five if not sooner. No, it would be five, since Thor didn’t want anyone to see him. So he would land a few blocks away in a deserted alley and walk up to the house.

Sure enough, the doorbell rang five minutes later. Christine answered it and then came into the den. “Mr. Laufeyson, your brother is here.”

“Thanks, Christine.” Loki said, not bothering to rise from his recliner. He suspected Thor had a lot to tell him and it would be best if he were sitting down. “Could you please keep the kids occupied for an hour or two? My brother just got back from a long flight—” **like to another world—** and
we have some private family matters to discuss about our parents.”

“Of course, sir,” Christine said and then she went upstairs along with the other two aides.

Loki cast some privacy wards about the room so that even if someone did happen to hear something, it would be muffled and sound perfectly ordinary. “Hello, Thor. Long time no see.”

“I came back as fast as I could,” his brother said, and hugged him.

Loki smirked. “Miss me much?”

“You look like Hel, brother. Bruce told me about all the children getting sick and then Steve and Tony are sick too. It’s like a plague.”

“Yeah, you could say that. My neighbor Mandy is staying here too. I had to bring her to the hospital yesterday.” He quickly detailed what had gone on while Thor was in Asgard.

“By the Nine, Loki! No wonder you look like you need to sleep for a month,” Thor said feelingly. “I’m sorry I wasn’t here to help, but you know Father. When he calls he doesn’t do so just to say hello and how are you.”

“What did he want?”

“To ask my advice on a treaty with the remaining Dark Elves. He thought you wouldn’t be impartial enough given that Malakith killed you so he called me.”

“How very thoughtful of him!” Loki sneered.

“Brother, he meant to spare you pain,” Thor began.

Loki’s lip curled. “I can handle pain, Thor. Been doing it my whole life. But of course Father wouldn’t think it important enough to have my input on something so vital as a treaty between Asgard and Svartalfheim.”

“Loki, you nearly died last time you came to Asgard!” Thor objected.

“Oh, who gives a damn? What’s done is done. I’m better off here anyway.” My real family is here, he thought but did not say aloud.

“Anyway, Mother woke up while I was there and she was healed finally---”

“Mother is awake and you didn’t think to inform me?” Loki cried, hurt.

“I’m sorry, brother, it all happened so quickly,” a guilty Thor murmured.

“Of course. And Father probably figured why bother sending his Jotun son a message right away after all I’m not on the need to know list,” Loki snapped, anger roiling in his gut.

“Loki, it wasn’t like that,” Thor sighed. Then he said, “But Mother insisted that she come to visit you here on Midgard. So she and Father are going to come here for Easter.”

Loki nearly fell off the recliner. “They’re coming here? To my house?”

Thor nodded. “I suggested it. Because Easter is the time for family and renewal.”

“By the Nine, brother! Now I have to get my house in order not just for my Avenger family but for them too. Oh, Nine Hells!” he groaned.
“Loki, I thought you’d be happy . . .”

“Oh, I’m happy, Thor. So happy I’m spitting rainbows and smiley faces,” the Master of Mischief said sarcastically. “Got any other good news for me?”

“Well, while I was there I visited our old rooms in the palace that we used to have as boys. And look what I found!” He reached into a pocket of his cape, which was magically designed to hold many things, and pulled out a red box of—

“My Loki Charms cereal!” Loki gasped. “I had forgotten all about that!” he took the red box from Thor, and smiled nostalgically at the picture, which was of himself as a thirteen-year-old, gesturing with a flourish to a bowl of cereal with the title *Bifrosted Loki Charms*. The cereal featured magical marshmallow bits of a scepter, a Tesseract cube, a shield, a horned helmet, Thor’s face, and a growling wolf. The caption beneath read *They’re mischievously delicious!* And another on the opposite side said *Fortified with long lasting magical energy!*

There was a starburst advertising *Free Magical Charm Necklace Inside!*

Loki opened the box and saw to his delight that the cereal was still fresh, thanks to the preserving spell, and it still contained a small glowing cube necklace, which he removed. There was only a minor enchantment of protection on it, but still he didn’t want anything with his magical signature falling into the wrong hands. “I cannot believe you found this after all these years,” the Master of Mischief smiled. “I was thirteen when I created this based off some silly Midgardian cereal ad I saw in Father’s seeing globe. It was supposed to give me extra magical energy after I ate it.”

“Did it work?” Thor asked.

“Yes, but not as well as I hoped. The energy boost only lasted for three days and it didn’t magnify my powers the way I’d hoped. So I put it away in the closet and forgot about it,” he recalled.

“Can you still eat it?”

“Yes, it’s preserved with magic so it’s still fresh. It’s made with Asgardian kithra wheat and frost mallows. You remember how we loved frost mallows as kids right?”

Thor grinned. “You always liked them more than I did. They were too airy for me. And I hated kithra porridge. So dry and bland.”

“This isn’t. I added honey to it and coated the pieces,” Loki told him. “So it tastes good. Here, try it.”

He handed Thor some cereal.

The Thunder God munched it. “Hmm. Not bad. I feel stronger already.”

Loki rolled his eyes. “It doesn’t work like that for non-mages, Thor. It’s just cereal for you.” He ate a handful. “But for me, it will briefly increase my magical energy.” He felt the cereal create a warm glow in the pit of his stomach which spread through him like a bubbly wine. “Not bad. But I should have tweaked it a bit more. The energy transfer is a little too quick and leaves me feeling a bit giddy like I’ve drunk too much mead. Oh well. Nice to know Father didn’t tell the servants to throw everything out like it was junk in my room.”

“Mother wouldn’t let him,” Thor said.

“That explains it,” Loki remarked. He clutched the box of cereal tightly. “Guess I’d better put this
away. It’s not something I want my kids getting into. Asgardian magic doesn’t react well with mortals.” He rose gracefully to his feet. “Be right back.”

He teleported into his room, luckily Mandy was asleep. He set the cereal box on top of his armoire, intending to open it and put it in his workroom, but then he heard Sonya yelling, “No! Bad dog!”

_Odin what have you gotten into now?_

He spun on his heel and left the room, not wanting whatever was going on to disturb Mandy who needed her rest, leaving the box of Loki Charms on the top of his armoire.

The weekend came, and Loki sent the three aides home, saying that he and Thor could handle things for a few days, after paying them a generous bonus and saying he would see them again on Monday. He introduced Thor to Mandy, who told the blonde god how his brother had saved her life, and she had adopted him as her honorary grandson.

“So that’s why he calls you Bestemor,” Thor mused. “I had wondered.”

“I can adopt you too, dearie,” she said with a twinkle in her eye. “A woman can never have too many grandsons.”

Thor smiled. “Thank you. I never knew my grandparents. They were gone before I was born. But you also have all nine of Loki’s children to be great-grandchildren.”

“Such sweet little imps,” Mandy laughed. “I hope they’re all recovering.”

“They seem to be. Thank goodness.” Thor said fervently. “How are you feeling, Bestemor?”

“Oh, it’ll take some time for my old bones to mend. I’m not a spring chicken anymore,” Mandy smiled. “No doubt those kids will be well before I am. But I’m shooting for Easter. I hear your parents are coming from Norway to celebrate it with you.”

“They are,” Thor confirmed. “I fear my brother feels a bit . . . overwhelmed.”

“Having your relatives over can be, but I’m sure Loki will handle it fine. He’s very resourceful.”

“We shall manage it together,” Thor stated. Then, noticing Mandy was growing sleepy said, “I shall take my leave of you now and let you get some sleep. Loki would punch me out if I ruined your recovery.”

Mandy chuckled. “Go on then, boy! I guess I am a wee bit knackered.” Then she closed her eyes and within moments was asleep.

Mystic came and jumped on the bed and curled next to her mistress. Thor left the old woman and the Pom resting and went to see what else Loki needed him to do.

“And keep an eye on the kids for me for a bit. Right now they’re all sleeping still. I gave them doses of their medicine earlier this morning, so when they wake up they can have some breakfast, nothing too heavy—toast, fruit, oatmeal, or cereal is fine. But I need to take a walk.” He ran his hands through his long hair. “I haven’t been out of this house except to take Mandy to the ER in days. I’m going a little stir crazy.”

Thor recognized the signs and said softly, “Go fly, brother. Take all the time you need. I shall mind the younglings and the animals.”
Loki flashed him a grateful smile, then walked into the backyard. In moments a peregrine falcon soared into the blue vault of the sky and disappeared from view.

Thor found a package of Oreos in the pantry and took it and a container of milk into the den. He turned the TV on and began to watch reruns of Highlander, a favorite show of both his and Loki’s. Soon half a package of Oreos was gone and so was half the gallon of milk. Thor found himself nodding off in the middle of an episode and before he could say “Bifrost” he was snoring, the combination of the snack and the quiet house serving to send him to dreamland.

Max woke and wondered where everyone was, the house was so quiet. He slipped out of bed and attached his gold cape to his Loki pajamas and padded over to Aleta’s room, but she was still asleep, the children’s Tylenol tended to knock her out. Then he wanted to ask his father something, and he went over to Loki’s bedroom and opened the door, forgetting that Mandy was now using it.

“Dad, I’m hungry,” he said, then looked over towards the bed and saw Mandy snoring with Mystic next to her. “Ooops!” he put a hand over his mouth.

As he backed away from the bed, his eye was caught by a red box on top of the wardrobe. His eyes widened when he recognized it was a cereal box. “Maybe Dad forgot to put it away in the kitchen,” he whispered to Mystic. He looked around for something to get it down with, then found one of Mystic’s balls on the floor and threw it at the box, trying to knock it off the armoire.

Max had pretty good aim and the box was right on the edge of the shelf.

“The ball hit it and it tumbled down into his arms.

“Yay! New cereal!” the little boy grinned. Holding it in one hand, Max ran out the door and into Aleta’s room, shutting her door as he did so. “Aleta, wake up! It’s morning and we gots new cereal with Dad’s picture on it!”

“Aletus, whaddya want?” growled his sister crossly. “You gotta see this!”

She scowled. “What is it? M’sleepy!

He held out the box of Loki Charms. “Lookit!”

She rubbed the sleep from her eyes. “That’s cereal. So?”

“Aletus on the box.” Max pointed.

Aleta stared. “But he’s little, like Hunter! How come he’s on here?”

“Dunno. Maybe cause they wanted him to be?”

Aleta shook the box. “What kinda cereal is it?”

“One with marshmallows, silly!”

Aleta opened the box. “Mmm! I like how it smells! Let’s eat some!”

“Okay. Lemme get some milk. You got spoons n’ bowls?”

“In my play kitchen,” Aleta said and went to where she had a pretend kitchen set up in the corner of her room with plastic utensils, food, and serving dishes. They were sized for a toddler.
Max headed downstairs to get some milk. He found the container right out on the coffee table and his uncle was snoring on the couch. He grabbed the milk and ran back upstairs with it, happy it wasn’t that heavy.

In her room, Aleta had poured two bowls of cereal and was waiting impatiently for Max to return. Just as her brother reached the landing, Vince came out of the bathroom and spied him. “Max, what are you doing?”

“Getting milk for my cereal,” the little boy answered.

“What cereal?” Vince queried.

“The one Aleta and I are having,” Max shoved open the door. “Aleta, I gots the milk!”

“Hurry and bring it here, Max. I’m hungry.”

Vince followed saying, “What kind of cereal are you eating? I want some too.”

Then he saw the box on the floor. “Cool! It’s Loki Charms! I think Dad made cereal now! Where’d you get this?”

“It was in Dad’s room. He forgot to put it in the kitchen,” Max replied, pouring milk into his cereal and Aleta’s.

“Neat! Hey, Nate! Look at this!” he took the box and went to show his brother.

Nate wheeled his chair over. “What’s that? It’s Dad on a cereal box! Must be some new campaign thing.” He read the box. “Hey, where’s the magic necklace?”

Vince shrugged. “Aleta and Max say there wasn’t one. Maybe it’s gonna get put in later? Anyway, let’s eat some! I’m hungry.”

“Go get us some bowls.”

Soon Vince returned with some bowls and spoons and retrieved the milk from Aleta’s room. “How’s it taste?” he called to his small siblings.

“Really yummy!” they chorused. “It’s the bestest!”

“Vince, this says fortified with long-lasting magical energy,” Nate remarked. “Could the cereal be enchanted?”

Vince shook his head. “You can’t sell enchanted cereal, Nate. Besides, it won’t do anything to you even if it was... you don’t have magic.” At least he assumed it wouldn’t.

He poured two more bowls. Now half the box remained.

They were just about to eat when the rest of their siblings showed up and asked where the party was and why they hadn’t been invited.

“Hey, share the wealth, bros!” Hunter said, and took the cereal box. “What the heck is this?”

“It’s Dad’s new cereal—Loki Charms!” Nate replied.

“Loki Charms? Must be doing some ad campaign,” Samantha said. “Give it here, Hunter, don’t be
a pig.”

“What? I only have one bowl!”

“Hey, we want some too!” protested Serena, Belle, and Lucy.

Luckily there was enough cereal for all nine children to have a bowl, though afterwards the box was empty.

All of them dug into their bowls, enjoying the sweet crunchy taste and the funny shaped colored marshmallows that melted like spun sugar on their tongues.

It was Aleta who first noticed something funny after she had finished her bowl. “Max, I feel kinda warm,” she giggled. “And fizzy.”

Little did she know the enchanted cereal was increasing her magic exponentially.

She felt her magic sparkle through her like ginger ale fizz, then she decided to try something she had always wished to do.

She narrowed her eyes and concentrated, then said to her small army of stuffed animals and dolls, “Ten hut! I command you all to march!”

A glowing ball of light exploded from her fingers and settled over the army of toys. In a twinkling all of the toys stood up and began to march around the room.

“Max! Max!” Aleta yelled excitedly. “I made me dolls n’ animals come alive! Look!”

“Cool!” her brother cried. “Now we can play with ‘em!” But before he could do so, he said, “Aleta, I feel weird.”

“Like sick?” his sister asked.

“No, just . . .” Suddenly a blue light enveloped him and he began shrinking until he was only two inches tall. He was so shocked he tripped over his spoon and landed in his cereal bowl with the milk.

“Help! Help! Aleta!” he shrieked, splashing about in the bowl as if he were in a pool. “I can’t swim!”

“Max!” Aleta yelled. “How come you’re small?”

“How should I know!” her brother squeaked. “Get me outta here!”

Aleta reached in her hand. “Quick climb on my hand! Or should I get Rescue Barbie?”

Max managed to scramble onto Aleta’s hand, which was like a raft to him.

His sister looked humungous to him.

“Max, you’re like the size of a mouse,” Aleta squealed.

Max covered his ears. “Not so loud, Aleta!”

“Sorry!” she whispered, then she set her brother down. “You’re all wet.”

“I know,” he said grumpily. “Got a towel?”
Aleta handed him a tissue. Max took it and rolled about on it until he was dry. “Max, you better be careful, you could get stepped on.”

“I know,” the miniature boy sighed. Suddenly Minx ran up to him. “Hey, can I ride Minx?”

The lokitty nodded and Max jumped on her back. “Yeehah! I’m a cat rider!”

“Everybody, follow me!” Aleta ordered, putting on her princess helm and taking her plastic wand in her hand. Then she marched out the door with her entire army following, including Minx and Max.

Across the hall, Belle noticed something occurring with her magic after she had eaten the cereal. She felt suddenly stronger and as if she could run a marathon. “Vince, something’s happening to me. My magic—it’s like overflowing!”

She stared at her hand, which now ran with rivulets of rainbowed light. “By the Nine!” Experimentally, she flicked the rainbowed light just as Mischief ran by.

The light caught the black kitten and made her fly in the air.

“Rrrow!”

“Mischief!” Belle cried, shocked.

The kitten was now running on the air, all her fur on end.

“Belle, get her down!” Samantha cried.

“I . . . I don’t know how!” her sister cried. She flicked her hand again, only this time she felt her own feet leave the ground and she too soared up in the air. “Yggdrasil’s Roots! I’m flying!”

Vince felt something odd happening to him too. “What the—?” He stared at his left hand, which had turned blue and waxy.

Serena screamed. “OMG! Vince, you’re like a zombie—half of you any how!”

“Really? Neat!” He ran in the bathroom to look at himself in the mirror.

What he saw was that half of his body, including his hair, had become blue skinned and dark long hair sprouted from one side of his head. Vertical white stripes cover the blue half of his face, and he whooped in delight. “Serena, you idiot! I’m not a zombie—I’m a frost giant! Well, half a one!”

Just then Max on Minx and Aleta ran into the room.

“OMG. What happened to you?” Serena cried, horrified. “You’re like a mini Lego figure!”

“Max shrunk!” Aleta told her. “And I made my dolls come alive!”

Hunter gaped at his siblings. “How is this happening?”

“It’s the Loki Charms!” Vince cried. “Has to be!”

“How come it’s not working on the rest of us?” Lucy asked. “I wanna fly like Belle!”

No sooner had she opened her mouth then huge feathered wings sprouted from her shoulders. “Whoa! I’m a Valkyrie for real!”
Nate frowned. “What’d you do, Lucy?”

His golden-haired sister flapped her cream-colored wings. “I just wished I could fly and this happened!”

“Well, I wish I could walk,” Nate said, and suddenly a thrilling tingling went through his paralyzed lower half and he suddenly pushed himself to his feet.

Everyone gasped.

“Nate, you’re standing on your feet!” Vince cried.

“I . . . know . . .” his brother cried, amazed.

“Take a step,” Hunter encouraged.

“I’ll do better than that!” Nate yelled. He suddenly jumped the entire length of the room and climbed up the wall.

“Look out Spidey! There’s a new wall crawler in town!” hooted his Ghost Speaker brother.

Hunter felt a tingling in his own limbs then suddenly he morphed into a large gangly black wolf with white feet. “I’m a wolf!” he cried, but what came out of his mouth was growls and yelps.

Suddenly, Serena began to cough, and colored bubbles blew out of her mouth. “Hey!” she shrieked and more bubbles flew out.

Hunter barked and jumped at the bubbles.

“Cool!” Lucy cried. “You’re like a bubble machine!” She flew into the air and began popping the bubbles.

Samantha, who had eaten last, was the last one to show the effects of magical cereal. Her hands began to glow and the bedpost she was leaning on turned to spaghetti. “What the heck?” She pulled her hand back and stared at it.

“Touch this!” Vince picked up a tennis ball, and handed it to her, and it became a meatball.

“Wow! Instead of everything I touch turning to gold, it turns to food,” Samantha whistled. “And now I sound like a tea kettle!” She tossed the meatball to Hunter, who devoured it in two seconds.

“When does this wear off?” Serena asked, more bubbles exploding from her mouth.

“Who says we want it to?” Nate said, now walking on the ceiling. He was delighted with his new magical powers.

“Nate, this can’t last,” Belle said, finally managing to get down on the ground. She held Mischief, who was shivering in her arms. “I’m not sure, but I think this is only temporary. So you’d better come down before it wears off.”

“Killjoy!” her brother yelled, then flipped upside down and landed on his feet. “I feel fine!”

“Look what I can do, Nate!” Vince picked up his brother’s bed with his blue frost giant hand. “Super strength!”

“Vince, watch it!” Lucy cried circling her brother in the air. “You might drop it!”
As if that were a premonition, the bed slipped sideways and crashed onto the floor.

“Whoops!”

Mandy woke up. “Lord have mercy! Was that an earthquake?”

The kids glanced at one another in horror. “We can’t let her see us! She doesn’t know about magic.”

Odin rushed upstairs, barking.

“What in Hel is going on?” they heard Thor bellow. He came thundering up the stairs. “Okay what broke?”

"Oh no!" Belle said as they heard Thor's heavy footsteps coming up the stairs.

"We're in trouble now!" Sam said.

Thor stormed down the hallway when he appeared in the doorway and saw the smashed bed. "By the Nines, what happened in here?!"

Odin came in behind Thor as he sniffed the floor and headed for the cereal box. "No! Odin! Don't eat that!" Max shouted and Thor turned to look at the cereal box lying on the floor.

"Is that....?! No! Keep it away from the dog!" Thor shouted.

"Get the box!" Aleta yelled to her dolls, who nearly trampled Minx doing as she ordered.

The dolls startled Odin and Thor when they grabbed the cereal box and ran over to Aleta.

"Aleta! Be careful! You nearly knocked Max down!" Belle said. "Sorry," Aleta said,-taking the box from the dolls, but Odin was determined to get the sweet smelling treat.

"Give it here!" Nate said as Aleta tossed him the cereal box and Nate started climbing the wall. "Odin's Good Eye, you can use your legs?!" Thor gasped.

"Uh, yeah, I can," Nate said as he watched Odin barking at him and tried to jump up to get hold of the box.

Hunter gave a play growl and jumped on the shepherd and the two wrestled across the floor, knocking Vince's skateboard to the ground.

"Hey! Watch the board, Hunter!" Vince cried.

"Sorry, Bro,' Hunter said and Odin playfully barked and wiggled under Hunter.

"Nephew, you're a wolf?!!" Thor exclaimed.

"Uh, yeah," Hunter said with a grin.

"Right. Hand over the cereal. Now!" Thor said with a look Loki gave them when they misbehaved.
"Will someone please tell me what's going on?!" Mandy yelled and Thor looked at the doorway. "Now look what you've done."

"Uncle Thor, you'd better tell her something quick," Samantha whispered. "Before she comes over here." She hid her glowing hands behind her back,

Sighing, Thor left the room then he went to Loki's bedroom and saw the worried look on Mandy's face.

"Thor, what was that noise? I thought the house was hit by an earthquake!"

"No, no. Odin got excited and chased Mischief on top of a . . . err . . . dresser and it tipped over. But everything's fine, Bestemor. I can fix it." He put an arm around the tiny woman. "Now why don't you get back in bed? You'll catch a chill standing here."

"Was anyone hurt, dearie?"

"Oh no. Except the dresser," Thor reassured her, and ushered her back to bed.

"Where's Loki?"

"He went out for a walk," he told her. "Do you need anything? Some tea or soup?"

"Some tea would be wonderful. And one of those scones if you have any more," Mandy said.

"I'll go check." Thor promised and then hurried from the room, shutting the door behind him. Phew! That had been close!

Thor hurried back to the other room as he saw the children trying to keep Odin quiet and he sighed.

"Is Mandy ok, Uncle Thor?" Sam asked.

"Yes, I told her a dresser was knocked over while Odin was chasing Mischief," he said, looking at Odin and Hunter curled on the floor and Odin was sleeping peacefully.

"That was good thinking," Belle remarked, letting the kitten down. Mischief sniffed and looked frazzled.

"I am going to make Mandy some tea. Do I have your word there will be no more surprises?"

"Yes, sir," Vince sighed. "But we didn't know what the cereal would do till after we ate it."

"Why would Daddy allow them to make a magic cereal to begin with?" Belle asked.

"They didn't make the cereal," Thor said then smiled. "He did."

"Daddy made a magic cereal?!!" Max asked.
"Aye. He wanted to make something to briefly increase his magical energy. It didn't work like he wanted and the power only lasted three days."

"I'm going to be able to use my legs for three days?!!" Nate asked with a wide grin.

"That's great for you, but what about me? I'm Samantha the Magic Food Buffet!" his sister moaned. "How am I gonna do anything like this?"

"What are you talking about?" Thor asked and Sam showed him how she can turn anything into food by turning a sock into a slice of pizza.

"And look, every time I talk, I spit bubbles!" Serena wailed.

"And I can make my toys real!" Aleta said, pointing to her dolls and they waved at Thor,

"What about the rest of you?" Thor asked. They told him what they could do as he sighed and wondered how Loki would react once he came home.

"Where's Dad?" asked Nate.

"He went out flying," Thor explained. "But he ought to be home any minute now."

Loki loved being able to fly when in falcon form. The world was spreading out before him and he was one with the wind. He wondered if this was what it was like when Thor flew and dipped his wings to the left. He soared over the treetops when he noticed an older gentleman sitting on the bench and he was feeding the ducks some seeds. Curious, Loki landed on the top of the bench as he watched the older gentleman and noticed he was wearing warm clothing, a large brim hat and sunglasses. The older gentleman didn't seem to notice him at first when he smiled and turned to look at him. "Hello, friend," the older man said with a grin. "Are you hungry?" Loki just looked at him when the older gentleman sighed and looked at the ducks.

"I guess not," he said and looked at the two ducklings who were fighting over the seeds. “See those two? They remind me of my sons. The large one is always overshadowing the little one and the little one feels like he is worthless. He’s not. He has gotten in trouble in the past, but he has also proven he isn’t the villain people thought he was. Not anymore. He has taken on more responsibility then even I could handle and is doing a remarkable job. He is a better father as well. I know I wasn’t the best, but I tried. I just hope he can forgive me at some point for what I’ve done because I do love him.” Loki looked at the older gentleman as he blinked then the older gentleman slowly got to his feet and wiped the seeds off his hands. “I also hope he will welcome me when I come see him over Easter,” the older gentleman said then slowly walked away.

Loki was stunned when the older gentleman vanished in a flash of light then changed back to his normal self and smiled. “You’re always welcome, Father,” he said then turned back into a falcon and flew away.

“Is he going to be angry with us?” Hunter asked.

"Oh, yes, he is going to be angry, but only because you meddled in something you didn't understand," Thor said and Max sniffed while tears appeared in his eyes.
“I shouldn’t have touched the cereal without asking,” the tiny boy wept. Thor felt sad for the little boy as he picked him up and held him against his chest.

"How was we supposed to know it was bad for us?" Aleta asked, looking upset. "It was good cereal!"

"Yes, but just because something looks good doesn't mean it is," Thor said and Max found comfort in the loud gentle thumping of his uncle's heart.

"Yeah, somethings care really hurt you if you eat it," Hunter said.
'I shoulda known better when I read the box," Vince admitted. "It DID say magically fortifying."

"What do you think Dad will do when he finds out?" Sam asked.

"We're gonna get scolded into next week," Serena hiccupped and rainbow bubbles floated all over the room.

"And be put in time out forever," Aleta said.

"I don't want to be in time out forever!" Max sobbed.

"I'll tell him it was my fault," Vince volunteered. "He can take away my skateboard and ground me to my room."

"No, I'm the oldest," Sam said. "It will be my fault."

"Like that'll ever work," Hunter snorted. "I'm the one usually giving him an attitude, and stuff, so I'll take the blame."

"Guys, you're all forgetting something. None of us can lie to Dad. We all promised not to and--and he'd know anyway." Lucy reminded them.

"Yeah, so I guess we'll just have to hope he...," Belle said.

"I'm home!" Loki called out and they looked at each other.

"Thor, where are you? This tea kettle is boiling over!"

“Coming!” Thor said as he left the room and headed down the stairs.

"Were you making tea and forgot?" his brother queried. "Good thing my tea kettle won’t burn. I put a charm on it. How are the kids and Mandy?"

"Mandy is feeling better and that's who I was making the tea for," Thor said as he pouted the water into one of Loki's best tea cups and placed the tea bag in the cup.

"And the kids?"

"They're fine," Thor said and quickly left the room with the tea.
Loki frowned. Something felt wrong here. "Thor, what aren't you telling me?" He hurried up the stairs, wondering if Odin had made a mess on the carpet or something.

He saw Thor go into his room when a cold chill moved through him and he followed. Mandy thanked Thor for the tea then she looked at Loki and smiled. "Hello, dearie."

"Are you all right?" Loki asked.

"Yes, but I did have a scare. There was this loud noise and I thought we were having an earthquake."

"Really?!" Loki said, looking at Thor.

"It turned out Odin was chasing poor Mischief and knocked over the dresser."

"He did?!" Thor now understood what the children were talking about Loki knowing when someone lied and he nodded.

"Well, I'm glad you're feeling better," he said then looked at Thor. "Brother, may I have a word?"

Thor followed Loki into the hallway. "Loki, there's something I need to tell you . . ."

"I'll say. Starting with what in Hel happened here while I was gone?" his brother frowned sharply.

"I just want your word you will not punish them harshly."

"Punish who?"

"The children."

"Why would I punish them?"

"Well, you see, Max found your cereal...."

"He what?!"

"He found your cereal and he and Aleta had some."

"By the Norns!"

"Then the others had some."

"They all ate it?!"

"Aye, and, well, things happened."

"What sort of things?"

"Magical ones. That's why I told Mandy about Odin knocking over the dresser. Because no one except family can know what really went on here."

"I see," Loki said with a nod when something tugged on the cuff of his pants and he looked down to see a two-inch-tall Max.

"By the Nine!"

Loki picked up Max as the itty bitty boy gave him a sad look and tears rolled down his cheeks.
"I'm sorry, Daddy," Max said and Loki felt an ache in his heart. He knew he should be angry with his youngest son, but he also hated seeing Max so upset.

"Max, how did you even get my Loki Charms, son? I put them up where you can't even reach," sighed the frost giant.

"I used one of Mystic's balls and knocked it down," Max said.

"Maximus, what have I told you about touching anything in my room?"

"That I'm not supposed to," he said with a sniff.

"And what happens when you do touch something?"

"I get put in time out."

"Then why did you?"

"I was hungry and couldn't find you."

"You could have woken Sam up."

"I almost woke up Missus Mandy."

"And you knew she was sick."

"Yeah," Max said with a nod.

"So now everyone has some sort of magical power and we need to keep her from finding out. She doesn't know we have magic and might not understand."

Would she be scared of us, Daddy?"

"She might."

"I don't want her to be scared of us."

"Neither do I," his father sighed.

"What are you going to do?"

"I want to talk with your brothers and sisters and see if I can't fix this."

"They're all in Vince and Nate's room," Thor coughed.

Nodding, Loki carried Max back to Vince and Nate's room and looked at his miserable children. "Hey, Dad," Hunter said when Odin woke up and headed for Loki. He sniffed Loki's foot then sat down and panted. "Well, what do you have to say for yourselves?" Loki asked and they looked at their feet. Loki then noticed Nate was standing and his eyes widened.

"Nate, you're standing?"

"Yeah, and I can do this!" Nate said and started climbing the wall.

"Be careful!"
"I am!" Nate said as he climbed along the ceiling then looked down at his dad. "Hi, Dad!"

"Hello. Now please come back down before I have a heart attack," Loki said with a grin. After Nate climbed back down, Loki walked over to him and gave him a hug. For the first time, Loki noticed how tall Nate was and silently wished he didn't have to take this gift away from him.

"Dad?"
"Yes?"

"It's okay," Nate said as if he knew what Loki was thinking. "I know you want me to do this all the time, but I'm happy the way I am. And I'd have to give up the cool chair Uncle Tony built. Some of the best things only last a little while."

"If I could, I would let you remain like this," his father whispered. "But even my magic can't fix everything."

"I know."

"Uh, Daddy," Belle said and he turned to look at her. "Uncle Thor said we're going to be like this for three days. Maybe, if we're careful, no one will find out."

"Missus Mandy might. She's just down the hall. If she sees Nate walking, she might ask questions," Vince said.

"Then I'll just use my chair," Nate said.

"And what about Max? He might get squished or stepped on," Aleta said.

"You could look after me," Max said. "I can stay in your dollhouse."

"Speaking of dolls," Thor said as the dolls started heading out of the room.

"Get them!" Lucy shouted.

"Hey! Report back to me, troops!" Aleta called. "On the double!"

The dolls quickly turned and marched back to their mistress and stood at attention. "Whew, that was close," Serena said.

"Where's my Loki Charms?" her father asked.

"Here, Dad," Vince said as he handed him the cereal box and Loki handed Max to Vince.

"Brother, maybe I should take the cereal to the mansion? Maybe Stark will know a safe place to hide it?" Thor said.

"Ah, no," Loki said with a shake of his head.

"Yeah, that's all we need. Uncle Bruce on a sugar high," Samantha sighed.

The sudden image of a rampaging Hulk on a sugar high moved through Loki's head as he shivered and held the cereal box against his chest. He peered inside and noted nearly all of the
cereal was gone. “Odin’s Spear, how much did you eat?”

"Uh, nearly all of it," Lucy said.

"I'm amazed none of you got sick, considering what mischief you all managed to get into with just one bowl of cereal each." He eyed Vince and said, "How did the bed get broken?"

"Uh.... That was me," Vince said. "I'm really strong."

"How strong?"

Vince walked over to Thor and lifted him carefully off the floor.

"By the Nine!" Thor said then laughed.


"I can do this," Sam said and turned a pen into a banana.

"Transformation spell," Loki said, softly.

He also included Nate's wall crawling and Max shrinking down to two inches to the list of things they could do then looked at Hunter. "You're a wolf, wolfling!"

"I'm a Valkyrie!" Lucy said, and spread her wings and flew up to the ceiling.

"Those are all shifter powers," the master mage mused.

"I can do this, Daddy," Serena said and blew out some bubbles from her mouth.

"And I made my toys come alive!" Aleta and the dolls saluted Loki.

"And what can you do?" he asked and looked at his little Lorekeeper.

"I can fly, too," Belle said and lifted off the ground.

"No, that's more like levitation," Loki said and Belle frowned.

Then he said, "I think I figured out why you all have the magic you do. All of those effects are spells I was studying when I did this experiment. Well, except for the shifting and the Jotun strength, I always had those. But the other enchantments . . . I was an apprentice when I made this cereal, and I was trying to figure out a way to make my spells stronger."

"You wanted to shrink, Daddy?" Max asked.

"Not really," Loki said and looked at Thor. "I wanted to make someone else feel small."

"You wanted to shrink me?" Thor asked. He then remembered the times he belittled his little brother and how he must have felt two inches tall.

"Brother.....," Loki said, but Thor shook his head. "No, I understand. I must have made you feel small with all my teasing when we were young. For that, I do apologize."

Loki smiled at his brother as he nodded and Aleta looked at her dolls. "Why did you want your toys to be alive?" she asked.
"I... I didn't have many friends as a child. I wanted ones who would do what I wanted and would do as I said," Loki said and she ran to her daddy and hugged his legs. "I would play with you, Daddy," she said.

"What about the bubbles?" Serena asked.

"That was just something silly I added."

"Because magic should be fun and not always serious," Belle smirked.

"Right," her father said and tapped the tip of her nose playfully.

"Why did you want to fly?"

"He wanted to fly because I could," Thor said.

"Yes, I wanted to soar through the sky alongside you," Loki said.

"What about climbing walls?" Nate asked.

"It would come in handy if I wanted to spy on someone."

"Why did you want to be a Valkyrie?" Lucy asked.

"Because they had special magical horses that were their bondmates. I have always loved horses. But no one is allowed to ride or to touch a Valkyrie's horse except a Valkyrie." Loki said quietly. He had tried, of course. His insatiable curiosity had earned him one of the worst switchings of his life for daring to "defile" one of the sacred horses from the Mistress of Swords.

"Oh," Lucy said. Loki walked to her and she gave him a hug and he kissed the top of her head.

"It was a long time ago," he said and she smiled up at him.

"Are we still in trouble?" Aleta wanted to know, her lower lip trembling.

"You are. But your punishment is to learn how to live with your magical gifts until they wear off, and to make sure that Missus Mandy doesn't find out about them. As well as remember to never eat anything you think is magical without checking with me first. Because next time the magic might not be so amusing, but could harm you. Am I understood?"

"Yes, Dad!" they all replied.

Loki heaved a sigh. "You hooligans are gonna drive me to drink with your shenanigans!"

"We're sorry!" they said contritely.

"You should be. But I forgive you." He held out his arms. "Group hug!"

All of them ran to him and hugged him, with Vince making sure Max wasn't crushed by putting him on Loki's shoulder. Loki looked at his brother. "You too, Thor."

Thor clasped them all very gently in his huge arms.

"Okay, now I need to eat something because I'm starving," Loki declared, releasing his children and sibling.

“Have some Loki Charms,” Thor teased. “They're mischievously delicious!”
Everyone howled with laughter, including Loki. He then sent the box of Loki Charms back down to his workroom, out of the reach of curious hands.

“T’ll think I need a stiff drink,” Loki muttered to Thor as they went downstairs. “That and a maple bacon and egg sandwich.”

“I can supply the mead, brother,” Thor offered. “But the sandwich . . . umm . . .”

“Never mind, Thor. I’m not eating charcoal,” Loki twitted.

And so ended the saga of the missing Loki Charms.
A Time of Renewal

Chapter Summary

Loki has the entire family over for Easter

23

A Time of Renewal

As the Easter sun rises, it brings with it the light of hope and renewal that blesses all it touches, and fulfills all promises of the heart. ~ Loki

The Spring Equinox this year fell upon March 21st, which when the traditional celebration of the goddess of spring Eastre was held. Knowing this Loki prepared for the arrival of his parents and his Avenger family by cleaning the house until it sparkled, using both Midgardian methods and then keeping up with it using his magic. The children all recovered from the flu and returned to school, except for Max and Aleta, who remained at home with their father.

The two mischief-making scamps often tested his patience during the week leading up to the holiday, as he was busy preparing for the big day by cooking all kinds of treats and preserving them with magic so they would last until the feast. He was also inventing clues for the big egg scavenger hunt, and quietly filling the baskets at night with the Easter candy and gifts then hiding them in his armoire, which he locked with a key he wore about his neck.

The kids and Mandy, who was still recuperating from her bout with the flu, volunteered to dye the Easter eggs this year, and he had bought about five kits to do so, so they could make all kinds of colored eggs, including glittery ones, tie dye ones, and ones with animal decals upon them. The night before, they boiled five dozen eggs, then placed them back in the cartons, ready to be decorated the next day.

The trouble began when Max decided to borrow a dye cup Aleta was using and Aleta grew angry because he hadn’t asked her. “That’s my robin blue dye, Max!”

“You’re supposed to share, Aleta!”

His sister gave him a fierce glare. “And you’re supposed to ask first, Maximus!” She slid the dye cup back over to her side of the egg carton.

“Hey! I was using that!” Max yelled, then went to grab the cup back.

“Keep your hands to yourself!” Aleta cried.

“Now, dearies, you can both take turns,” Mandy began placatingly from her side of the table.
“Well, it was my turn, but Aleta stole my dye!” Max pouted.

“It was mine first, Maximus!” his sister insisted. “Now wait your turn.”

“You’re not the boss of me, Aleta Lenore!” her brother growled, then went to take the cup back.

Then his elbow bumped into the orange dye cup and some of it sloshed onto Aleta’s shirt.

“Maximus, you got orange on my princess shirt, you dumb cluck!” Aleta howled.

“It’s your fault ‘cause you wouldn’t give me the dye!” her brother snapped.

“Well, now you can wear it!” Aleta cried and threw the orange dye at her brother, getting dye all over his clothes.

“Stop, you two!” Mandy shouted.

“Dad! Aleta threw dye on my clothes!” Max howled.

“What the blazes is going on in here?” Loki demanded, coming into the kitchen. “You’re supposed to be dying eggs, not having WWIII!” He fixed his two dripping orange children with a Disapproving Look.

“Max started it!” Aleta pointed a finger accusingly at her brother.

“Did not! Aleta wasn’t sharing!”

“Quiet, the pair of you!” their father snapped. “Mandy, I apologize. They know better than to behave like this.”

“All little children quarrel, Loki,” the wise old woman said. “It’s no fault of yours.”

He shook his head and turned back to his two troublemakers, who were now giving each other glares worthy of Fenris in a snit. “I don’t care who started it, I’m finishing it,” he said in a controlled tone. “If you can’t dye eggs nicely together, you won’t be dying them at all.”

“Noo!” Aleta sobbed. “We’ll be good!”

“M’sorry!” Max sniffled.

“All right. Now both of you apologize and start remembering the manners I taught you,” Loki ordered.

He waited until the two had done as he had said, then looked at Mandy. “Umm . . . you have purple dye on your shirt, Mandy.”

“Ooops!” the elderly woman giggled. “Looks like we all got dye-tized!”

“Would you like to get changed?” Loki asked solicitously. “Sometimes that dye can stain if it sets.”

Mandy considered. “Okay, dearie. I am rather fond of this shirt. My late husband gave it to me.”

Loki offered her his arm and escorted her up the stairs to his room, moving slowly in deference to her arthritic knees.

“Sometimes I just don’t know what gets into them,” he lamented as they ascended the stairs. “No,
scratch that. I know what gets into them—the same thing that is in me—the imp of mischief.”

Mandy patted his hand. “They’re good kids, Loki. All kids have an imp in them. It simply shows more on some days than on others.”

Meanwhile in the kitchen, Aleta was getting ready to dye an egg with some glitter paint and Max tied a white cloth around his egg and dipped it in the blue egg dye. He was reaching for the container of stickers when Odin woke up and decided he wanted to play.

The shepherd puppy whined and pawed at their sneakers, upset that they were busy and not paying attention to him.

“Odin, go lay down!” Max said crossly. “We’re dying eggs, not playing now.”

The puppy barked then jumped up on Aleta, jostling her arm. Some of the glitter paint spilled and dripped upon his fur.

“Oh no!” she cried. “Now look what you’ve done, Odin!”

The puppy wagged his tail happily.

Max peered over at her. “I think he looks funny. Like a rock star puppy.”

The glitter paint, which was green, had fallen upon the shepherd’s face, and now decorated his muzzle and ear.

Aleta considered. “He needs more glitter,” she declared. Then she took a paint brush and dipped it into the purple and pink paints and painted a streak down Odin’s back.

“I wanna help!” Max insisted and took a brush also and dipped it in the gold glitter paint. “I’ll do his feet.”

Five minutes later a panting Odin was shimmering in all colors of the rainbow.

Loki returned to the kitchen to see his youngest children calmly dying eggs while Odin sat beside their feet looking like he had jumped into a vat of rainbow glitter.

Loki’s jaw dropped. “Oh Sugar Honey Iced Tea!” he cried in horror.

Aleta and Max turned to look at him. “Ta da! It’s the Easter puppy!” his daughter announced.

Loki put his face in his hand. “Okay. Whose idea was it do that?”

“Some paint fell on Odin and made him into a rock star dog,” Max explained. “So then we helped.”

“Isn’t he pretty, Daddy?” Aleta asked proudly. “Like an Easter egg.”

“Oh, he’s pretty all right. Like a psychedelic LSD trip,” their father snorted, trying desperately not to burst out laughing.

“Huh? What kinda trip is that?” his son queried innocently.

“One I better never catch you on,” Loki coughed, covering his mouth to hide his smile.

“I don’t wanna go there,” Max informed his father. “I wanna go to Asgard.”
“Me too! I wanna go there and be a princess!” Aleta chimed.

“Talk to your grandfather,” Loki chuckled.

“When’s he comin’ here, Daddy?” his youngest asked.

“On Easter,” Loki repeated for the hundredth time. “Both your grandparents and your Uncle Balder will be here for the holiday.”

Frigga had sent a message by raven asking if Balder could come, as he was feeling rather down because his former wife and daughter were no longer around to celebrate with. He also wished to apologize to Loki for what his family had done to the God of Mischief.

Loki agreed. If he was going to have Odin here, he might as well have Balder too. Easter was a time for renewal and mending old wounds.

“Then we gotta make Uncle Balder a special egg like we did Uncle Thor,” Max said seriously.

“You do that while I take Odin out for a walk,” Loki agreed, then snapped his fingers and called, “Odin, come!”

He had been working with the puppy, along with Sam, to teach him basic obedience commands, hoping to tame the wildness down a bit before his Asgardian relatives came. So far it seemed to be working.

Odin trotted at his heels and Loki opened the screen door to let the puppy into the yard. Loki snapped a picture of the colorful puppy on his phone and titled it My Little Rainbow Puppy. Once Odin had done his business and gotten a pat on the head and a small piece of ham jerky, Loki took the hose and attached the Pet Hand Washer to it and washed the glitter paint off the shepherd as best he could.

Though bits of sparkle still clung to the dog’s damp fur and when he was in the sunshine he glimmered like a high elven court lady’s gown. Or a disco ball. Which made Loki start laughing. “You poor thing!” he giggled at the disgruntled dog. “You sparkle like one of those ridiculous vampires from Twilight.”

Odin woofed then shook all over his master.

“Thanks a lot!” Loki frowned, then he burst out laughing again because the dog was grinning a silly puppy grin at him.

Brushing at his damp jeans, the Master of Mischief dried the dog off with a quick dry charm, then said, “I’d better go back inside before something else ends up painted—like poor Mischief!”

He returned to the kitchen with Odin trailing him, to notice with relief that Mandy had come back and was helping the two children do a striped egg for their uncle, and it didn’t look like anything else had been painted that wasn’t an Easter egg.

“Look, Dad! We made Uncle Balder a special striped egg.” Max said, pointing to the green, gold, and purple striped egg now sitting in the cardboard carton to dry.

“When it’s dry I’m gonna paint it with glitter too,” Aleta said.

“It’ll be too pretty to eat,” Loki remarked.

Odin flopped down under the table by Loki’s boots, worn out from being the Easter doggie.
“Let’s dye this next one this bright canary yellow,” Mandy suggested. “I always liked that color.”

“Okay!” Aleta said excitedly and dipped the egg in the yellow cup.

“Mind if I help?” Loki asked, then picked up another egg and began to paint it with polka dots.

“Cool, Dad!” Max cried. “It’s like a dino egg!”

“Like in Land Before Time!” Aleta recalled, having rented the movie and seen it at least three times.

“Glad you like it,” their father smiled, then went to dye another egg.

Soon all the eggs except one carton were dyed, those were for the older kids to do when they arrived home from school.

Loki had Max and Aleta go scrub the dye from their hands while he also did so in the kitchen sink.

Just then the oven timer rang, it was time to check on the Easter bread. The Easter bread was an egg bread that was bread into a nest shape and had several colored hardboiled eggs nestled into the dough. Then it was brushed with an egg white and sugar wash on the top and some colorful dot sprinkles. It symbolized good luck and renewal and everyone was supposed to eat a piece for luck. Loki had baked 12 loaves, because his family loved it and with his parents and Balder coming would need the extra.

He had also baked one extra loaf, so they could all eat it now, and it was that loaf he checked on. As he removed the colorful bread from the oven and placed it on a cooling rack, Mandy inhaled the aroma and said, “Dearie, maybe you missed your calling. You should have become a baker and not a video game designer.”

Loki quirked an eyebrow. “No, Bestemor. This bread is all I can bake, except for simple things like cookies and magic bars and quick breads.”

“Is it done yet?” chorused Aleta and Max, practically drooling on the table.

“Yes, scamps. But it needs to cool before I cut it, or else you’ll burn your mouth and that won’t be fun at all,” he warned, thinking he sounded like Grisel, the Head Cook at Gladsheim, who used to say that every Easter, and almost every Easter as boys he and Thor would snitch pieces of the cooling bread and suffer the consequences. But a burnt tongue on an Asgardian healed in two seconds, and it was not the same for a mortal.

“Aww!” they groaned simultaneously.

But after ten minutes, Loki cut them all slices and spread them with butter. He and Mandy had theirs with tea, and the kids with chocolate milk. Mandy declared after taking a bite that this bread was heavenly, and Max said, “Dad makes the best Easter bread! Can I have more?”

“You do know we need to save some for your brothers and sisters?” Loki grinned.

“Please? Before Hunter and Vince eat it all!” Max begged, and Loki relented and gave everyone another slice.

“Where did you learn how to make this, dearie?” Mandy wanted to know.

“Oh, it’s an old family recipe,” Loki fibbed. It was partially true, the recipe was centuries old.
At last the big day arrived. Loki made sure his house was so clean you could eat off the floor. Every surface sparkled and there was not a speck of dust within a fifty foot radius of the house. He had cast space warp spells upon the house and added two rooms, so he wouldn't need to displace anyone. One room was a near mirror of his own suite, done in cool blue and silver tones, the other was a warm beige and maroon for Balder.

That done, he assisted his children in dressing for their grandparents and uncle’s arrival, the boys had their good silk shirts and last year’s Easter ties and their suit pants with their dress shoes polished to a mirror finish by Mandy. Loki himself wore his best Armani charcoal suit with a fine green silk shirt and gold Ferragamo tie with a diamond tie tack pin and his Gucci dress shoes. His girls had different dresses they had chosen, and all wore flower crowns on their heads except for Aleta, whom he couldn’t get to quit wearing her princess helm, and decided it wasn’t worth a tantrum to insist upon it.

He very nearly had a meltdown with Max that morning because the little boy had wanted to wear his Loki pajamas and not his Easter clothes. Luckily, Loki's silver tongue had prevailed, and he convinced Max that later he could change into his superhero outfit and show his grandparents. Odin, Frigga, and Balder had all been briefed about his Midgardian house guest, and would come dressed in appropriate Midgardian clothing for the occasion.

Loki had all of his children line up on the sidewalk, from oldest to youngest, with himself at the head of the line. "Okay guys, now you all remember how to greet your grandparents, right?” he instructed. At their nods he continued. "I want you all to be on your best behavior today. That means no arguing, name-calling, dirty looks, tattling, or fighting. You will all remember the manners I've taught you. If you misbehave, there will be serious consequences." He lectured using his steel sheathed in velvet voice.

"We know, Dad." Sam said. "We won't embarrass you." I hope. He was glad he had opted to be Sam for today rather than have to fuss with his hair and makeup.

"Dad, do we have to bow to Uncle Balder?" asked Vince.

"No. Balder is a prince like Uncle Thor and I am, so you can shake his hand." Loki instructed. "But you bow or curtsy to your grandparents." Were we in Asgard, all you boys-except Nate-would take a knee too.

He fought to keep from pacing like a tiger across the lawn, making himself stand still. Then he looked over at his children, making sure none of them were slouching, scuffing their shoes, picking their nose, or committing some other faux pas. They look fine, Laufeyson. Now calm the Hel down! You were less nervous when you were sentenced to prison, by the Norns! He swallowed hard, his stomach a mass of nerves.

Finally a familiar blue Caddy pulled up to the house, and Thor got out, dressed in a blue suit with a white dress shirt and red tie. He went around to the passenger side and opened the door for a tall elderly gentlemen with silvery hair and a silk eyepatch over one eye dressed in a conservative gray suit with a purple and blue striped tie and matching cummerbund.

On the other side of the car, a handsome blonde man wearing white trousers and a sky-blue button-down shirt with a white and blue striped tie exited the vehicle them held the door for a beautiful woman in her early fifties whose upswept golden hair as confined by a diamond hair piece. She was wearing a gorgeous saffron yellow gown and gold citrine jewelry adorned her arms, hands, neck, and ears.

Frigga accepted her husband’s arm, Balder and Thor to either side, and together they walked over to where Loki and the children waited.
Odin nodded to his eldest son and Balder approached his brother, a cautious smile on his face. “Loki, you’re looking well.”

“A happy Easter to you, Balder, and welcome to my home,” Loki said, and then he embraced his sibling and gave him the traditional kiss of welcome on the cheek.

Balder swallowed hard and whispered in his brother’s ear, “Loki, I’m so sorry that my wife and daughter harmed you—”

“You have nothing to be sorry for, brother,” Loki murmured back in Norse. “We can speak of it later. Now, let me introduce you to my children.”

He nodded at Sam, and he approached Balder with his hand outstretched, saying quietly, “Happy Easter, Uncle Balder. I’m Sam Laufeyson.”

Balder took the slender hand in his own and shook it firmly. “A joyous Eastertide to you, nephew.”

Hunter was next, then Belle in her beautiful gold tissue dress, who gave a respectable curtsy and then smiled at her handsome uncle. “A joyous Eastertide, Uncle Balder,” she said in flawless Norse. “I’m Belle Laufeyson.”

Balder’s eyebrows rose into his hair. “You speak the old tongue well, little niece,” he said, and took her hand and kissed it in the courtly manner of Asgard. “May the blessings of the season be upon thee, milady.”

“Belle is my Lorekeeper,” Loki explained. “She has the gift of all tongues.”

“Your father possesses that gift as well,” Balder said, his blue eyes twinkling.

Then he moved on to Nathan who held out a hand from his chair. Having been told by Thor about Loki’s children’s disabilities, Balder was not surprised and greeted Nate warmly. “This machine is most unusual. You must show me how it works, nephew.”

“Sure, Uncle Balder!” Nate said happily, always glad to show what the Magic Bullet could do.

Serena was next, giving him a quick curtsy in her frost blue dress with her diaphanous shawl, her platinum hair accented with frost blue glitter at the tips and braided in addition to her flower crown. “Serena, Uncle Balder. Welcome to our home.”

Balder kissed her hand also.

Then came Vince, who gave his uncle a cheeky grin in addition to the handshake when he introduced himself.

Lucy was next, giving her uncle a shy smile, along with her curtsy. She was wearing a pretty lavender dress and had her hair wound about her head with her flower crown atop it. “Happy Easter. I’m Lucinda Laufeyson, Uncle Balder. But everybody calls me Lucy.”

“Then I shall too, sweetling,” Balder said, charmed by the golden-haired girl, who looked almost as if she could be his own child. To her he gave a kiss on the cheek, as was proper for a male relative in greeting a child younger than seven.

“And who is this brave young lad?” Balder asked Max, kneeling so he could shake the boy’s hand. His eyes widened and he looked back at Loki questioningly.
Loki gave a brief shake of his head, knowing quite well what Balder was inferring.

“I’m Maximus, Uncle Balder. Max for short. Happy Easter!” the boy grinned adorably.

Balder smiled back, thinking that this one could have been Loki’s blood son if he didn’t know better.

Last he turned to Aleta, who wore a lovely green velvet gown with Irish lace on the sleeves and hem and pretty silk tights. “And who is this fair little maid?”

“Aleta Lenore Laufeyson! Hi, Uncle Balder!” she held out her small hand for him to kiss.

Laughing, Balder obliged.

“We made you a special Easter egg!” she told him.

“You did? That is most generous, thank you!” he said, giving her a bright smile, thinking this could have been his daughter long ago, except Aleta had not the supercilious air Jorunne had possessed even at that young age.

Then he stood to one side while Odin approached with Frigga. Frigga went immediately to embrace her son, saying softly, “Loki, how glad I am to see you again!”

“Me too, Mother! You look fantastic,” he said feelingly, hugging her tightly.

“As do you,” she returned, standing back from him and looking him up and down. “Thank you for having us, son.”

“Happy Easter, Mother!” Loki said and flashed her one of his amazing smiles. “Your grandchildren can’t wait to meet you.”

Frigga greeted each in turn, hugging both boys and girls alike warmly, and saying, “Please, call me Bestemor, children. For I am your grandma here and not Queen of Asgard.”

When she came to Max, she picked up the little boy in her arms and said softly, “Do you know you look exactly like your papa when he was your age?”

“We have the same color eyes and hair,” Max smiled.

“You do indeed and I’d wager the same mischievous nature too!” She kissed his forehead and turned back to her son and said, “Oh, Loki they are precious!”

Aleta greeted her, then asked, “May I ask you a question, Bestemor?”

“Certainly, alskling.”

“Daddy calls me that,” Aleta remarked.

“Shall I tell you a secret?” Frigga whispered. “I called him that too when he was a little boy.”

Aleta giggled.

“What was it you wanted to ask me?” Frigga encouraged.

“If you’re a queen, where’s your crown?”

“Aleta!” Loki gasped.
Frigga laughed. “Well, darling, crowns get awful heavy even for queens, so I left mine at home.”

“Daddy made me this one,” she told Frigga, indicating her soft fabric helmet.

“It is lovely, just like you,” Frigga said.

“Maybe I can make you a new crown, Bestemor?” Aleta offered.

“That would be wonderful, Aleta!” Frigga beamed. She kissed Aleta on the forehead too. “So precious!” she murmured again before going to stand beside her eldest son.

Then Odin approached Loki, who stood at attention like a good soldier, and said, “A joyous Easter to you, Father. You honor my house.”

To his utter shock, Odin hugged him. “No, Loki, my son. It is my honor to be here with you to celebrate the season of renewal.”

“Thank you, Father,” Loki said, nearly shocked speechless.

“There is something I must discuss with you later, son,” the All-Father murmured. “But first let me greet these grandchildren I have heard so much about from your brother.”

He approached Sam with a twinkle in his eye. “Well met, grandson. Thor tells me you are skilled in debate and diplomacy, a fine thing to learn.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Sam said, bowing respectfully. “I’m captain of my debate team in school.”

“Call me Bestefar, child. Like Frigga says, here we are simply your grandparents. Perhaps later we may discuss certain topics.”

“It would be my privilege, sir,” Sam said, then wished him a Happy Easter.

He turned to Hunter next, saying, “I see the arrow does not fall far from the bow, young warrior.” Before Hunter could bow to him, Odin clasped his wrist in a warrior’s greeting.

He smiled at Belle next, greeting her in Old Norse. “A joyous Easter to you, little Lorekeeper.”

“All honor to thee, Bestefar,” Belle curtsied. Then she produced a piece of parchment from her pocket. “A gift, milord. ‘Tis a poem I wrote.”

Odin took the parchment gravely. “You are most kind, granddaughter.” Then he kissed her cheek.

To Nate, he said, “Thor tells me you are a fine engineer, young Nathan.”

Nate looked pleased and said, “I’m building a labyrinth, Bestefar. Would you like to see it?”

“I would indeed. You must show me after dinner.”

He moved on to Serena, who presented him with a Rubix cube, explaining it was a logic puzzle, and Odin declared he would have to figure it out with her help.

To Vince he asked about his prowess in sports, and Vince offered to show him some skateboard tricks.

Lucy gave him a gift of chocolates, and Odin smiled and said, “Verily, little one, you are as sweet as they.”
Max was next, and like Frigga before him, Odin marveled at the resemblance between the small boy and Loki. “You are the spitting image of your father, young Max.”

“Hello, Bestefar!” Max smiled his adorable smile. “Did Uncle Thor tell you we have a puppy named after you?”

Loki wanted a hole to open up and swallow him.

“Really, Loki?” Odin queried, amused.

“Father, the dog came with that name when we adopted him,” Loki explained, flushing slightly. “So we kept it.”

“I would like to meet this namesake,” the King of Asgard said, smirking.

“Odin likes to play fetch,” Max told him. “But you gotta watch he doesn’t pee in the house.”

“Maximus!” Loki groaned. “Father, he means the puppy isn’t quite trained, but we’ve been working on it.”

“I’ve had many a puppy in my time, Loki, so I know all about it,” Odin declared. “Wolf and dog.”

“You have a wolf for a pet?” Max asked in awe.

“Two. Geri and Freki are their names. I will tell you the story later, little Lokisson.” Odin said and ruffled Max’s hair.

At last he came to Aleta, who studied him for a moment, her gray eyes wide with curiosity.

“Your dress is ravishing, little one. I am pleased to make your acquaintance, my lady.”

“I’m not a lady, I’m a princess!” Aleta corrected, her small chin lifting, and the rest of her siblings gasped. “Princess Aleta Lenore Laufeyson of Asgard! See my crown?”

Loki looked horrified, like he wanted to run away and hide. *Nine Hells, Aleta! I never should have made you that helmet.*

But Odin was not offended by the forward little girl. He smiled and said, “I stand corrected, Princess Aleta.” He peered at the familiar fabric helmet with the words Loki’s Princess upon it. “That’s a fine crown you have there. It looks much more comfortable than mine.”

“Daddy made it for me,” Aleta said proudly. Then she reached into a pocket and withdrew a card. “This is a card I made for you!”

Odin put a hand on his heart. “For me? Why thank you, Your Highness!” He took the card.

As he peered at it, Aleta said frankly, “Lemme tell you who I drew on it, Bestefar. Since you can’t see so good with one eye.”

Thor, Balder, and Frigga started laughing. So did the rest of the Laufeyson children.

“Aleta Lenore!” Loki hissed, mortified.

“What, Daddy? It’s true and you always say to tell the truth,” Aleta began.

“The little firecracker is right, Loki,” Odin laughed. “And she is your daughter for sure! The same bold sassy mouth.”
Loki exhaled sharply, relieved to see his father wasn’t angry at the child’s wry observation. Then again, he reflected, it was hard to stay angry at his little spark for long.

Aleta pointed out who was who in the drawing, then asked candidly, “Does it hurt?” she indicated Odin’s eyepatch.

He shook his head, his lips quivering. “Not anymore.”

“Did you shoot your eye out?” was her next question. “Cause Daddy always says to be careful or else we could shoot our eye out.”

“Umm . . . no . . . it was an accident . . .” Odin coughed, struggling to conceal a grin.

“Were you running with scissors? Cause you’re not s’post to do that either,” she lectured, one hand on her hip.

“Err . . . no . . .”

Loki prayed the earth would just open up and swallow him.

“Can I touch it?”

Loki put his head in his hands. “By the Nine I’m going to drop dead of embarrassment before this holiday is over!”

“That’s Loki’s daughter, all right!” Balder chortled.

“Like father, like daughter!” Thor giggled.

“Oh, Loki, she’s just precious,” Frigga told him. “She reminds me of you, dear. You always managed to ask questions no one else would dare and get answers too.”

“How is it you didn’t die from shame, Mother?” her frost giant son asked over his brothers’ laughter.

“Oh, Loki! There’s nothing more curious or more honest than a little child. Enjoy it while you can, because they grow up too quick.” Frigga patted his shoulder, her eyes sparkling.

“But Father—”

“Loki, look at him,” Frigga said, smiling. “Your little spitfire has conquered the king with her clever little tongue! Best guard that one well, my son, for she will draw men to her like moths to a flame, without even half trying.”

“Mother, please! Don’t even go there! Not yet,” her son begged. “I have four others to go through before her.”

“And you will do fine, darling,” she grinned. “Just like you have already. You ought to be proud. Your children bring honor to you, my son.”

“Thank you, Mother,” he said, a warm glow going through him at her words. Then he called, “Aleta, let your grandfather come and see the house before you start pestering him.”

“Okay, Daddy. C’mon, Bestefar! You can see my room first!” she grabbed the All-Father’s hand and began towing him towards the house.
Balder nearly asphyxiated. “Oh . . . oh . . . may the Norns have mercy . . . she’s an irresistible imp and Father doesn’t stand a chance . . .”

“C’mon, Balder. You need to meet our adopted grandmother, Mandy MacAllister,” Thor said, and led his brother into the house.

Mandy greeted Balder, Frigga, and Odin graciously, though Odin introduced himself as Olaf and Frigga as Fran. “I’m so pleased to meet you,” she told the couple. “You have raised a fine son here. If it weren’t for Loki, I wouldn’t be sitting here right now. Your son saved my life.”

Odin’s eye widened. “What happened?”

“I grew deathly ill with the flu and Loki came by and found me passed out and brought me to the hospital. Then he insisted I stay here so I wouldn’t be alone. He’s a godsend.” Mandy preened.

“I only did what any good neighbor should,” Loki said modestly.

“Most neighbors wouldn’t have bothered to check on me until I was dead,” Mandy sniffed. “And that’s the truth, dearie!”

Loki led his parents upstairs to their suite and Balder brought up their suitcases. After he had shown them their rooms, Aleta dragged them off to see her room.

Once the Asgardian king and queen had explored the house, Loki put a plate of sweet bread on a platter as well as several kinds of finger foods, then served both along with coffee to his parents and Balder. Max brought Odin in and the puppy begged pieces of sweet bread from Frigga, and said that he did remind her of her husband.

“Who made this?” Balder asked, reaching for the loaf and cutting a second piece.

“I did,” Loki replied.

Balder laughed. “Funny, Loki.”

“I’m serious,” his brother refuted. “Who do you think cooks around here?”

“I thought you hired someone,” his brother spluttered.

Loki smirked. “Why hire someone to do what I can do myself?”

“Where did you learn how to cook?” Balder wanted to know.

“I watched our cook when we were kids and I learned some from Grisel. The rest I picked up by reading and watching videos,” Loki explained.

“This is delicious, Loki,” Frigga praised. “I doubt Grisel could make it better.”

“Thanks,” Loki said, eating a piece himself. There were also some appetizers, like scallops wrapped in maple bacon, mini quiches, spinach puffs, and artichoke cheese dip with pita chips.

His family enjoyed everything he had made, and drank large amounts of tea, coffee, soda, and a dark beer.

Frigga met Mischief when she jumped on the goddess’ lap, and the kids gleefully told her how they had gone and rescued the abused animals from the shelter with the help of their Avenger uncles. Sam related how Thor and Loki had played a trick upon the receptionist and how they had come to adopt Odin.
Balder asked Loki if he might see the tree house, and Loki took him out to the backyard, where he did show him the tree house, but afterwards his older brother said sadly, “I’m sorry, Loki, that my wife and my daughter hurt you and almost killed you. They betrayed me and everything I stood for. I want you to know that Father punished them for their treachery.” He went on to detail what Loki had dreamed after waking up the morning after his restoration. “I never . . . I never thought either of them capable of what they did,” he said miserably. “But after I saw what I did in your Seeing globe I realized I had been hiding from the truth of what my daughter was. She was . . . twisted and . . . evil and it is my everlasting shame that I protected her for so long. I was a fool.”

He looked at the tree house and his eyes shimmered with tears.

Loki said quietly, “Balder, don’t blame yourself. No father wants to admit their child is a sociopathic murderer.”

“I keep thinking there was something I should have done . . .”

“There wasn’t.” Loki sighed. “You need to understand, brother, that your daughter was born lacking something in her make-up, empathy, compassion, something which makes people feel regret and remorse when they hurt someone or something. Here on Midgard, they have done studies on such individuals, and they call them psychopaths and they have cases on those who have become killers and have killed multiple times using the same kind of pattern.”

Balder stared at Loki in horror. “Then there are others like Jorunne?”

Loki nodded. “Yes. The studies have also shown how to detect signs of this disorder. I’ve read a few cases and one of the signs is a marked disregard for the life of anything, but especially animals. Most serial killers begin in childhood by torturing small animals. When Jorunne was my apprentice I told you of several times when I caught her doing so, but . . .”

“Karnilla and I thought you lied out of jealousy,” Balder admitted, ashamed. “Then when you sent her home because she . . . she tried to seduce you into doing what she wanted . . . I didn’t want to believe that so I blamed you. Because that was easier than believing that my daughter was a conniving, manipulative little bitch.” He hung his head. “Loki . . . tell me what I can do to atone for what they have done . . .”

“Balder, you don’t need to do anything.” Loki said softly. “I don’t blame you. What they did was their choice, not yours.”

“But I protected them. I didn’t see the truth until it was too late,” the blonde god sniffed. “Go ahead, hit me. I deserve it. Thor knocked me down when he first saw me once we crossed Bifrost.”

Loki arched an eyebrow. “Thor likes to settle things with his fists. But there are other ways. Besides, hitting you doesn’t really have any effect and well you know it. Stop tormenting yourself. I forgive you, Balder. Now you need to quit guilt-tripping yourself, okay?”

He put an arm around Balder’s shoulders. Balder turned and hugged him, saying hoarsely, “I loved her, Loki . . . Karnilla . . . but it wasn’t enough . . .” He began to cry, sobbing into Loki’s shoulder. “. . . she nearly tore us apart . . . and I still miss her!”

Loki just remained where he was and rubbed slow circles on Balder’s back, murmuring, “It’s okay . . . sometimes the ones we love most hurt us the most . . . shh . . .”

“. . . sorry . . .” Balder wept, hiccupping sobs. “. . . I’m getting you all wet . . .”

“You’ve nothing to be sorry for . . . just let it go . . . and don’t worry I’m not going to melt, older
brother, I’m a frost giant, remember?” Loki joked, still patting comfortably.

When Balder would have pulled away, Loki just tightened his hug and said, “I’m no psychiatrist but you need a shoulder to cry on more than I need a dry shirt.” He allowed Balder to cry himself out, sensing that his brother’s guilt was eating him alive and this was the only way he could be free of it. Finally the golden head was still on his shoulder and Loki asked, “Feel better now?”

Balder nodded. “How did you know . . .?”

Loki laughed. “Balder, I have nine kids. I’m regularly breaking up fights or hugging someone after they’ve used me as a waterfall.”

“Then you don’t mind?” sniffl ed the golden god. He went to wipe his face with his sleeve.

“Don’t do that!” Loki scolded. “Here, use a hankie, you don’t want snot all over your shirt.” He held out a cambric green square.

Balder took it gratefully. “Thanks, Loki.” He wiped his eyes. “You’ve changed, Loki, since—”

“Dying and being reborn will do that to you. So will being a father to nine orphans. Twelve technically, if I count Sleipner, Fen, and Jorgy.”

“Loki, they’re animals, monsters—” Balder began, then trailed off.

“Shifters, brother, like me, not monsters,” Loki corrected. “Though they’ve chosen to live in their shift form, unlike me. Well, Sleipner was born a horse so no wonder he feels more comfortable in that skin.”

“I wasn’t even aware they could shift.”

“They don’t like to advertise that fact. But all of them can take human form if they so choose. They simply don’t.”

“I’m a fine one to talk, considering what kind of monster my own child was,” Balder said bitterly.

“Balder, if there’s one thing I’ve learned being a parent to my nine, it’s that you aren’t responsible for all your kids mistakes. Or their choices. Jorunne wasn’t a child, Balder. She chose her own fate.”

“You’re right. Much as I hate to admit it.”

“There’s a first time for everything.”

“I didn’t mean that the way it sounded,” his brother began.

“I know what you meant,” Loki teased. “Now go wash your face. There’s a bathroom in the tree house. You go back inside like that and Mother will think we were fighting and have my head for harming her golden boy.”

Balder laughed. “When the Hel did you get so wise, little brother?”

“That happened after I adopted nine orphans. Maybe you ought to try it,” he suggested with a smirk.

“I don’t think I’m that brave,” Balder shook his head.

“I always knew that was a misnomer,” Loki twitted and they both laughed.
Balder re-emerged from the treehouse and handed Loki’s handkerchief back to the God of Mischief.

“Just throw it in my laundry room, Balder. If you think I’m going to stick that back in my pocket with your snot all over it . . .” Loki made a face.

“You’ve had worse in your pockets and we both know it,” Balder refuted.

“Who cares?” Loki retorted. “That was then and this now. Come on, I need to finish organizing my scavenger hunt before my kids stage a riot.”

So far, Loki thought, this Easter was off to a surprisingly good start, and he thanked the Norns and hoped the rest of went as well.
Scavenger Hunts and Surprises

Chapter Summary

More Easter fun plus a long overdue talk between Loki and Odin!
Lots of feels here!

24

Scavenger Hunts and Surprises

Seek and ye shall find~ Loki

“Does anyone know what time it is?” Loki called as he entered the house.

Thor blinked. “I think it’s almost noon.”

His brother shook his head. “Lucy, tell you uncle what time it is.”

“It’s time for the Easter scavenger hunt!” the sunny-haired girl sang.

All the kids cheered.

“What’s the Easter scavenger hunt, Loki?” Balder queried.

“I know! I know!” Max cried, jumping up and down with his hand in the air.

Vince rolled his eyes. “Jeez Louise, Max! We’re not in school!”

“Go ahead, scamp. Tell your Uncle Balder about the Laufeyson scavenger hunt,” Loki ordered.

“Um . . . it’s when Dad hides our Easter baskets and we gotta find clues and use them to find more clues and then you find the basket at the end,” Max explained.

“It’s like a treasure hunt,” Nate said helpfully.

“That sounds like fun,” Balder said.

“It is. Lots of fun,” Belle told him. “Dad makes clues depending on our age and interests. And we can ask for help if we’re stuck.”

Mandy laughed. “What a brilliant idea!” Just then her phone rang. “My grandchildren are calling from California,” she cried happily.
“Go take the call in my study,” Loki suggested. “That way no one will disturb you.”

Mandy hurried upstairs, talking excitedly.

“All right, kids. You know the rules. Go line up in the den.”

They all ran into the den and lined up along the wall.

“Now your first clue is in the basket on the table. Aleta and Max, since you can’t read, you have picture clues. Aleta, your first clue has a black kitten on it. Max, yours has my helmet. The rest of you can all read, so go find the card with your name on it.”

Everyone stampeded towards the table.

“Outta my way, slowpoke!”

“You get outta my way, Hunter!” Vince growled.

Nate didn’t even bother trying to get to the table. He just extended his chair’s arm and plucked the index card with his name on it from it.

Sam grabbed his card and then said, “Hey, Lucy, here’s yours,” to his younger sister and handed her the card with her name on it.

Aleta crawled under the table and popped up on the other side. “Got it!” she yelled, clutching the card with a black cat on one side.

Max ran right inbetween Hunter’s legs and snatched up his card with Loki’s helmet. “Me too!”

“Hey!” his brother yelped. “You almost tripped me, squirt!”

Max stuck his tongue out. “You snooze you lose!”

“Think fast, moon pi!” Vince teased and snatched Serena’s card just as she was about to grab it off the table.

“Give it back, daredevil!” his sister cried.

“What’ll you give me?” the Ghost Speaker bargained.

“A black eye,” his ice princess sister snapped.

“You wish,” Vince snickered. He held Serena’s card above her head.

“Vince, quit being a jackanapes,” Belle scolded.

“Say that in English, bookworm!” her brother snorted.

“Learn to read, ignoramus,” his sister shot back, and then she grabbed Serena’s card from his hand. “Here, Rena.”

“Thanks, Belle,” her sister said gratefully.

The Lorekeeper just smiled and beckoned and her card flew into her hand.

“Showoff,” Vince muttered.
“Quit being a dweebette,” Hunter ordered, and swatted him on the back of the head.

His brother glared at him. “Just wait, Hunter. I’m gonna beat you to the next clue.”

“Seeing is believing,” Hunter smirked, and went to stand back along the wall.

“Okay, if you all have your clues, turn over the cards and read them. When you solve what’s there, you can find your next clue. May the odds be ever in your favor,” Loki called.

“Dad! You’ve been watching Hunger Games too many times!” Serena groaned. Then she looked at her card, which had a math word problem on it. “Mary had 82 eggs. 70 are eaten by a hippopotamus. How many eggs does Mary have?” she read aloud.

“All of them. Hippos don’t eat eggs,” Vince remarked.

Serena gave him an annoyed look. “That’s not the answer. Don’t you know how to do math?”

“I know that hippos eat grass, not eggs,” Vince said loftily.

“Who cares?” his sister scowled. She wrote down twelve, then read the second part of the clue. “The answer from the first question fill in the blank ---- shoes are in the . . .” She ran over to the coat closet where they kept their rain and snow boots.

There she found her second clue, inside her pair of lavender rain boots.

Aleta flipped over her card and saw a picture of Mischief eating. She ran into the laundry room and looked by the cat’s dish. She saw the corner of a piece of paper sticking out slightly from beneath the purple bowl and gently picked the bowl up and took the clue out. It also had a black cat shape on one side. “A clue! A clue!” she yelled.

Max looked at the picture on his card. It showed a picture of Odin the puppy sleeping. The boy frowned, then he grinned. “I know what this is!” he said, and ran to where Odin’s crate was in the kitchen. He pulled open the door and crawled inside. There he found his second clue on Odin’s green blanket. “Found it! Aleta, I found another clue!”

“Me too!” his sister cried excitedly.

The shepherd woke and would have raced after the children, but Loki grabbed his collar. “Down!” he told the dog firmly. Odin lay down. “Good dog. Stay!” Whining, Odin curled up by his foot, chewing a rawhide.

“How long did it take you to do this, Loki?” Frigga wanted to know.

“A few nights. I needed to make enough clues for everyone to have a good hunt and not too hard for the little ones,” he explained. “And it took awhile for me to take all the pictures with my phone.”

“How long did it take you to do this, Loki?” Frigga wanted to know.

“Your phone?” she repeated.

Loki showed her his iPhone and demonstrated how it worked.

While he was showing his parents the wonders of Midgardian technology, his children were busy searching for clues.

Nate looked at his clue and frowned—it appeared to be some sort of map. He studied the map when he realized his next clue was on the top shelf of the bookcase in Loki’s den and pushed the
button to make the wheelchair zoom down the hallway.

"Out of the way!" Nate said as his brothers and sister darted out of the way and Loki sighed, rolling his eyes.

"Slow down!" Loki said.

Nate headed into the den when he saw the piece of paper sticking out of one of the books and used the mechanical arm to get the book down. "I found a clue!" he called out and looked at the paper.

His next clue was another map, but this one looked like it was upstairs. "Maybe this one isn't mine," he said when Thor walked in the room and he looked at his uncle. "Uncle Thor, I think this is my clue, but it's upstairs."

"No fear, Nephew," Thor said as he picked Nate up out of the wheelchair and they headed for the stairs. "Now, where do you think the clue leads?"

"It leads to my room," Nate said and they headed up the stairs.

"Blast. I forgot I put one of Nate's clues upstairs. What was I thinking?" Loki said and Frigga patted his arm.

"He doesn't look that upset, dear," she said and he nodded.

Thor carried Nate down the hallway when they walked into the bedroom and Nate saw a piece of paper sticking out from under his pillow. "There it is!" Nate said and Thor leaned over so he could reach for the piece of paper. Nate read the clue then he smiled at Thor. "My basket is in the hall closet downstairs."

"Then let go find it!" Thor said with a grin and they went back downstairs. Nate gave Loki a thumbs up when they headed for the hall closet and Loki brought the wheelchair over to them. Thor placed Nate on the wheelchair when he opened the door and Nate saw the Easter basket hanging from a string.

"Found mine!" Nate shouted and the other kids moaned. Loki undid the string as he placed the basket on Nate's lap and Nate looked what was inside.

There were some special Gertrude Hawk eggs filled with coconut and caramel and sea salt, which Loki knew were his son's favorite candy. There was the new Easter tie, this one was electric blue with golden gears and screws on it. Nate smiled when he saw it. There were some wooden brain teaser puzzles. But the best thing was the video game in the middle.

"Hunter!" he yelled. "Look what I got! It's the prototype!"

His older brother halted in the middle of finding a clue. "Get out! You got the prototype Asgardian Quest 2?"

"Yeah!"

"Don't worry," Loki said. "All of you are getting a copy except Max and Aleta."

"What do we get, Daddy?" Max asked.

"Find your baskets and see, imp."
Odin watched his grandchildren running around as they tried to find clues and Frigga noticed a look in his eye. "What bothers you?" she asked and he made a little sigh.

"I'm just sad we never did this with Loki, Balder, and Thor when they were small," he said and she patted his arm.

"Can you imagine the chaos if we had? Loki would have found his basket by now. Thor would have torn the castle apart trying to find his basket. Balder would have given up, fussed that Loki was cheating, and gone off to sulk in his room."

"True," Odin said with a laugh and shook his head.

In contrast, the Laufeyson children not only seemed happy to find their own clues, but also to help their siblings when they were stuck.

"Hunter, I don't understand where this is," Serena said as he looked at the clue she had found in her boots as he leaned against the wall.

The clue was another math problem. "Take the distance from the front door to the kitchen and divide it by the number of boys in the family then head east by that many paces," Hunter read. "You need to count how many steps it is from the front door to the kitchen."

"I know, but Daddy has longer legs than I do. What if he measured the distance by his stride and not mine?"

"I think he measured it by your stride," he said and she walked to the front door and started counting. She stopped at the kitchen door when she quickly divided it by five and headed for the pantry. She opened the door when she went into the pantry and her basket was sitting between the cereal boxes and the oatmeal containers.

"I found mine!" Serena said with a grin and walked out of the pantry.

"Good job, moon pi!" Loki clapped in approval.

"Well done!" Odin shouted and Serena smiled.

"What did you get?" Nate asked.

Serena showed him. Her basket contained some solid chocolate and white chocolate mini bunnies and some snowflake non pareils. It had a crown of silk violets and forget-me-nots. Her copy of Asgardian Quest 2 was there, and so was some new Sudoku books and some pretty hair extenders in all kinds of colors.

"Cool!" Nate said and she went to show Odin and Frigga.

Max looked at his next clue. It was a picture of Odin playing with his favorite toy, a stuffed hamburger that used to squeak until Loki took the squeaker out. He was afraid that Odin would eat it and had tossed the squeaker in the trash. "Oh, I know where that is!" he said and ran over to the box where Odin's toys were kept. He carefully removed the toys when he found the clue under the knotted rope Odin loved playing with and picked up the piece of paper. "I found another clue!"

"No fair!" Aleta said.
"Let me help you, Leta," Sam said and went to help her.

Max looked at the next clue and it was a picture of Odin sitting in a puddle of water. He didn't look happy and Max saw the bottle of dog shampoo in the corner. Smiling, Max ran upstairs when he went into Loki's bathroom and saw the shower door was closed. He slid the door back when he saw the basket and picked it up. He quickly ran down stairs, trying hard not to spill anything out of the basket, then came up to Loki. "Daddy! I found mine! It was in your bathroom!" Max cried, holding up the basket.

"Very good, imp!" Loki said.

"Do you need any help, Belle?" Balder asked and Belle looked at her clue.

"If you don't mind," she said and he got off the couch and walked over to her.

"May I see what you got, Max?" Frigga asked and he approached her. She lifted him up onto her lap as they looked at the foil wrapped chocolate eggs in clear plastic eggs, a hollow chocolate bunny, a new box of crayons and two coloring books and at the center of the basket was a plastic version of Loki's helmet. "Oh, that will go great with my pajamas!" he said. "They look just like Daddy's armor!"

"You made him pajamas that look like your armor?" Odin queried in surprise and Loki nodded.

"I'll be right back!" Max said and Loki took him upstairs to change. They came downstairs together, Max resembling Loki in miniature. Frigga and Odin smiled and Max put the plastic helmet on his head. "See! I look just like Daddy!"

"Yes, you do," Odin said and Max went to sit on his lap.

Balder and Belle looked at the first clue. The blonde god frowned and his eyebrows scrunched down. '"Today I'll bake. Tomorrow I'll brew. The next I'll fetch the queen's new child'? What sort of nonsense is this?" he asked and Belle tapped the tip of her index finger against her lips.

"That is from Rumplestiltskin," she said when they headed for the library and she looked at the books of fairy tales. She found the right book when she saw the piece of paper sticking out of top of the book and looked at the clue.

"Where secrets lie, the raven knows. Only she can travel where no one goes," she read, a smile on her pixie face as she realized where her father had hidden her basket. "Uncle Balder, I know where my basket is, but only Daddy and I can go there."

"Well, I am glad I could help you find this clue," he said with a bow and Belle left the room. She went upstairs to the wardrobe and placed her hand against the door. Recognizing her magical signature, it opened with click. She walked inside the wardrobe where she found the hidden entrance and opened it, going down to Loki's secret lab. She saw the basket sitting on the worktable and picked it up then headed back upstairs, closing the door tightly behind her.

"I found mine!" Belle announced and held the basket up. "Well done," Loki said, clapping. His daughter flashed him a bright grin.

"What did you get in your basket?" Max asked as he placed one of the chocolate eggs in his mouth.

"Let's see," Belle said, and she showed him each item as she picked it up. "Here's some peanut butter eggs. I love peanut butter," she told Frigga.
"And here's my copy of Dad's new game."

She found her silk crown of gold and pink roses next.

Next was a set of beautiful jeweled tone inks and an emerald green ostrich quill. "That's for me to write in my journal," she said, smiling.

But the last thing was the best of all. Her eyes widened as she picked up something wrapped in parchment paper. Inside was a silvery book with Norse runes on it and she gasped. "Dad! This is the Elementary Booke of Mystic Fire and Frost!"

"I told you that you would receive it when you were ready, little raven," Loki declared, his eyes twinkling.

"Loki, that's a spellbook!" Frigga exclaimed.

"Are you sure that's wise, brother?" Thor asked.

"Yes, I am sure," Loki said as he sweetly smiled at Belle.

"I promise I will never do any spells without your permission!" Belle said, holding the book to her chest.

"I know you won't. You'll just drive me insane asking me when we can practice," her father laughed.

Odin looked at Loki then at Belle when he thought about the lessons Frigga had with Loki and how he never wanted anything to do with them. Seeing how excited Belle was and how happy Loki looked made him frown and Frigga eyed him in concern. "Are you alright?" she asked in a soft voice.

"I am a fool," he said.

"How so?"

"I never wanted anything to do with your lessons with Loki and now I wish I had. Maybe it would have helped me understand him better."

"That is in the past. Your granddaughter has a good teacher and will be careful with what she learns."

"And he had a good teacher as well," he murmured and Frigga blushed.

“When can we practice, Dad?” Belle asked eagerly, her brown eyes shining in excitement.

Loki grinned. “See? I knew you would ask that! I promise I will teach you one new spell after we have dinner and I put Max and Aleta to bed. Will that suit you, little raven?”

“It will! For the magic is like fire in the blood—”

“—and only a kiss of frost shall tame it to thy will,” Loki finished the familiar quote, which was written upon the first page of the spellbook.

Father and daughter shared a look of complete understanding, and Belle came around the table and hugged Loki, leaning her head on his shoulder for a moment.

Vince studied his clue as he leaned against the wall, chewing on his lower lip. He re-read the clue,
huffing in annoyance, as Nate steered the wheelchair closer and looked at him. "Need some help, Bro?"

"Yeah," Vince said and showed Nate the clue.

"A box without hinges, key, or lid. Yet inside golden treasure is hid," Nate read aloud. "Hey, you remember the riddle game from The Hobbit, right? The one Bilbo played with Gollum?"

Vince nodded. "Yup. And the answer to this was . . ."

"An egg!" both boys said at the same time.

Vince darted to the fridge and found his second clue tucked inside the carton of eggs.

"What does it say?" Nate asked.

"The pile which grows from dirty things hides the clue. Pick them up and you'll find what belongs to you," Vince said and frowned. "What does that mean?"

"I think that's Dad's way of telling you to pick up our dirty laundry," Nate laughed and Vince ran upstairs. He went into their room where he looked at the piles of dirty clothes on the floor and started placing the clothes into the laundry baskets. Behind the third pile, he found his Easter basket and laughed. He checked to see he got it all when he left the room and came down the stairs. "I found mine," he said triumphantly and Loki smirked.

"I'm surprised. Seeing where I had to hide it," he teased, and Vince laughed.

"Where did you hide it?" Balder asked.

"He hid it behind our dirty laundry," Vince said. "We sometimes leave it on the floor."

"Sometimes?!" Loki asked.

Thor laughed as Odin and Frigga looked at him and Odin loudly cleared his throat. "I wouldn't laugh if I were you," Odin said. "I remember many a time we had to remind you to clean up your soiled clothing."

"Uncle Thor used to leave his dirty clothes on the floor?" Vince asked.

"Oh, yes," Frigga said then looked at Loki. "As did your father."

"I never!" Loki said with a stunned look and Frigga laughed.

"May we see what you got?" Frigga asked and Vince walked to the couch.

Inside was a copy of Asgardian Quest 2, a black tie with silver horses rearing on it, packages of Bertie Botts Every Flavor Bean and Chocolate Frogs from Harry Potter.

"That is the coolest candy, Bestemor," Vince grinned. "You gotta try some later."

"I would be careful with the candy beans. I tried one and it tasted like vomit," Thor said and Vince snickered.

"Why would anyone want to taste that?" Frigga asked.

"You don't. That's the fun part," Vince said. "There's good ones in there too that taste like chocolate cake and butterbeer and strawberry peanut butter ice cream."
His other items were comic books and a new helmet for his skateboard with flames on each side.

“So wicked! Thanks, Dad!”

Aleta looked at the picture of the black cat sitting on a pillow as she and Sam tried to figure out where the clue was. “I know! I know!” the little girl yelled and ran upstairs. Sam followed Aleta into her room, where the child went to her doll bed in the corner. Mischief liked sleeping on the bed and Aleta saw the piece of paper sticking out from under the pillow. “I found the next clue!” she said and turned the clue over.

The black cat was sitting under an arch as Aleta frowned and Sam smiled. “I think your basket is in my room,” Sam said as they ran down the hallway to Sam’s room. The basket was sitting under Sam’s desk. Aleta carefully crawled beneath it and removed the basket. She hugged Sam as they went downstairs and Aleta ran to Loki.

"I found my basket, Daddy!"

"I knew you could, Spark," he said, kneeling down as she looked into the basket.

"What did you get?" Max asked.

“Ooo! A chocolate kitty!” she held up a large chocolate cat. It looked very much like Mischief.

There were sticker books and glitter markers. A box of marshmallow chicks and bunnies.

A plastic scepter with a large blue jewel that looked like Loki’s own. “A princess scepter!” she crowed.

Her silk crown of green and gold flowers with jewels inbetween them was the last thing she pulled out of the basket and she hugged Loki. “I have a crown like the big girls!”

“You do, spark, because now you’re old enough,” he told her.

She beamed proudly.

"May I place the crown on you?” he asked and she nodded. Loki removed the felt helmet then placed the silk crown on her head and smiled. “Beautiful!”

"Do I still look like a princess, Daddy?” she asked, holding the scepter in one hand and he nodded, as a small tear rolled down his cheek. My little one soon will be little no longer."

"Don't cry."

"Sorry," he said and wiped the tear away.

Hunter scratched the back of his head and frowned. "Sight and sound. Adventure abound?” he muttered, then he figured it out. He went into his room and headed for his Xbox and saw the piece of paper sticking out from under the pile of video games. He removed the piece of paper, read the next clue and pressed his lips together. "Use your nose like a hound. Where the little kit hides is where it's found?” he whispered then sniffed the air and headed out of the room. Downstairs, he sniffed the air again as he entered the living room. Ever since the Loki Charms incident, his senses had become more acute, especially his sense of smell.

"Do you need a tissue?” Loki asked, but Hunter shook his head and headed for the couch where
Frigga, Odin and Max were sitting. Hunter scratched his head, puzzled, then he got down on all fours and went around to one side of the couch. Smiling, picked up the basket and gave Loki a smug look.

"Took you long enough, wolfling."

"You must have hid the scent. I didn't know until I got on the floor," Hunter said with a laugh and Loki nodded.

"What did you get?" Aleta asked and Hunter knelt so she could see what was in the basket.

There was a chocolate Xbox and some Raisinnettes, his own copy of Asgardian Quest, plus a book of various bonus codes that he could use for his video games. His tie was light blue with a wolf howling at the moon.

Then he saw something wrapped in thick bubble wrap at the very bottom of the basket.

When he unwrapped it he nearly fell over. "These are mine?" he gasped.

"Yes, they are," Loki said.

Inside were two perfectly balanced silver throwing daggers, with a wolf's head on the pommel with gold citrine eyes and a black leather belt with two sheaths on either side. The buckle of the belt was a wolf surrounded by a runic circle.

"Wow!" Max said after he had gotten off the couch and looked at the daggers.

"Those aren't toys, Imp," Loki warned. "Look with your eyes not your hands."

"Okay, Dad," and Max put his hands behind his back.

Hunter placed the belt around his waist then he inserted the daggers in the sheaths. He gave his father a tight hug.

"Thanks, Dad," Hunter whispered and Loki patted his son's back.

"Do you know how to use those, Hunter?" Balder asked curiously.

Hunter nodded. "Yes. I can hit what I aim at almost all the time. But Dad can beat me whenever we practice."

"Well, just be careful. I do not want to hear you've injured yourself," Frigga said worriedly.

"I will, Bestemor," Hunter assured her. "Dad only lets me use them when I practice with him."

"You have the best dagger fighter in the Nine teaching you," Balder said quietly.

Loki blinked several times and gazed at Balder, honored that his brother thought so highly of him. "Thank you, Balder," Loki said and Balder just smiled.

Lucy was upstairs as she looked at her clue and sighed. "Two of ivy, two of snow. Four of purple. One does glow?" she read as she paced when she thought of something and went into her room. She opened her closet door when she looked down and saw her shoes. She saw something sticking out from her sneakers which lit up when she walked. She looked at the next clue, sighing and tapping her fingers on the wall.

"Need some help?" Sam asked.
"Nope," Lucy said then read the clue again. "Down in the pantry. I sit in wait. I am near the last vegetable you ate."

“We had carrots last night,” Sam said and Lucy headed for the stairs. She skipped downstairs and went into the kitchen. She headed for the pantry when she went inside and looked around. She didn't see her basket then recalled the smaller pantry where Loki kept the canned vegetables and jam jars and raced over to it. She opened the door and there was her basket sitting next to the canned carrots. She giggled. She marched to the living room and Loki smiled when she held up her oblong pink basket. "Got it!"

“That’s my clever Valkyrie,” Loki said.

"What did you get?” Aleta wanted to know. “I gots a princess crown and a scepter.”

“You look awesome!” Lucy grinned when she found the box of candied fruit slices and a jar of chocolate covered cherries and another of chocolate almonds.

The copy of the game was also in the basket and her silk crown had small pink rosebuds and ivy. At the bottom of the basket was a small purple velvet box and she picked it up. Inside was a silver necklace with a gold spear charm on the end and her eyes went wide. "It's a Valkyrie spear!” she gasped and Loki walked over, taking the necklace out of the box. She held her hair back as he slid the necklace around her neck and closed the clasp. He smiled at her when she hugged him and he planted a kiss on the top of her head. "Thank you, Daddy!"

"You're welcome," Loki said.

"Daddy, where's Sam?" Max asked.

"I guess he's still looking."

Sam looked at the clue upstairs in his room and shook his head. Loki usually made his clues hard to figure out and this year was no exception.

"I sit in the place where the men went into the breach?” he muttered then started pacing when something clicked in his head and he headed down the stairs. He went into the den where he made for the shelf where Loki kept the Shakespeare books, peering at the titles. He found Henry V and opened it to the monologue. He found the clue then placed the book back and read, "I am behind you?” Sam turned to look at the display case where Loki kept some of his rare books when he saw the basket sitting behind the glass and the key was perched on top of the case. He walked to the display case, unlocked it, and removed the basket. Shaking his head, he headed for the living room.

"About time," Loki chuckled and Sam rolled his eyes.

"What did you get, Sam?” Nate asked.

Sam found two packages of chocolate turtles and a bag of dark chocolate Moose Munch. His tie was wrapped about Asgardian Quest 2 and it was green with Norse runes on it.

There was also a silk crown of multi-colored flowers with tiny white butterflies wrapped around it.
'Thanks, Dad," Sam said and hugged Loki.

"There's one more thing in there," he pointed out.

He dug around and found an envelope. Inside were concert tickets to see Bon Jovi, one of Sam's favorite singers along with VIP backstage passes. "How--how did you get these? They were all sold out!"

"Would you believe I helped design his latest CD cover? He was so impressed he said he owed me a favor. So, I called him and said you were a fan and needed tickets."

Sam looked like he had died and gone to Valhalla. "You're the best, Dad! I can't wait to tell Todd and Trudy. They're gonna pass out!"

"You can invite them if you like," Loki told him. "Or take someone else, like one of your uncles."

'I'll have to think about it," he said.

"Okay, you can go put your baskets in your rooms and relax for awhile until your uncles get here. Oh, and I wouldn't tell them just yet about the new game you all have. Because you'll never get your Uncle Tony or Uncle Steve away from the TV all night if you do," Loki warned.

"Can we play it though?" Hunter asked.

"Go ahead. Just come down and say hello when I call you," Loki waved them off.

"Can I play too?" Thor asked.

"Sure. Vince and I have extra helmets," Hunter said. "Uncle Balder, you wanna try?"

"What am I trying?"

"The new VR game Dad made. Don't worry, we'll show ya how," Hunter said, and then led the way up to Vince's room, because they had the most space to sit and play as well as the largest TV of the children.

While the older boys and girls went to play Asagardian Quest 2, Frigga colored with Max and Aleta showed her how to use her Bedazzler. Mandy emerged from Loki's study after Skyping her grandchildren and seemed both sad and happy.

"Is everything okay?" Loki asked considerately.

"I'm fine, dearie. Just a bit nostalgic today. What can I help you with?"

"Would you mind cutting up some cucumbers and tomatoes for a salad?" he asked.

"Not at all, dearie. Just give me a cutting board."

Loki fetched all the vegetables and a large bowl from the fridge, as well as a cup of tea for Mandy. Then he checked on the lamb stew bubbling on the stove and the scallop and shrimp pie slowly baking in the oven.

"I need to see how the pig is roasting outside," he told his parents. He had brined a pig and was roasting it over hot coals in a large fireproof box.

Frigga nudged her husband. "Now would be a good time, dear."
Odin coughed uncomfortably and mumbled, “Yes, I suppose you’re right,” then he followed Loki out in the yard.

He found his son turning a long metal handle sticking out of a wooden box. The smell of smoke and roasting meat filled the air.

"The pig is inside here,” Loki explained. "It's like the pits we used to dig back in Asgard, but this is easier. It's been roasting since early this morning."

"It smells wonderful,” Odin said and Loki glanced at his father.

"Is there something you wish to talk to me about?"

"I...,” Odin said then paused. Loki felt an old sensation of fear or anger bubbling to the surface when he shook his head to clear such thoughts away.

"I just want to tell you I'm sorry,” Odin said and Loki blinked.

"There is no need..."

"Yes, there is," Odin said as he balled his hands into fists.

"Are you speaking about the incident with Jorunne and Karnilla? Because Balder already apologized . . ."

"No, I am talking about you and I."

"I don't understand."

"You know as well as I that I have never been the sort of father I should have been towards you.”

Loki gave him a small nod and turned the metal hand some more.

"Well, I wasn't an easy child to raise. I was mostly getting into trouble...

"And as a father, I should have tried harder to find out why. Instead, I mistreated you and thought punishment was the only answer."

"I wanted . . . sometimes I just wanted you to see me the way you did Thor and Balder," Loki began quietly, his emerald eyes filled with remembered pain. "But you never did. I was never good enough for you. Not big enough, or as good with weapons, all I had was my wits and my magic and my clever tongue . . .but you never noticed me unless I made you by disobeying or playing some prank."

Odin placed his hand on his youngest son's shoulder and frowned as he noticed Loki slightly stiffened at his touch. "I did notice," Odin began. "But the reason behind my not seeing you was most from guilt."

"Guilt?!" Loki said with a hint of bitterness.

"Yes," Odin said with a nod. "I wanted to tell you the truth long ago about where you came from and who you were. I was afraid.... I thought.... I thought if you knew then you would hate me."

"How could I hate you?! I was left in that temple to die! You said so yourself. I was destined to die." His eyes flashed. "I was the unwanted baby, the sacrifice!"

Yes, and I could NOT allow that to happen! So I did the one thing no one else would have done!
I took you with me! I made you my son!"

Loki turned to look at Odin and swore he saw a tear in the All Father's eye.

"Why? To assuage your conscience? Because for most of my life I have never felt like I truly belonged. Yes, I was given the title of prince, but I wasn't treated with the same sort of respect as Thor and Balder. They were allowed to get away with things I was beaten for, Father!"

"No! It was because you were an innocent! True, I did kill many Frost Giants! Children as well as infants, but you were different!

"How so?!!"

"Because of what you are."

"I am a Frost Giant!"

"That is only half the story."

Loki was stunned. He looked at Odin as he sighed then looked at the roasting pig.

"More secrets? Tell me what else you've hidden from me."

"When the Frost Giants invaded Asgard, many of them took women as mates. One of them was my Royal Magician, Astra. According to the reports I received, she was taken by Laufey. I went to find her in his kingdom and, when I found her, she was dying. She told me about how Laufey had asked her to marry him so he could have an heir and stake claim to Asgard. She told him she was not royalty, but it didn't matter.

Their child would be of royal blood. But, after she gave birth, the child was too small and sickly. It couldn't handle being of mixed blood. She told him the child was a male and she had named him...Loki."

"I...," Loki said and became silent.

"She died shortly after telling me where the priests had taken the child and I went to find you. The moment I saw you, I could see your mother's eyes looking back at me."

"Did you... Was she also your mistress?"

"No. But she was a good friend. I vowed then and there I would raise you as my own."

"But you still treated me like a I was nothing!"

"You were never that."

"Then why!? Why wasn't I allowed the same treatment as Balder and Thor?!"

"As I said, I was afraid you would hate me."

"Because of who and what I am?"

"Yes."

"But I started hating you," Loki said, softly. "I hated that I was punished and they got away with everything. That I was imprisoned while they went off to get into more trouble. People scorned me and believed lies about me. I thought no one could ever love me besides Mother. When I
died.... When I was given another chance.... I vowed never to be like that with my children."

"Did you love them no matter what they did?"

"Yes." His hands clenched. "But not just that, I would ACCEPT them for who and what they are.
I don't judge them. And they know . . . they know that I CHOSE them for my own. Love binds
deeper than blood. Although I have blood adopted them. Only they don't know this. Except for
Belle."

"Can you find it inside your heart to forgive a foolish old man? For I see you now. I see you for
who and what you are. And I am so proud of you."

Shock ran through him. "Do you mean that? Really?"

"Yes," Odin said while a tear rolled down his cheek.

Loki felt as if someone had squeezed the breath right out of him. He had waited all of his life to
hear those words and now . . . now he was too astonished to say anything.

Loki looked at his father for the space of a few heartbeats then walked to him and hugged him.

Loki was surprised to feel his father shaking as Odin cried and he hushed him. Whatever anger,
hatred or pain he felt was slowly being washed away and Odin hugged his son harder.

"That is all I ever wanted,” he said hoarsely. "Just that."

"Forgive me," Odin said with a crack in his voice.

"I do." Loki said honestly. "The past is built on sand, Father. Let it be washed away with salt
water. Let it go. We can start anew. This is the season of renewal."

"Yes," Odin said with a nod as he stepped back and Loki handed him a green silk handkerchief to
wipe his eye and nose.

"First Balder, now you. I think I should buy stock in handkerchiefs.” Loki remarked with a wry
smile.

Odin's hearty laughter filled the air as he shook his head and lightly patted Loki's back.

"Is there something you would like to ask me about your mother?” Odin asked.

"Everything," Loki said and Odin started telling him about Astra.

Loki listened raptly, storing away the information to examine later when he was alone. He would
need time to process this revelation.

He wasn't a monster. He wasn't unwanted. He was loved by the man he called his father. And he
had almost thrown it all away.

"Are you alright, my son?" Odin asked and him calling Loki his son had a whole new meaning.

"Yes,” Loki said with a nod, but neither of them had seen Frigga standing just inside the doorway.
She had been listening to what they were discussing and she smiled, wiping the tears from her
eyes.

She had known about how close Odin was to Astra, but she had never been jealous. In fact, Astra
was one of her most trusted confidants and she was saddened when Odin told her of Astra's
passing. Frigga had also vowed to make sure Loki was well looked after and hoped that Astra was just as proud of her son as they were.

"Yes," Odin said with a nod. "Astra was a very powerful enchantress, and she did know a great deal of magic. She was also a Seer."

"Did I also inherit her need to cause mischief?"

"Yes, I am afraid you did," Odin said with a laugh. "That might give you some insight to why I let you get away with most things."

Loki laughed then turned the metal handle due to the smoke rising from the pig.

"I just wish I knew what she looked like," Loki said when Odin reached into the pocket of his suit jacket and removed a small parcel wrapped in parchment.

"I wanted to give this to you when I finally decided to tell you," Odin said and handed him the parcel. Loki unwrapped the parchment when he saw a small portrait framed in a gold frame and the woman looking at him was smiling. She had long dark hair like his, but what stood out was her emerald green eyes. His eyes.

She had the same delicate features as he did and he could see the hint of mischief behind her eyes. "She's.... She's lovely," Loki said.

"She was," Odin said with a sigh. "No man or god could ask for a better friend."

Loki stared at the portrait for long moments. He couldn't help but notice that Astra's brilliant eyes and mischievous smile also reminded him of his youngest son.

"Did she have any family?"

"I did hear a rumor she had a brother. No one knew that much about him." For a split second, Loki wondered if Max might be the child of his mother's brother, but dismissed the idea. Even if he was, Max was his son and that was all that mattered.

Besides, Max's mother had been a prostitute and hadn't even known who the father of her baby was. It was in his adoption records--Father Unknown. And now they would never know, because she was dead.

"Thank you for this, Father," Loki said.

"You are welcome," Odin said then sniffed the air. "And you need to pay attention to the pig or we'll be eating something else for dinner."

"We have plenty of other things to eat," Loki snickered. "But Thor will punch me out because he's the one who wanted this."

"If he dares try, he will answer to me!" Odin said and both of them broke out laughing.

Loki took a quick peek at the pig by lifting up the cover of the box. "It looks fine. I can leave it now and come back out after an hour to turn it again. It needs time to slowly baste in its juices."

"Then let us go back inside and see what chaos your children are up to," Odin said.

"They're always up to something," Loki chuckled.

Sure enough when they entered the house, they found Aleta pushing her doll carriage with
Sure enough when they entered the house, they found Aleta pushing her doll carriage with Mischief inside. The cat was wearing a purple ribbon around her neck and a small straw doll bonnet with pink and blue flowers.

"Aleta, what have you done to the cat?!" Vince cried. "She's not a doll!"

"I'm taking her for a ride," Aleta said.

"But she's wearing a hat!"

"It's Easter. She has to wear a hat!"

Vince rolled his eyes. "Why don't you play with your dolls? You could put Minx in a hat."

"No! I want Mischief to be the baby!"

"Papa, a little help," Mischief said and Loki transformed into his cat form. He placed his paws on the side of the carriage when he looked at her and softly laughed.

"You look adorable, Kit," he said.

"I know, but I don't want to wear this hat. Or be in this carriage."

"Then jump out."

"If I do, she'll be sad," she said then sighed. "And it's only for a little while."

Vince looked disgusted. "Aleta, don't be a brat. You're gonna get arrested for cruelty to animals."

"No! I don't want to go to jail!" Aleta shouted and Loki knew she was about to explode.

"No one is going to jail!" Loki said after he changed back into his normal form and removed Mischief from the carriage, taking the hat off. Aleta ran to him when she wrapped her arms around his leg and Loki glared at Vince.

The boy sulked. "If you're mean to your pets that's where you end up. Like those people at the animal shelter."

"Yes, but what Aleta was doing wasn't cruel or mean. Most little girls like to dress their cats or dogs up in clothes," Loki said and Aleta glared at her brother.

"And they like to push them around in doll carriages. Most pets love it."

"She wasn't happy," Vince retorted. "Next thing ya know she'll dress Odin up in ribbons and a bonnet and make him look like a sissy!"

"And what is wrong with her wanting to dress up a pet?" Odin asked. "It doesn't hurt them nor is it cruel. Some royals I know dress their pets up in silks, ribbons and bells and none of them seem to mind."

"I do remember Sleipnir wearing ribbons and bells during a parade once," Loki said.

"Who's Sleipnir?" Aleta asked.

"He is my horse," Odin said and her eyes widened.

"You have a horsie?!!"
"Yes, I do."

"I still think it's cruel," Vince sighed.

"Vince, I asked Mischief if she minded," Loki told him. "She said no. If she had, she wouldn't have stayed in the carriage. Remember, a cat does what she wants."

"Yeah, you're right," Vince said then looked at his sister. "Sorry, Leta."

"It's okay," his sister smiled sweetly. Then she said, "Let's play Princess of Asgard. You can be my bodyguard. And you gotta do what I say."

"Dad?!" Vince said and Loki laughed.

"Fair's fair, Daredevil," Loki said and Vince sighed, nodding his head.

"Come with me," Aleta said as she left the room and Vince slowly followed her.

Odin watched Loki remove the hat from Mischief's head then placed the cat on the floor and Odin smiled. "You handled that quite well."

"This was easy. You should see when they really start fighting," Loki told him then the loud sound of shouting came from upstairs. "See what I mean?"

Frigga frowned. "Thor and Balder are up there. What could be going on?"

"Let's go find out," Loki said as they headed up the stairs and down the hallway.

"Thor, please, calm down!" Balder's voice said.

"You are cheating!" Thor cried out and Loki looked into the room.

Both men were wearing the VR helmets, but Thor looked angry and was ready to strike his brother.

"Dad, do something!" Hunter said.

"Brother, please, tell me what's wrong," Loki said and Thor whipped his head around, trying to find him.

"Balder is cheating!" Thor bellowed.

"I am doing no such thing!" Balder said in his defense.

"Tell me what happened," Loki said, trying to keep the peace.

"We were doing the quest in the game and I happened to find the object we needed before he did."

"Yes, by cheating!" Thor said and Loki got out of the way as Thor swung his fist.

"Brother, calm yourself. I am sure Balder found it fair and square," Loki said.

"But....."

"By My Good Eye, if you two cannot play this game peacefully then I am going to take it away from you," Odin said in a voice the brothers knew all too well and Thor sighed.
"And you can both wash all the dishes after dinner," Frigga declared. "A fine example you are to the children!"

"And there will be no dessert for either of you," Loki said.

Thor and Balder both were stunned and ashamed as they removed the VR helmets and handed them to Loki.

"I do apologize, Brother," Thor said, holding out his hand.

"It is forgotten, Brother," Balder said with a grin and they shook hands.

"Man, they're worse than we are," Nate whispered and Hunter lightly nudged him.

"Do you two want to help them wash dishes?" Loki asked and the boys shook their heads.

"Dad, when I get to the ice caverns, my game keeps freezing!" Belle reported, coming into the room. "I think there's a glitch."

"You made it there already?" Hunter cried. "How?"

"Let me see, Raven," Loki said and they went into her room. He put the VR helmet on when she turned the game on and he moved into the ice cavern.

Suddenly the game stopped and he sighed, taking the glasses off. "How did you get there already?" he asked and Belle smiled.

"I'm just that good," she said and he laughed.

"Well, I am going to have to call and tell them we need a patch in the ice cavern."

"You might want to put up a warning on the game site so people won't return the game."

"Good idea, Raven," he said then went back to the other room.

"So, how did she get that far, Dad?" Hunter asked.

"She's just good at the game." he said with a smile. "Who are you playing as?" he asked his daughter.

"I'm a Runemistress," she said. "And Rena is a Jotun priestess. We teamed up with the game you and we kick everybody's butt!"

"Cool."

"Maybe the glitch is in her game," Nate said.

"You might be right, but I still want to make sure none of the other games have it."

"Better safe than sorry," Frigga said and he nodded.

"Dad, we've got the same problem!" Sam called out and Loki left the room.

He walked in Sam's room and Sam and Lucy held the VR helmets in their hands. "By the Nine. Didn't they check these things?" Loki sighed and wiped his face with his hands.

"Maybe that's why it was taking so long to release it," Lucy said.
"You might be right," Loki said with a nod and made a mental note to call the developers in the morning.

"We can still start over and skip the ice cavern for now," Sam said.

"Good idea," Loki said and went into the hallway. "Everyone start the game over, but skip the ice cavern until the patch is ready."

"Ok," the kids chimed and Loki, Odin, Frigga, Thor and Balder went downstairs.

"Well, this is why we do prototypes before we release them to the public," Loki sighed.

"I am sure you will straight things out, Son," Odin said and Loki nodded.

Just then the doorbell rang. Loki answered it to see the Avengers on the porch. "Ding dong, it's the Easter parade!" Tony joked.

"Hello, Stark," Loki said while stepping back so Tony and the other Avengers could enter.

"Something smells incredible!" Steve remarked.

"We aren't late for dinner, right?" Bruce asked.

"Uh . . . I have some bad news," Loki began. "Thor and Balder ate it all."

"What?!" they all said at once.

"Loki!" Frigga said as he looked at her and he laughed.

Tony shook a finger at him. "Real nice, Laufeyson! Better behave, your mom's watching."

"As is his father," Odin said.

"You got him to visit, too?" Tony whispered and Loki nodded.

Loki made introductions to his parents and Mandy, and then said, "Let me get the other three loaves of Easter bread and the rest of the appetizers."

He carried them into the dining room, then called upstairs, "Kids! Come and say hello to your uncles and Aunt Tasha!"

Odin and Frigga swore the house was going to shatter from the sounds of the children rushing down the stairs and Odin the puppy made a loud bark.

"Whoa! Did a herd of buffalo just run down the stairs?!" Tony asked and the kids laughed.

"It's the charge of the Mischief Brigade!" Clint laughed.

"What did I say about running down the stairs?!" Loki called out from the kitchen.

"Sorry," the kids said at the same time.

"Uncle Tony! Look! I have armor and a helmet like Daddy!" Max said and Tony looked at him.

"Looking sharp, Kiddo," Tony said with a wink.

"Aunt Tasha, I got a crown and scepter like a real princess!" Aleta showed Natasha her new
"Wow!" Natasha said. "You look amazing, Princess!"

"Uncle Steve, Dad got me tickets to see Bon Jovi," Sam told him. Steve loved the rock star.

"Get out! Seriously?" he gasped. "Loki, what did you do, play poker with someone?"

"No, I just helped him with his album cover and he owed me a favor," Loki said.

"Do you want to go with me, Uncle Steve?" Sam asked.

"Yes, I would!" Steve said.

"Dad, are we gonna have the Easter hare race now?" asked Vince. "Now that everybody's here?"

The hare race was tradition and it involved the children all trying to outrun Loki in hare form and reach the Easter tree, which was decorated with colorful ribbons and eggs.

"If everyone is ready, yes," Loki said.

Mandy yawned suddenly. "Oh, Loki, I'm so sorry. I think I'd better lie down before dinner," she apologized.

"I think maybe you did a bit too much today, Bestemor," Loki said, and gave the old woman his arm. He helped her into the den and tucked her into the recliner with his afghan and Mystic, who had been sleeping upstairs in the bedroom.

"Thank you, dearie," she said and he leaned down to kiss the top of her head.

"I'll wake you when dinner is ready," he whispered then left the room.

Loki led everyone outside, though he put Odin in his crate, not wanting the puppy to try and attack him. Odin gave him a sad look. "Sorry, pup. You have to stay here for a bit. I'll let you out later."

That done, he went out on the lawn. His kids had lined up at the line he had drawn with glitter sand. He waved a hand and they were all wearing sneakers.

"Tony, you give them the count," Loki ordered, then he blurred into a large brown hare with green eyes.

"On your marks, get set, GO!"

Hare-Loki exploded from the starting line, running like a streak of brown fur through the grass.

"Yes! Go, Brother" Thor cheered and Balder laughed.

"How can the kids ever catch him?" Balder wondered.

"He witched their sneakers," Thor replied.

"I just hope they are careful of the little ones," Frigga said.

"Do not worry," Odin said as Loki darted by. "I am sure he has cautioned the older children to watch out for them."
As the kids raced pell mell after their father, their sneakers blurs in the grass, Nate gunned the Magic Bullet and came around the outside.

"Yes! Nate is going to win!" Thor shouted.

"I wouldn't be so sure,' Frigga said as Hunter started gaining on the Magic Bullet.

As the two brothers fought for the lead, Loki paused, panting slightly, and hid himself in the grass. Since the object was to catch him, it didn't matter if the kids reached the tree unless he was there.

Belle was slightly behind her brothers and she picked her head up. Beside her Max ran, panting, his helmet askew. "Max, go towards that patch of dandelions," she whispered to her small brother.

"Where did he go?" Aleta asked.

"I don't know," Max said when he thought he saw some brown in the grass and pointed.

Hushing her, they started creeping up on Loki when he saw them and the whiskers twitched. "Oh, no, you don't," Loki thought and ran off.

"Darn!" Aleta cried, and ran after him.

"Wait for me!" Max shouted.

"Move your butt, Maximus!" his sister yelled.

Vince and Lucy saw the little ones running after Loki when they gave chase and Loki darted around the grass. He stopped when Hunter appeared and Hunter smiled. "Gotcha!" Hunter said, but Loki darted away before he could catch him.

Loki put his ears back and put on a burst of speed, sprinting towards the tree.

"Rena, remember what we did in the game?" Belle panted.

Her platinum-haired sister nodded. "We'll never catch him unless we play a trick."

Sam and Nate were neck and neck but they weren't able to overtake Loki.

Vince and Lucy nearly got him but he dodged. Then Loki headed for Belle and Serena and his eyes went wide when Belle waved her hand and a rabbit cage appeared in front of Loki. He couldn't stop as he ran inside and Serena closed the door. "We got him!" Belle said.

"Let's get to the tree!" Hunter said and they ran to the Easter tree. Belle placed the cage down on the ground and she opened the door and Loki hopped out.

He changed back into his normal form while looking at her and placed his hands on his hips. "Where did you learn how to do that?" Loki asked.

"It was in the spell book you gave me," she said, looking down. He wasn't sure if he should be angry or not that his little Lorekeeper used magic without him, but he did admit it was a good trick. "Well, don't do that again. You have no idea what price you'll have to pay for it," Loki warned and she nodded.

"Man, she got you good, Trickster!" Tony hooted.

"Yes, she did," Loki said, placing his arm around Belle.
He untied several ribbons from the tree and braided them into a crown and placed it on his daughter's head. "The ribbon of victory!" he said and lifted Belle's arm up.

Everyone cheered while Belle blushed then looked at Serena. "Daddy, Serena helped me," Belle whispered and Loki made another crown and placed it on Serena's head.

"It appears we have a tie!" Loki said and Serena hugged her papa.

"Three cheers for my clever daughters!" He stood between them and Tony snapped a picture on his phone.

Afterwards, the Avengers visited with Loki’s Asgardian family while Loki finished up with the cooking. Then he set everything on the table, with the help of Sam, Tasha, and Frigga.

He took the pig out of the roaster and had Thor carry it inside on a large board. Loki took a huge carving knife and sliced up pieces and set it on a platter.

Wildflower mead was poured in all the glasses, even a small bit for Max and Aleta.

Then everyone gathered around the table and toasted each other to a joyous Eastertide.

The food was devoured and then dessert was brought out. There was cinnamon rice pudding, poppy seed bread, apple tarts, and bunny cupcakes.

They all ate till they were groaning and everyone praised Loki’s culinary skills.

Loki made sure that all his Avenger family had leftovers to bring home.

As promised, Balder and Thor cleaned the whole kitchen and washed all the dishes while Loki sat on the sofa and sipped coffee and ate an apple tart. He felt pleasantly weary yet very happy.

Sam came in followed by his siblings carrying a brightly wrapped present.

“What’s this?” Loki asked, setting his coffee cup down.

“It’s your Easter present from us,” his eldest announced.

“Open it! Open it!” Max and Aleta chanted.

Loki took the present and unwrapped it slowly, deliberately teasing his impatient children. When he finally got the paper off, he glanced down and saw a beautiful frame of ivy leaves and in the middle was a family portrait of himself, the children, Odin, and Mischief.

“Do you like it?” asked Lucy. “We thought you could put it in the den over the fire place.”

“It’s amazing,” her father said. “Thanks so much!” His emerald eyes shimmered with tears. He quickly blinked them away, then held out his arms and all his children surrounded him and hugged him.

This had been the best Easter he could ever remember.
Once Upon a Time

Chapter Summary

Odin tells Max and Aleta stories of Loki as a child

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Have you ever noticed how parents can go from the most wonderful people in the world to totally embarrassing you in three seconds? ~ Loki

After the Avengers had returned home to the mansion, Frigga, Balder, Odin, and Loki relaxed in the den while the children either returned to playing Asgardian Quest 2 or played with some of their other Easter presents. Serena was doing some of her Sudoku puzzles, Nate was working on one of his brain teasers, and Belle approached Frigga carrying her green journal which contained the chronicle of the Laufeyson family. “Bestemor, would you like to read this? It's my chronicle of our family.”

Frigga's eyes widened, for she knew exactly what a Lorekeeper Chronicle was. “Are you sure, Belle?”

Belle nodded. "Yes, this way you can see exactly how we all came to be Dad's children."

"Thank you, child. I shall enjoy this immensely," her grandmother said, then opened the chronicle and began to read.

Loki smiled. There was no greater complement than a Lorekeeper allowing you to read her chronicle.

He picked up his tablet and began to read his neglected book, but he was also listening to the conversations going on around him.

Balder and Vince were discussing different types of Asgardian creatures and what they looked like and where they were found.

While Odin was seated between Max and Aleta and the two tots were asking him to tell them a story.

"What kind of story?"

"A funny story!" Max said immediately.

"That's real and not made up," Aleta specified. Then she added, "I wanna hear a story about
"That's real and not made up," Aleta specified. Then she added, "I wanna hear a story about Asgard."

“Well . . . I know of two stories which you might enjoy—all of them are true, both of them have funny pranks in them and they are all about Asgard." Odin said, his good eye twinkling. "They are also, incidentally, about your father and uncles when they were boys."

Loki almost dropped his tablet. Oh no, Father! Surely you've got to be kidding! One of the reasons I rarely speak about my childhood is because I don't want to give those two scamps ideas!

But it was too late to protest, and if he did so, the children would be even more persistent about hearing whatever story Odin was going to tell. He recalled a saying he'd read on social media—once you have kids, your parents live to embarrass you by telling their grandkids everything crazy or naughty you ever did. He buried his face in the tablet, the tips of his ears turning bright red.

“Really? Cool!” Max cried excitedly.

Aleta poked him. “Shhh! This is storytime, you gotta be quiet!”

“I don’t have to listen to you, Aleta,” Max returned.

“Ahem! Are you ready to hear the story?” their grandfather queried.

Both children hushed immediately.

Odin began. “Once upon a time in Asgard . . .”

Fingernail Stew

The winter Loki was five was one of the longest in any Asgardian’s memory. It seemed that spring would never come and the whole realm was beset with snow storms, ice storms, and other wintery weather. The sun peeked its head out of the clouds for brief moments before ducking back to hide. Everyone was sick of the endless cold, snow, and ice. People began to complain to the All-Father that the Jotuns had brought the Fimbul Winter early, and could he please do something about it.

Loki was the only one who didn’t complain, because he loved the snow. He didn’t get cold and need to go inside to warm up like his older brothers Balder and Thor did. Instead he could stay outside playing in the courtyard and the garden until one of the servants or Frigga called him inside. Loki loved making snow sculptures from the frosty mounds that were heaped in the corners of the garden or by the pillars in the courtyard. He made all different kinds of things—sometimes he made people and sometimes animals—like horses, wolves, ravens, and cats. He used sticks to draw faces on his creations, and borrowed clothes from the rag bin to put on the people sculptures.

Frigga and Odin thought they were wonderful, but Thor thought they were silly, and told his brother he was crazy spending so much time outside making sculptures that would melt as soon as the weather grew warm. But Loki didn’t care.

Besides making sculptures, Loki liked to slide down the big hill behind the palace on his green sled. All his brothers had sleds, Thor had a red one, Balder a blue one, but Loki added gold...
flames to his green sled and used it every chance he got. When Thor and Balder were sparring in
the arena inside, Loki was sledding down the hill, learning how to make the sled fly over the
snow.

Sometimes other children would join him, the sons and daughters of servants or occasionally the
young nobles being tutored at the palace. But the noble sons often got angry because none of
them could beat Loki down the hill. Even though Loki was younger than they were, they still
couldn’t win a race against him.

This made several of the bigger boys jealous, because they thought Loki was cheating. He had to
be, they reasoned, because no puny little five-year-old could beat their big ten-year-old selves. So
they decided to get revenge.

Late one night after supper in the hall, three of the big boys snuck out to the small shed where
Loki, Thor, and Balder stored their sleds. The shed was locked, but the boys brought an iron bar
to pry the lock off and once they got inside they loosened the rivets on Loki’s sled so when he slid
down the hill the runners would come off and he would lose any race they challenged him to.

The next day it was extra cold and perfect weather for sledding. Loki got up early and ate
breakfast, hurrying through his bowl of porridge with raisins, honey, and cream. He put on his
favorite winter coat of evergreen and his fur hat and gloves. He had sheepskin boots with fur on
the top that matched his hat.

“Where are you going so early, little brother?” Thor asked, yawning from his bed.

“Sledding.”

“Again? Don’t you ever get sick of it?”

“No. Do you get sick of fencing?”

“Don’t be silly! Of course not.”

“I like sliding,” Loki replied.

“You’re going to turn into a Jotun if you don’t quit spending so much time in the snow,” Thor
tezed.

Loki glared at him. “I am not!”

Then he ran out of the nursery and through the passageway into the courtyard. He rushed over to
the shed and pulled his green sled out and dragged it to the top of the hill.

Several of the bigger boys were already at the top, whispering and laughing.

“C’mon, snow prince!” they teased. “Let’s see what you’ve got!”

“Snow prince?” sneered Rolf. “More like snow midget!”

“I’m not a midget!” Loki cried.

“You’re so small a giant would use you for a fingernail pick!” another boy laughed.

Their words hurt Loki, who was ashamed of being small, and he shouted, “At least I’m not so big
that my sled breaks when I sit on it!”

“Take it back, teeny weeny baby!” yelled Rolf.
“Make me, ox-butt!”

“I challenge you to slide down the hill!” Rolf brayed, a nasty gleam in his eye. “First one to the bottom wins.”

The boys got on their sleds and prepared to slide down. Just as they pushed off, the alarm bells sounded.

The bells only rang if there was sightings of Jotuns, and whenever they were heard, it meant danger and everyone needed to come inside, because the frost giants were coming. All the Aesir children knew that Jotuns ate children for breakfast.

Loki heard the bells just as his sled started to wobble and he tried to stop so he could get off, but the sled was unmanageable. It continued to coast until the rivets fell out and the sled crashed halfway down the hill, with the runners going one way and Loki on the wooden seat going the other way.

“Bye bye, midget!” hooted Rolf as he watched the crash.

Then he stopped his sled and ran off back to the palace with his friends, leaving poor Loki alone.

Luckily when his sled crashed, Loki wasn’t badly hurt, just bruised and breathless. He was more upset his sled had broken than the fact that he’d been abandoned by Rolf and his friends. For a few minutes he sat in the snow and cried. Then he heard the bells again, and got up to run down the hill to the palace.

Little did he know the Jotuns were closer than he thought, and when he moved, one spotted him against the snowy hillside. The Jotun smiled and licked his lips, then went to grab the little boy.

Loki heard the ground shake as though it was an avalanche and he screamed and started to run, but it was too late.

The Jotun grabbed him like a cat grabs a mouse, picking him up by the collar.

“What have we here?” the Jotun bellowed. Loki nearly went deaf.

“Let me go!” Loki squeaked. “I am Loki Prince of Asgard! If you hurt me my father will kill you!”

The Jotun laughed. “Then we shall take you home and hold you for ransom, little prince!”

Loki struggled, but was unable to get free and the frost giant tucked him in his large smelly pocket and stomped off, smashing the hill flat and knocking down several trees and buildings as he did so.

Loki nearly smothered inside the giant’s smelly woolen pocket and he was scared and wanted his father or anyone to rescue him. Only no one even knew he was missing.

Meanwhile, everyone in the palace was going into the catacombs beneath the main floor to hide until the guards and warriors fought off the Jotuns. Frigga went looking for her sons and soon found Thor and Balder. “Are you all right?” she asked the boys.

“We’re fine, Mother, but we want to go help fight the Jotuns!” complained Thor.

“Not yet, son. You’re too young,” his mother said.
“I’m big enough!” Thor insisted, but Frigga realized one son was missing.

“Loki! Where’s Loki?” she cried, looking around. “Thor, Balder have you seen your brother?”

Balder shook his head. “Last time I saw him he was going outside.”

“He was going sledding again, Mother,” Thor answered.

Frigga was horrified. “If he was outside . . .” she began asking everyone she saw if they had seen Loki, but no one had, and he was nowhere to be found. Frantic, she contacted Odin through her magic pendant and told him that Loki was missing and could be lost or kidnapped by Jotuns.

Odin promised to find him and went to Hlidskjalf, his magic throne that enabled him to see anything in all the Nine. He sat in it and used it to see where Loki was.

He saw a large Jotun in a blue tunic and leggings walking along the border of Asgard and Jotunheim, with a huge club over one shoulder and a long knife in his belt. Peeking out from his trouser pocket was a tiny dark head.

“My son!” Odin roared angrily.

As he watched the Jotun was joined by two others and they spoke together for a few moments in their guttural tongue.

Loki felt sick from being stuck in the Jotun’s pocket and also from hearing what the giants planned to do with him. He had the gift of tongues and could understand any spoken language and speak it as well.

“What shall we do with the little morsel, Thurid?” demanded one Jotun.

“I say we bake him in a pie!” cried the third one, eyeing the child hungrily.

“No!” roared the one who had captured the little boy. “He’s barely a mouthful. We’d waste the pie crust. I say we hold him for ransom and see how much the Aesir will pay to have him back.”

“A puny little thing like him? They’d not pay a copper piece for him. I say we roast him over the fire!”

“He says he’s the prince of Asgard!” Hrongar said.

“That puny thing, a prince? He’s lying!” Thurid sneered.

“I say we eat him in a sandwich!” said Orm, the third Jotun.

Loki was scared to death. But he knew he couldn’t let the Jotuns see how scared he was, or else they would eat him because he was weak. He also hoped that someone had noticed he was missing and come for him. But that didn’t seem likely, so he knew he had to do something to help himself.

So he decided to play a trick on the Jotuns.

“I don’t taste very good,” he spoke up, sniffling a little. “I’m all bones and muscle. If you want me to taste good you’re gonna have to cook me in a stew.”

Thurid snorted. “A stew? What kind of stew?”
“You don’t know how to make stew,” sneered Hrongar.

“Last time you tried boiling an old boot it tasted nasty!” Orm cried.

“I do,” Loki spoke up. “I can tell you how.”

“Why would you do that?” asked Orm. “We’re going to eat you!”

“Um . . . well . . . I’d rather be eaten in a good stew than something gross,” Loki answered.

Please, please someone help me! He thought.

“Then tell us what to do,” the Jotun said.

“First you start a fire and boil some water,” Loki told them.

The Jotuns made camp inside the forest and did what he said.

Loki trembled when he saw the pot of water. But he bravely said, “Then you need to cut your fingernails and add them to the broth. Cause everyone knows fingernails make good stew.”

One of the Jotuns took out a small knife and began cutting his fingernails.

“What? Where are we gonna find that?” cried Orm.

“Go out and look,” ordered Hrongar.

His brothers grumbled and stomped away, leaving Hrongar and Loki alone.

“You need some little rocks,” Loki told the Jotun. “And some moss. Blue moss.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. If you don’t have that, the soup won’t taste good.”

Hrongar sighed, then he rose and stomped over to find some rocks and moss.

As the Jotun bent over to gather some rocks and moss, Loki climbed down from the pocket using a loose thread.

But the thread didn’t reach the ground, so Loki used the seam of the Jotun’s pants and climbed the rest of the way down.

As soon as he touched the ground he took off running.

“Come back here you little rat!” roared Hrongar and he went to run after Loki.

Loki kept running, nearly falling as Hrongar thudded after him, making the ground shake.

But then there was a flash of light and a one-eyed man with a staff appeared before Hrongar.

“You took my son, Jotun! And tried to kill him!” screamed Odin. “And now you shall pay!”

Then he blasted the frost giant with a huge column of fire that burned the nasty Jotun right up.
And when his companions returned to see what was happening, Odin killed them too.

Then he went and hugged Loki and carried him home, where his mother and brothers waited, safe and sound at last, saved by a clever trick and a father’s wrath.

Max and Aleta cheered. Then Max said, “But Bestefar, what happened with those mean boys? Did they get in trouble for breaking Dad’s sled?”

“And they left him alone to get eaten!” Aleta snapped angrily. “They oughta be spanked and put in jail!”

Odin chuckled. “Indeed, little spitfire! And basically that’s what happened. Those wicked cowardly boys were given switchings and sent from court along with their parents, and Loki got a new sled and Seven League boots so he could run away to safety if he was ever outside when the alarm bells rang again.”

“Dad has a sled that we can ride on with him,” Aleta told Odin. “It’s really fast!”

“We beat Uncle Tony with it last time we raced,” Max stated.

“I just bet you did, imp,” Odin tweaked Max’s nose.

Behind his tablet, Loki smiled. He rarely thought about that incident, but that had been the catalyst that caused him to hate his father’s people.

“Can we hear another story?” begged his granddaughter.

“Very well. This is the story of a time when your Uncle Thor’s goats got into the hall during a feast and caused a lot of trouble . . .”

Goat Buffet

Thor and Loki were eight when Thor received two goats and a chariot for his birthday. Loki was given a spellbook of basic enchantments which he studied with his mother Frigga. While Loki was learning magic, Thor was learning how to care for Tanngrisnr and Tanngnjostr and drive his chariot. Though Loki loved his magic, he often wished for a familiar. He thought about asking for one next year, but meanwhile he was learning all sorts of spells.

That year was also the year when the Svartalfheim ambassador, a Dark Elf named Krull, came to Asgard to open diplomatic relations between the two realms. He brought with him his son, Adabiel, who was two years older than Odin’s sons. Adabiel was an arrogant coldhearted boy who was too handsome and too spoiled for his own good. He thought all Asgardians were beneath him, including the two brothers.

Like all Dark Elves, Adabiel had midnight hair and pale skin, large pointed ears and eyes that looked innocent but concealed a heart darker than night’s shadow. He was ten but considered himself more adult than child, and above the rules of Asgardian laws and common courtesy.

Adabiel thought he could do whatever he wished, and started off his stay in Asgard by throwing a pitcher of water at one of the maids because she was too slow in fetching his cloak. The pitcher hit the young woman in the face, making her nose bleed and splattering her uniform with water.

“Next time hurry up when I tell you, you worthless sow!” the boy snapped.

The poor girl was sobbing and just managed to give the brat a curtsy before she left the room, her
nose dripping blood all down the hallway.

“Kara, what happened to you?” Loki asked, he was coming out of his mother’s sitting room where he had been practicing some magical runes.

“Nothing, milord,” she sniffled. “It was an accident.”

"No! Your gown is wet as well as covered with blood! Please, tell me what happened!"

"Please, milord... I was just clumsy..." Kara whimpered. "I... banged into a wall and hurt my nose. Next time I'll watch where I'm going, Prince Loki." Tears tracked down her cheeks.

"Here. Let me heal you," Loki said in a soft voice.

Kara was the head cook's daughter, a pretty little maid with flaxen hair and brown eyes.

He had only learned healing spells as he gently placed his hand over Kara's nose and closed his eyes. He felt the bones mending as he made sure she felt no pain then moved his hand back and smiled. "There. That's much better," he said and Kara lightly touched her nose.

"Thank you, milord," she said with a curtsy and walked by him.

Loki gazed after her, troubled. There was something not right about her explanation. And he wondered why she was afraid, when she never had been before.

He looked down at the blood droplets as he followed them back up the hallway and found they were getting wider the further he went down the hallway.

Like a hound following a trail, Loki followed the blood all the way back to Adabel's door.

"Adabel!" Loki bellowed while banging his fist against the door and curbed his anger when Adabel opened the door.

The older boy looked down at him like he was spit beneath his boots. "What do you want, little Loki?" he sneered.

"There seems to be blood in front of your door. I was worried something had happened to you," Loki said and the older boy glared at him.

"Well, as you can see, I am fine."

"Then why is there blood in front of your door?" Loki queried, trying to sound nonchalant.

"I have no idea. Go fetch a servant and have them clean it up. Better yet. You do it."

Loki stiffened. "I'm not your lackey, Adabel. You're a guest in my home. Now why don't you act like it?"

"Are you threatening me?"

"No! I am merely stating a fact. Guests should treat their host's home like it was their own. Do
"I don't need to answer to you, little Aesir witch brat! I am a Prince of the Blood of Arcadia."
Adabiel declared haughtily. "And I don't need lectures from midgets with attitudes! Go play with
your potions kit, Loki!"

Adabiel slammed the door while Loki glared at the door then looked down at the blood. He hadn't
tried blood magic yet, but he did know blood can tell a person things.

He knew that sometimes an Asgardian constable used blood magic to tell if a crime had been
committed and whose blood had been shed.

Nodding, he waved his hand when a small glass vial appeared and he leaned down, scooping
some of the blood into it. He carefully capped the glass vial then headed down the hallway and
went out of the castle. It didn't take him long to arrive at the constabulary. When he walked inside
one of the constables was startled when he saw him. "My prince, what are you doing here?!" he
asked.

"I need to request a favor, Constable Sigurd," Loki said. "I need you to test this blood and tell me
who it belongs to." He held out the glass vial.

"Are you in any kind of trouble, milord?"

Loki shook his head. "No, not this time. But a friend might be."

Sigurd looked at the blood when he cupped the glass vial in his hand and nodded. "Follow me,"
he said and they went into the back room.

At the center of the room was a large table with wooden bowls, glass vials and tubing, small oil
burners and leather bound books. Torches were sitting in iron holders as the flames caused long
shadows on the walls and a soft breeze came from the slightly open windows.

Several men and women wearing gray uniforms were working at the table, testing various

Loki saw Gretta was tall with long black hair tied back with a gold cord and her eyes were the
color of moss.

"No, I'm not busy," she said then made a small bow after seeing Loki standing there. "Your
Highness."

Loki nodded back politely. "Hello, miss."

"How may I serve you?"

"A friend of mine might have been attacked. I need you to examine this blood and find out who
attacked them."

Gretta looked alarmed. "And your friend could not identify the attacker, Your Highness?"

"They could have, but were too frightened to tell me."

"Why were they afraid?"

"That is what I want to find out."
"May I inquire who this friend is?"

"It is Kara. She is one of my father's most loyal servants. It would take a lot to frighten her, so seeing her in tears..."

"She was crying?"

"Yes," he said with a nod and she took the vial in her hand.

"Gretta is one of our best sanguinists--that's a blood diviner," Sigurd explained.

Gretta walked to the table when she reached for a small round glass dish and dripped some of the blood into the dish.

"Blood shall tell the tale that is true," murmured Sigurd.

Loki went to stand next to Gretta when she reached for one of the small glass bottles and uncorked the top. She dripped some amber liquid on the blood when the blood started bubbling and she glanced at Loki.

"What's happening?" he asked curiously.

"Watch and see!" she said with a grin when a blue smoke rose from the blood and formed into two figures. The first figure looked male, but not Aesir and the other was female. The figures became clearer when he looked at the female and was stunned to see it was Kara.

"By the Norns," he whispered as he looked at the fear on her face then turned to look at the male figure.

"Adabiel!" he hissed angrily.

"You know this person?" she asked.

"I wish I didn't. He's the Dark Elf ambassador's son. A prince of his people."

"He seems to be threatening her," Gretta said as she looked at Adabiel.

"Can you find out more?" Loki asked and Gretta nodded. She placed a few more drops of blood in another dish then some of the amber liquid. They watched the blue smoke swirl until they saw Adabiel smash the pitcher into Kara’s face and Loki's eyes widened in anger.

"That miserable coward!" Loki growled. "How dare he mistreat her?"

"Calm yourself, milord," Sigurd said.

"How can I be calm!? He attacked one of my father's servants!"

"But it will be your word against his if you tell your father about the attack. And the girl may not want to accuse him."

"She might if you two will come and show Father what you found out."

"We will tell him, but you need to convince her to tell her side of the story," Gretta said.

"Then let us go to the castle," Loki said while Gretta and Sigurd picked up the glass with the blood in it and they left the room.
Loki was angry all over again when he remembered the way Kara had looked all bloody and scared—and making up tales to him, she who had grown up beside him and gotten into mischief with him.

"You will come with me to talk with Kara then we will speak with Father," he said as they went in the castle when he saw Kara going up the stairs and called to her.

"Do you need me for something, milord?" Kara said while going back down the stairs then saw Sigurd and Greta. She knew they were constables and slowly backed away, Had Adabiel accused her of something? Were they here to arrest her for not doing her duty?

"Kara? What is the matter?" Loki asked as tears dribbled down her cheeks.

"Please, Prince Loki, don't let them take me," she said and he gave her a confused look.

"They are not here for you," he said, walking closer and looking into her eyes. "They are here to help you."

"Help me?"

"Yes. I didn't believe you walked into a wall and followed the blood back to the source."

"You did?"

"Yes, and when I confronted your attacker..."

"No! Please! It was my fault! I was too slow and he had all right to punish me!"

"Hey . . . not even a guest has the right to hurt you that way. I don't care what you've done. If I had ever done something like that to any servant Father would make me go cut a switch!"

"He would?"

"Yes! Now, please, come with us and tell Father what happened."

"He won't believe me."

"Yes, he will. You are one of his most loyal servants and he would be furious if he learned from someone else that you have been harmed."

Kara chewed on a fingernail when she nodded and Loki smiled. Taking her hand, they headed for the throne room and the Einherjar guards stood at attention. "I need to speak with the All Father."

The Einherjar guard opened the door while Loki led Kara in the room and Greta and Sigurd followed behind them. Odin sat on the throne when Huginn and Muninn alerted him he had visitors. He was surprised to see the constables as he sat up straighter and wondered what was going on.

"What is the meaning of this?!" Odin demanded then looked at Loki. "Loki, what have you done now?!"

“Nothing, Father. I'm not in trouble, I swear by the Norns.”

"Then why are you with these constables?!"

"They aren't here to arrest me, Your Majesty. They're here to confirm what I'm about to tell you.”
"And what is it you wish to tell me?" Odin said as he sat back and was relieved that Loki was not in trouble.

"It appears one of your guests has attacked this young girl," Gretta said, walking to stand next to Loki.

"Is this true, Kara?" Odin said and Loki lightly nudged her as he nodded for her to speak.

"Ye-yes, Sire. It is true," Kara said as she looked down at her feet. "But it was my fault."

"How so?" Odin asked.

"I was... I was not fast enough when he told me to do something."

"Not fast enough?! You are one of the most punctual servants I have."

"Father, he smashed a pitcher into her face and broke her nose!" Loki interjected. "She was bleeding all over when I saw her as I was coming back from magic lessons."

"Who are you talking about?"

"Adabiel," Loki growled and Odin frowned.

"Are you accusing a Dark Elf prince of attacking Kara?"

"We have proof, Sire," Gretta said when she and Sigurd walked to the throne and he looked at the glass in their hands. "Prince Loki was able to obtain some blood from the scene of the attack and we used blood magic to figure out what happened. If I may, I wish to show you the findings."

"Proceed," Odin said and she swirled the blood in the glass. Odin watched as the blue smoke swirled then formed into Kara and Adabiel and he saw the fear in Kara's face. Sigurd swirled the blood in the second glass when Odin saw Adabiel's attack and Odin looked at Kara.

"Is this what really happened?" Odin asked.

"Ye-yes Sire," Kara said then fell to her knees and placed her face in her hands.

"I am so sorry." Odin stood up then he walked down the stairs then knelt down and moved her hands away. She looked at him as he smiled and cupped her cheek in his hand. "There is no need for tears, my dear. I believe you," he said in a soft voice then looked at Loki before standing. "We do have a problem. Even with this evidence, Adabiel's father will never believe his son had done anything wrong."

"But Father! The blood tells the tale!" Loki objected.

"Loki, Krull wouldn't care if Adabiel beat Kara almost to death," Odin sighed. "Because the Dark Elves believe that is their right as royals to treat servants as they choose. So even though I shall speak to the ambassador about this incident, Adabiel won't be punished much if at all."

"By the Nine, Father! If Thor, or Balder, or I had ever done such you'd switch us black and blue. Can't you punish Adabiel?"

"Regrettably, no. Were I to lay hands on a guest after giving my hospitality I would start a war. But I will speak to his father and I shall get one of the older male servants, like Ragnar or Vidar to serve the prince instead."
Loki bit his lip. It wasn't fair but he understood why Odin couldn't give that brat what he deserved. Which meant he would have to get payback on his own. And unlike all the other times, Loki had a feeling that his father wouldn't be angry.

Now he just had to think of a few satisfying pranks.

He swallowed hard, then bowed to his father. “Father, may Kara serve me instead?” That was the only way he knew of to protect her.

Odin eyed the girl thoughtfully. “Will this suit you, Kara?”

She curtsied. “Yes, Sire. I would be honored to serve Prince Loki.”

“He will make it so.” He peered at the constables. “I shall keep this as evidence. Perhaps it may sway Krull, although I doubt it. But thank you for bringing this to my attention.”

“Just doing our job, Sire,” said Sigurd, then he bowed and Gretta curtsied and their audience was at an end.

As they all left the throne room, Loki whispered to Kara, “Don’t worry. One way or another Adabiel will pay for hurting you.”

“Oh please, milord! I don’t want to get you in trouble. Not on my account,” Kara begged.

Loki gave her a reckless devil-may-care smile. “It’ll be all right. This time I don’t think I’ll get in trouble. And even if I do, it’ll be worth it to wipe that smug grin off that rotten snot’s face!”

Kara wrung her hands. “Oh, Loki, be careful!” Then she put a hand to her mouth in horror. “I mean milord!”

“You can call me Loki when we’re alone,” the green-eyed prince said. “You’re my friend, and friends don’t kneel to friends.”

“Oh no, I couldn’t! My mama would skin me raw if she knew!”

“Then we’ll make sure she doesn’t know,” he said with a sly grin.

“It’s not proper, milord,” Kara stammered.

“Oh hang proper. It’s not proper that Adabiel gets away with beating you either.”

“It is the right of princes to chastise servants,” Kara quoted.

Loki snorted. “Not this prince. I don’t care what he does when he’s at home. He’s in Asgard now and nobody hurts my friends!”

She placed a hand on his arm. “Loki, don’t. If you hurt Adabiel, the All-Father will be angry.”

“Not this time, he won’t. Besides, I’m not going to hurt him—just humiliate him to death. And that’ll hurt more than my fist in his face.”

Kara sighed. “Very well. But if you get in trouble—”

“That wouldn’t be anything new. Now come on. You can dust my room or something while I plan. I’ll make you look busy so we can talk.”

Loki decided that he had to make the prank public, so everyone would see Adabiel get a taste of
his own medicine. He knew the spiteful and wicked prince wouldn’t want everyone laughing at him, and making people laugh was what Loki did best.

He sat and thought, perched on the edge of his window seat with his chin in his hand leaning on one drawn up knee while Kara busied herself with a feather duster and some lemon polish. He thought and though, his clever brain coming up with multiple plans then rejecting them. Until finally . . . “By the Nine, I’ve got it!”

Kara nearly dropped the pillow she was plumping on the floor. “Got what, milord?”

Loki shook a finger at her. “Loki, Kara. Remember?”

She flushed. “Aye, Loki.”

“Better.” He flashed a mischievous grin at her that lit his whole face. “My prank is going to be twofold. First one thing and then another. And no one will be able to say I did it. Well, they might but they won’t be able to prove it.”

“What is it? What is it?” Max and Aleta chorused, practically jumping up and down on their grandfather.

Odin held a finger to his lips. “Shhh! Miss Mandy is sleeping,” he indicated where the elderly lady had fallen asleep in Loki’s recliner, with Mystic on her lap.

“Okay, we’ll be quiet,” the two imps whispered. “What did Daddy do?”

“You see, Father? They don’t need any encouragement!” Odin thought, hiding his own snickering behind his tablet.

“Ahem! Shall I go on?”

“Yes!” Both children cried.

“Then hush and listen.”

They grew still as mice when a cat stalks, their eyes wide.

“Well, first I’m going to need to get my brother Thor to help,” Loki told Kara. “The first part needs him to let me use something of his. And for the second part I’m going to need a bowl of whatever soup is being served tonight for dinner.”

“I can get the soup, Loki. My mama will give it to me.” Kara promised.

“Good. I was hoping you’d say that. And can you get some chocolate cookies too?”
She giggled. “Of course. Mama always gives me cookies. She’ll give me extra if I tell her they’re for you. And some milk.”

He grinned in delight. “Thanks, Kara. Be prepared to see Adabiel become the laughingstock of the entire court tonight!”

“I can’t wait.”

“Meet you back here in half-an-hour,” Loki said, then he went off to find Thor, who was probably either sparring with Balder or feeding his goats.

Kara went down to the kitchens to get the soup, cookies, and milk.

On the way to the practice fields, Loki passed by Adabiel again. The Dark Elf scion was smirking at something one of the noble sons who hung around court hoping to get the ear of the king said.

“I say the most beautiful woman in the Nine is our queen Frigga,” the courtier proclaimed.

Adabiel sneered. “She is ugly as a dried up old hag compared to our Svartalfheim maidens. They are as beautiful as the Vanir Freya!”

Loki went hot with rage. How dare that skulking coward say that about his mother? He quickly amended his original plan to include something even more humiliating.

The courtier looked alarmed. “Milord, I’d not say such things too loudly around here. The queen is most beloved.”

“Who cares? Everyone knows you Aesir can’t hold a candle to us Alfheim when it comes to sheer attractiveness. And the queen is like a dowdy old woman compared to any of my cousins or my baby sister.”

You’re gonna be crying like your baby sister when I’m through with you, Adabiel! Loki vowed. Hide and watch!

Again the fawning courtier hushed the arrogant prince and they continued on their way, never noticing Loki in the shadows.

Loki found Thor down at the goat pen, feeding his goats. Tanngrisnr was a snowy white goat and his brother Tanngnjostr was brown and white. Both were shoving Thor playfully as his brother went to feed them. Loki took some carrots from the bucket outside the pen and climbed over the fence.

He gave an odd kind of whistle and the two goats quit trying to butt Thor and came over to him, bleating for the carrots in his hand. He stroked their soft coats and said, “Hey, boys. Want to help me prank an idiot?”

His hands finger combed their fur and removed several hairs. He would need it for the potion he would make later.

“Loki, how did you get them to do that?” Thor wanted to know. “They have no manners, brother. They keep trying to knock me down.”

Loki shrugged. “I like animals. I’m a shifter so they like me.”

“Can you teach me? They’re fun but I’m tired of getting stepped on. And my bottom hurts,” Thor admitted.
“All right. I’ll help you train them . . . but you have to help me too,” Loki bargained.

“With what?”

“With the prank I’m going to pull on His High and Mighty Elfness Adabiel.”

Thor’s mouth hung open. “Loki! He’s a guest. Father will whale the hide off you.”

“No, he won’t. He sort of gave me permission. Because of what happened with Kara. And he doesn’t even know about how that pondslime insulted Mother!”

“What did he say about Mother?” Thor’s fists clenched.

“He called her an ugly hag. Said even his baby sister was prettier. And he broke Kara’s nose by smashing a pitcher of water in her face,” Loki reported.

Thor’s cerulean eyes blazed. “He did? Then he deserves whatever we do to him. Tell me what you want me to do.”

“I need to borrow Tanngrisnr and Tanngnjostr . . .”

Loki returned to his room after telling Thor of the plan to find Kara had finished cleaning and was dozing on the window seat. A bowl of soup and a tray of cookies and milk was on his small reading table. Loki gently shook her shoulder.

“Hey, sleepyhead, wake up! I’m back!” he sang in her ear.

Kara started awake. “Oh! Forgive me, milord!”

“Only if you call me Loki,” he reminded.

“Loki, I’m sorry. I was just so tired and it was so peaceful . . .”

“I don’t blame you for taking a nap. You’ve been awake since dawn, right?”

She nodded. “I got you your soup and the cookies and milk.”

“Good. Let’s eat, then I’ll explain why I wanted the soup.”

They ate all the cookies and milk, then Loki told Kara what he was going to do with the soup. “I’m going to put pepper in it, lots of it. To disguise these,” he showed her a handful of wriggly worms.

“Ugh! Loki, that’s disgusting!”

“I know. And it’ll be even more disgusting when he eats it,” the mischievous prince laughed. “I’m going to disguise it with a seeming so at first he thinks he’s eating noodles.”

“That’s really funny!” she smiled at him.

“That’s for hitting you. But wait till you see what else happens.”

He took the bowl of soup and put it on the side of the table. He would pay one of the hall servers to make sure this bowl was given to Adabiel. He knew the servants hated their haughty guest and would be happy to do him a favor.

Then he removed a few vials from his leather satchel and his small cauldron and set it on the little
charcoal brazier. He added some water and then a few drops of some oil and the goat hairs he’d obtained from Tanngnjostr and Tanngrisnr. He added something clear and viscous from another vial, then stirred it all together and let it steep.

Kara watched in awe. “What are you brewing, Loki?”

“Something that’s going to make that jackass irresistible . . . to goats!”

The girl’s eyes went wide. “What are you going to do with it?”

“Sprinkle it on his clothes.”

“But won’t he notice?”

“No. Because it’s odorless and it’s clear. Well, it’s odorless if you’re not a goat.”

“Then what?”

“Just wait and see! I promise it’ll be something you’ll never forget!”

Loki turned himself into a raven and flew into Adabiel’s room through the open window with the vial of Eu De Goat in his feet. As he suspected, the Dark Elf had servants lay out his clothes for that night’s banquet on his bed. Loki worked the stopper free with his beak and then shifted back into his human shape and sprinkled Adabiel’s clothing liberally with the potion, making sure he put most of it on the elf’s pants. Then he changed back and flew out the window with no one the wiser.

At the banquet that night, Adabiel and Krull were seated at the same table as Odin and his family, the highest spot on the dais. The ambassador and his son were at the left hand of Odin, while Frigga was at his right. Balder was next to Krull. Loki was seated next to Frigga and Thor next to Loki.

Everyone greeted each other and Odin clapped his hands and the food was brought in. The high table ate first and was given the first choice of small plates of smoked fish, bread, and pickled beets. Loki ate his smoked salmon slowly, thinking Adabiel wouldn’t be sneering soon at him from across the salt cellar.

The soup course was served and the high table was given soup from fine silver bowls. Loki slowly sipped his and watched his nemesis over the rim of his bowl. It was vegetable beef noodle soup and was very good.

Loki glanced over at Adabiel as the elf berated one of the servants, who bowed in fear as he backed away. Loki chewed angrily then swallowed as he watched the elf eat and saw he chewed with his mouth open.

"Ew!" Aleta said.

"That’s gross!” Max said and Odin nodded.

Loki watched when Adabiel looked at the soup while the servant placed the bowl in front of him and Adabiel looked at the large noodles swirling in the broth. "This smells delicious," Adabiel said when he lifted his spoon and scooped a large amount of the soup onto the spoon.

Thor nudged Loki and Loki winked at him. The two brothers barely concealed their smirks of glee. Balder saw and raised an eyebrow, concealing a grin. He didn’t know what they had done
but he was aware they had done something to their supercilious guest.

Adabiel swallowed a spoonful of soup and then began coughing. He grabbed his goblet of mead and chugged it down.

“Oh dear,” Frigga said softly. “Too much pepper, Your Highness?”

“No, Your Majesty, I’m fine,” Adabiel lied, his eyes streaming tears.

“Are you crying?” Thor asked softly.

“No! It’s the pepper!” Adabiel snapped, and wiped his eyes with his napkin. He was red faced.

“Maybe we ought to get you a new bowl?” suggested Frigga.

“No. I like hot things,” Adabiel said, not wanting to seem like a baby. He then began to eat some more soup . . . sucking down the noodles.

Loki ate some more of his own, waiting until Adabiel had a particularly long noodle hanging from his mouth before he released the seeming, but only so Adabiel could see it. Everyone else at the table except Loki would see noodles.

The Dark Elf’s mouth bulged as he glanced down at his bowl. Then he saw the wriggling fat gray worms all in his soup . . . as well as the one long one still in his mouth!

“AHHHH!” he shrieked and spit the worm out.

“By the Nine! What has happened?” Frigga cried.

“Worms! There’s worms in my soup!” Adabiel spat, now looking green. “And I ate them!”

“What worms?” Krull demanded. “Boy, quit shrieking like a girl and act your age! The soup is perfectly fine.”

“But . . . but Father! There really are worms!” Adabiel whined.

Balder chuckled. “Maybe you’re dreaming?”

“I assure you, young prince, that none of my cooks would ever put worms in your soup,” Odin informed him.

Adabiel whimpered. “But they’re right there! How come you can’t see them?”

“Stop it! You’re embarrassing me!” his father hissed.

Thor and Loki were giggling behind their napkins, and every diner in the hall was staring at the high table, some puzzled and some laughing.

"Was this your doing?" Balder whispered to Loki. Loki wasn't sure if he should let his older brother in on the prank out of fear he would tell Odin, but he nodded his head and Balder smiled. "Well done."

"You mustn't tell Father," Thor whispered.

"Why would I do that? He deserves it," Balder said with a glare toward Adabiel.

The Dark Elf scion was glaring at the servants, who were also laughing and smirking behind
their hands. They didn’t know what was really going on but they were glad to see the nasty prince so upset. "You!" he called one of the male servers. "Take this away! It's not fit for pigs to eat!"

Frigga gasped, insulted. "I beg your pardon?"

Krull gave his son a furious glare. "Forgive my son, Queen Frigga. He didn't mean what he said. He's just excitable." He elbowed Adabiel and hissed in elvish, "You little idiot, stop making a scene! Just shut up and eat whatever is there!"

Adabiel sulked and muttered, "Forgive me, milady, I was mistaken." He looked like he had swallowed a lemon.

Loki barely concealed a smile, thinking it high time the elf got the rough edge of someone's tongue. But the best was yet to come.

The fruit and dessert course was brought in, and everyone exclaimed over the large sculpture of flavored ice shaped like a warrior riding a horse. It was surrounded by small chocolate cakes and tiny lingonberry tarts.

“Ooooo!” the kids said and Odin smiled.

The servants went about serving the tarts and the cakes as Loki looked at the swirls of chocolate mousse on his cake and Thor was practically drooling.

"Wipe your chin." Loki whispered and Thor used the napkin to wipe the drool away.

"Are you gonna do it now?" his brother hissed in his ear.

"Just waiting for the perfect moment," Loki said with a small smirk.

He began to eat his dessert, enjoying the treat immensely.

Adabiel poked at the tart sitting on the plate in front of him and Krull sighed, rolling his eyes. "Stop playing and eat it," he growled and his son nodded.

Balder sucked ice off his spoon and said, "This ice is fabulous, Mother. I must compliment Grisel on her artistry."

"I will tell her you're enjoying it," Frigga said. Loki and Thor also enjoyed the ice and Loki noticed Grisel had added some cherry sauce to his.

Adabiel cautiously ate his ice as he noticed the others staring at him and he fought the urge to tell them to leave him alone.

Loki waited until Odin had finished before he made a discreet gesture under the table.

Odin stood up and announced, "And now for our honored guests we have some entertainment!"

Oh, it is going to be entertaining, alright," Loki thought with a small grin and gave Thor and Balder a wink.

The doors to the hall were thrown open and a troupe of dancers came in with cymbals and bells. As they processed into the hall, there came a strange noise, as of goats baaing.
"By My Good Eye, what is all that racket?" Odin demanded.

Then Tanngnjostr and Tanngrisnr and another smaller black goat trotted down the banquet hall.

Some of the guests were startled, but others just thought it was part of the entertainment and laughed.

The goats raced over the benches and inbetween the diners, their slit pupiled eyes focused upon something at the far end of the hall.

"Thor! What are your goats doing out of their pens?" Odin demanded. "I have no idea, Father. I thought I had closed the gate," Thor said.

Loki grabbed a tart off a platter and waved it at the goats. "C'mere, Tanngnjostr and Tanngrisnr!" He was really directing them towards Adabiel.

The goats, anticipating a snack, headed toward Loki when they smelt something even better and headed for Adabiel.

"No! Stay away!" Adabiel screamed when Tanngnjostr slid under the table and Adabiel screamed.

Tanngrisnr jumped on the table and raced right at the Dark Elf. "Mhhaamaaa!"

"Thor! Control your goats!" Odin shouted. "Yes, Father!" Thor said and leaped over the table, running toward the goats.

"Let us help, Brother!" Balder said and he and Loki went to help Thor.

And the little black goat jumped right over it and landed on Adabiel's leg. 'Mnnyaaah!" he cried in bliss and began jumping up and down.

"Get off of me!" Adabiel shouted.

He began running about with the goat jerking against his leg.

People were pointing and hysterically laughing.

"Help!" he screamed while Thor, Loki and Balder tried to catch him and the little goat bleated, but didn't let go of his leg.

A larger goat, the little goat's mother, replied to her child's call when it scraped its hoof on the floor and charged at Adabiel.

Tanngrisnr bleated and head butted Adabiel right in the behind, sending the boy and the little goat flying towards the angry nanny goat.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!" Adabiel shouted then landed on the nanny goat's back and the little goat let go. The nanny goat snorted and walked in a circle when she raised her back legs and bucked him off of her back.

Several of the warriors were howling with laughter, nearly prostrate on the floor.
The servants had placed the trays on the tables as they leaned against the walls and covered their mouths, laughing as tears rolled down their cheeks.

Even the musicians had placed their instruments on the floor and were holding onto each other while laughing.

Thor was holding onto Tanngnjoster's collar and laughing, leaning on the goat.

Loki and Balder had finally caught Tanngrisnr as they laughed and Loki patted the goat's head. "Good boy," Loki whispered, watching Adabiel turning in circles while glaring at them.

Adabiel landed right on top of the table where the remainder of the ice was and smacked headfirst into the melting sculpture.

Then Tanngrisnr jumped up and tore a huge hole right out of the seat of the elf's pants.

"Mnnnyaahhh!"

"AHHHHHHHHH!" Adabiel shouted and everyone pointed at the bright pink underpants he was wearing.

"He's wearing female underpants!" Thor shouted, collapsing to the floor as he laughed.

Loki cracked up, leaning against the table. This was even better than he had planned.

Adabiel scooted off the table as he tried to hide his shame when he looked at Loki and frowned. "You! You did this!" Adabiel shouted as he pointed a finger at him. "I should have known! Guards! Arrest him!"

Balder stepped in front of his brother. "You have no authority here, you little pipsqueak! How dare you accuse Loki of doing anything when everyone can see he was right here the whole time?"

"He is a trickster! They can't be trusted!" he shouted and looked at the guards. "Don't just stand there! Arrest him!"

"Beg pardon, milord, but that's not the way things are done here," drawled Ralf. "We only take orders from the royal family, not guests."

"Even royal guests," added Tanni, a tall guard with brown hair.

"Adabiel, stop this nonsense at once!" Krull shouted as he stood up then looked at Odin. "I do apologize."

"I also for my son's unruly goats," Odin sighed. "Thor, go and put them back in their pen."

Yes, Father," Thor said and he, Balder and Loki went about herding the goats then led them out of the room. Thor gave Loki a smile as they headed outside toward the goat pens and led the goats inside.

Back in the hall, a furious and humiliated Adabiel was having a royal tantrum, demanding Loki be punished for what he had done.

"Adabiel, stop acting like a child!" Krull shouted.

"No! I demand that freak be locked away!" Adabiel shouted and Odin's eye widened.
"What did you just call my son?!!" Odin asked.

"Apologize at once!" Krull said as Kara poured some wine into his glass and he gave her a small nod.

"You! You are in on this, aren't you?!" Adabiel shouted, pointing at her and Krull frowned.

"Now what are you talking about?"

"She is the one who put those worms in my soup!" he shouted and Krull sighed.

"There were no worms in the soup!"

"They were all in on it!" he shouted. "Don't you see, Father?"

"All I see is my son embarrassing me!"

"And what reason would we have to harm you?" Frigga asked.

"Have you done something?" Odin asked.

"No!" Adabiel said and the room became silent when the doors opened and Heimdall walked in the room. Everyone was shocked to see the Gate Keeper away from his post and his dark eyes locked onto the elf. "Heimdall, what brings you here?" Odin asked and Heimdall made a deep bow.

Thor, Loki, and Balder re-entered the hall just as they saw Heimdall come in.

"Of course," Loki whispered. "I should have gone to him. He would have seen what happened."

Don't blame yourself, Brother. It looks like someone is about to get what's coming to him," Thor said, patting his brother's shoulder.

I am sorry for not coming sooner, Sire," Heimdall said as he glanced at Adabiel.

"No need for apologies," Odin said. "What news have you brought me?"

"It appears the young Dark Elf has abused one of your loyal servants," he said, looking at Kara. "Isn't that right, Girl?"

"Y-yes," Kara said and Adabiel glared at her.

Krull stared at her. "She seems fine. When did this occur?"

"It was last night. Prince Loki had found her shortly after the attack and healed her."

"See! I told you it was the freak! He is trying to frame me!" Adabiel shouted.

"Do you have any proof?" Krull asked.

"Yes, we do," Odin said and clapped his hands. A servant brought the glasses with the blood in them and Gretta walked to the throne.

"Who is this?"

"This is Gretta. She is one of my constables," Odin said and he handed her the first glass.
"What is she going to do?"

"I am going to use blood magic," she said and waved her hand over the blood. The blue smoke rose from the blood when the smoke formed into Adabiel and Kara and she explained that it looked like he was shouting at Kara.

"Were you shouting at her?" Krull asked.

"No!" Adabiel said and his father looked at Kara.

"Why was he shouting at you?"

"I... I had been too slow with something he asked me to do," she said and lowered her head.

"I see," Krull said then looked at Gretta. "Is there more?"

"Yes, Sire," Gretta said as she picked up the second glass and waved her hand over the blood. The blue smoke rose up as the others saw the figure of Adabiel smashed the pitcher into the figure of Kara's face and some of the women gasped.

"No! That isn't what happened! It's a trick! Loki is framing me!" Adabiel shouted.

Frigga spoke up. "Now that is a bald-faced lie, young man! Loki was with me all morning having lessons. And Kara would have been in to clean your rooms while he was in my quarters."

"Shut up, you old cow!" Adabiel shouted and the room became dead silent.

"Uh-oh!" Max said.

"He is in trouble!" Aleta said.

"Yes, he was," Loki said and Odin nodded.

"Serious trouble," the small Seer declared. "Nobody calls MY Bestemor a cow!"

"No, they do not," Frigga said with slightly smug look and Thor laughed.

"What happened next?" Max asked.

"Did he get his butt smacked?!" Aleta asked.

"Scamps, let your grandfather finish," Loki gently reprimanded.

"Sorry," they said and Odin smiled.

"WHAT did you just call my wife?" Odin demanded, his voice crackling with anger.

"I called her an old cow! Look at her! My little sister is better looking than her!" Adabiel said and Thor, Balder and Loki stormed toward him.

"No one says that about our mother and gets away with it!" Thor bellowed.

"What are you going to do? You cannot raise a hand to me! It will cause a war!"

"Then apologize to our mother and admit to your crime," Loki said. "If I had said such things to her, it would break my mother's heart and I would be punished for hurting a servant."
"Never!"

"Then you are no prince. A true prince would never intentionally harm anyone unless in battle and respects the people who serve them."

"They also respect their parents," Balder added.

Several of those watching applauded.

Adabiel looked at the brothers, at Frigga and Odin then at his father and frowned. He had never been spoken to in such a manner, but he also knew his reputation was on the line.

“Come here,” he said while pointing to Kara and she slowly walked to him. He saw the fear in her eyes, just like all the servants at home, and he felt a knot in his chest. He stood straighter when he lowered his head slightly and reached out his hand. She took his hand as he looked at her and sighed. "I wish to apologize. I had no right in harming you,"

"Do you mean that, Sire?" she asked.

"Yes," he said with a nod.

"Then I accept your apology," she said with a small smile.

Adabiel looked at Frigga when he walked to her and placed his hands in front of him. "Queen Frigga, I... I wish to apologize for my harsh words," he said.

“I am glad you want to apologize, but those words were very hurtful," she said and he nodded.

"Again, I apologize."

"If you truly mean your words, there is someone else you need to apologize to," she said and pointed toward Loki. Nodding, he walked to Loki as Loki crossed his arms over his chest and glared at him.

"I'm sorry," Adabiel said in a soft voice and Loki blinked his eyes a few times.

"Sorry, I didn't hear that," Loki said.

"I'm sorry for the way I acted."

"He called you a freak," Young Sif said and Loki's eyes widened.

"Oh really?!" Loki asked and Thor and Balder appeared behind their brother.

"I really am sorry!" Adabiel said and Loki swore he was nearly in tears.

"Did he really mean it?" Max interrupted. "Or was he just saying that?"

"Daddy would know," Aleta pointed out. "He always does."

Loki frowned. The elf prince seemed sincere. And yet... and yet Loki knew plenty of bullies and he knew that such people didn't suddenly change their behavior or personality in mere moments.

"You're a slick talker, Adabiel. But I know that what you say isn't what you mean. Or else you wouldn't have taken this long to say you were sorry. You're only sorry you were found out," Loki said coldly.
Adabiel glared at Loki. He knew his ruse was over. His pride and reputation was in tatters.

"Well, it was worth a try," he said with a sly grin.

"Why you lying little--!" Thor looked like he was going to punch the elf in the nose.

Balder grabbed him. "You can't, little brother!"

"He's right," Loki said.

“And that is why I will get away with all this," Adabiel said, but didn't see Krull coming up behind him.

"None of you can harm me or it means war."

"They may not be able to do anything, but I can!" Krull said and Adabiel turned to look at his father.

The boy laughed mockingly. "You, Father? You promised Mother on her deathbed you would raise me as she wanted."

"Yes, I did, but I now see the error of that promise."

"Error?"

"Yes, I wanted a son I could be proud of. A son who treats people with respect. A son who would mean his words and acknowledges his misdeeds."

"I am a Prince of the Blood! Like my mother before me," Adabiel declared arrogantly. "And I apologize to no one! Not even you, Father, for you only hold your rank because you married into the royal family."

Krull had had enough. He looked at his son and remembered how his father treated him when he had misbehaved. One time, he had taken Krull over his knees during a formal dinner and spanked him. His howls echoed around room as the guests laughed then his father had placed him on his feet and seemed to be trying hard not to cry. He told Krull he hated humiliating him in such a manner and he had apologized to everyone. Would the same happen if he humiliated Adabiel?

You have let him get away with behaving this way, he thought. And now you must correct it. Jacinda, you were wrong. Our son has become a spoilt bully, not a prince worthy of our house.

"Well, Father, what are you going to do?!!"

"Something I should have years ago when you told me you could do whatever you wished because you were royal and I wasn't." Krull said, his dark eyes snapping. "Royal or not, boy, I'm still your father and I have had it with your defiance and your disrespect to me and to Odin and his family!"

With a speed of a serpent, Krull grabbed hold of his son and Loki waved his hand, making a chair appear behind Krull. Nodding, Krull sat down and pulled his son onto his lap. "Release me, you cur!" Adabiel shouted.

Odin snapped his fingers and a hazel switch appeared in his hand. He gave it to Krull.

"Thank you," Krull said and Adabiel's eyes widened.
"You wouldn't dare!" Adabiel shouted.

"Stop mewling like an infant and take your punishment like a man," Krull said and raised the switch.

"Let me go, Father! You have no right!"

"I have every right!" Krull said and slammed the switch against Adabiel's bottom.

Adabiel's howling filled the room and some of the guests started snickering.

"Silence!" Odin said with a raised hand and the room became silent.

Except for the boy sobbing and kicking over his father's knee.

Krull used the switch nine more times then dropped the switch onto the floor and his hand was shaking. Not from anger, but from the pain of having to harm his son.

He let his son stand up on shaking legs as Adabiel glared at him and wiped the tears away with the back of his hand.

"Now apologize," Krull ordered. "And this time you had better mean it."

"And if I refuse?!" Adabiel asked with a defying look.

Krull picked up the switch again. "You want five more?"

"N-n-n-n-no!" he said with a shake of his head and Thor smiled, nudging Loki.

"Then apologize!" Krull said and Adabiel looked at Kara.

"I am truly sorry," he said and she nodded. He then turned and looked at Frigga.

"Yes?" Frigga asked and he made a little cough.

"I am truly sorry for the things I have said. Please forgive me."

“I forgive you. Now apologize to Loki.”

Gritting his teeth, the elf prince did so.

Loki nodded in acceptance, but he sensed he had made an enemy that day, one that might one day try and do him serious harm. But it had been worth it.

“Did he go home? Did you ever see him again?” Aleta wanted to know.

“I hope not!” Max said. “I feel bad for his sister, having to live with a mean brother like that.”

Loki laughed. “You know, imp, so did I.”

“To answer your question, yes he did go home. His father sent him home with an escort the day after that dinner,” Odin replied. “And after that Krull came alone to visit us on his ambassadorial trips.”

“Thank the Norns!” Frigga said fervently.

“Hey, Bestefar,” Max said suddenly. “Can we come to Asgard when it’s summer?”
“Yeah I wanna see it and live in the castle like a real princess,” Aleta said eagerly. “Only not a nasty one like Adabiel.”

“That would be lovely!” Frigga cried.

“Yes, I would like that very much,” Odin smiled. “When can you come?”

“Uh . . . summer vacation is in a few months,” Loki said. “As soon as the kids are out of school we’ll pack and come over Bifrost and stay for a month or two.”

“Yay!” Max and Aleta cheered.

“Okay, scamps, I think it’s time for bed,” Loki announced.

“Awww!” they groaned.

“Hey, none of that,” he said quietly. “Tell your grandfather thank you for the stories.”

Both Max and Aleta gave Odin a hug and kiss, thanking him prettily.

Then Loki picked up Aleta in one arm and would have picked up Max too, but Frigga did so, saying, “Do you mind if I help, Loki?”

Her son smiled at her. “Your help is always welcome, Mother.”

As she climbed the stairs holding her grandson, the Queen of Asgard couldn’t help but think that if she closed her eyes she could imagine she held Loki in her arms. Max leaned his head on her shoulder and yawned. “Sleepy.”

“You’ve had a long day, alskling,” his grandma murmured, stroking the fine ebony hair that was so like her son’s.

She carried the little boy into his room, and gently lay him down in bed. Max yawned and asked, “Sing to me?”

So Frigga sang the same lullaby she used to sing to her sons, and Max smiled and fell asleep.

She gently stroked his cheek, then went across the hall to find her son rocking his little spark in the rocking chair and singing the same lullaby in his skin-stroking velvet voice. Frigga leaned in the doorframe and watched, thinking what a beautiful picture this was of Loki and his baby girl.

Loki waited until Aleta was fast asleep before putting her into bed. He kissed her forehead then turned and saw Frigga.

“Is Max asleep?”

“Oh yes. I sang to him and he fell asleep right away.”

Her son laughed softly. “I used to also.” He went to kiss his youngest son good night.

Frigga followed then stood looking down at the sleeping child and muttered, “Loki, he looks so much like you. Are you sure he’s not . . .?”

“It’s impossible to know, Mother. Max’s mom was . . . she was a lady of the night. And she didn’t know who fathered him.”

“Is she alive?”
“No. She died and it’s a good thing because she hurt him terribly. She used drugs and when she did she beat him and locked him in closets. When he first came here he was like a shadow, afraid of every loud noise or sudden movement, he wouldn’t even let me touch him. It took me months to get him to stop hiding under the bed.”

“Poor baby!”

“Yes and he wasn’t the only one. All of these kids were abused and abandoned. Until they came to live with me.”

“You fixed all the broken pieces.”

“As best I could. And that’s why I don’t care who fathered Max. He’s my son. Nobody’s son but mine,” Loki said firmly.

Frigga hugged him. “No one would ever doubt that, Loki. I’m proud of you, son.”

“Thank you, Mother.” Loki murmured. “Shall we go down and have some tea?”

“Lead the way, my son,” she laughed, and followed him back down the stairs.
Lights, Leather, and Loki

Chapter Summary

Loki’s Asgardian Quest gamer con takes off and Vince and Hunter get into trouble at school for defending a girl. Lots of Loki in leather pants!

26

Lights, Leather, & Loki

Fangirls? What fangirls? Oh THOSE glorious fangirls! ~ Loki

Odin and Frigga decided to spend an extra few weeks with Loki and his family, since there was nothing pressing that they needed to return home for and the realm was in good hands with Odin’s Council of Regents, Balder and Heimdall. Plus Frigga was having far too much fun with her Laufeyson grandchildren to want to go home right after the holiday. Loki was just glad that with the addition of two adults, some of his responsibility was cut in half. Mandy recovered from the flu and was pronounced with a clean bill of health and returned to her own home next door, though Loki sent Samantha, Hunter, and Belle over for the first two days afterwards to check on her and make sure she was doing all right. Odin was always happy to walk his namesake, and the shepherd was quickly learning to use the grass to do his business on and not the carpet.

Frigga happily watched Max and Aleta when Loki was on the phone with his tech support staff, fixing the glitches in the new game and sending patches around to everyone who had received a prototype. His older children happily re-tested the game, as did Thor, Tony, and Steve, and finding no more major bugs and everything running smoothly, declared it was ready to launch a few months ahead of schedule. Laufeyson Tech did two premieres—the first was a preorder for those die-hard fans who couldn’t wait for the official launch at the end of May. The preorder launch also came with a discount of 15% off the retail price and a special fan convention to celebrate it where Loki would sign copies of the game and take pictures and use his silver tongue to sell more of the product. The fan convention was to be held the second weekend after Easter, since everything was running smoothly with the prototype.

In addition to the signings and the question and answer session, Loki also had food vendors from around the city and several art designers selling T-shirts, hats, figurines, and other memorabilia based on the game. He anticipated quite a crowd, especially considering how popular the last game had been. But even he didn’t realize just how much the Midgardian women loved both the game and himself, who was considered a heartthrob by half the women in the Tristate area and even across the United States.

A few nights before the con, Lucy came home with a disturbing tale of something that had occurred at school. “Dad, two sixth graders got arrested today at lunch time.”

Lucy shook her head. “No. They put peanut butter in a girl’s sandwich when she was allergic to it and she had to get rushed to the hospital and almost died.”


“And her poor parents,” Loki added. “Did those kids who did it know she was allergic?”

Lucy nodded. “Yup. We all did. Every kid with allergies at Riverside has their name on a big sheet outside the cafeteria or their classroom so everyone knows in case they eat something by mistake then they can get emergency help or one of those pen things.”

“A pen thing?” Odin frowned.

“She means an epipen, Father. Short for epinephrine, it’s a drug that is used to help an allergic child having trouble breathing be able to breathe till an ambulance comes. Sometimes you have really bad allergic reactions to food or bee stings and your throat can close up and you stop breathing. The epipen prevents that.” Loki explained. “Thank the Norns none of mine are allergic like that.”

“So they arrested them, even though the girl and boys claimed it was just a prank.”

Loki shook his head angrily. “That was no prank. Not when it almost kills someone deliberately. That was a criminal offense. If they knew how bad this girl’s allergy was then they deserve to be locked up. Pranks are supposed to be funny and maybe humiliate someone, but not truly harm them.”

“Was the child all right?” asked Frigga.

“I think so.” Lucy said. “It’ll be on the news tonight, so we can watch it.” Then she rummaged in her purple My Little Pony backpack and pulled out a piece of paper. “Dad, can you look at this? We had to finish writing thirty common proverbs today and since everybody was upset about what happened to Latisha we didn’t finish them in class so Miss Merrow gave ‘em to us for homework.”

“I’ll look as soon as I’m done fixing dinner, Valkyrie. Just leave it on the counter.”

“Okay, Dad. Gonna go and get changed.” She left the paper and ran upstairs.

Loki finished preparing dinner and then turned to see what Lucy had written for homework. He read about halfway down and started laughing uncontrollably.

“Loki, what is it?” Frigga asked.

“It’s . . . oh blessed Yggdrasil!” he re-read it and started giggling again. “My kids crack me up! And this isn’t even meant to be funny . . . but it is!”

“Are you going to share what has you so amused?” Odin wanted to know.

The puppy lay by his feet, gnawing a large ham bone from last night’s supper.

“Umm . . . I will, Father, but first I’d better get you up to speed about Midgardian proverbs so you’ll understand why I’m laughing like an idiot,” his son said.
“Get me up to speed? Loki, I don’t understand . . .” Odin wrinkled his brow in puzzlement.

“Sorry, I forget you’re not used to Midgardian slang expressions. What I meant was I need to give you a quick lesson in Midgardian culture.” He punched several buttons on his tablet then handed Odin the iPad. “Here, Father. This will tell you what you need to know about proverbs that Lucy was supposed to figure out how to finish. They’re like wise sayings, the kind of things elders on Asgard tell their children.”

Odin took the device and read the short article about English proverbs and what they meant. He then passed the device to Frigga so she could read also.

“Oh my! Some of these are similar to our own sayings,” she remarked.

Loki nodded. “I know. Now here’s Lucy’s assignment. She was supposed to finish the rest of the proverb. But she’s only five and doesn’t recall or know what they all are so she . . . err . . . made up her own answers. And well . . . read it and then you’ll see why I was laughing so much.”

Frigga read the following:

1. When in Rome . . . say hi to Caesar.
2. When the going gets tough . . . call your dad for help.
3. People who live in glass houses . . . need a lot of window cleaner.
5. The early bird . . . is really tired.
6. Never look a gift horse in the . . . butt they could poop on ya.
7. You can’t make an omelet . . . unless you’re allowed to use the stove.
8. If it ain’t broke . . . don’t worry about it.
9. Don’t bite the hand . . . you’ll give somebody rabies.
10. If you can’t beat ‘em . . . don’t punch ‘em.
11. Necessity is the mother of . . . some mythical monsters.
12. A penny saved is . . . a penny who doesn’t know that?
13. The grass is always greener . . . before my dog pees on it.
14. Honesty is . . . when your dad asks who did it and you say it wasn’t you but you know who did.
15. Children should be seen and not . . . spanked or locked in closets.
16. A little bit of knowledge . . . means you need to go to school.
17. Don’t put the cart before the . . . groceries they’ll fall all over.
18. Don’t throw out the baby . . . unless you wanna end up in jail.
19. When the blind lead the blind . . . they get run over and die.
20. Hindsight is . . . when you have eyes in your butt.
21. If at first you don’t succeed . . . scream Help me, Dad!
22. If wishes were horses . . . I’d be a Pegasus.
23. It’s no use crying . . . after you’re in time out. You just get more minutes.
24. Happy is the bride . . . who loves her husband.
25. You can’t have your cake and . . . your sister’s too.
26. If you play with fire . . . your dad’s gonna ground you forever.
27. Laughter is . . . spelled Loki.
28. The enemy of my enemy . . . better run the other way.
29. Where there’s smoke . . . Uncle Thor was cooking again.
30. Nothing hurts like . . . stepping on Legos.

Frigga started laughing. “I happen to agree with 27, dear. And since when does Thor cook?”
“He doesn’t. Last time he tried the fire department came over thinking my house was on fire. That’s the joke,” Loki grinned.

“Loki, what are Legos?” Odin asked.

His son winced. “Torture devices disguised as children’s toys,” he answered. “Trust me you never want to step on one.”

“You’re a good father, Loki,” Frigga said. “It’s plain your children know they can come to you when they need help.”

“I try, Mother. There were a few times when one of them didn’t but in the end we worked everything out,” Loki said quietly, thinking of Hunter and the incident with the stolen money.

“Then that’s all that matters,” Odin said approvingly. “Is Thor coming over for dinner?”


“Why wouldn’t he?” Frigga said. “I’m amazed at how well you cook, son.”

Loki looked pleased. “I like it. It relaxes me. It’s like making potions.”

“I can see why,” Frigga said. “Perhaps I might try it.”

“Frigga, darling, we have cooks,” Odin began.

“Yes, I know, but that doesn’t mean I can’t try my hand at it every now and again.”

“Mother, ask Grisel to give you lessons. Cooking here on Midgard is a lot different than in Asgard. I wouldn’t presume to cook over there.” Loki cautioned.

“Then that is what I shall do,” Frigga decided.

Loki had just put the ham basted with brown sugar and pineapple juice into the oven when he heard Aleta yelling at Max. “Oh, Nine Hells!” he muttered. “What is going on now?”

Odin was still puzzling over some of Lucy’s responses. “What is this ‘time out’ she is speaking of, Loki?”

“That’s one of my punishments,” he replied. “You’ll see me use it if you follow me upstairs,” his son replied. He removed his apron, which was a forest green one that said I Cook What I Want and You’ll Eat It and Like It, tossed it over the back of a chair, and took the stairs two at a time.

He found Aleta pointing accusingly at Max and Odin, who was crouching at his son’s feet with Aleta’s plastic scepter inbetween his paws. Several silk flower petals were also scattered about the room. “It’s all your fault, Max! I toldja not to let him in here and now he chewed my magic scepter and my princess crown!”

“He came in here, Aleta! I didn’t bring him!” Max protested.

“You didn’t shut the door!” his sister snapped, glaring at him.

“So sue me!”

“I oughta punch your lights out!” she advanced on her brother, her small fist lifted.

“Aleta Lenore, don’t you dare!” Loki ordered. He quickly stepped inbetween his combative
toddler. “You know the rules in this house, young lady!”

She stared up at him, tears in her gray eyes and her lower lip sticking out. “But Daddy, Max let Odin chew up my Easter presents!”

“I did not, Dad! Odin came in here himself!” Max wailed.

“Enough!” Loki ordered. He pointed to the shepherd. “Odin, kennel, now!”

The puppy whimpered and slunk out of the room, going downstairs to his crate.

Loki picked up the scepter, which had teeth marks in it, and waved a hand and the plastic toy was fixed. “There! Good as new.” He set it on the bed, then looked sternly at his youngest. “Aleta Lenore, what’s my rule about hitting people?”

“I’m not s’post to hit anyone . . . unless they’re kidnapping me,” she said, sniffling.

“Was Max kidnapping you?”

“No, but—”

“Then you don’t hit him,” Loki said implacably. “I don’t care how mad you are.”

“It’s no fair! My princess crown is all broken!” the girl howled. Abruptly she burst into tears and threw herself on the floor, shrieking like a banshee gone berserk.

Max covered his ears and ran out of the room.

“By My Good Eye, I’m going to go deaf!” Odin cried. “Loki, what are you doing? Spanking the child?”

“No, Father. I don’t hit my children,” his son replied, turning and walking out of the room.

“Then what is all that howling?”

“That is my three-year-old having a fit,” sighed the Master of Mischief.

“What are you going to do about it?” his father wanted to know.

“Right now, I’m ignoring it,” answered his son. “She’ll stop once she realizes it’s not getting my attention.”

“It doesn’t seem like it’s working,” Odin winced, holding his ears.

“It will. Trust me.”

“Loki, what is wrong? Is someone hurt?” Frigga called.

“No, Mother. Aleta is just having a tantrum.” Loki replied.

“Oh. Thor used to do that when he didn’t want to share with you.”

“I don’t remember that,” Odin remarked.

“That’s because you were away for most of the time when the boys were little,” his wife replied.

Aleta’s hair-raising shrieks suddenly became sobs and then Loki returned to her room and stood
with his hands on his hips. “Well, young miss? Are you about done beating up the carpet and yelling so everyone in Asgard can hear you?”

His daughter lifted her tear-stained face from the rug and hiccupped. “I’m still mad at you.”

“At me? What for?”

“ ‘Cause you didn’t yell at Max for ruining my princess crown,” she said indignantly.

“Aleta, Max didn’t ruin your crown, the dog did. And he’s in his kennel. Furthermore, I can fix that.” He gestured and all the strewn silk petals were gathered up and rearranged back into the flower crown. “ ‘There!’ He held the crown in one hand. “Now quit blaming your brother for something he didn’t do.” He tapped a foot on the floor. “ ‘See? You had a fit over nothing. Now go sit against the wall and put your hands in your lap for four minutes. You know better than to throw a tantrum like that.’

“M’sorry! I don’t wanna time out!”

“Did I ask what you want? Go!”

She gave him a mule stubborn look. “But Daddy!”

“Aleta Lenore. One.”

“No! Don’t count!” she whimpered.

“Two.”

She went and sat down against the wall with her hands folded, sniffling and pouting.

Odin peered in the room, observing his son and grandchild.

Loki was looking at his timepiece. Aleta was staring at her shoes, looking woebegone and repentant.

When the four minutes had gone by, Loki called, “C’mere, spark.”

Aleta got up and ran to him, and her father picked her up and hugged her. “M’sorry I was bad.”

“I know. All’s forgiven.” He held her and kissed her forehead.

His daughter put her head on his shoulder and yawned.

Loki saw and patted her back, walking about the room slowly, until Aleta’s eyes shut and he put her in her pink princess bed for a nap.

Odin observed that the simple punishment and subsequent forgiveness had taken all of six minutes and was accomplished without shouting, smacking, or threats of any kind. Yet the little girl knew exactly why she had been punished, was repentant, and was not afraid of her father.

Loki walked towards him, saying quietly, “That’s what time out is, Father. But she was overtired, or else she might not have thrown a fit like she did. When she wakes up she’ll be her old self.”

“I see. What was that thing you did with the counting?”

“That’s incentive. If I get to three and my scamps don’t listen, they get extra minutes added on and go to bed early. They don’t usually require me to go that far.”
“That is quite remarkable,” his father said honestly.

Loki looked astonished. “Really?”

Odin nodded. “What you accomplished is something I never managed. I punished with fear.”

“I learned a different way,” Loki explained. “I had to. My children were so damaged that if I ever raised a hand to them, I would lose any trust they had in me. Plus they’re too fragile for me to discipline that way. They had enough of that kind of punishment with the orphanage and their real parents, in Max’s case. I refused to be like the ones they were afraid of. So I made up my own rules and consequences.”

“Frigga was right. You are a good father, my son. A better one than I was to you,” Odin said sincerely.

“Thank you,” Loki murmured, touched. This week had been full of surprises. He wondered what else the weekend would bring.

The morning of the con, Loki rose as soon as the sun peeked over the horizon. He quickly showered and put on his dark Armani suit and midnight silk shirt. Along with his striped green and gold tie. That was for the initial pictures with his Laufeyson tech staff. He would change afterwards into his gamer outfit, which was a blue version of his armor, golden cloak, complete with helmet and staff, like in the game. The armor was outfitted with leather pants and a leather baldric, plus knee high boots with mystic Norse runes stamped on them in gold glitter. He would also carry his two daggers, but they were not real, but props.

He carefully combed his long hair, using a few products to tame the unruly waves so they wouldn’t start doing what they wanted in the middle of a photo. Part of it he braided and tied with blue hair ties, pulling the braids back around his head.

His parents would be accompanying Thor, Bruce, and Tony to the con to see for themselves how successful Loki was with his business. So would Max and Aleta. Clint, Tasha, and Steve would be showing up later, they were visiting a children’s hospital.

Loki would be going over to the con first, as he had to make sure everything was running as it ought to and there were no issues with security.

He found Frigga downstairs already, having a cup of coffee and a banana nut muffin. They had baked a batch last night and Frigga had been delighted with how they turned out. “Good morning, Mother.”

“Good morning, Loki.” She eyed her son appreciatively. “You look delectably handsome in that suit, darling.”

Loki flashed her a brilliant smile. “You make me sound like something to eat.”

“Believe me, son, women will be falling all over themselves like you were the choice dessert at a banquet.” Frigga assured him, thinking that out of all her sons, Loki was the handsomest, though she would never say so aloud.

Loki made himself two cups of coffee, one for now and one for his travel mug. He then took two muffins, one to eat now and the other for a snack later. He put the muffin into his insulated snack pack along with some water. Then he sat down next to his mother and joined her for breakfast.
“Are you sure you’ll be all right getting Max and Aleta dressed? I’ve put out their outfits over their dressers, but if they give you a hard time let them wear what they want. I figure Max would want to wear his pajamas and helmet, and Aleta her green dress with her helmet.”

“Don’t worry, Loki. I’m sure everything will be fine. You just worry about your work.” She patted his arm. “Thor will come and pick us up at nine.”

“He knows where to go when you reach the convention center, and he has your wristbands and your tickets which will entitle you to free food and drinks for everyone. If you need me, call.”

“Quit fretting, Loki. We will be fine,” Frigga assured him.

He gave her a kiss on the cheek. “Very well. I’ll see you soon.” Then he teleported over to the convention center.

He met Derek in the conference hall, and they went over the schedule briefly. There were blocks of time where he could do photo op sessions with fans and two blocks where he would be signing games and autograph books. “Then we have an hour for lunch, and you can meet your family by the food trucks and take a break. We’ve set aside a room for you and your family so you aren’t disturbed by anyone.”

“Thanks, Derek. Now let’s go and speak with the head of security.”

Once had taken care of all those pesky details, he took a few photos with his tech staff, these would be added to the back box of the game. He also signed their copies of the game for their kids. By the time he was done with that, several vendors had begun setting up their booths, and it was time for him to change into his costume.

He quickly placed his suit and shoes in the zippered garment bag he had brought along, then used magic to make his costume flow on him, not wishing to waste time pulling it on. Then he sent the garment bag into the room where he had met with his staff, and walked down the hallway and out into the main atrium where a table was set up for him to begin signing.

As soon as he appeared, women nearly trampled each other to get in line. Security had to make sure everyone was all right and no one was cutting. Women picked up their phones and snapped pictures as he walked to the table, waving and screaming and drooling like starving people at an all-you-can-eat buffet. He waved back and flashed them a smile.

Several girls nearly passed out.

_I hope they have insurance._

“Mr. Laufeyson, can you sign my hand?” blurted one sixteen-year-old.

“Why don’t you show him your tattoo, Moira?” giggled her friend.

Her friend elbowed her, flushing.

“Mr. Laufeyson, my body is ready.”

“Excuse me?” he blinked.

“Mr. Laufeyson, my body is ready.”

“Excuse me?” he blinked.

“To have your child,” the girl, who was probably near Samantha’s age said, fluttering her eyelashes at him coyly.

“Sorry, darling, I have nine already,” he replied, thinking _Norns help me, I’ve just been_
“Mr. Laufeyson, will you sign my game and my cousin’s copy?” asked a tall girl.

He held up his hands and said, “Ladies, your attention please!”

Instantly all eyes were riveted on him. He wondered if they were all being mind controlled.

“This is a signing only session. So all I’m doing here is signing on your game or notebook. Body parts are off limits.” A low groan was emitted. “I will sign multiple copies of things, however. If you would like a personal message, tell me before I put my pen to your game box. Oh, and one more thing. Please do not act like sharks in a feeding frenzy. You will all have a turn to get something signed. So wait patiently. Thank you.”

He turned to his PR rep. “Okay, Monica. Let’s have the first one.”

Loki lost track of how many things he signed after the first fifty people. But he did engage his customers with a few words and a smile before signing whatever they put in front of him. Once, as he was busy signing a copy of a game for a boy about Nate’s age, his little sister crawled under the table and on to his lap!

“What’s going on?” the boy gasped.

“Hi!” the adorable blond girl said, giving him a gap-toothed smile.

“OMG, Sarah!” her brother gasped.

“Well, hello there!” Loki chuckled, holding the tot, who was even younger than Aleta, securely against him.

“Pretty!” the child exclaimed, pointing to his gold medallion. It bore the double serpents that were his symbol.

“Oh, Mr. Laufeyson, I’m so sorry!” the harried mother cried. “Sarah, how did you even get over there?”

“I think she crawled under the table,” Loki said, allowing the curious child to hold his medallion.

“She has a mind of her own,” her mother said ruefully.

“They all do,” Loki said easily. He quickly conjured something and reached in his pocket. “Here, sweetie. You can’t have mine, but how about this one?”

He gave her a glittery version of his pendant, one made from durable hard plastic.

“Oooh! Pretty!” Sarah cried, and Loki put the pendant around her neck.

“Mr. Laufeyson, you didn’t have to—”

“It’s nothing. Just a souvenir for her to play with,” Loki waved off her protests.

“Sarah what do you say?”

“Fank you!” the child lisped, then she reached up and pulled his face down to give him a kiss. “Mmmmaa!”

“Aww! You’re a real charmer, aren’t you?” he laughed.

“Come on, Sarah, we’ve taken up enough of Mr. Laufeyson’s time,” her mother said. Loki
handed her daughter back, and the child waved at him. “Bye!”

Loki waved back and blew her a kiss, which made half the women on line sigh in envy and fan themselves.

The next woman who came up to sign, a young one in her twenties, asked, “Can I sit on your lap too, Mr. Laufeyson?”

“Only if you’re two years old,” he returned, and quickly signed her game.

After the first block of signing was over, Loki went back to the room he had stored his suit in and took a quick break, drinking the water he had brought and eating half a muffin. Then he brushed the crumbs off and looked at his phone. There was a text from Thor. Brother, we're here. Mother shopping.

Loki smirked. Of course she is! he wondered though what would appeal to her at this con. And if Frigga were shopping, then Aleta and Max were too. Odin and the guys were probably eating.

He rose and returned to the atrium, this time walking on to the large stage and having his PR Director use the PA system to announce that Loki wanted to say a few words about the special raffle that would be held today. "If you could all direct your attention to the stage, please."

People bolted over to where Loki was standing with the microphone.

They all began clapping, cheering, and chanting, "Loki! Loki! Loki!"

Odin jerked his head up from where he was standing towards the back of the overcrowded hall, eating a Cinnabon. "What is happening now?"

"Loki's about to announce something and all his fans are going a bit nuts right now," Tony laughed.

"He's very popular. Women love him," added Bruce.

Loki allowed the adulation of the crowd to sweep over him. It flowed through him like a draught of sparkling mead. Then he held up his hands for silence. The crowd grew still as if he had cast a spell upon them.

"Just watch this," Tony whispered to Odin and Thor.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to thank you all for coming here, and for your enthusiasm over my new release of Asgardian Quest 2," he began. Cheers followed this statement. "However, I'd like to bring your attention to a raffle we are doing today. You can purchase tickets over in the green booth, and for every ten dollars you spend you will receive a chance to win this prize package."

He held up a large basket. 'In this package are both VR games, signed by me, with a special helmet that is only available with this package—it has green edging and the double serpent symbol on either side.' Gasps of longing filled the air. Loki held up a hand and the room grew still again.

"Also included in this package is a special T-shirt, a mug, three figurines, a pendant similar to this one I have on—" he held it up. "And a commemorative photo of me and my design team. All proceeds are donated to Columbia Presbyterian Children's Hospital for research on childhood diseases such as lymphoma, diabetes, and so on. Now if you want to win, please donate because we all should help eradicate these horrible diseases and safeguard our children. And remember, even if you don't win, your donation can help save a life. What do you say?"

The response was deafening. "We love you, Loki!" several fans screamed. Then they all made their way over to the green booth in ones, twos, and threes to donate.
"By the Nine!" Odin exclaimed. "I've never seen anything like that. Are you sure they aren't enchanted?"

"Not like you mean," Bruce laughed. "It's just the way he is."

"But what has he done to gain this-this adoration?" the All-Father queried.

"Nothing except show up," Tony said. "And talk."

"My brother has always had a silver tongue," Thor remarked.

"Buddy, this is way more than that. These women are mostly from New York and persuading a New Yorker to part with money is like trying to take candy from a baby. Unless you're Loki. Then you'd give him your firstborn without even blinking an eye." Tony laughed.

He pointed to where several women were shaking Loki's hand and afterwards looked as if they had been hit over the head, a rapturous expression on their faces. They saw Loki head towards the photo op screen, followed by two security guards.

'What are they following my son for?'

' Those are his bodyguards. He needs them or else some of those women would be mobbing him, trying to touch him, hug him, and rip his clothes off." Bruce explained. "Loki's like Elvis."

'That was a famous rock star," Steve explained, coming up behind them.

'I think there's even more people at this con than the year before," remarked Clint.

"Which is good," Tasha said. "It means more money for research."

'What does my son do with all the money made from here?" Frigga asked, joining them with her arms full of shopping bags and Max and Aleta clinging to her hand, each holding a new stuffed toy. Max had a green and gold dragon and Aleta a white and silver unicorn.

"He donates about seventy-five or eighty percent of it to charities," answered Steve. "Some he puts away in trust funds for his kids. And the rest goes to the people he employs as bonuses."

"You wouldn't know it by the house he lives in, but Loki could own Manhattan if he wanted," Tony told them. "He could live in one of those huge mansions on Park Ave with gates and guards and servants."

"But he doesn't," Frigga observed.

"By his own choice. He said he doesn't want his kids to grow up thinking the world owes them and they should be waited on all time. He also likes his anonymity. It's why he sends his kids to public school. One of the best in the city but still public."

They watched as the head of Laufeyson Tech did photos with all of the women, children, and some men who had attended the con for the day. One of the great things about this photo op was there was no charge to get a picture taken with Loki. His PR rep had suggested they charge a fee and Loki flatly refused. "What for?" he'd said. "I'm not a celebrity, I'm a video game designer. It's just a picture taken on someone's phone." He allowed people to take up to three pictures during the photo session, in case the first one didn't turn out. His staff grumbled about that, but he silenced them by reminding them that part of their salary was due to the customers who bought the games, and they quickly shut up.
"He seems to be having fun," observed Frigga.

"He is," Thor agreed. "He says he likes this part of the con the best."

After the photo session they decided to break for lunch and Loki was happy to escape his adoring public for awhile and hide away in the private room reserved for him, his family, and friends. He had Monica order food for everyone from the food trucks. "Just get something from all of them and bring it here. We aren't picky, we eat everything."

In ten minutes his Pr Rep returned with several other staff members bearing food from every food truck there was and drinks also. Max and Aleta sat next to him eating chicken nuggets, hot dogs, and some mac and cheese. Loki had BBQ beed brisket tacos and a salad. There were funnel cakes and caramel corn also. He listened with half an ear to his children prattling about their grandma buying them new stuffed animals as playmates while eating.

"So how are you enjoying this so far?" he asked Odin.

Before his father could reply, Loki's phone rang. Loki would have ignored it, but the ringtone, which was Pink Floyd's "Another Brick in the Wall" made him reach for it.

Oh Hel, that's the school calling!

"Excuse me, Father. The school is calling me. Perhaps one of my kids is sick." He rose and answered the phone moving to the other end of the room. Or in trouble.

"Hello, Laufeyson speaking."

He listened gravely as the principal's secretary Miss Winters detailed that an incident had occurred involving his son Vince and two older children. “I understand. Yes, I’ll be there shortly.”

“What happened?” Thor asked, seeing the dismay on his brother’s face.

“I need to go to the school and pick up Vince. Apparently he beat up a fourth grader. But there’s something else going on here. Vince doesn’t normally pick fights.”

“Go. We’ll wait for you,” Tony urged.

“Can we come?” asked Max.

“No, scamp. You need to stay here with Bestefar and Bestemor. I’ll be back soon.”

“Loki, you haven’t even finished eating,” Frigga objected.

“Don’t worry. This shouldn’t take long. I can eat when I come back,” her son said. “I need to speak with Monica.”

After telling his PR rep that there could be a brief delay, Loki slipped down the corridor and teleported back to Riverside.

Loki was in such a hurry to resolve the issue and hurry back to the con that he forgot he was still wearing his leather pants and armor costume. He had removed his cloak and helmet when he went to eat lunch, but the rest of his costume was very noticeable. He strode down the hall towards the principal’s office, his boots tapping out a swift march when he passed two seventh graders coming out of the girls’ room.

“So I said to John-holy hot damn!” one girl gasped, her mouth hanging open, her eyes glued to Loki’s leather pants. “What does he teach?”

“Whatever he teaches, sign me up!” her friend sighed rapturously. “I’d fail class just so I could
“Quick, Maria! Take a picture on your phone!”

There was a swift click and then the two girls were leaning against the wall, their eyes glued to the phone screen. “OMG! Can I die now?”

Loki glanced back and saw them. “Girls, shouldn’t you be in class?”

“Um . . . yes, sir!” one said, and she dragged her friend down the hall, whispering, “He TALKED to me!”

“He LOOKED at me!”

This was followed by squeals and giggles.

Loki just shook his head. “Norns spare me from hormonal teenage girls!”

A door opened on the right hand side of the hallway and a teacher pushing a rolling cart with a TV and a mounted video camera walked out. She was saying to another staff member, “So many of these kids nowadays have no appreciation for works of art or sculptures of-sweet baby Jesus!” She stopped the cart dead in the middle of the hallway and grabbed the video camera, panting as if she had run a mile in a hundred degree weather.

“Corinne, what the-“ exclaimed her colleague. She began fanning herself with her copybook. “I think my ovaries just exploded.” She shoved her colleague out of the way. “Let me see! Don’t hog the view all to yourself!”

They both peered avidly through the video camera. “Woman, I hope you are filming this!” hissed the second teacher.

“Of course! It’s like watching Michaelangelo’s David get up off the pedestal and walk!” drooled the art teacher.

“I don’t know about you, honey, but he’s way hotter than any old marble dude!” She began fanning herself again. “I need some oxygen!”

“Ahem! Something wrong with your equipment, ladies?” inquired a cold voice behind them.

“Eep!” gulped the art teacher. “Oh no, Mr. Lightfoot. We were just making sure everything was working with the lens.”

“Yeah you never know what you’re gonna see with the way these machines work,” added the second teacher.

“Carry on then,” Lightfoot said stiffly. “Come along then, Laufeyson,” he beckoned to Hunter. “By now my secretary ought to have contacted your father and told him about the incident with you and your brother.”

He practically frog-marched Hunter down the hallway.

By then Loki had reached the office and gone inside.

“Blast! Figures old Lighten-Up would have to come along and ruin everything, the old bat!” muttered Corinne.

“Tell me you stopped filming,” begged the other teacher.
“Tell me you stopped filming,” begged the other teacher.

“I sure did! Who wants to see HIS wimpy ass?”

Principal Lightfoot entered the office, then said to his secretary, “Becky, tell Nurse Morse that when she finishes putting ice on Mr. Tanner’s lip to send him over here.” He frowned.

“Of course, sir.” She patched through a call to the nurse’s office.

“Yes, please send Matthew Baker and Carl Tanner to the principal’s office,” she said then ended the call and looked at Loki.

“Are those the boys my son was in a fight with?” Loki inquired and she nodded.

Then she asked curiously, “Were you at a Ren Faire, Mr. Laufeyson?” She indicated his costume.

“Blast,” he said as he looked down at what he was wearing and she swore he was blushing. “No. I was at a convention. I am promoting my new video game...”

“Asgardian Quest 2?”

“Yes.”

“My brother loved the first game!”

“That’s nice.”

“But why are you dressed like that?”

“This is my gamer outfit.”

“Ah,” she said with a nod then sighed. “I’m sorry we had to pull you away from the convention.”

“That’s alright. My children come first.”

The door opened behind him when Loki turned and looked at the two boys heading toward him. They both gave him a startled look as he leaned against the edge of the desk and crossed one ankle over the other. “Hello,” Loki said, but the boys didn’t answer.

Just then Lightfoot returned and said, “Mr. Laufeyson, gentlemen, let us adjourn to my office.” He gave Loki a disapproving icy glare as he gestured for them to proceed him into the inner office, where Vince and a young Muslim girl and her father awaited them.

“Dad!” his younger son exclaimed. He had a faint bruise on his left cheek.

“What happened, Vince?” he asked concerned.

“I didn’t duck quick enough,” his son answered candidly.

“Hunter, why are you here?” Loki turned to his older son.

“Because, Mr. Laufeyson, both of your sons were involved in this fight.” Lightfoot said coldly. “It appears that trouble follows your family like the plague.”

Loki’s eyes narrowed. “Why don’t we discuss what happened before you start assuming this was my sons’ fault, Lightfoot?”
The principal harrumphed, then looked at the other two boys. “Mr. Baker and Mr. Tanner, where are your parents?”

“My mom’s at work,” answered the taller one.

“My parents are away,” replied Carl. “Only my housekeeper is home and she doesn’t drive or speak much English.”

“Very well.” Lightfoot looked over at the girl who was sitting modestly in a chair beside her father. “Miss Rashid, suppose you tell us what occurred at recess that led these four to get into a fight over you?”

The girl blushed. “Mr. Lightfoot, they were not fighting over me. Carl and Matthew were . . . were teasing me and making fun of my hijab and they—they called me names and were trying to look up my dress!” Her eyes glittered with tears.

Beside her, her father looked furious. Loki also scowled.

“Gentlemen, what do you have to say for yourselves?” the principal demanded.

“We were trying to see if she had a bomb strapped to her,” replied Matthew. “Like those terrorist that blew up the concert over in Florida.”

“And we pulled off her scarf to see if she was hiding anything under it,” added Carl. “My dad says we need to protect ourselves from terrorists.”

“My daughter is not a terrorist!” objected her father. “We are citizens of the United States. She was born here!”

“I told them that, Mr. Rashid,” Vince spoke up. “Aliyah is in my class and we have social studies together. But they just laughed at me and told me to mind my own business if I knew what was good for me!”

“Did you throw the first punch, Mr. Laufeyson?” demanded Lightfoot.

“No, sir. I told Carl and Matthew to leave Aliyah alone, and they kept on tormenting her. So then I went to tell one of the monitors and Matthew jumped on me and knocked me down.”

“Liar! You punched me in the eye!” Matthew snapped, indicating his black eye.

“That was after you knocked me in the dirt and told me you were gonna break my nose because I was a traitor,” Vince snapped. “Just ask Aliyah.”

Lightfoot looked at the Muslim girl. “Miss Rashid?”

“What Vince says is true. He did not start this, but he was defending me.”

“That was when I saw what was going on and I went to help my brother,” Hunter declared. “I pulled that sneaky snake off him and asked him what he thought he was doing picking on my little brother.”

“I got up and hit Matthew and Carl tried to hit Hunter, but Hunter ducked and Carl got me instead,” Vince explained. “I told Hunter they were picking on Aliyah and making fun of her religion.”

“So I asked those two what was wrong with them, picking on little girls, and they called me
terrorist lover and tried to beat me up,” Hunter informed the principal. “Only they forgot they
don’t know how to throw a punch and I do. So I beat THEM up.”

Loki could tell none of his sons were lying about what had happened. Neither was Aliyah. The
other two, though, had lied twice.

Lightfoot was eyeing Hunter with displeasure. “Are you certain that’s what really happened, Mr.
Laufeyson? Because I know you have a reputation for being an instigator and you were once a
member of a gang. So how do I know you’re telling the truth?”

“I am!” Hunter cried.

“Wait a moment, Lightfoot. What point do you have in bringing up my son’s past when it has
nothing to do with what went on today?” Loki interrupted, his eyes suddenly becoming shards of
emerald ice. “Hunter is no longer in a gang, and hasn’t been for three years. In any event, that’s
neither here nor there. What’s important is that these two young men were caught tormenting and
insulting this young lady because she’s Muslim and my sons came to her rescue.”

“While I agree that Mr. Tanner and Mr. Baker were at fault, that doesn’t excuse your sons’
attacking them,” began the principal.

“They were defending each other,” Loki objected hotly. “Since when is that wrong?”

“School policy forbids fighting of any kind,” Lightfoot declared smugly.

“Fine! Suspend us then,” Hunter said rebelliously. “But we were right to help Aliyah. Dad taught
us any boy who hurts girl is a coward, and we should respect everyone no matter what religion
they are.”

“Call me a coward again, and I’ll rearrange your face, Laufeyson!” spat Baker, rising to his feet,
his fist clenched.

“Sit down!” Loki ordered sharply, in a voice that no one ever disobeyed.

The boy gulped and dropped back into his seat like a shot.

“I give the orders here,” Lightfoot began, flushing. “Mr. Baker, you will refrain from attacking
another student, no matter how provoked you feel. Furthermore, you and Mr. Tanner as
suspended from school for a week for fighting and for insulting another’s religion. After this you
are to leave Miss Rashid alone.” He turned to the girl. “Miss Rashid, you may go.”

Aliyah rose to go and her father nodded stiffly and followed her out of the office.

“As for you two, you are also suspended for three days for fighting. I suggest next time you
inform a teacher instead of settling things with your fists like hoodlums.”

Hunter flushed and Vince opened his mouth to protest. Loki put his hands on their shoulders and
squeezed gently, warning them to watch what they said.

Both boys lowered their eyes and muttered, “Yes, sir.”

“You may go, your suspension begins tomorrow,” Lightfoot declared.

Loki ushered them from the office, biting his lip to keep from calling the principal a few choice
terms.
Just as they walked into the main office, Mr. Rashid came up to Loki. He held out a hand. “Please accept my deepest gratitude, Mr. Laufeyson. I will ask Allah to watch over you and your family and keep them safe for your sons have acted like brothers to my daughter and protected her modesty and upheld her rights.” He shook Loki’s hand firmly.

“You are welcome. My sons were glad to be of service. My name is Loki.”

“I am Najid. All honor to your noble house,” Mr. Rashid said, and gave Loki a brief bow. “I must go, I have patients waiting back at the office. I am an orthopedic surgeon.”

“I too have to get back to my convention.” Loki said, smiling. “Come, boys. I was in the middle of lunch when the school called. Are you hungry?”

“I’m starving,” Hunter said.

“You’re always starving!” Vince laughed.

Loki walked past the secretary’s desk. Abruptly he turned and said, “As long as I’m here, why don’t you take a picture with me, Becky?”

Becky looked as if she were about to fall off her chair. “Thanks, Mr. Laufeyson!” She patted her hair into place then stood up and came to stand beside Loki.

Loki put his arm about her and said, “Hunter, take her phone and take our picture.”

Hunter did so, then took two more. He handed Becky her phone back. “Here, Miss Turner.”

“Thank you, Hunter,” she said, beaming. “You just made my day!”

Loki grinned. Then he handed her a business card. “Email me and I’ll send your brother a signed copy of Asgardian Quest 2.”

Becky sank down in her chair, staring at her phone, a stunned yet delighted look on her face.

The boys trailed their father outside, where they found Steve behind the wheel of the Caddy waiting for them. “I figured it’d be quicker if I came to get you,” he said and opened the door for them to get in.

As they drove back to the convention center, Vince asked, “Dad, are we in trouble for fighting at school?”

“You are, but I’ve decided to mitigate your punishment because you were defending a girl’s honor and that never deserves punishment in my book. I’m proud of you and Hunter. You did what was right, not what was easy. So you’ll be doing a few chores for me at home and that’ll be all.”

The boys let out relieved sighs.

Then Loki said, “Hurry, Rogers. We’re all starving and my fangirls are waiting.”

Steve smirked. “Okay, keep your pants on, Loki!” He stepped on the gas while Loki rolled his eyes and in the back seat the boys burst out laughing.
"Dad! Dad, guess what?" Serena yelled as she ran into the kitchen, her platinum hair coming loose from her braids, which were dyed ice blue that day.

Loki glanced up from the pot of chicken and dumplings he was stirring. "Did you win that math bee you were telling me about?"

"Yes, but that's no big deal. I win them all the time. Mr. Barron picked me for the lead in our school play! We're doing a cool version of Rumplestiltskin set in Norway and I'm gonna be the miller's daughter Freya."

Loki raised an eyebrow. "The miller's daughter is called Freya?"

Serena laughed. "I know that sounds crazy but people will at least remember it."

Loki paused from cooking and hugged his fey-looking daughter. "That's great, moon pi! So when is this play?"

"Umm . . . it's in two weeks. It's not a long play, so we don't need a lot of rehearsals. Mr. Barron wrote it." She waved around her play script.

"I can't wait to see it," Loki said, his emerald eyes glittering with excitement. "And your grandparents will be here to see it too."

"Dad, I'm gonna be doing the sets for the play," Nate informed him, as he got a snack from the fridge. "I'm gonna build a cottage and a cardboard castle."

"That is right up your alley, Racer," his father said, and playfully mussed his hair. He occasionally did that to Vince and Max, but mostly Nate, because Nate had told him that was what his original dad used to do and the boy still remembered it.

"That sounds lovely, Serena and Nate," Frigga said, she was having a cup of tea at the table.
Serena nodded. "I'm playing opposite Bobby Cameron, the cutest boy in my class," the girl said and flushed. "He's Rumple."

"Oooh! Serena and Bobby sittin' in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G!" Vince chanted. "First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes a baby in a baby carriage!"

Serena death glared her brother. "Shut up, daredevil! He's NOT my boyfriend!" Though she secretly wished he was. She turned back to her grandmother. "I have to make a costume for the play, Bestemor."

"I can help with that, dear," Frigga said.

"You can sew?" Serena looked astonished.

Frigga nodded. "Yes, indeed. I used to make clothes for my ladies in waiting. And my sons too when they were small."

"Would you make a dress for me?" Serena asked, her indigo eyes shining hopefully.

"It would be my pleasure," her grandmother said, stroking her cheek.

Kathy

Nate took his snack into the den, where Odin was watching a documentary about medieval archery. "Bestefar, do you want to see my plans for the cottage I'm gonna build for the school play?"

"You're going to build a cottage, young Nate?" his grandfather asked in astonishment.

"Well, it's out of pine wood and cardboard, but yeah," his grandson said, and took the plans he'd drawn out of his back pack to show his grandfather.

The two began discussing various ideas for windows, doors, and interior designs. Nate wanted the cottage to be historically accurate, and Odin could, of course, recall what an actual Norwegian cottage looked like during the sixth and seventh century, as well as what an ordinary Asgardian home looked like.

While Loki cooked, Frigga and Serena drew dress patterns on some of Aleta and Max's poster board, and sketched different hairstyles, though Frigga assured Serena that her platinum hair would have most likely been worn in a single braid as a child or two braids wrapped about her head.

"You have beautiful hair, child. Like snow and ice made soft. If you truly lived back then, your hair would have been something that a boy noticed and thought beautiful."

"Really? Sometimes I used to think my hair made me look like an old lady," Serena remarked.

"Never! Women would kill for this shade of hair," Frigga assured her granddaughter. "Some women spend lots of money to dye their hair this color." She combed the long tresses with her hands. "Never be ashamed of how you were born, Serena. You are as you were meant to be, a lovely moon maiden. Why, I know several noble ladies at my court who would drool in envy to see your hair. Is that not so, Loki?"

Her son turned from the stove. "It is, Mother. In Asgard it is common to have golden hair or hair in various shades of blond or red, but my dark hair and your moonlight tresses, Serena, are something that catches the eye."
His quiet mathematician smiled. Then she asked her grandmother what color the dress should be.

The conversation at dinner that night centered around the play and the props for it. Frigga said she would start cutting the pattern for the dress after dinner and Odin and Nate were working on the interior of the cottage.

“How often do you have rehearsals?” asked Samantha.

“Twice a week,” answered her sister. “I need to study my lines, but I’ve almost got the first half memorized.”

“With your memory, you’ll know it all in two days,” her older sister predicted.

Serena had the best memory of all her siblings, even Belle, because in order to hide her dyslexia she had honed her skills to a razor edge. Of course now she didn’t need to hide her disability, because no one would ever make fun of her, but she still possessed her prodigious ability to memorize things.

“Use your glasses, darling,” Loki reminded her. The glasses he spoke of were red tinted ones that helped dyslexics read without causing the words to appear jumbled or backwards.

“I will,” she said.

Once dinner was done, the children separated to do different things. Serena took her copy of her play book into the room she shared with Belle and began to memorize her lines.

Loki watched The Last Unicorn with Max, Lucy, Aleta, and Belle, while Samantha helped Frigga with Serena’s dress and Hunter and Vince went outside to shoot some hoops. The basketball hoop was at the front of the driveway. Nate and Odin were working on the design for the cottage.

Odin slept inbetween Belle’s feet, while Mischief curled up on Loki’s lap, purring.

Everything went well until bedtime, when Loki came up to say goodnight to his older children and tuck in the younger ones. Frigga and Odin had put the youngest Laufeysons to bed, allowing Loki some free time to relax, but the god never missed the good night ritual, and came upstairs to tuck everyone in bed.

His youngest three were sleeping and he kissed their foreheads, his two eldest were drowsily listening to soothing music and he hugged them goodnight. His middle boys he tucked in bed with a kiss and then he moved on to his girls. Belle was asleep with the book over her nose, and he removed it and said, “Sweet dreams, little raven,” and kissed her cheek.

Then he moved on to Serena, who had her night light on. She was sitting up, staring at her play script and looking frustrated. “You still awake, moon pi? You know you don’t have to memorize this all in one night.”

“Dad, I don’t think I can do this,” she whispered, looking at her hands.

“Of course you can,” he encouraged, sitting on the bed. “I’ve seen you memorize much harder things than this.”

“No. It’s not my lines. It’s saying them in front of people. You know I hate when people stare at me. My stomach turns to jelly and I feel like I’m gonna barf. How am I gonna do this?” She looked as if she were about to cry.

“Hey,” he said softly, reaching out a hand to hug her. “That’s not something that only happens to
you. Plenty of professional actors get bouts of stage fright.”

“What do they do about it?”

“Well, I’ve heard that some of them imagine the audience in their underwear,” Loki related.

Serena frowned. “If I did that I’d start laughing and never be able to say my lines.”

“Okay, then we’ll think of something else.” Loki mused. “I think that your nerves come from not believing in yourself. And worrying about what others think. But if you practice enough you can conquer them, Rena.”

“How?”

“I’ll help you.”

“But Dad . . . you have work and stuff. You don’t have time to help me,” she said quietly.

“Who told you that?” he demanded.

“Nobody, but . . .”

“Serena Amelia Laufeyson, what do I always say?”

“That your kids come first always,” she recited.

“And are you or are you not my daughter?”

“Yeah, but—”

He put a finger to her lips. “Then trust me when I say that I will be there to help you. Nothing is more important to me than helping my children.”

He gazed into her eyes, and she saw that he truly meant what he said. She threw her arms about him and hugged him. “Thanks, Dad.”

“You’re very welcome, sweetie,” he said in her ear.

Smiling, Serena curled up on her side and said, “Dad, would you rub my back?”

“Sure,” he said softly, and began to rub slow circles up and down, and gently run his fingers through her hair. His quiet daughter relaxed beneath his hand, and soon she closed her eyes and was slumbering.

“Sleep well, my little Alfar,” he murmured, and placed a featherlight kiss on her cheek before slipping from the room like a shadow.

“We’re ordering pizza tonight,” Loki declared at breakfast that morning. He had made pork roll, egg, and cheese sandwiches that morning on toasted brioche buns. He had the pork roll shipped from New Jersey, since it was something that the stores in the city didn’t carry normally. Loki and his children loved it, and Odin declared he would have to take some back to Asgard with him.

The kids never minded when he ordered out, so none of them said anything, just put in requests for the kind of pizza topping they wanted. His mother looked startled. “You’re not cooking tonight?”

“No, because tonight I need to help Serena practice,” he answered. “We’re going out to the
treehouse to rehearse.”

“Can we watch?” Vince asked.

“No!” Serena said immediately.

“Not this time,” Loki added. “This time you need to stay away and let us practice. I’ll tell you when we need an audience.”

“But we wanna see!” Aleta protested.

“You will, spark. Just not this time. Why don’t you have Bestefar watch The Lion King with you?” Loki suggested.

“Yes! Simba!” Max cheered. “And I can wear my Simba pajamas!”

“Then can we watch Toothless?” asked Aleta.

“If you don’t fall asleep first,” her father chuckled. “I’ll leave the Blue Rays out for you.” He had taught Odin and Frigga how to use the Blue Ray so when he was at work, they could watch movies with the children.

“And I’ll work on your dress, Serena,” Frigga said. “Samantha, you can do the trim.” She was also instructing her eldest grandchild on certain sewing techniques.

“Vince, we can work on that dragon model you have,” Nate volunteered.

“Okay,” his brother agreed, though he was secretly plotting how to sneak over to the tree house.

Until Loki eyed him sharply and said, “Don’t even think about it, Vincent!”

His son’s mouth hung open. “W-what?”

“You know perfectly well what,” Loki interjected.

The boy’s eyes widened. “How did you know? Did you read my mind?”

“I didn’t have to. I know you, daredevil. Tell you not to do something and you can’t wait to go do it,” the god of Mischief snorted.

“Reminds me of another boy I used to know,” Odin said slyly.

“Thanks, Father,” his son sighed.

“But what are you doing in the tree house?” Vince asked.

“Rehearsing,” Loki replied. “Now do yourself a favor and stay inside. You don’t want me to take away your skateboard, do you?”

“No way!” his son cried. Now that the weather was warmer, he loved practicing tricks on his board.

Loki ordered several pies, one with cheese, one with pepperoni, one white pizza with spinach, one Hawaiian pizza, and one steak with onions, peppers, and mushrooms. To them he added a large garden salad, and then they all feasted upon them and drank Coke and ginger ale. He usually didn’t allow his children to consume too much soda, they were hyper enough normally, but every now and then they were allowed to have some instead of the water, unsweetened iced tea, milk,
and flavored seltzer they usually drank. Hunter liked coffee, but Loki only let him drink decaf, because too much caffeine could stunt a growing child.

Loki and Serena headed over to the tree house, Serena carrying both playbooks, she had obtained another one from her teacher so she could practice at home. They walked up the ramp into the tree house, and Loki took one of the books and said, “Now, I want you to sit here and just relax. Do you remember how we used to practice breathing and counting when you first came to live here and you were afraid of the dark?”

Serena nodded. “Good, I want you to do that now. Breathe and count to five, then exhale and think of something pleasant. Meanwhile, I’ll study this script so I can play opposite you.” He seated himself on a chair across from her and began to read.

Serena began to do her counted breathing, and as she did so began to relax and the butterflies in her tummy quit fluttering.

After ten minutes Loki observed his daughter was relaxed and calm, then he shut the book and said, “Okay. Now let’s practice. We’ll start from scene 2, where Freya comes home and finds out her father just promised King Bjorn she could spin straw into gold. I’ll be the miller.”

With that Loki shifted into a large ruddy faced man with straw colored hair, handsome yet feckless, in a brown tunic and trousers. “There you are, Freya!” he said in a deep gravelly voice. “Did you sell all your thread at the market?”

Freya nodded. “Yes, Papa. Every last spool.”

“Good! I told King Bjorn today that my daughter could spin the finest thread in Norway.”

“Oh, Papa!” Freya sighed. “You shouldn’t boast so!”

“But it’s not boasting if ‘tis true. Then I told him you could even spin straw into gold,” the miller declared.

Freya clapped her hands to her mouth. “Oh, Papa! What were you thinking? I can’t spin straw into gold! No one can unless they have magic!”

They went back and forth until they reached the end of that scene, then Loki skipped over two scenes which didn’t have Serena’s lines and moved on to her meeting Rumple in the tower.

For that scene he conjured the illusion of a tower room filled with straw and a spinning wheel, then he shifted into a younger version of himself in a green tunic and black pants with a furry peaked hat.

Serena’s eyes widened. “Dad, was that what you looked like when you were a kid?”

Loki smirked. “Yes. I’d make myself smaller, but your friend Bobby won’t be able to do so, so it’s best if I remain this size. As you can see, I wasn’t all that tall.”

“Bobby isn’t either. It’s one reason why Mr. Barron chose him to play Rumple,” Serena said.

“All right, let’s begin.”

Serena as Freya sank to the ground amid heaps of “straw” and began crying. “Oh! I am doomed! If I cannot spin all this straw into gold, King Bjorn will call me a liar and kill me!”
“We cannot have that, now can we, dearie?” came a small high-pitched voice and Loki as Rumple appeared in the room with a puff of green smoke.

Freya looked up, wiping tears from her cheeks. “Who are you? How did you get in here?”

“I have my ways, dearie!” the imp chuckled. “For one such as I, no door is ever locked.”

“Can you . . . help me get out of here?”

The imp shook his head. “Alas, fair one, I cannot.”

“Then I really am doomed!” Freya sobbed, and put her face in her hands.

Rumple came and touched her shoulder gently. “There now, why are you crying?”

Freya told him about the bet and what the king had said he would do to her.

“I see,” Rumple said. “Perhaps I might make a deal with you, dearie?”

“What kind of deal?” Freya asked suspiciously. “I have naught to pay you with in coin.”

“I don’t require money,” laughed the imp. “But all magic comes with a price!”

“Then what is your price?”

“That,” he pointed to a leather cord around her neck with a tin medallion on it.

“You want my spinner medallion?” she asked puzzled. “It’s hardly worth anything at all.”

“That is my price. I shall spin this straw into gold for your medallion. Do we have a deal?”

Freya took the cord off and handed it to him. “We do. What is your name?”

“I have many names. Call me . . . Mr. Gold,” said the imp with a grin.

Then he began to spin the straw into gold.

“That’s so amazing!”

“That’s my magic, dearie!”

They went through most of the play that night, and occasionally Serena asked Loki how she ought to say a line and sometimes Loki explained that not saying something was as effective as talking.

He took on the role of the guards on the tower and the king, who kept trying to get Freya to marry him.

Freya kept refusing, however, making one excuse after another, though she told Rumple she would sooner marry a snake because the king only wanted her because he thought she could spin straw into gold and not because he loved her.

Meanwhile, as the nights went on, Rumple and Freya fell in love.

Abruptly, Serena closed the playbook. “I’m kinda tired, Dad. Can we stop now?”

“I think that’s a good idea. We did a lot. How do you feel?”
“Better than when we came out here,” she admitted.

“Good. Then by the time we finish this, you should be okay to practice in front of an audience.”

“No!” she yelped. “I can’t! Not yet!” she looked panicked.

He put his hands on her shoulders. “What frightens you, darling?”

“I’m afraid I’ll be so worried that I’ll forget what I’m supposed to say,” she groaned. “I’m such a coward!”

He tipped her chin up. “Never say that!” he ordered softly. “You are not a coward for being afraid. Only if you let your fear control you. But that’s not going to happen. Because together we will take your fear and use it to make you stronger.”

“How? Everytime I think about standing up in front of people my knees go all like spaghetti and I feel sick.”

“Then we’ll practice until you don’t feel that way. We’ll run through the rest of the play tomorrow night. Then I’ll have Mandy and Bestefar watch while you perform a few scenes.’

“But not anyone else, okay?”

“For now,” Loki agreed, though he planned to increase the number of people watching until he had everyone in his family watching.

Serena nodded. But a part of her worried, not just over the audience, but over the fact that at the end of the play she would have to kiss her co-star, Bobby. She didn’t know how she was going to do that without being utterly embarrassed and fainting, because she had a crush on the boy. And she didn’t know how to ask Loki for help without admitting she liked Bobby. She didn’t want her dad to forbid her to be in the play.

She worried her lower lip. Perhaps she could ask Samantha for advice.

Together, father and daughter walked back to the house, Loki resuming his normal form as they did so.

“Let’s have some ice cream, moon pi,” Loki offered.

“Chocolate chip mint?”

“Of course!” he agreed.

The next day at school, Serena met Bobby in social studies. “Hi,” she greeted, making herself look at him and not at her sneakers. She gave him a tentative smile.

“Hi,” he said, and he gave her a shy smile back. He was a small boy, no taller than she was, with brown floofy hair and a cute pixie face with bright brown eyes. He had moved here a year previous from Scotland, and still had some of his Scottish accent. Serena found it adorable.

“Umm . . . have you started studying for the play yet?” she asked.

He nodded. “I had my dad help me. He read the other parts.”

“Me too! My dad did the same,” she said, smiling. Of course she didn’t say that he had also changed shape while doing so.
“We have rehearsal tomorrow,” he reminded her.

“I know. I hope I’m not too nervous.”

“My dad said to pretend no one is there except me,” Bobby confided.

“My dad had me do counted breathing and to believe in myself,” Serena told him.

They exchanged understanding looks before going to sit down as Mr. Barron came into the room.

Even though she liked social studies, Serena spent part of the class drawing hearts with her initials and Bobby’s in her notebook rather than writing down the timeline of the Vikings.

Rather than thinking about how Leif Erickson had founded Vinland, she was thinking instead of a boy with floofy hair and a sweet smile and imagining what it would be like to kiss him.

That night, Serena told Loki that she didn’t want to finish the entire play because there was a surprise at the end and she didn’t want to spoil it for him. So they practiced almost till the end, until Serena was comfortable and sounded natural when speaking as Freya.

“We’re going to rehearse tomorrow,” she reminded her father.

“That’s good,” he agreed. “Then you can get used to moving around on stage and so on.”

Serena hoped she wouldn’t trip because she was staring at Bobby and forgetting to watch where she put her feet.

I need to talk to Samantha. Really soon.

After rehearsal the next day, which went rather well to Serena’s astonishment, Bobby called to her as she was getting her backpack, ready to head out to the bus. “Serena, wait!” he rushed up to her, holding a piece of paper. “Um . . . I just wanted to give you this. My dad wrote it out for me so I wouldn’t be nervous but I thought you could . . . umm . . . use one too, so I made you this.”

Serena took the paper. On it was written the following quote: Courage doesn’t always roar. Sometimes courage is the little voice at the end of the day that says I will try again tomorrow.

“Wow! Thanks, Bobby!” she said, and flashed him one of her special smiles she usually reserved for her father or other family members.

He flushed and dug the toe of his sneaker into the floor. “It’s just a . . . my dad calls ‘em motivational sayings.”

“I think it’s awesome! Thanks so much!” she hugged the paper to her like it was a thousand dollars.

“You’re welcome. Err . .. I’ll see you tomorrow in Barron’s class.” He waved shyly and then followed her as she headed towards the bus.

Serena felt like she was floating.

When she arrived home, Loki asked, “How was play practice, moon pi?”

“It went great, Dad!” she called back. “Bestemor, how’s my costume?”

“It’s coming along nicely, dear!” Frigga said. “I’ll have the top ready for you to try on soon.”
"I can’t wait!" Serena called and raced upstairs, thinking she only felt this happy when she won a math contest.

On the way to Samantha’s room she passed Vince, who had his helmet in one hand.

"Ooh, didja get a note from your boyfriend?" he teased.

"He’s not my boyfriend, now go away!" Serena ordered crossly.

"What’s it say?" he demanded, trying to see the paper. "Roses are red, violets are blue, sugar is sweet, I love you?"

Serena flashed him a glare that threatened his imminent demise. "Vince, go knock yourself out! Now bug off! I don’t have a boyfriend! Bobby’s just my play partner!"

"Yeah, that’s what they all say," her little brother hooted. "Next thing ya know, you’re going on a date!"

Serena rolled her eyes. "Whatever, dork!" She continued on down the hall to knock on Samantha’s door.

"Come in," her big sister called.

Serena opened the door to find Samantha busy stitching something which she quickly tucked in her sewing basket. "Hey, number cruncher. What’s up?"

"Samantha? I need to ask you a question?"

Serena shut the door behind her and locked it.

Her sister raised an eyebrow. "What’s with the top secret act?"

"Vince is nosy," Serena sighed.

"So are all little brothers," Samantha laughed. "Go ahead."

Serena’s hands clutched the paper, then she shoved it at her sister. "Bobby gave me that after rehearsal."

Samantha took it and read it. "That’s a quote from Mary Ann Radmacher. Pretty sophisticated for an eight-year-old."

"His dad gave it to him so he wouldn’t be nervous acting. Then he gave it to me," admitted Serena, flushing.

"Oh. I see. That was nice."

"Samantha... I... um... I like him..." she whispered, feeling her face go hot. "I like him more than sudoku puzzles."

Her sister whistled. "That bad, huh?"

"I always did," Serena admitted. "I just... couldn’t say anything..."

"Looks like he likes you too."

"No way! I’m just the math geek."
“Just? Rena, you’re way more than just your brain. Trust me, by the time you’re my age, you’re gonna have Dad and Uncle Thor waiting with sticks to beat off all the boys.”

Serena giggled. “They’re gonna do that anyway.”

“True. They’d be doing it for me, if I was dating,” Samantha responded.

“Samantha, I have to kiss Bobby at the end of the play,” Serena declared.

“So what’s the problem?”

“I’m afraid I might faint or something stupid.”

“Uh . . . then just close your eyes and pretend you’re kissing Vince. Or Dad.”

“Ugh! I could never kiss Vince like that!” Serena made a face.

“It’s just a kiss for the play, number cruncher.”

“Yeah, but in front of all those people!” Serena wrung her hands. “I don’t even know how.”

“Hmm . . . I can help wit that,” Samantha chuckled. She grabbed a body pillow from her bed. “Here, moon pi. Pucker up and kiss Gaz. He’s from a movie called The Full Monty.”

Serena’s eyes went wide. “Wow! He’s really cute!”

“Tell me about it,” sighed her older sister. “He’s also married. But you can practice with him.”

She handed Serena the pillow.

“I never saw this movie,” Serena said, gazing at the handsome actor whose real name was Robert Carlyle.

“Yeah and you’re not gonna till you’re my age. Dad would kill me,” Samantha hissed. “He doesn’t even know I’ve seen it.”

“Why? Is there . . . sex in it?” whispered her sister.

“No, but . . . you see some naked guys’ butts,” Samantha coughed. “It’s actually funny but you’re too young to see it. And Dad would think I was too, so I had to give it to Trudy to keep at her house. But I got the pillow case so . . .”

“If Dad ever found out . . .”

“He won’t. Trust me. I’m the Mischief Maker’s daughter and son,” Samantha said blithely. “Now start practicing! That way you won’t feel stupid when you actually do it.”

Serena did so, imagining as hard as she could the soft pillow was her heartthrob.

Samantha watched and coached softly, until a knock on her door made them both freeze. “It’s dinner, darlings,” came their father’s voice. “What are you doing in there?”

“Practicing for my play,” Serena called. “OMG!” she mouthed to her sister.

“We’ll be down in a minute, Dad, to set the table,” Samantha called smoothly.

They waited a few minutes then Samantha peeked out the door. “Coast is clear,” she hissed.
Serena dropped the pillow on her sister’s bed. “Phew! That was close!”

“Uh huh. Let’s go eat. I think you got it now anyway.”

Serena gave her a relieved smile. “Thanks, Samantha.”

“Anytime.”

The next night, Loki had Serena say her lines with him in front of her grandparents and Mandy. This time he didn’t shift, simply read them from the playbook copy, but Serena did well, and seemed to be slowly conquering her stage fright.

“See? You’re gonna do fine,” he soothed.

She shook her head. “I think I’m gonna be sick with anymore people.”

He picked up a glass of ginger ale with bitters from the table. “Here. Drink this, hon. It’ll settle your stomach.”

His daughter sipped the fizzy drink. “Tastes weird.”

“Drink it all,” he urged. “It’ll help.”

After that, he had Serena practice every night, each time adding a person to the audience. The next night, Thor watched with Frigga and Odin, and this time Loki shifted and played opposite her as his younger self. The night after that, Tony came and so did Pepper. Gradually, Serena realized she had quit feeling sick before the performances and she could say her lines and concentrate on her acting.

She found that reciting the quote Bobby gave her helped tremendously, as did Loki’s constant practice and his encouragement. She found she looked forward to the rehearsals the way she did long division problems or math contests, as sometimes Bobby would talk with her while they waited for the bus. She learned that he and his dad Joe came from Glasgow and his dad worked in construction. She also learned that he too came from a single parent household as his mom had left when he was baby.

“I think she made my Dad sad, so I’m not sorry she’s gone,” he told her candidly.

“Yeah I wouldn’t be,” she agreed. “I never knew my real parents, they gave me away when I was a baby. So all I know is my Dad Loki. But that’s okay. I wouldn’t want to know people who just dumped me like trash.” Serena said feelingly.

“Your dad’s really nice.”

Serena smiled. “Yup. So’s yours.”

“Did you get all the answers to that math quiz we got yesterday?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Cause I think I missed a few.”

“Oh. Do you remember what they were? I could help you,” she offered.

He pulled out the quiz and pointed out the problems. Serena explained how she got the answers until the bus came.
Serena was still thinking about how Bobby had smiled at her when she came home. She could barely concentrate on her homework, luckily it was easy, and she thought about how the play ended, and how she was going to wow the socks off the audience like a real actress. *I hope I don’t embarrass Bobby though.*

Her costume was almost ready, Frigga had to just add a few more darts to the skirt and embroider the final pieces on the hem. Serena was excited to wear it. It was a brilliant sky blue with pretty red, gold, green, and purple flowers on it and a border along the hem. The top of the dress featured puffy sleeves with lace and a darker blue vest wit more vines and flowers.

She hoped Bobby liked it.

She decided to go for a walk, and went to get Odin’s leash, figuring the shepherd could use the exercise, when Vince bumped into her.

“Hey!” she cried.

“Watch where you’re going, moony,” he teased.

“You watch it,” she ordered irritably.

“I am. You were the one too busy daydreaming about your boyfriend,” he cackled.

“Stuff it!” she growled. “I’m gonna walk Odin.”

“Just make sure you’re walking in straight line, and not into trees!” her brother hooted, rolling his eyes and sighing dramatically. “Oooh Bobby! You’re *sooo* dreamy! I can’t wait to put my arms around you!” He pretended to faint.

“Will you shut up? You’re such an idiot!”

Vince stuck his tongue out at her. “I might be an idiot but at least I’m not all googly eyed over a skinny shrimp!”

“Bobby’s not a shrimp!” Serena saw red. “He’s just hasn’t got his growth yet! Anyway, why do you care?”

“Why do you?” Vince returned. “Are you in love?”

“No!”

Vince began to dance around her, singing, “I Won’t Say I’m in Love” from Hercules and generally being a total annoyance.

Serena lost her temper. “Knock it off, brat!”

“Make me!” her brother taunted.

Serena went to shove him, and Max called, “Hey! No fighting!”

“Shut up, Max! I’ve had it!” his sister shouted.

“Dad! Serena and Vince are fighting!” Max yelled.

“Enough!” Loki growled, appearing between them in a flash of green light.

“Dad, *she* started it!” Vince pointed at his sister accusingly.
“Because you were being a jerk!” Serena said hotly. “Dad, he makes me want to punch him! He keeps teasing me!”

“She’s in love with Bobby Cameron!”

“You’re a dork!” Serena spat, clenching a fist.

“Stop!” their father ordered. “If you can’t settle your differences without hitting each other, it seems we need to get out the paint ball guns.”

He turned to Hunter. “Hunter, you know what to do.”

Frigga and Odin stared at them.

“Loki, what do you mean? Guns shoot people!” Frigga gasped.

“These aren’t real guns, Mother. They’re toys . . . well they shoot paint,” her son explained. “You’ll see.”

“You’re going to have them battle each other?” Odin queried.

“Just watch.” Loki said. Hunter returned carrying two paint ball guns and two belts with paint balls in a pouch. “Thanks.” He took the guns and paint balls. “To the backyard.”

Everyone followed.

He handed a gun and a belt to Vince and Serena. “You know the rules. Rock, paper, scissors to determine who gets first shot.”

The other kids chanted, “Rock, paper, scissors, shoot!”

“Scissors beats paper!” Vince crowed.

“Okay. Line up!” Loki ordered and Serena and Vince went back to back, each holding their gun at the ready. “Twenty paces!”

He counted and they walked twenty paces away from each other.

“Load!”

They loaded some paint balls into the gun.

“Turn, aim, fire!”

They both turned around, and Vince fired the first shot, which got Serena in the arm with a red ball.

“Ooo!” crowed Max.

“Return fire!” Loki ordered.

Serena did, nailing her brother with a green paint ball in the chest.

After that, it was anything goes, as the two shot each other and ran all over the yard, until ten minutes was up and all the paint balls had been used.
“See, Mother, I figure if they’re gonna try and beat each other up, they might as well do it in a way that doesn’t result in bruises, cuts, or a trip to the hospital,” her son explained. “This way they get their anger out and release their aggression without hurting each other.”

“But who wins?” Odin asked.


They did so, and Vince apologized for teasing his sister. “Can’t you take a joke, moon pi?”

“That wasn’t funny,” Serena said.

“Yeah, but you with yellow and green paint in your hair is!” her brother giggled.

“Go look in the mirror, Frankenstein!” she returned, laughing.

“See? Works every time,” Loki said smugly.

“Son, that’s amazing,” Odin said. “Maybe I should have my Einhirjari do that.”

“Father, they’re immortal. It’s not the same,” Loki laughed. But he was proud anyway that his father approved of his unorthodox discipline.

“Loki, what about their clothes?” Frigga asked, indicating her two dripping grandchildren.

“The paint is water based. It’ll wash out,” her son answered. “Go get changed, you two.”

“Dad, can we have a paint ball fight too?” begged Nate.

“Well . . . okay,” he agreed. “Go get your guns and ammo.”

There were cheers from the rest of his zoo and they all ran to do as he said.

_The night of the play:_

The Laufeysons, Frigga, Odin, and the Avengers were all in the front row as the curtain went up and the Riverside production of _Rumplestiltskin_ began.

He praised Nate for his historically accurate set decorations, saying they looked just like he remembered.

From the moment Serena stepped out on the stage, Loki was riveted to his seat, his hands clenched in white-knuckled anxiety. He prayed everything would go well. He knew his daughter’s fragile self-esteem would be crushed otherwise.

Frigga rubbed his arm. “Loki, relax, dear,” she whispered. “Look, she’s doing beautifully!”

Her son took a deep breath. Then he stopped worrying and saw that his mother was correct. Serena was beautiful in her historically accurate costume and said her lines naturally, as if she truly was the miller’s daughter.

There were a few comical missteps but on the whole the children performed excellently considering they were only eight, nine, and ten years old and it was their first performance. The play would run for another night after this. Everyone laughed when Rumple imitated the proud king, and gasped when it was revealed that Bjorn was actually a usurper who had stolen the crown from the rightful king—and cursed him to be Rumplestiltskin. It turned out Bjorn was a
frost giant, and the king was an old enemy of his. So he had taken the throne by treachery.

And the only way to break the spell and restore him was for a maid pure in heart to fall in love with the ugly rumpled spinner and give him his heart’s desire. But first she had to guess his name.

This she did by listening at the door while the king ranted to a guard about how he was going to finally kill Rumplestiltskin and end the royal line.

And when Rumple came again and asked her to say his name, she did.

“Rumplestiltskin! Rumplestiltskin! Rumplestiltskin!”

Rumple sighed and smiled. “You have done what no other maiden ever has, Freya!”

“Not yet,” she disagreed, then she kissed him. “I love you, Rumple. No matter your skin, I know your heart is true!”

Then glitter floated down from the ceiling and whirled around the figure of the twisted spinner and when the lights came on, Rumple was now the true king.

“The spell is broken! I am now myself again!” he cried. Then he turned to Freya. “But there is still something else I need to tell you. I am not just a king. I am not even mortal. My name is Loki, God of Mischief, and I was trapped into this form by my old enemy the Jotun Thrym, fated to live a mortal life unless I could learn to love a mortal woman.”

“You are not a king?” Freya gasped.

“I am . . . but I am a god too,” answered Loki-Rumple. “Can you love me even though you loved a lie?”

“I did not love a lie,” Freya returned stoutly. “I loved a man who was cursed twice. Whatever name you go by, I will love you still!”

“Will you marry me, Freya?”

In answer she kissed him again.

Then Rumple-Loki ordered his guards to arrest Thrym and throw him in the dungeons, but Thrym was so mad that he had been defeated that he stamped himself right through the floor and disappeared, never to be heard from again.

And Loki and Freya lived happily ever after and had many children.

“Wow! What a twist!” Tony exclaimed. “I did not see that coming!”

Beside him, Tasha, Frigga, and Loki wiped their eyes.

“That was beautiful!” Frigga said.

“Serena was amazing!” Tasha agreed.

“She kissed a boy,” Loki muttered. “My little girl is growing up.”

“Brother, are you crying?” Thor asked.

“Shut up, Thor!” Loki snapped. “You wouldn’t understand.”
Then he rose to his feet and began applauding loudly. Everyone in the audience followed suit and the curtain came down and the actors came out on stage to take bows.

People threw flowers and chocolate and cheered.

Serena held Bobby’s hand and whispered, “We did it! And they liked it!”

Bobby blushed. “Yeah. Why wouldn’t they? You made a perfect Freya!”

“And you made a perfect Rumple!” she laughed.

“Hey, you wanna get some ice cream?”

“Seriously?”

He nodded.

“When?”

“Uh . . . how about in two hours. I gotta get changed and stuff. And ask my dad.”

“Okay. Me too. I’ll give you my number.”

“I already have it,” he reminded her. “Mr. Barron gave us a list of all our numbers in the beginning, remember?”

“Oh. Right.” She blushed. “I’ll call you.”

Then they were running off stage to wardrobe. But Serena didn’t want to take her dress off, so she ran instead back up the aisle of the auditorium after getting her bag and right into Loki’s arms.

“Serena, you were incredible!” he hugged her. “I’m so proud of you!”

Serena found herself being hugged and congratulated by her whole family. She was happy but also overwhelmed. Finally, when everyone had calmed down, and they were walking to the van, she tugged on Loki’s hand.

“Dad, I need to tell you something.”

“Go ahead,” he encouraged.

“Umm . . . Bobby wants me to go out for ice cream later. To celebrate.”

“What?!” he was flabbergasted. “He asked you out on a date?”

“No. Just for ice cream.”

“You’re eight years old, for crying out loud!” Loki hit himself in the forehead.

“Loki, dear, calm down,” Frigga said. “It’s not a betrothal. They’re only going for ice cream.”

“But—but Mother!” her son sputtered.

Tony started laughing. “Man, if he’s like this now—he’s gonna be a basket case when his girls really start dating!”

Steve and Clint burst out laughing, along with Thor.
“I’m waiting on the porch with a club!” Loki threatened. “And there’s going to be an application they have to fill out if they want to even think about dating any of them!”

“Dad! You’re being ridiculous!” said Samantha.

“No, he’s being an Asgardian,” Belle corrected.

“Does this mean I can’t go for ice cream?” Serena asked, looking as though she were about to cry.

“Loki, they’re children. What harm can it do?” Odin said.

Loki was torn. Then he looked at Serena. He hated to play the ogre and make his daughter unhappy. “Okay. You can go. But I’m going with you.”

“Dad!”

“I’ll pay for your ice cream and then I’ll sit in a booth away from you. I’m not leaving you alone with a boy, Serena Amelia!”

Behind him Tony, Steve, Clint, and Thor were hysterical.

“Loki, dear, aren’t you overreacting a wee bit?” Frigga remonstrated.

“No,” her son said. “I’m sure Bobby’s father would agree with me.”

“C’mon, Rena. Dad’s just regressed to Fred Fintstone,” Samantha said comfortingly. “I’ll help you dress for your date.”

“No make-up, Samantha!” Loki reminded.

His eldest rolled her eyes. “Jeez Lousie, Dad! Chill! Just lip gloss, okay?”

“I mean it!”

“Dad, go beat up a brontosaurus,” Samantha said sassily.

“Samantha!” Loki frowned.

“Sorry. But you really are going nuts. It’s not like she’s going to prom.”

When they arrived home, Samantha took Serena upstairs along with Belle to get ready. Both sisters assured her that Loki would calm down eventually.

“He’s just scared,” Belle confided.

“Of what?” Serena asked.

“Us growing up. He wants us to stay little girls he can protect,” Belle said sagely.

“He’d better get a reality check,” sighed Samantha. “Here, Rena. Wear your lavender dress. It’s classy and pretty.”

“I’ll do your hair,” Belle said.

Soon Serena was ready. Belle had done her hair up in three braids about her head with silk flowers entwined in them and loaned her a silver chain with a unicorn. Samantha had applied some light lip gloss that shimmered.
“Any more and Dad will freak,” she said. “Have a good time, sis. Oh, and hold hands under the table so Dad doesn’t see and drop dead.”

Serena giggled. “He’s being kinda silly.”

“He’s a dad. It’s what they do. Worse, he’s an old-fashioned Asgardian one. But he’ll get over it.”

Downstairs Loki was pacing like a caged panther. “I can’t believe I agreed to this!”

Frigga snickered. “Oh, Loki! It’s just ice cream!”

“Yeah and next thing you know it’ll be let’s go to the movies or dancing and he’ll be kissing her in the back seat of his car and I’ll be arrested for killing him!”

“You’d have to get in line, brother,” Thor remarked.

“You can have what’s left after I’m done,” Loki retorted.

“Boys, you’re being ridiculous!” Frigga sighed. “Odin, can’t you talk sense into them?”

“Me? Leave me out of this!” Odin raised his hands. “Besides, I’d be the same if I had a daughter.”

“Loki, please regain the sense you were born with and remember that you’re going to be there with them,” Frigga reminded him. “So nothing is going to happen.”

“Okay, Mother. Okay,” Loki heaved a sigh.

“Why don’t you go meditate, dear? Before you give yourself a stroke,” urged his mother.

Loki agreed and went into the den and sat in his recliner. Mischief came and curled on his lap and he stroked her plush fur. “They say cats help blood pressure. I sure hope so, because mine’s probably off the charts right now.”

Mischief purred and he petted her, drawing deep breaths and then letting them out slowly. Gradually he calmed down.

When Serena finally came downstairs, he appraised her dress and hair and said, “You look beautiful, Serena.” Can I put a bag over your head?

“Dad, I called Bobby and he’s gonna meet us at the ice cream parlor,” Serena informed him. “His dad is gonna be there too, so you can have ice cream with him.”

“Lovely,” Loki said through gritted teeth.

“Dad, are you okay?”

“Fine, moon pi,” he said. “Okay, let’s do this.” Just this once and never again! You’re not allowed to date till you’re moved out!

“Have fun, darling!” Frigga waved.

Loki was sweating as he drove the six minutes to Every Day’s A Sundae. Breathe, Laufeyson! You will NOT hyperventilate in the damn parking lot!

“There’s Bobby and his dad!” Serena waved.

I should have said no. I should have just said—he watched as Serena got out of the car, her eyes
shining like stars at midnight. Okay. Maybe this will be all right.

He quickly got out and locked the van, pasting a smile on his face. “Hello. I’m Loki Laufeyson.” He shook hands with Mr. Cameron, who looked like a grown up version of his son with brown hair and bright brown eyes and a friendly smile.

“Pleasure. I’m Joe Cameron. This is my son, Bobby.”

“How do you do, sir?” Bobby said, and held out his hand to Loki.

“Fine, thanks,” Loki said and despite himself he smiled back at the kid. *He’s got manners. I like that.* “This is Serena, my daughter.”

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Cameron,” Serena said, and also held out her hand.

“The pleasure is all mine.” Joe said. “You two looked fine up there on that stage, didn’t they, Loki?”

“Yes, they did. They were both amazing.” Loki agreed.

“Gee thanks, Mr. Laufeyson,” Bobby said, flushing. “I was so nervous I thought I was going to throw up.”

“So was I. But Dad made me drink some ginger ale with bitters before we got to school,” Serena said.

“You know that old remedy too?” Joe laughed.

Loki nodded. “I sure do. It’s quick for curing upset stomachs, though usually I like peppermint and chamomile tea too.”

“Shall we get these two stars some ice cream?” Joe asked.

“Yes, please!” Serena said, and Bobby seconded it.

They entered the shop and Loki told the girl at the register to just put the bill on his tab.

“That’s really not necessary,” began Joe.

“My treat,” Loki insisted. “I’m in here so much I should own half this place.”

He made his way to a booth over in the opposite corner, allowing the kids to pick a table right in view of his. Joe joined him, and then the servers brought their ice cream sundaes. Joe had an apple caramel one, and Loki had a banana split with mint chocolate chip, peanut butter ice cream, and chocolate, with hot fudge, whipped cream, nuts, and cherries on top.

Serena had a chocolate chip mint sundae with an Oreo on top and Bobby had chocolate fudge with hot fudge and whipped cream.

Loki watched out of the corner of his eye, but saw that neither child was doing anything except eating ice cream, and he turned and began to eat his own.

“Bobby tells me you’re a video game designer.”

Joe whistled. “I’ve seen that game in stores. I didn’t know you were that Laufeyson.”

“The one and only,” Loki chuckled. To his surprise, he found he was enjoying talking with Joe, and he forgot all about keeping an eagle eye on the kids, who were simply eating ice cream.

Serena breathed a sigh of relief and squeezed Bobby’s hand under the table. “This is so good!” she said, licking the spoon.

“Mmmhmm!” the small boy agreed. “Sundaes always has the best ice cream.”

The two smiled and then Serena said, “You wanna try my sundae?”

“Okay. If you try mine.”

They wiped their spoons off and traded them, and each ate some ice cream from the other’s dessert glass.

“Which one do you like best?” inquired Bobby.

“I can’t decide. Kind of like how I felt at the end of the play. When I didn’t know if I liked Rumple or Loki better.”

“Hey, your dad’s name is Loki too!”

“Yup. He was named after the God of Mischief. My grandma and grandpa are history teachers and they come from Norway. They’re here for Easter break.”

“That’s cool. I never knew my grandparents.”

“I’m glad they came. My grandma made my dress for the play.”

“I thought it was really pretty,” Bobby said, and blushed.

Serena giggled. “Thanks! I liked yours too.”

“Would you try out for another play?” Bobby asked.

Serena nodded. “Sure! I had fun. Once I got my tummy to behave.”

“Same here. Maybe we could do the Snow Queen next time. You’d make a really good queen with your hair.”

“You—you like my hair?”

He nodded. “It’s different.”

“Aww! Thanks!” She ate some more ice cream, thinking that this had been one of the best nights of her life. Just like in the fairy tales.

She glanced over at Loki and winked.

The Master of Mischief smiled. Then he said to Joe, “Why don’t we arrange a play date for next time?”

“Sounds good to me. Do you prefer weekends or after school?”
An old enemy cast a regression spell on Thor, turning the God of Thunder into a two-year-old. And guess who gets called to deal with him?

28

When dealing with a two-year-old you need to have fortitude, patience, humor, and a bottle of tranquilizers handy~ Loki

It had been a week since Frigga and Odin had departed for Asgard, and the Laufeysons were studying for end of the semester exams and Loki was preparing for their camping trip in the Catskills at the beginning of the summer. He wanted to use that time to show his children how to live without all their electronic gadgets and learn survival skills they would need when they went across Bifrost to Asgard for the rest of their vacation. He was currently making a list of everything he would need to purchase for the trip when he got a frantic call from Tony.

“Loki, we have a situation here, buddy!” Stark said, sounding almost panicked.


“No, we’re not under attack. Well, that is to say the team as a whole wasn’t. But err . . . this does involve your brother,” Stark coughed.

“Involves? Explain, please.”

“Uh . . . well, you see Thor went to see about some kind of electromagnetic disturbance over in Queens. Something odd was going on and he decided to check it out himself. But when he got there he found an old acquaintance of yours from home—Amora the Enchantress. She was holding some people hostage, and Thor managed to get them released, but she insisted he . . . date her and when he refused she zapped him with some spell that . . . turned him into a two-year-old!”

There was dead silence on the other end of the phone.
“Loki? Did you hear what I just said?”

“Yes, Tony. I heard you,” the Asgardian responded. Then he swore softly in Old Norse. *Damn you to Hel’s deepest pits, Amora!* “My brother is now a two-year-old thanks to a regression spell. Where is he now?”

“Here at the mansion. But Loki, he’s . . . um . . . kind of wrecking the place.”

Loki’s eyebrow rose. “What?”

“You see, he kinda found Bruce’s stash of double fudge cookies and Kit Kats and ate them—*all of them.* And then he drank Clint’s Big Gulp he left on the counter so now he’s bouncing off the walls on a—”

—sugar high,” Loki groaned. “Nine Hells, Stark! Don’t you know you have to watch a two-year-old?”

“Laufeyson, none of us—well except maybe Clint, and he just got here—know how to deal with a two-year-old Thunder God. He’s quicker than greased lightning and he’s into fifty things at once and when Clint tried to take the candy away he threw a fit like you wouldn’t believe—”

“Oh, I can believe it, all right,” Loki snorted. “You forget I grew up with him.”

“Anyway, please can you come and help us out? Before we don’t have a house left.”

“Where’s Mjolnir?”

“It’s sitting on the floor. None of us can wield it and neither can he. Oh, and he doesn’t remember any of us. Did Amora tamper with his mind?”

“Just leave the hammer where it is. As for him not remembering you—that’s because of the regression spell, Stark. When you regress, you remember people who were part of your past life, not your present one. So Thor wouldn’t know his Avenger family, just his Asgardian one,” Loki explained.

“So he’ll know you?”

“Yes. And our parents and Balder, Heimdall, and anyone we had contact with in childhood. None of whom are here except me,” Loki sighed. “I’m coming over. Just let me tell Sam to keep an eye on my twin troublemakers.”

He hung up the phone and explained to his eldest he had to run over to the mansion and help Uncle Tony with something. “Can you watch Max and Aleta till I get back?”

“No problem, Dad. They’re in the den watching Frozen.”

“I’ll be back soon,” he promised, then teleported away.

When he arrived at the mansion, things were in a state of chaos. JARVIS was running about with a feather duster and a broom, trying to sweep up crumbs and candy wrappers, a lamp shade was knocked askew in the den, and Tony was muttering and pacing in the front hall.

“Oh, good, you’re here!” he exclaimed. “Thor climbed on top of the bookcase and is refusing to get down. Is there any way you can reverse the spell, Loki?”

The master magician nodded. “What magic does, magic can undo. However, I need to see exactly
what spell Amora cast on Thor. There are more than one type of regression spell, and some of the nastier types can become permanent if you don’t know how to reverse them or do it too soon.”

“You mean he could be stuck as a kid forever?” Tony cried in dismay.

“Not forever, until he grows up again,” Loki told him. “However, I’m not going to let that happen. Where is he?”

“In the library. Uh, excuse the mess,” Iron Man said as he led Loki through the house. Cushions were strewn all over in the den, something looked like it had spilled on the floor, and various things like shoes, clothes, and hockey equipment were scattered across the floor.

“What the Hel happened in here?” Loki asked.

“Thor. He got mad when Clint wouldn’t let him play with his bow. Started throwing whatever he could get his hands on.”

“And you just stood there and let him?” the God of Mischief frowned.

“No, but it took us by surprise and by the time we reacted he’d run off and climbed the bookcase. He keeps yelling something about flying. Pepper and Tasha are in there, terrified he’ll try and jump off the bookcase and hurt himself, but he won’t come down. And all of us are too big to climb after him.”

“Oh blessed Yggdrasil!” Loki rubbed his temples. Then he went to corral his troublesome brat of a brother.

In the library he found Natasha and Pepper standing in front of the bookshelf, holding a toy rubber hammer and a plate of cookies. Several books had fallen from the bookcase and lay upon the floor. Loki winced to see precious books treated so uncaringly, but he said nothing to the two women. Instead he looked up to see a familiar toddler with long blond hair, bright cerulean eyes, wearing a blue shirt that was too big, perched precariously on top of the bookcase.

“C’mon, Thor, let’s play with Mjolnir,” Natasha called, waving the hammer.

“Look, Thor, we have cookies!” Pepper urged, holding them up. “Nice warm chocolate chip ones! You can have one if you come here.”

“No!” the irrepressible toddler yelled, his cherubic face screwed up in a pout.

“Take those away,” Loki ordered Pepper. “He’s had enough sweets for one day, plus he’s misbehaving. You don’t reward that.”

“Loki!” cried Natasha. “Help us!”

“I am.” Loki walked over to the bookcase. “Thor Odinson, what do you think you’re doing up there?”

The child stared down at him, his little brow wrinkling as he tried to remember who this was. “Playing,” he replied.

“You don’t play on bookcases,” Loki remonstrated. “You could fall. Do you know who I am?”

“Daddy?” came the puzzled response.

“Norns forfend!” muttered Loki. “No, little brother. I’m Loki, your older brother.” For now,
anyway. He had to admit he liked saying that.

“Loki?” Thor repeated.

“That’s right.”

“You’re big.”

“Yes. Now come here before you fall and get hurt,” Loki ordered. “You’re not supposed to climb up there.”

Thor gave him a scowl worthy of a mule. “Don’ wanna! Wanna fly!”

“Listen, scamp. You can’t fly.” Loki informed him. He knew that part of his brother’s mind was confused, equating his younger self with his grown-up one, and believing he could fly the way he normally could.

“I can too!” the child insisted, his chin jutting out.

“Wrong,” Loki said flatly, not about to get into an argument with a toddler. “Now come down, young man.”

Thor shook his head.

Loki huffed. “Okay. Then I’m going to come up and get you.” With that, the Master of Mischief levitated the eight feet to the top of the bookcase and plucked the stubborn imp off it.

Thor immediately began to scream. “NO! NO! Loki, lemme GO!” He tried to throw himself backwards out of Loki’s arms, but Loki held him firmly.

“Stop it, Thor!” Loki snapped, trying to hold onto the wriggling two-year-old without hurting him. “Oww!” he yelped as the struggling toddler’s foot connected with his stomach.

“Bozhe moi!” Natasha exclaimed in shock. “He’s a little savage!”

Loki grunted and then shifted the howling child, tucking him under his arm where Thor’s flailing feet and fists couldn’t connect with any of his vulnerable body parts. “Enough, young man!” he snapped. “Quit fighting me. You won’t win.”

The frustrated little god threw his head back and howled, making the rest of the Avengers wince and cover their ears. Loki wished he could do the same. He fixed Earth’s Mightiest Heroes with a disapproving glower. “This is what happens when you give a toddler too much sugar. Especially my brother.”

“We didn’t give it to him, Loki,” protested Clint. “He found it and ate it.”

Loki shook his head. “Never mind, Barton. But that’s part of the reason he’s out of control like this.”

“What’s the other reason?” Bruce wanted to know.

“He’s Thor, Crown Prince of Asgard,” Loki sighed. “I’m going to take him home now. If I can get him to sleep, then I can examine him to see what spell Amora cast and see about reversing it.”

Thor continued to kick and bawl, still trying to free himself from Loki’s grasp.

“Good luck, Loki,” Tony offered. “I’ll come by in a day or two.”
“Thanks, Stark,” The Asgardian said sarcastically. “Let’s go, little brother. You and I need to have a talk.”

“Uh oh,” Clint muttered. “When my dad said that, it meant his hand was gonna talk to my butt.”

“I’m not your father, Hawk,” Loki said evenly. “I say what I mean.” Then he blinked away, leaving the Avengers to clean up the mess their teammate had made of the mansion.

Arriving in the small breezeway between his house and Mandy’s, Loki took his brother and held him so he was looking at Loki’s face. “Thor, you need to quit this, you little drama queen. You’re not getting your way, understand?”


“I’ll put you down once we go inside. But first you need to listen to me. All right?”

The toddler slowly nodded, then hiccupped again. Loki held him against his shoulder, patting his back firmly. “See? All that screaming and crying gave you nasty hiccups.” He walked up and down the breezeway, patting Thor’s back. “In a little bit we’re going to go in my house and meet your nieces and nephews. They’ll play with you.”

“Play now, Loki!”

“Not yet. First you are going to get some new clothes and wash your face. Then, if you’re good, you can play with Max and Aleta. Understand?”

Thor nodded. “Wanna play, Loki.”

Loki sighed. “You have a one-track mind, kid. Stubborner than ten goats. But stubborn or not, you’re going to learn to mind me, by the Nine.”

He then walked over to the front porch and opened the door, calling, “Hey, kids, I’m home! Everyone come into the den for a family meeting.”

All the Laufeysons came running and seated themselves in the sofa, chairs and the floor, looking at their father and the blonde child he was holding with unabashed curiosity.

“Daddy, do we got a new brother?” Aleta asked frankly.

“You adopted another kid?” Sam asked, startled.

Loki held up a hand. “Not really. This is actually your Uncle Thor.”

“Uncle Thor? No way!” Hunter gasped.

“He’s a little kid!” Vince cried. “Younger than Max and Aleta.”

“How did it happen, Dad?” asked Belle.

“Your uncle ran into an old enemy of ours, Amora the Enchantress. She cast a regression spell on him and deaged him to two years old. He doesn’t remember anything about his adult life. He only knows me because I was there during his childhood the first time.”

“Can you fix him, Dad?” Max wanted to know.

“I’m going to try. In the meantime I need all of you to help me watch him. Since he doesn’t know
you, I’m going to tell him he’s your little brother. He already believes he’s mine.”

“How long will it take you to reverse this, Dad?” Belle wanted to know.

“I have to determine what spell was cast, little raven. Then I can figure out an antidote,” Loki explained. “But first, I need you all to introduce yourselves to Thor.”

The children did so, with Lucy and Serena cooing over how cute he was, and Vince rolled his eyes and said, “Oh brother!”

Odin came running into the room and went to sniff the new addition to the family.

“Doggie!” Thor cried, and went to get off Loki’s lap and pull the shepherd’s ear.

“No, Thor. You don’t pull Odin’s ear,” Loki said. He took the toddler’s hand and placed it on the puppy’s head. “Pet the puppy nicely.” He moved Thor’s little hand gently down Odin’s back. “Nice.”

“Nice!” Thor squealed.

“Aww!” the girls sighed.

“Okay, little Donner,” Loki said to his brother. “It’s time for you to get changed and get washed up.”

“Dad, you called Uncle Thor a reindeer name!” Lucy giggled.

“Actually, Valkyrie, Donner in German is thunder,” Loki told her. “So it fits.”

“What’s Blitzen mean?” asked Max.

“Lightning,” replied Loki. “Okay, go and play or finish your homework. I’m going to be busy with Thor for awhile.”

He teleported upstairs and went into Max’s room, figuring he could borrow clothes from his son’s closet and shrink them to fit Thor, and he also set up a small bed with light blue sheets and a red comforter with a fluffy pillow. “There, look, Thor,” he told the toddler, who was exploring Max’s room. “A nice superhero bed for you.”

Thor looked at the bed, then crossed his arms over his chest. “No! No nap, Loki!”

His brother raised an eyebrow. “That seems to be your favorite word, little brother. That and “I want”.” He held some of Max’s jeans and a T-shirt that had a growling dinosaur on it up to Thor and said, “Hmm. You aren’t all that much smaller than my son. These just need slight alterations.”

He twitched a finger and the clothes shrank to the right size. “Okay, now let’s get you washed up.”

He brought Thor into the children’s bathroom down the hall and wet a washrag with warm soapy water and cleaned the chocolate stains from the boy’s chin and hands.

Thor went to protest, but Loki made silly faces at him and the toddler quit whining and laughed instead. “Loki funny!”

The God of Mischief grinned and said, “When you aren’t being a royal brat, you’re adorable, brother.”
He removed the too big shirt, recognizing it as one of the Avengers own, cut down for the toddler. He also found that Thor was wearing what looked like a cloth diaper, and said, “I think I have some Pull-Ups in the closet from when Aleta was being potty trained. That’ll be better than this.”

He summoned one and laid it on top of the clothes on the counter, then gently washed the little boy all over. “I’d give you a bath, but you’ve had enough excitement for one day.”

He was about to dress the scamp when Thor said, “Loki, pee pee.”

“Wait, little brother!” Loki said, and then quickly placed the child in front of the toilet and waved a hand to lift the seat. “Go on.”

He helped the child, praising him afterwards. “Good job! Now let’s get dressed.”

Once in his new clothes, Thor seemed to want to run about, and Loki brought him downstairs to play with his new “brothers” and “sisters”.

While Thor played with Max and Vince, Loki started supper then surreptitiously examined his brother with his Sorcerer’s Sight, trying to determine what spell Amora had used.

But it was difficult because Thor was like a whirlwind, never still long enough for his magic to get a good reading. Sighing, Loki determined he would have to wait till the two-year-old fell asleep.

Just as the macaroni and cheese was done, Lucy came into the kitchen. “Dad, something’s the matter with Thor.”

“What do you mean, sunshine?”

“He’s holding his tummy and crying. I think his tummy hurts.”

“Darn!” Loki muttered. “I was afraid of that. All that candy and cookies was too much for his stomach to digest.”

“Dad, I thought you Asgardians didn’t get sick,” Lucy frowned.

“We don’t, but we can get tummy aches from over eating or other things,” Loki explained. *Like hangovers.* “That’s what Thor has, a tummyache from too many sweets.”

Lucy winced. “Ouch! That’s no fun.”

“No. I need to make some digestive tea,” her father said, and put on a pot of water to brew, then stuck a teabag of peppermint and chamomile tea in a cup.

Then he went to find his brother.

Thor was curled on the sofa, holding his belly and groaning. Loki swore under his breath at the irresponsibility of the Avengers in not watching his brother.

Max watched worriedly. “Dad, Uncle Thor’s sick.”

“Yeah, his tummy hurts,” Aleta said.

“I know, kids,” Loki said, and went to sit down next to his brother. “Hey, buddy. I bet your tummy hurts from all those cookies and candy, huh?”

Thor whimpered. “Oww, Loki!”
Loki gently stroked the flyaway hair and said, “I know. Let me see.” He gently removed the little boy’s hand from his belly, and put his own there, gently pressing.

“Oww!” Thor wailed.

“Shh, little brother.” Loki soothed. His touch, imbued with magic, told him the little boy’s stomach was distended with gas and from being stuffed with sugary sweets. “I’m going to make it better. Now relax.” He gently rolled Thor onto his side and began to rub his back, patting up and down the way you would a baby. The repetitive motion caused Thor to belch loudly.

“Hey, you is supposed to say excuse me!” Aleta told her uncle.

“That’s right, spark, but he’s sick so don’t worry about it,” Loki chuckled. “Why don’t you and Max go play in your room?”

“Okay, Max, you wanna play rescue pet heroes?”

“Okay, but I get to be the horse,” Max told her and they ran upstairs.

Lucy eyed her father and small uncle and said, “Can I help, Dad?”

“You can. I want you to go and get me a can of ginger ale,” Loki said, and his daughter went to go get one from the pantry.

Thor was still moaning, and Loki gently rubbed his back some more. “It’s okay, little brother.” He gently extended the little boy’s legs, saying, “You need to stretch out, Donner. Curling up like that is keeping all that gas in your tummy.”

“Loki, owwie!” Thor cried.

“Shhh.” Loki bent Thor’s legs, moving them up and down, trying to release some of the pressure.

Thor passed gas loudly.

“Eew!” Lucy cried. “It stinks in here!”

Loki wrinkled his nose. “Mimir’s Beard, Thor!” he coughed, waving a hand. “Just set the ginger ale down on the table.”

“Here,” Lucy said. “I need a gas mask!” and ran out of the room.

Loki summoned some air freshener and sprayed it. Then he picked up the ginger ale and opened it. “C’mon, Thor. Sit up and sip this. It’ll make you feel better.” He helped the child sit up, cuddling him on his lap, and coaxed the soda into his mouth. “That’s it. Little sips.”

Once he had drank some of the ginger ale, Loki let Thor snuggle in his lap. When the tea kettle whistled, Loki used his magic to pour hot water into the mug and let the peppermint chamomile tea steep for five minutes before summoning it and a spoon to him.

But when he tried to give some to Thor, the little boy shook his head. “No! No med’cine, Loki!”

The magician laughed. “This isn’t medicine, you stubborn little thing. It’s tea for your tummyache. But even if it was, you’d still be taking it.”

Thor shook his head.

“Oh yes!” Loki said firmly, and tapped him on the nose. Then he began to sing “Pop Goes the
Weasel” and when he got to the “pop” part he tapped Thor’s nose and the boy opened his mouth and laughed.

Loki promptly popped the spoonful of tea in.

The startled Thor swallowed it.

“See? You’ll take what I want you to take, brother,” Loki said slyly. He made a game of feeding the cranky toddler the tea, and soon had gotten half the cup down the boy without hardly any fuss at all.

Then Thor yawned, for the tea was starting to make him sleepy, as well as relieve the pain in his stomach. Loki picked him up and held him against his shoulder, then sang softly to him the same lullaby he sang to his own children and Frigga had sung to him and Thor long long ago.

Thor popped his thumb in his mouth and sucked sleepily. In moments he had drifted off and Loki waited until he was sure the little thunderer was asleep before bringing him up to his bed in Max’s room.

“Sleep well, alskling,” he murmured, then kissed his brother’s cheek.

He found Max standing behind him. “Daddy, is Uncle Thor gonna sleep in my room?”

“Yes, son. Do you mind? If you want, I can take him into my room. But I thought you might want to share like your big brothers do.”

Max looked thoughtful. “Dad, is Uncle Thor younger than me as a kid?”

Loki knelt and nodded at his youngest son. “He is, imp. He’s two to your four.”

Max’s emerald eyes glittered excitedly. “Yay! I finally get to be the big brother!”

Loki started laughing. “Oh, Max, I know exactly how you feel!” He swept his son up into a hug. “So can you be the big brother tonight and share your room?”

Max grinned, his smile lighting up his whole face. “I can, Dad!”

“That’s my big boy,” his father praised.

“Dad, can I wear my Loki pajamas tonight?”

“Yes, I washed them yesterday. Now let’s go eat, I think the mac and cheese has cooled enough now.”

At bedtime, Max got into his pajamas and crawled under the covers. Loki tucked him in and read Where the Wild Things Are until he fell asleep. Then he bid his other children good night and went to sleep himself.

Only to be awakened some four hours later by his son tugging on his arm.

“Dad . . . Dad wake up!”

“Huh? Max?” Loki sat up, wide awake. “What’s the matter?”

“Uncle Thor keeps waking me up,” his son whimpered.

“No . . . he wants to play and I’m tired, Dad!” Max said in aggrieved tones. “I told him to go to sleep until morning but he keeps getting outta bed and poking me and asking me to play.”

Loki sighed. “Climb up in my bed, scamp and go to sleep. I’ll deal with this.”

He padded down the hallway and found Thor trying to grab Mischief, who hissed and scratched him.

_Papa, this rude boy pulled my tail!_ The black kitten spat, growling.

Thor began to cry. “Bad kitty! Loki, kitty ‘cratched me!” he held out his hand, which bore a small scratch on it.

Loki knelt and said, “Thor, did you pull Mischief’s tail?”

The little boy nodded.

Loki gave him a Disappointed Look. “That’s why the kitty scratched you. Because you hurt her. That was mean.” He picked up the child. “Come on, let’s clean that scratch and then you are going to sleep, mister.”

He washed the scratch with soap and water and put some salve on it, then carried the overactive scamp back to bed. “Time to sleep.”

“Not tired. Wanna play!” his brother said stubbornly.

“This is not playtime, Thor. This is bedtime.”

His brother shook his head. “No, Loki!”

Loki was tired, and not up to dealing with the obstreperous toddler. He also didn’t want to engage in a battle of wills and wake up the whole house. So he resorted to his magic, and sprinkled sleep dust over his brother, and Thor instantly fell asleep.

He gazed down at the angelic looking child and said, “You might look like an angel, brother mine, but you have a devil in you too and these next days will be interesting.” He cast an identify spell on the boy, trying to figure out what spell Amora had used, and when he finally did he had several choice words in Old Norse to say about Amora.

For her spell was one of the more insidious kinds, and he would need to prepare a special elixir to combat it, one in which he would need ingredients from Asgard. But he would worry about that tomorrow. Right then he was too tired.

The half-Jotun returned to his bed, and slept curled about his son, until his alarm woke him up.

At breakfast that morning, which was scrambled eggs, maple bacon, and English muffins, Loki conjured a high chair for Thor and set him in it, saying, “Time to eat, Thor,” and then giving the boy a plastic plate with some eggs, cut up English muffin, and pieces of bacon.

“Yum!” Thor dug right in, not too surprisingly, though Aleta stared at him and cried, “Daddy, he’s using his fingers! He’s supposed to use a fork!”

“Good luck trying to teach him that, princess!” Loki giggled. “Took your grandma a couple years.”

“Here, Uncle Thor.” Aleta said primly. “Watch me.” She put some eggs on her fork and ate it.
“See?”

“Me do!” Thor said, and Aleta gave him her small fork.

Five seconds later, Loki heard, “No, Thor! You is supposed to eat it, not wear it!”

“Eat it and wear it!” Thor yelled, banging the fork on the high chair.

Loki glanced up from getting his own breakfast and burst out laughing. “Oh, where’s my phone?”

His brother had scrambled eggs in his hair, bits of bacon, and butter and crumbs smeared all over his face and his pajamas.

Loki’s phone whirred as he snapped several pictures. “I ought to send these to Mother. She’d think they were adorable! After I tell her why you’re a toddler again.”

“Daddy, he’s a mess!” Max said.

“I know. But messes can be cleaned.” Loki said, and waved a hand and Thor was clean. Then he sat down to eat his own breakfast. “Let’s think of things you can play with your uncle today,” he encouraged his own mischief makers.

“We can color.” Aleta said.

“What else?” Loki prompted.

“I can let him play with my toys,” Max offered.

“That’s very generous of you to share, Max.”

“I’m the Big Brother I can share,” his son said proudly.

Suddenly there came a yelp from Odin.

“What the—” Loki turned around to see Thor sitting beside the shepherd’s dish happily eating the puppy chow while the puppy sat there and cried. “Aww, by the Nine, Thor! No!”

“Eww! Daddy. He’s eating dog food!” Aleta squealed in disgust.

“He’s Uncle Thor, Aleta. He eats everything,” Max reminded his sister.

Loki rolled his eyes. Then he scooped up the toddler, who was happily crunching and said, “No, Thor! That’s not your food!”

“Mine!”

Loki ignored him, saying to Odin, “And you! You just sat there and let him eat it?” Odin wagged his tail. “Never mind. I’m just happy you didn’t bite him, though he’d have deserved it.”

“Mine!” wailed Thor, reaching out for the dog bowl.

“Gross!” Aleta cried.

“Max, go bring Odin and his food out in the yard,” Loki said, then looked at his brother. “You really will eat anything, won’t you?” Then he cast a spell that would lock up and dangerous or poisonous substances, and put a shield over the kitty litter also.
Loki sat down with his brother on his knee and began to try and finish his breakfast.

“Mine!” Thor whined and grabbed a piece of bacon off Loki’s plate.

“Norns, does that ever sound familiar!” Loki muttered. He quickly ate what remained of his breakfast, then fed Thor the rest of the eggs and bacon in the pan.

Once they were dressed, Loki took a moment to teleport down to his lab and set up a cauldron and what ingredients he had to make an antidote. Nine Hells, I have to go to Asgard soon to get the rest of what I need. I'd better call one of the Avengers to babysit.

He teleported back upstairs to find Thor and Max engaged in a shouting match over Max’s plastic Loki helmet.

“That’s mine!” Thor roared, tugging on one horn.

“No, it’s mine! Dad gave it to me for Easter!” Max yelled. “You can wear the Viking one.”

“Mine!” Thor bellowed.

“You is supposed to share, Thor!” Aleta put in.

Good luck with that! Loki thought and came into the room, saying, “Thor, how about this helmet?” and held out a plastic winged helmet very like his brother’s actual one.

Thor looked at it, then yelled, “Mine!” and kept pulling on Max’s.

“Dad!” Max looked as if he were about to cry.

“Max, quit pulling on that and come here,” Loki ordered.

“But Dad! That’s my special helmet!”

“I know. Just come here and pretend you want this one.”

“Okay,” his son muttered, then said, “Cool! Can I wear that?” He went and took the helmet from Loki and put it on his head.

Thor suddenly dropped Max’s helmet on the floor. “Mine!” he cried and toddled over to grab the winged one off Max’s head.

“You wanna wear this?” Max asked. “Here!” he put the helmet on Thor’s head. Then he ran to get his own. “We traded, Dad!”

“That’s my boy!”

“Daddy, Thor needs to share,” Aleta declared.

“I know, spark. But he’s a baby, he doesn’t understand that.”

“I can teach him,” his intrepid daughter declared.

“Go ahead and try,” Loki laughed. “Maybe you can.”

His phone vibrated. “Keep playing nicely,” he told the three toddlers and walked into the hallway to answer it.
“Hey, Steve.”

“Hi, Loki. How’s Thor doing?”

“He’s being Thor when he was two,” Loki remarked.

“Have you figured out how to reverse the spell yet?”

“Yes, but it takes time. I need some special ingredients from Asgard . . .” As Loki explained what he needed and asked if one or two of the Avengers could come babysit, he heard the sound of little feet running down the stairs. “Hang on, Steve. The scamps just went downstairs.”

He followed, but not before he heard Aleta shout, “No, Thor! You eats marshmallows, not puts them in your nose! Daddy!”

“By the Nine! Steve, I’ll call you back. I have to go.”

“What happened?”

“My brother. If you find a babysitter, send him over,” Loki said and hung up.

He found Thor in the kitchen, holding a half full bag of marshmallows from the pantry, some of which were spilled on the floor. But he saw that at least one was sticking out of Thor’s nose.

Loki face palmed himself. “Of course you would do this! I thought my days of using one of these was over.” He said regretfully, and summoned a metal tool called an alligator to him. He picked up Thor, saying, “Brother, you aren’t going to like this, but it’s the only way to get these out. Unfortunately, I’m not a healer who has magic to deal with this.”

He carried Thor over to the table and put a pillow down.

“I just hope Mandy doesn’t call the cops,” Loki murmured. “Now stay still.” He muttered a spell to hold the boy on the pillow. “I’m sorry, kiddo.”

The next sound heard was a child howling.

“Last one, Thor,” Loki crooned over the boy’s screeching. Loki was fast, and the alligator didn’t truly hurt, but it was unpleasant and Thor hated being restrained and having the metal tool in his nose.

“What the hell are you doing to the kid, Loki? Torturing him?” came Nick Fury’s voice from behind him.

Loki turned with the alligator in one hand. “No, though it sounds like it. He shoved five marshmallows up his nose and I had to remove them with this.”

“Why didn’t you just bring him to a doctor?”

“Do you know how many times I would have had to run to a doctor when my two youngest were in that phase? I would have been back and forth every two days. So I learned how to do this myself. Saved me a lot of aggravation waiting for a doctor to do something I could accomplish in five minutes.”

“Your magic wouldn’t work?”

“Fury, magic isn’t the cure all for everything. My magic isn’t healing for something like that. I could hurt more than help. Like anything else, magic is a tool and used wrongly can do more harm
“Could hurt more than help. Like anything else, magic is a tool and used wrongly can do more harm than good. This is as effective and has less risk.” He waved a hand and Thor could move again. “All done, little donner.”

His brother got to his feet and glared at Loki, rubbing his nose. “Loki bad!”

His brother ruffled his hair. “Yeah, I know, I’m the bad guy right now. But if you don’t shove marshmallows up your nose, you won’t have to get them taken out.”

“Loki bad!” sniffled the child. Then he looked at Fury. “Hi!”

“Hello. Do you remember me? Nick?” Fury said.

Thor shook his head.

“He doesn’t remember anyone from his adult life.” Loki explained. “Did Stark brief you on what happened?”

“Yeah. He did. He said you have to go to Asgard for some kind of potion ingredients in order to change him back.”

“I do. Is that why you’re here?”

Fury nodded. “How long do you think you’ll be?”

“Not long. I have what I need in my work room back in Asgard. I figure a few hours.”

“We’ll be fine.”

Loki nodded. “Let me tell Aleta and Max you’re going to watch them. Then I’ll leave.”

After admonishing his twin scamps to behave for their Uncle Nick, Loki transported himself to his workroom in Asgard. Once he had retrieved what he needed, he went briefly to speak with his mother and explained what had happened with Thor.

“Loki, will you be all right watching your brother and your own?”

“T’ll be fine, Mother. I know what Thor is like. And once I brew the antidote, he’ll be back to his old self.”

“How long will that take?”

“About a week to a week and a half,” Loki said. “It has to steep slowly.”

“When your father gets back, I’ll send him down to help,” Frigga said. “He was never home when you two were little. I think it’s time he experiences what it’s like dealing with a two-year-old god.”

Loki started laughing. “Mother, you are so evil! I love it!”

She hugged him. “Give Thor a kiss from me, dear.”

“I will. I’ll send you a message when he’s back to normal.”

Then he transported back to his house. To his relief he found the house still standing. The children were playing in the yard, and seemed happy. Thor was running through the grass chasing Odin. Fury was sitting on the back porch, watching the kids and looking relaxed. Loki breathed a sigh of relief. He teleported down to his lab and set up the potion, chopping the ingredients and adding them in the correct amounts to the cauldron along with the pure water he had gotten from a
spring on Asgard. Then he lowered the flame magically and let the potion simmer.

He reappeared beside Fury and said, “Looks like they behaved for you.”

Nick started. “Damn, Laufeyson, give a guy some warning!”

Loki chuckled. “Thought you SHIELD agents were always aware of your surroundings?”

“No, when you magic types sneak up on us.” He clamped his cigar in his teeth.

“You really shouldn’t smoke those.”

Fury snorted. “Your daughter’s already been at me, Mischief Maker. Told me I was gonna die if I smoked anymore.”

“She gets that from watching TV. I just don’t like smoke around my kids.”

“I wasn’t smoking in the house,” Fury replied. “Did you get what you needed?”

“Yes, and I’ve started the potion brewing. In about a week and a half, maybe less, you’ll have Thor back.”

“Good, because I know he’s your brother and all, Loki, but that kid is like a cyclone. Touching everything.”

“That’s Thor for you.”

“And he doesn’t like to be told no. Gets all ticked off.”

“He never has. But part of that comes from how he was hardly ever told not to do something when he was that age. But this time will be different. Because he’ll be playing by my rules now.”

“Better you than me,” Fury said. “Well, I gotta run. See you around.”

Fury left, and Loki turned as his children spotted him and raced over, screaming, “Daddy! Daddy!”

“Hello, scamps!” he knelt and hugged them.

Thor followed a moment later with a panting Odin. “Me too, Loki!”

Loki released his two so he could hug his small brother, saying, “Miss me, troublemaker?”

Thor threw his arms around Loki’s neck and hugged him. “Loki home!” he smiled sweetly and kissed Loki on the cheek.

“Yes, I’m home now. Are you hungry?” Loki smiled at Thor, thinking that he was adorable at times, when he wasn’t being a whirlwind of destruction.

“Yeah, we are,” Max said.

“Hungry, Loki!” Thor said.

“Can we have grilled cheese and bacon, Daddy?”

“And chips!” Max sang.
“All right, let’s go inside.”

After lunch, Max and Aleta wanted to color, and Loki suggested they show Thor how to, and got out the coloring books and crayons. For awhile things went well, with all the children coloring quietly. Loki washed up the dishes from lunch and was putting a chicken pot pie in to bake when Aleta said, “Thor, can I have that red crayon?”

“No! Mine!” the two-year-old cried, his chin jutting out stubbornly.

“Thor, you gotta share with Aleta,” Max told him. “Look, here’s a blue crayon.” He tried to get the younger boy interested in a different color.

“Yeah, sharing is caring, Thor,” Aleta recited. She reached for the red crayon.

“NO!” Thor bellowed. “Mine!”

“Thor, we share in this house,” Loki began, coming over to the table.

“Yeah, now let me have it,” Aleta ordered.

Thor glared at her. “You’re a little f$#@bag!”

Max’s mouth dropped open. “Oooh! You said the Real Bad Word!”

“Daddy, Thor is swearing!” his daughter tattled, as if Loki hadn’t been able to hear what had just been said.

Loki stood over his brother. “Thor Odinson! You don’t say that word, ever!” He bent and took the red crayon from Thor’s fist, handing it to Aleta.

Thor wailed. “No! You’re a little F#@%bag, Loki!”

*I’m gonna kill Fury!* Loki thought angrily, for he knew the director of SHIELD had a very salty vocabulary and had probably said this in Thor’s hearing.

“He said it again!” Aleta declared.

“Yes, thank you, Aleta.” Loki scooped up his brother and said sternly, “I warned you, young man. Little boys who say curse words get their mouths washed out.” He summoned a small bottle of aromatic bitters from his fridge. Loki didn’t use soap to correct filthy language, instead finding this worked as well and was not harmful to the child, but would get his point across. He put a drop of the red liquid on his finger and when Thor opened his mouth to yell, rubbed it on his tongue.

“Never say that again!”

The little boy screwed up his mouth from the bitter taste. “Yuck! Ugh!” He went to spit it out but Loki tilted his chin up and said, “No, that’s going to stay there for ten seconds.”

“Yeah you don’t say bad words to Daddy!” Aleta scolded.

“He said it to you first,” Max reminded.

Thor began to cry.

“Are you going to say that word again?” Loki queried.

The little boy shook his head. “No. Sowwy!”
“You’re forgiven, little brother.” Loki then gave him a spoonful of honey to erase the bitterness and a hug. Then he sat down with his imp of a brother on his lap and said, “Thor, we’re going to practice sharing. You can’t have everything you want. . . “

With Aleta and Max helping, Loki taught the small thunder god the rudiments of sharing. He showed Thor the sticker chart, and explained that each time he shared with Aleta and Max, he got a gold star on the chart. He also got stars for no tantrums, playing nicely, listening, and taking a nap.

Gradually, Thor settled into a routine, and learned the meaning of boundaries. Loki was patient, until his brother was playing on the third day with Max, the two were playing explorers while Aleta used her Bedazzler, and Thor hit Max with his toy hammer.

“Oww! You don’t hit, Thor!” Max cried, holding his arm.

“Gimme!” he indicated Max’s sword.

“No way! You have your hammer!” Max said stubbornly.

Thor’s sunny countenance turned story. “Gimme! Now!” Then he launched himself at Max, knocking the slender four-year-old on the floor.

“Oww! Dad! Thor’s hitting me!”

Loki heard the commotion from the kitchen and teleported into Max’s room. He saw his brother on top of his son, and that triggered a long ago memory of himself getting beaten up by his brother because Thor wanted a toy he had, and their nurse saying, “Now, Prince Thor it isn’t nice to hit your brother.” Thor had just ignored her and kept right on punching Loki.

“Thor! What are you doing?” Loki snapped. He pulled Thor off Max, holding the angry toddler under his arm.

“Max, are you okay?”

Max sat up. “I’m okay. Are you gonna put him in time out?”

Loki nodded. “Max, go help Aleta decorate.”

His son ran out of the room.

Then he turned back to his little brother. “Thor, you hit Max! That was very naughty!” Loki scolded. “We don’t hit each other in this house. And because you did, now you’re going in time out.”

He carried the angry child over to a small chair and said, “You sit here for three minutes and think about how you hurt Max, young man!”

Thor, of course, had never been disciplined like that before. And instead of staying on the chair where Loki put him, he jumped up and tried to run out of the room.

“Oh, no you don’t!” Loki said and moved quicker than a serpent to snatch the child and return him to the chair. “You stay there, Thor, until I say you can get up.”

“No! No!” the toddler howled, and once more tried to get up.

Loki put him back, then said, “If you won’t stay on your own, I will make you,” and he caused
Thor’s behind to stick to the chair. “Three minutes, and you think about what you did.”

Thor began bawling and kicking the chair. “Nooo! Noo! Loki mean!”

“No, you were mean for hitting Max,” Loki said. He began timing him with his watch. “Little boys that hit get time out.”

Thor cried and kicked the entire time, and Loki just rolled his eyes and said, “I know you don’t like it, but you have to learn.”

Finally the three minutes were over and Loki released the spell and picked up the toddler and hugged him. “All’s forgiven. Next time don’t hit Max. Okay?”


Loki wiped his face with a tissue. “That’s good, but you need to say sorry to Max.”

After apologizing to Max, Loki took Thor into the den for some story time, and read him Green Eggs and Ham, doing all the appropriate voices.

“I will not eat them here or there, I will not eat them anywhere! I do not like Green Eggs and Ham! I do not like them, Sam-I-Am!”

Thor giggled. “Funny! Funny, Loki!”

Loki grinned. Then he ticked the boy’s tummy, making him squeal with laughter. “Grrr! It’s the Tickle Monster!”

Thor squeaked and tried to jump off the couch. “No tickle!”

“Oh yes! I have a tasty morsel right here!” Loki caught him and ticked his knees and neck and ribs, making the child scream with laughter.

“Help, Max!” the two-year-old yelled.

“I’ll save you!” Max said, and came in and tackled Loki.

“Me too!” Aleta said, and soon all four of them were rolling on the floor, laughing and tickling each other.

That was a good day.

But then a few bad days followed, when Thor turned into a stubborn goat and refused to listen or play well with others, and touched everything he wasn’t supposed to.

Tony arrived right in the middle of Loki putting Thor in time out again for touching his helmet and throwing a fit when Loki took it away.

"Loki, you put him in time out?"

"Yes, Stark. This is the fourth time in two days."

Tony gaped at him. "What did he do?"

"Would you like a list?"

"Seriously?"
Loki laughed. "Tony, if you thought my brother was some kind of model child, think again! He wasn't. And most of the time he was allowed to get away with behavior I was punished for because he was my father's favorite son. So he thinks he can tell me what to do, like he used to our nurses. Only that's not the case with me. He's in my house and what I say goes."

"God, sounds like you have a fight every day."

"He's only been here a few days, Stark, so he's testing me . . . a lot. But I expect that. When he acts up, he gets in trouble. But he isn't always like that. Like my scamps he can be sweet and funny."

"Guess they don't call 'em the Terrible Twos for nothing, huh?" the Avenger shook his head.

“No, they don’t. But I’ve been down this road before. My brother is as stubborn as his goats—but so am I. Guess which one is going to win?" Loki asked, then he called to Thor, “You can come out now, Thor.”

The little boy jumped off the time out chair like he’d been bitten in the butt by a bug and ran to Loki. “M’sorry!” he sniffled. His speech had improved in the four days he had been there, because he listened to Aleta and Max talking. He hugged his brother about the knees.

Loki hugged him back, saying, “Next time behave! Now say hello to your Uncle Tony.”

Tony knelt and said, “Hi, Thor. Gimme five!” he held out his hand.

Thor smacked his palm into it, having been taught that by Vince.

Tony laughed and picked him up. “Hey, rugrat, you wanna go to the park?”

“Yes! Yes!” Then he looked at Loki. “Loki go too? An’ Max n’ Leta?”

“Okay, little brother. We’ll all go.”

Running about at the park tired all of the kids out, and Loki was able to put them down for naps without a fuss, though Tony helped by telling Max and Thor a story while Loki sang Aleta to sleep.

“Man, they tired me out!” Tony said. “I feel like I just fought Kang and fifty minions.”

“They’ll do that to you, believe me.” Loki chuckled in agreement. “Especially Thor. He just goes and goes like the Energizer Bunny till he falls over.”

“How do you deal with three kids if they all misbehave?” Tony whistled.

“They all get time out,” Loki replied. “But it’s funny. Since Thor came and he’s been misbehaving, my two scamps haven’t been, for the most part. Max takes his role as the big brother very seriously, and he seems to be trying to teach Thor how to behave. Aleta too has tried to teach him manners.”

“Does it work?”

“Sometimes. My brother is stubborn, but smart. He understands more than you think, even at this age. But his good days are slowly starting to outnumber the bad ones.”

“How much longer before that potion is done?”
“Four more days,” Loki answered.

On the sixth day, Loki had a surprise visit from Odin.

“Hello, Father,” he greeted the older man, who was wearing a gray hoodie and jeans with a black eye patch.

“Loki, your mother told me that Thor was in danger, and to quote her, she told me to get my wandering ass down to Midgard and help you. Where is he?”

“In time out. For playing with the stove.”

Loki opened the kitchen door and showed his father Thor sitting in the time out chair against the wall.

“My beard! Who?” Odin stared at his tiny blonde son.

“Amora.”

Thor looked up and saw Odin. His eyes lit up as he recognized the older man. “Daddy! Loki is mean!”

He jumped off the stool and ran to Odin.

Odin frowned and pointed back to the chair. “Sit back there and think on what trouble you caused!”

“I don’t wanna! I wanna play!” his son pouted, his sunny countenance turning stormy.

Odin was not amused. “THOR ODINSON!” he yelled. “Get back in that chair this instant or else you’re going to have a sore backside!”

Thor’s face crumpled and he started sobbing. He gazed at his brother. “Loki, Daddy yelled at me!”

“Because you’re not listening. Now go!”

Thor trudged back to the chair. “I hate time out!”

“Next time don’t play with the stove!” Odin scolded. “Is he always like this?”

“In trouble? No, but he has good days and bad days,” Loki replied. “Today . . . isn’t such a good day.”

When the time out was over, Thor got a hug from both Loki and Odin. The child was delighted that his father was there, and ran to draw him a “pitcher” while Loki and Odin discussed the antidote Loki was brewing and how it would work to bring Thor back to his older self.

“Why does it take such a long time?” Odin wanted to know.

“Because several of the ingredients need time to mature and ripen. They do that when they are heated and allowed to steep. Kind of like a good tea,” his mage son explained.

“Daddy, look! I drewed a pitcher for you!” Thor tugged on Odin’s sleeve.
Odin looked down. “Thank you!” He stared at it. “What by the Norns is it?”

Loki peered at it. “Thor, tell, Daddy what’s in the picture.”

“A rainbow an’ a cat an’ a horse, an’ Loki.”

Odin coughed. “Loki’s in this picture?”

“I think I’m the green scribble figure,” Loki chuckled.

“I’m going to give this to Mommy and she’ll hang it up on the wall,” Odin told the blond moppet. He tucked the picture in his pocket. “Now go play. Daddy’s talking with Loki.”

He turned back to Loki and began asking more questions about the spell that was cast, and vowing to find Amora and punish her.

Thor scowled, as he wanted Odin to pay attention to him and not Loki.

“Daddy! Daddy!”

“Not now, Thor! Daddy’s busy!” Odin shooed him away.

Thor’s brows drew down in a scowl that always meant mayhem. But the two adults weren’t paying attention.

“I am not sure that will work Father....... OWW!”

“What in the Nine happened?”

“Thor just bit my leg.” Loki said, then gave the sneaky little boy a glare. “You don’t bite, young man!”

“Sit in the corner young man! Three minutes!” Odin ordered.

Thor shook his head, sniffling. Then he dragged his feet over to the time out chair.

“I am starting to think this does not work for him.” Loki sighed. “None of my children were biters.”

“Then maybe a smack will,” Odin suggested.

“No, Father. Fear isn’t good. Let me think.”

Loki thought for a minute. He suspected Thor was jealous that he wasn’t being paid attention to. However, he needed to learn that such aggressive behavior was unacceptable.

He whispered something in Odin's ear. His father nodded and whispered, "Will that work?"

"We have nothing to lose by trying," Loki replied, then he promptly sat down on the floor and put his face in his hands and began crying.

Odin came and hugged Loki saying in a scolding tone, "Look what you did, Thor! You HURT your brother! You ought to be ashamed!" He patted Loki on the back. "Poor Loki!"

Thor studied the two, his blue eyes filled with puzzlement. "Loki sad?"

"Yes. Loki is crying because you bit him," Odin scolded. "See?” He pointed to the teeth marks in
Loki's leg. "That hurts!"

On cue Loki sniffl ed and cried some more. Thor’s lower lip trembled.

“Loki no cry!” Abruptly the toddler threw himself at his brother and began bawling. "M'sorry, Loki! No more bite!"

Loki lifted his head from his knees, his face wet with tears. "Do you promise?"

Thor nodded. "Pwomise!"

"Are you going to behave?"

"Uh huh. Loki no cry!" He hugged the God of Mischief about the knees.

Loki wiped his eyes. "I won’t if you stop biting. Okay?"

"'Kay. I tiss it better,” Thor lisped and then he bent down and kissed the red marks. "All better?"

Loki picked up his brother and hugged him. "All better, scamp."

Thor hugged him. “Love my Loki.”

“I love you too, Thor,” Loki smiled.

Odin gaped at him. "By the Norns! How did you know that would work?"

"I didn't. But thank Yggdrasil it did!” Loki said in relief, carding the toddler's flyaway blond hair. Thor put his head on Loki’s shoulder and popped his thumb in his mouth.

"Looks like someone is sleepy." Loki murmured.

"No!" Thor's head popped up a mulish scowl on his face.

Loki patted his bottom. Then he began to sing, and Thor yawned and put his head down again. By the time the song was done his brother was sleeping, his thumb in his mouth.

"Will you be all right?" Odin asked.

"Yes. Trust me, Father. This I can handle. However, if you wouldn't mind watching him while I go and check on the draft I'm making . . .” He handed the sleeping two-year-old to his father.

Odin held his son, thinking how it had been too bad he had missed all these years with Thor and Loki. Then he thought about Loki’s cleverness in getting Thor to understand how biting was wrong, and figured his patience would have snapped by now and he’d have resorted to his typical punishment, and perhaps caused Thor to hate him the way Loki had out of fear.

“You’re better off with Loki, son. He’ll do right by you,” Odin murmured and kissed his sleeping son on the forehead. “Your mother will be pleased you two are finally getting along.”

Loki returned, saying, “It’s coming along nicely. It should be ready in another three days.” He gazed at Thor. “Come, let’s put him upstairs. I have him sharing a room with Max.”

“Max doesn’t mind?”
“No. Max is over the moon that he’s not the little brother anymore. I told them to treat Thor like he was their brother, and they have. Both Max and Aleta have enjoyed being the teacher for once.”

“I thought they’d be jealous that you have another little one to care for,” Odin said, surprised.

“Only a little. But Max is surprisingly unselfish and so is Aleta. They understand that Thor is only little for awhile and so they can share me.”

“I’m sure they can’t wait for him to grow up again,” Odin laughed.

“Probably, but they’ll never forget this. And neither will I.” Loki said feelingly.

It was odd, but he had enjoyed this time with his brother, despite all the mishaps, and he would miss the little blonde imp. Admit it, Laufeyson. You’re also going to miss being the older brother. But to everything there is a season.

Three days later, the potion was complete, and Loki fed it to Thor with his dinner. The potion made the child sleepy so Loki held and rocked him and then put him in his king sized bed.

As Thor slept his body rapidly aged, and he whimpered in his sleep, growing from a toddler to a ten-year-old in moments.

“Shh! I know this hurts,” Loki soothed. “But it will be over and you’ll be back to normal in ten minutes.”

Sure enough, the magic returned the God of Thunder to his proper age in moments, and then Thor opened his eyes. “Loki? Where am I?”

“Welcome back, brother,” Loki greeted.

Thor sat up, examining himself. “I’m—I’m big again!”


“A little sore but good!” Thor said, then he coughed and added, “You took care of me . . . I can’t remember everything but I do that. You were very good to me.”

“Did you think I wouldn’t be?” Loki asked.

Thor just smiled. ”No, but you could have just called our parents and let them deal with me.”

"Father was here, but he doesn't know how to deal with a two-year-old who continually defies you. Or to put it a different way, you'd have had perpetually sore backside."

"Never mind! I'm glad it was you, brother."

Then he caught Loki in a bone-crushing hug. “Thank you.”

“By the Nine, Thor, I need to breathe!” Loki coughed.

“Sorry. My memory’s fuzzy.”

“It’ll come back to you.”

“Well, I guess I’d better go back to the mansion. I’ve abused your hospitality enough,” he said with a laugh.
"You kept me on my toes," his brother acknowledged, then waved as Thor summoned Mjolnir and flew back to the mansion.

Later that night, Loki's phone rang. "Hello, Thor."

"Loki . . . I just remembered what happened. I don't . . . I put you through torments of Hel! How did you not kill me?"

"I drank heavily." The Master of Mischief joked. "No, seriously, I counted to ten and walked away and reminded myself that you were two and this would eventually pass. And Mother would be mad if I turned you into a frog or a garden gnome. But it was a close thing!" he added.

"Loki, I wouldn't blame you if you had. I BIT you! I kicked you and had tantrums and wrecked your house."

"Yes, I know. In short, brother, you were a terror. Like any and every two year old child. And I thought about shipping you off to Asgard. But I didn't want Mother to have a relapse. So I dealt with you. And we both survived. By the skin of our teeth, but we did."

"I owe you, Loki."

"You do. So start packing, because you're coming with us to the Catskills, Thor, and we're going on a family camping trip."

'T'm bringing a keg of mead."

"Better make it two with the way you drink."
Loki and his family, including Thor, drive to the Catskills for a family camping trip . . . and it's the car ride from Hel!

The four words a parent dreads most on a car ride—are we there yet? ~ Loki

School was finally out, and the Laufeysons celebrated by throwing an end-of-school dinner and inviting their uncles and aunt to it. Loki fired up the grill and cooked marinated strip steaks, barbecue chicken, hot dogs, shrimp on skewers, and grilled vegetables. Sam made macaroni salad and Hunter made German potato salad. Belle and the younger children popped popcorn and made cinnamon butter popcorn, and cut up watermelon, kiwis, pineapple, and grapes for a fruit basket. Then they made s’mores brownies.

They put several kinds of drinks in a cooler—including soda, flavored water, iced tea, and for the adults beer and wine coolers.

“Dad, will Uncle Thor be big again?” Max asked his father.

“Yes, imp. Why? Did you think he would stay little forever?” Loki chuckled.

“No, but . . . I liked when Uncle Thor was little,” Max admitted. “He was fun to play with. Except when he hit me with his toy hammer.”

“I’m sure he’ll apologize again for that,” Loki said quietly. “But you’re right. I enjoyed him when he was a boy too this time around.” He tweaked his son’s nose. “However, Uncle Thor needed to grow up again because Midgard needs him as one of its heroes. And we need him to come with us on the family camping trip.”

“When are we going, Dad?” asked Max curiously.

“The end of the week,” replied the God of Mischief.

“Yay!” Max jumped up and down.

“Daddy, when’s everyone gonna be here?” Aleta asked, running over to him.
“Very soon, princess. Why don’t you go and play on the swing set?”

“C’mon, Max! Betcha I can swing higher!” she called and jumped down the porch stairs to the swing set.

“Cannot, Aleta!” her brother disagreed, then ran after her to claim the second swing.

As the two began swinging higher and higher, Tony, Thor, and Clint arrived.

“I can smell whatever Loki’s cooking down the street!” Tony declared, his mouth watering.

“Whatever it is, I can’t wait to eat it,” Thor seconded.

Loki turned with the spatula in his hand, wearing his green apron with his slogan *I Cook What I Want and You’ll Eat It and Like It*. “Thor, when can you not wait to eat something?”

Thor grinned and hugged Loki. “I can think of one time . . . when I was little.”

“Once I cured your indigestion, you ate like there was no tomorrow,” Loki remarked. “Are you all ready to come on the trip?”

“Yes. I packed everything including my fishing gear.”

Loki nodded. “Good! These steaks should be done momentarily. The rest of the food is out on the picnic tables. There’s beer and wine coolers in the red cooler. Just help yourself.”

The older Laufeysons came outside to greet their uncles, and suddenly Aleta noticed who was here and stopped swinging. “Max, Uncle Thor’s here!”

“And Uncle Tony and Uncle Clint,” Max observed, and went to greet them.

“Hiya, squirt!” Clint knelt and hugged Max.

“Look, Uncle Clint! I got big arm muscles!” Max boasted.

“Let me see,” Hawkeye said, and Max made a fist. “Wow! You’re almost as strong as your Uncle Thor, buddy!”

“Dad, didja hear that?” Max hooted.

“I did, scamp.” Loki removed the last steak from the grill and carried the platter to the long picnic table.

“Uncle Thor!” Aleta cried, hugging the big warrior about the knees. “Daddy says you’re gonna come with us on vacation.”

Thor picked her up. “I am, little niece! Are you excited?”

Aleta nodded her head. “Daddy says we’re gonna live in the woods like you did in Asgard. And he’s gonna teach us how to find food and see animals. And we’re gonna go in a canoe down the river too.”

“A canoe?” Thor frowned. “Loki, when did that get decided?”

“Last night. I promised Hunter and Vince we’d run through the rapids.”

“Brother, I’ve never been in a canoe before.” Thor said uneasily.
“Don’t worry. I’ve read up on it. Besides, if you capsize you can swim.” Loki reassured him.

Thor made a face. “That’s not very reassuring, Loki.”

“Quit grousing. You’ll be fine. Just watch out for rocks midstream.” Loki made himself a hot dog and bit into it. “Mmm! Nothing tastes as good as grilled hot dogs.”

“Daddy, can I have a hot dog?” his baby girl asked.

“Yes. One minute,” Loki said.

“Here, spark. I can get it for you,” Thor told her and put a hot dog with some mustard on her plate.

“Thanks, Uncle Thor,” Aleta said. “Do you miss being little like us?”

Thor chuckled ruefully. “You were very patient with me, Leta. But I know one thing I didn’t miss—time out.”

“I know!” Aleta said. “I hate it! It’s so—”

“—boring!” Aleta, Max, and Thor chorused.

“What do I always say, Aleta?” Loki smirked.

“If you don’t like the time, don’t do the crime,” the three repeated.

“You’ve got them well trained, Trickster,” Tony sniggered.

“I’m not a dog, Man of Iron,” Thor objected, then slyly fed Odin a piece of hot dog under the table.

“I saw that, Thor!” Loki warned. “He’s only allowed one type of our food. Otherwise I will call you to come and clean up whatever accident he has a three in the morning.”

“But Loki! He’s hungry!” Thor objected. “Look at the face!” He pointed to where Odin was sitting and begging with huge puppydog eyes.

“I’m going to tell you that when you’re over here cleaning up dog puke off my carpet,” his brother snorted. “Here. Give him these.” He handed Thor a bag with red, white, and blue stripes with the logo Treats for Troops, Operation Drool Overload—organic dog treats made with peanut butter and blueberry—each bag purchased helps support your armed forces!

Steve and Bruce had arrived while the others were eating, and Cap examined the treat bag curiously. “That’s neat! I wonder if they do cat treats?” he asked curiously. “I can buy some for Jinx and Radar.”

“They do. Mischief has a bag inside,” Loki replied, sitting down with a plate of food and a glass of sangria cooler. He rarely drank anything stronger around his children, despite his extremely high tolerance for Midgardian alcohol.

“Hey, who’s watching your pets while you’re away?” Bruce wanted to know.

“Mandy volunteered to come over and spend our vacation here with Mystic. That way the house will be watched too,” Loki answered.
“Can she handle them, brother? She is getting a bit long in the tooth.”

Loki nearly choked on his drink. “Thor, you say that to her face and see if she doesn’t beat you with her cane! I asked her a similar question and she threatened to beat me! She’ll be fine, Thor. If anything happens, I’ve left her all of your numbers.” He indicated the Avengers.

“We’ll keep an eye out,” Steve reassured the Asgardian, knowing that Loki would understand he meant an eye out for villains who might try and destroy his house while he was away.

“This steak is wonderful,” Tony raved. “What did you do to it, Loki?”

“I put a little of this and that on it,” he answered aggravatingly.

“You and your secret recipes!” Tony snorted. “One day I’m going to hack into that computer of yours and find them all.”

“Good luck with that, Stark. Because I don’t keep them on any computer.” Loki replied with a smirk.

"Uncle Tony, Dad doesn't even write them down," Sam told him.

"You don't?"

"No. I simply have perfect recall."

"Do you?" Tony asked Thor.

"Only for combat techniques. Anything else, no."

"Dad, Belle, and Serena have the best memories," Sam stated. "Vince and I are good, but not like them. And Max has a really good memory too for a little kid. He can recite whole commercials after hearing them once."

"And then he sings them over and over to be annoying," Serena declared.

"I like them," Aleta defended.

Her sister rolled her eyes. "Whatever."

Tasha and Pepper arrived then and everyone was busy eating and drinking.

"I don't know which I like more-this shrimp with whatever garlic and lime stuff is on it or the hot dog," Pepper said, looking at both of them.

"Here. Have both." Loki put a shrimp skewer and a hot dog with a bun on her plate.

"Loki, I can't. I'm trying to watch what I eat," she sighed.

"It's a magic hot dog. You eat it and it's zero calories."

"You can do that?" she gaped at him.

"I'm kidding! If I could do that I'd put Weight Watchers, Jenny Craig, and Nutrisystem out of business," Loki laughed. "I was trying to make you feel better."

Pepper smiled. "I'll eat it anyway. Today's my cheat day."
"Leave room for dessert," Loki instructed. Then he ate his own shrimp skewer and some macaroni salad.

"Is there any way for you to magically make someone lose weight?" Pepper asked curiously.

"Unfortunately, no. Several mages once thought so but their magic didn't react well with their test subjects."

"Like they got too skinny?"

"No, they wasted away and died," he replied gravely. "People always think magic is some kind of cure all. It's not. Sometimes you have to know when to leave well enough alone."

"Your food's worth going off my diet for, Loki," she said, and took some vegetables and some potato salad.

"Compliment of the day," the Asgardian smiled.

"I think Dad should be on Iron Chef," Hunter said, coming back for seconds.

"No thanks, son. I'm already famous as a video game designer I don't need to add cooking to that list," Loki shook his head.

"Yeah, then all your gamer fans might expect you to bake them stuff and take pictures with you," his son chuckled.

"Or add free packages of cookies with the game," his father snorted. He reached over and scooped up a grilled zucchini and some peppers and placed them on Vince's plate. "Eat that."

"Aww, Dad!" his younger son groaned.

Loki just looked at him.

"Okay," the boy grumbled.

"And don't think you can feed it to the dog."

"Better listen to him, nephew," Thor advised. "Or else no dessert."

"Yeah and you'd know," the sandy-haired boy laughed.

Clint started laughing. "You seriously wouldn't let him eat dessert without eating vegetables, Loki?"

"When he was two, yes. That's a rule all my kids know. I gave Thor broccoli with cheddar cheese sauce. He threw it at me, so no ice cream."

"Cruel and unusual punishment, brother," Thor refuted.

"Oh, please! I gave you three chances before I took your dessert away." Loki rolled his eyes. "And look, it works." He indicated Thor's plate, which did have some vegetables on it.

"That's because of Green Eggs and Ham," remarked Nate.

"I love that book," Thor said.

"Now you know what to get your uncle for his birthday, Max," Loki told his youngest. He never
needed to remind Max to eat vegetables, like his father, he actually enjoyed them.

Once everyone had eaten their fill, Loki made coffee and set out the desserts. Those disappeared quicker than spring flowers on a frosty night. Afterwards, Nate and Tony took the Magic Bullet and tinkered with it, returning an hour later and informing Loki that they had made the battery powered chair able to last two weeks without needing to be recharged.

"I figured that was a good thing on this camping trip," Tony said to the Mischief Maker.

"It is and thanks." That had been one of the things he had been worried about. He had already decided to bring Nate's bed with them, the other children all had new thermal insulated sleeping bags.

He had made tracking amulets for all of his children from extra pendants left from the Asgardian Quest 2 con, except for Belle, who already had one. The amulets were shiny metallic plastic with the double serpent symbol on the front and an L for Laufeyson on the obverse. Loki was taking no chances with kids missing or lost in the woods. They would also double as communication pendants, meaning they could speak with Loki wherever they were, obliterating the need for cell phones. Loki had the master amulet, made from real Niflheim gold, citrines, amethysts, and emeralds, about his own neck. All the other amulets were linked back to it and when in use a corresponding stone would glow on his. He had even made one for Thor, though his bore Thor's hammer on it, and it was also linked to Loki's.

One week later:

“Okay, everyone double check all your suitcases, backpacks, and make sure you have what you want to take in the car in your messenger bag. If it gets packed with the other bags in the trunk, you’ll have to live without it till we get to Mystic Swan Lake. That includes you, Thor,” Loki instructed.

The van was packed to capacity, including the large roof caddy on top, which held the fishing gear, poles, Vince’s skateboard and helmet, and some extra food items.

He watched as the kids rechecked everything and made sure they had what they wanted for the road trip. He had packed Max and Aleta’s little backpacks himself—Max had a wolf one and Aleta a kitten. His own green one was filled with some water and lemonade, power bars, trail mix, dried fruit, chocolate, several books, and a first aid kit. Extra batteries, flares, and a flashlight were in the glove compartment. His daggers were also inside his bag, wrapped in oiled silveron material.

“Okay, everyone go to the bathroom now. And I mean everyone.” He looked specifically at his two oldest as he said this.

“I’m not two anymore, Loki,” Thor objected.

“Shut up, Thor, and do as you’re told,” Loki ordered.

“What if we don’t have to?” came Hunter’s response.

“I don’t care. Try anyway. Because the first rest stop isn’t for an hour and I’m not having an accident in the car.”

“Did you go, Master Mischief?” Thor queried, with one eyebrow raised.
“You’re a riot, Thor,” Loki coughed. “And yes, if you must know.”

The kids scattered to use the facilities while Loki did a final check of everything. He phoned Mandy to let them know they would be leaving soon and she could come over anytime to check on Mischief and Odin.

As a precaution, he had made Aleta and Max wear Pull Ups, just in case they had an accident it wouldn’t be so bad. Though he had to bribe his son with candy and a story before he would agree to use ‘baby underwear’.

“Thor, did you tie down the roof caddy?” Loki asked as he helped the kids into the car.

“Of course,” his brother replied, adding one last bag into the trunk. “Do you think I’m stupid, Loki?”

“No comment,” his brother answered, making sure Aleta was buckled into her car seat. He handed her Minx, and her sippy cup of pineapple sparkling water. He also tucked the Got Mischief blanket around her and Max.

“All right, this caravan is leaving!” he called. “If you’re not in the van by the time I count to ten you’re staying home alone with Odin and Mischief!” He began counting.

The kids all were inside before he reached eight.

He got in the driver’s seat and Thor rode shotgun. “Okay. When I call your name, say “I’m here.” Hunter, Sam, take your headphones out.”

He went down the line, from oldest to youngest. Everyone was there. Loki turned the car over and the GPS lit up. Then he began backing up out of the driveway.

There came an ominous creaking noise.

“What’s that?” Belle asked uneasily.

“Sounds like something’s on the roof,” Serena replied.

“Duh! The caddy’s on the roof!” Vince reminded, rolling his eyes.

More creaks and groans.

“Dad, it sounds like something’s gonna break,” Nate called.

As if on cue, there was a sharp snap and the caddy lurched and slid off the roof and down the front of the car onto the ground.

“By the Nine, Thor! I thought you said you tied it down!” Loki swore, putting the van in park.

“I did . . . I think.”

Loki facepalmed himself. “This vacation is off to a great start!”

“It’s a sign,” Aleta remarked.

“Never mind, spark,” sighed her father. He got out to fix everything, and Thor helped him. By the time they got everything fixed, they were fifteen minutes late leaving. That delay meant they ran into traffic going out of the city and Loki growled at the drivers in Old Norse.
“Dad, maybe we should have flown,” suggested Nate. “Uncle Tony woulda let us use the Quinjet.”

“Hush, Nathan. I need to concentrate before I ram the jackass in front of me,” Loki replied, thinking maybe his son was right. Then again, if they had left when he’d planned they would have avoided this gridlock.

Finally they were out and driving on the highway towards upstate New York. Sam was dozing in his seat, Hunter was listening to his IPod, playing Head Like a Hole. Serena was doing one of her sudoku puzzles and Belle was reading. Nate was playing a peg game and Vince was playing his Game Boy. Lucy, Max, and Aleta were watching The Last Unicorn on the DVD player. Thor was munching on some trail mix and counting how many New York license plates he saw.

Loki had on his favorite classic rock station and was humming along to Springsteen’s Born to Run and musing on maybe this trip wouldn’t be so bad despite the rocky start when Hunter began caterwauling along to his music.

“. . .head like a hole, black at your soul, I’d rather die than give you control . . .”

Lucy, Max, and Aleta screamed, “Shut up!” and held their ears.

“I’d rather die than listen to you!” Serena yelled.

“What the Hel?” Loki cried, and slammed on the breaks, almost rear-ending the car in front of him.

Trickster flew out of Max’s hand and hit Thor in the head.

“Hey!” the Thunder God cried. “It’s raining wolves!”

“Dad, you made me lose Trickster!” wailed Max.

“Hunter, quit singing!” Lucy yelled. “You make me wanna go deaf!”

“You make cats in heat sound like divas,” Sam groaned. He yanked out his brother’s headphones. “Yo, bro! Shut your pie hole! You’re killing us!”

“Hey! What’s the big idea, Sam?” an irritated Hunter growled.

“Your singing nearly made Dad get into an accident,” Nate informed him.

“What?” Hunter stared around. “Dad, are they kidding?”

“No. Please spare us all, Hunter. You do want to arrive in one piece, right?” Loki asked, wincing.

“Okay. I forgot there were people around,” sighed the former Beta. He usually sang alone in his room and hadn’t realized how off key he was.

He put his headphones back in and settled back in his seat.

“Thank the Norns!” Belle muttered.

“Are you writing all this down?” Serena wanted to know.

“Of course, number cruncher,” her sister grinned. “It’s what I do.”

They passed a sign that said Rest Stop 4 miles with pictures of McDonalds, a gas pump, and
“Are we there yet?” Aleta asked.

“Aleta Lenore, no asking that question!” Loki declared.

“Can I ask it?” Max wanted to know.

“No. No one is allowed to ask that,” their father said sharply. “We’ll get there when I say so.”

Suddenly the van hit a bump and the TV went out.

“Daddy! The TV is broken!” Aleta wailed. “And we were in the middle of the good part!”

“Oh, Nine Hells!” Loki hissed. “Well, you’ll just have to wait till we stop and I’ll see if I can fix it.”

“But what do we do without the TV?”

“You can play a game called I Spy. Lucy, show them how.”

“I’ll play too,” Thor said. He was bored.

“You say, I spy with my little eye . . . and then look out the window and say what thing you see,” Lucy explained. “Like this. I spy with my little eye—a green convertible.”

“Me next! I spy with my little eye . . . an ugly rusty station wagon,” Aleta said. “Your turn, Max.”

“I spy with my little eye . . . a yellow bus. Okay, Uncle Thor.”

“I spy with my little eye . . . a man in a yellow Subaru. Hey! That idiot just gave me the finger, Loki!” Thor snapped. “Stop the car!”

“Thor, are you out of your mind?”

“No, brother. Stop the car so I can go and teach that jerk some manners!” Thor growled, flexing his muscles beneath his blue T-shirt.

“Thor, by Mimir’s Beard, I am not stopping this car so you can get out and beat up some lowlife and get arrested,” Loki snapped.

“He gave me the finger!”

“Why don’t you cry about it?” Loki said sarcastically.

“My honor is at stake!”

“Who cares?”

“I do!”

“You’re the only one who does! Now relax, go to sleep, or something. I need to concentrate. We have idiots on the road today. Must be a full moon.”

“If I was driving . . .” Thor muttered.

“If you were driving, some guy would be in the hospital, and the cops would have arrested you
for assault,” the God of Mischief stated. “Either that or knocking over landmarks.”

“What? I’m not that bad, Loki!”

“No? You forget, I drove with you when you stole that Svartalfheim ship in Asgard. I wasn’t sure how we’d survive,” quipped the magician.

“You’re exaggerating, Loki.”

“Like Hel,” his brother refuted.

“Uncle Thor, can I have Trickster?” Max asked.

“Sure, little imp,” Thor reached down and handed the stuffed wolf back to his nephew.

“I spy with my little eye . . . a dragon!” Max declared triumphantly.

“You do not, Maximus!” Aleta cried.

“Uh huh! It’s a cloud dragon. So there!” he stuck his tongue out at her.

“Daddy! Max stuck his tongue out at me!”

“Dad, Aleta’s a busybody!”

“You mind your own business, Maximus!” She pulled the blanket over to her side.

“Hey! Give me half!” he yelled. He grabbed the other corner of the blanket.

“Let go, Max!” yelped his sister.

There ensued a tug-o-war over the green blanket.

“Knock it off, you two!” Thor bellowed.

“He started it!” Aleta pointed to her brother.

“Baby, baby stick your head in gravy!” Max chanted.

“Daddy, Max is making fun of me!” She poked her brother in the arm.

“Dad, Aleta poked me!”

“He breathed on me! Yuck! I have dog germs!”

“Somebody shoot me!” muttered Loki.

“With what?” Thor queried.

“A tranquilizer,” replied Loki shortly.

“Dad, she touched me!”

Loki rubbed his temple where a headache was slowly gathering. I must have been insane! Why did I ever think this was a good idea?

“The next one who does anything to his sister, or her brother, gets time out.”
Peace reigned in the car for about ten minutes, just long enough to drive into the rest station.

“Do me a favor, Thor? Take them inside and let them use the bathroom and get some snacks,” Loki asked his brother. “Get me the biggest coffee they have, double shot of espresso, two sugars, one cream. And whatever burger they have available.” He handed him some money.

“What are you doing?”

“Banging my head into a wall.”

“Loki!”

“Okay, okay. I’m going to try and fix the bloody DVD player so Max and Aleta don’t kill each other before we get to the campground,” he amended. He clapped Thor on the shoulder. “Go get ‘em, Mighty One!”

“Loki, I don’t think you need coffee. I think you need sleep.”

“Thor, quit trying to be a shrink and show me my coffee. Because you really don’t want to be around me if you don’t,” his brother growled.

“All right. But the next time we stop, I’m driving and you sleep.”

“Fine. Coffee! Now!”

Thor strode away, calling to the kids like some steroid version of a mama duck, “Okay, kids! Everyone follow me!”

They all did, though Hunter had to be dragged out of the car since he was snoozing. Loki heaved a sigh of relief. *Got Prozac, Laufeyson? Now why wasn’t that on my list of necessities?*

Then he opened the back door and sat down inside to see what had happened to cause the DVD to go on the fritz. “Damn gremlins!” he swore, then realized it was a simple fix, just a loose cable. He tightened it up and pressed Play and the movie started again. He quickly hit Stop so the kids wouldn’t miss the Lady Amalthea part, which was his favorite—being a shapeshifter.

Then he simply leaned his head back on the seat and closed his eyes for a brief moment. Oh the sound of silence! He couldn’t wait to get to Mystic Swan Lake. He loved the city but he had to admit there were times when his soul yearned for the wide open spaces of wilderness where his shifter heart could roam and the silence rejuvenate his soul.

Abruptly he sat up, rubbing his eyes. *Thor, where the Hel is my coffee?*

He slipped out of the van, shutting the door and just leaning on it, scanning the pedestrians going in and out of the rest stop, some with screaming children, some without, and he looked to see if Thor were coming with his coffee.

It was then his attention was caught by three children in a group about one of the lamp posts by the parking lot. To his surprise he recognized them as Vince, Nate, and Max. His trouble radar went on red alert. Then his eyes went wide in horror when he saw his youngest calmly *peeing* on the lamp post!

“Nate, is anybody coming?” Vince hissed.

Nate looked around. “Um... no... umm... except Dad!”
“Aww, man! Max, stop!” Vince whispered frantically.

“I can’t!”

“Maximus Laufeyson, what do you think you’re doing?” Loki hissed, in a tone that barely carried, yet conveyed his displeasure worse than screaming would have.

Max looked up, his green eyes wide. “Hi, Dad,” he said with a guilty smile. “Vince bet me I couldn’t pee on this lamp post.”

Loki slammed a hand to his forehead. “Nine Hells! If Vince told you to jump off the Brooklyn Bridge, would you do it?” Norns, are you channeling Thor today?

“No, ’cause I’d die. But nothing gets hurt on the lamp post.” Max answered blithely.

Loki moved so his son wasn’t visible to anyone coming out of the rest stop. “Max, by the Nine! Cover yourself!” Norns grant me patience, because if you grant me strength I’m gonna kill somebody! “You don’t do that! I know you know better!”

His youngest sniffled. “But Dad . . . Vince told me to! So . . . so he should be in trouble.”

“Maximus, did the pee come out of your penis?” Loki hissed, his emerald eyes flashing.

His son nodded, ashamed.

At that point Nate and Vince nearly busted a gut laughing.

Loki quickly waved a hand and the puddle vanished. He’d be damned if he was going to get a ticket for some prank. Then he zeroed in on his other two sons. “You two! Stop laughing! This isn’t funny!”

“We know, Dad!” Nate giggled. “But it kinda is . . . ‘specially what you just said!”

Vince could barely speak. “I didn’t think the little scamp would actually do it!”

“Really?” Loki frowned. “You had a pretty good idea he might, Vincent!” He shook his head. “All of you are in trouble when we get to the campgrounds.”

Max began to cry. “M’sorry! Am I gonna be in time out forever?”

Loki sighed. “No and yes, for four minutes. And your brothers will be doing something else during that time. Which will be determined once we arrive. Next time don’t listen to your brother when he tells you to pee somewhere except the bathroom, Max! You’re not a puppy.” He picked up his youngest. “Come on, let’s go wash your hands. You two, fall in behind me.”

They all trooped back in the rest stop.

“Do you think anybody saw?” Nate wanted to know.

“I saw,” his father interjected. “And that was one too many.” He knew probably some others had also and just thanked Yggdrasil that no one had called the cops.

They were returning from the men’s room when they met Thor with the rest of the family coming out the door.

“Oh so that’s where they went!” Thor said upon seeing the boys with Loki. “I was going to ask Hunter to check the restroom. Here, I got your coffee, Loki!”
Loki took the 20 oz cup and sipped it. “Thanks!”

“Dad, we got you a Big Mac,” Belle said and handed him the sandwich.

“Thanks, little raven. Now if we’re all done here—” he fixed his three younger sons with a pointed Look. “—let’s get back on the road. Oh, and I fixed the DVD player.”

“Yay!” cheered Aleta, clutching Minx in her hand.

Max brightened at that, though he still was upset.

Loki counted as his children got back in the van, making sure they were all there before climbing into the driver’s seat. Beside him, Thor was eating a box of Cinnabons and drinking a 20 oz coffee also.

“It’s a good thing you found them, Loki,” Thor was saying. “I turned around and suddenly they were missing.”

“You have no idea, brother,” sighed the Mischief God.

“What do you mean?”

“I’ll tell you later. Just to let you know, those three are in trouble when we get to Mystic Swan Lake for an inappropriate prank,” Loki coughed. Then he unwrapped his burger and began to eat it before pulling out of the rest stop.

Thor raised an eyebrow. “What did they do, look up some ladies’ skirts?”

Loki almost choked on his Big Mac. “Nine Hells, Thor! They aren’t interested in girls that way yet! But don’t give them any ideas, by the Nine!”

Thor smirked. “I dunno, Loki, I was ten when I used to drop coins on the ground so I could see Brunhilda’s underwear . . .”

Loki turned the volume up on the stereo.

“Thor! Lower your voice!” he growled. “And you don’t need to remind me! When she ran off screaming that the prince of Asgard was looking up her skirt, guess who got blamed for it and beaten? Me!”

“Loki, I never thought—”

“That was your whole problem, brother. Not thinking!” Loki snapped. “Or rather, thinking too much with one part and not your head. I didn’t even like the girl!”

“You didn’t? But she was built like a---” Thor held out his hands.

“Yes and she had a laugh like a hyena and was a greedy little gold digger,” Loki said sourly. “I wouldn’t have touched her if you paid me!”

“How did you know that?”

“How didn’t you?” Loki returned. “Her father was one of the biggest gamblers in the whole court. In debt up to his eyeballs and the only thing he had as collateral was his pretty daughter making a match with some rich idiot so he could trade on his status as father-in-law to pay off his creditors. And Brunhilda was well aware of that fact, brother mine! Even at twelve, she was hunting for
some poor rube so Papa wouldn’t get his legs broken! So it’s a good thing you didn’t marry her.”

Thor sighed. “But I’ll bet she would have been a good time.”

“Not in my bed,” Loki snorted and drank some more coffee.

“Want a Cinnabon?”

“No. I just need the caffeine and the protein.” Loki waved away the offer.

He lowered the volume on the radio, Miley Cyrus was wailing and he’d rather hear his kids than her any day of the week.

“Belle, do you have any more soda?” Serena asked her sister. “I’m dying of thirst.”

“Oh?” her sister lifted her eyes from her current book. “Soda? No. This is water.”

The platinum-haired girl turned around and spied Hunter’s can of Dr. Pepper sitting on the cup holder. Her brother was snoozing with his headphones in and his Yankees hat over his face. Serena slyly reached over and snagged the purple and maroon can. Then she tilted back her head and drank—only to get a mouthful of pistachio shells.

“Gross!” she yelped, putting the can back and spitting out shells.

“Eew! Serena!” Lucy cried.

“Daddy! Serena’s littering!” Aleta yelled.

Hunter sat up and smirked, his cap in one hand. “Ha! Next time don’t drink what doesn’t belong to you!”

Serena glared at him.

“Pick up whatever is on the floor,” Loki ordered. “This isn’t a junk pile.”

As if that were a premonition, a truck in front of them had some debris fly off and nearly slammed into the van’s windshield.

“Loki, what the f@%!?” Thor yelled.

“Daddy, Uncle Thor just said the F-word! You need to wash his mouth again!” Aleta yelled.

Loki slammed his palm down on the horn. “You stupid mother!” he growled, then snarled something in Old Norse. He quickly maneuvered around the debris in the road, making Sam bang his head into the door and yell, “Dad, I’m being knocked up!”

Hunter was startled out of his doze and that was the first thing he heard. “OMG, Sam’s pregnant?”

Loki nearly caused a five-car pile-up.

“I think we should drive,” Nate announced.

“Hunter, you dweeb!” Sam snapped. He cuffed his brother upside the head. “Get hearing aides!”

“Dammit, wolfling, you nearly gave me a heart attack!” Loki scolded.
“God, the men in this family!” Sam groaned.

“You sure you wanna join them?” Belle asked, laughing.

“Not right now I don’t!”

Several people honked their horns at the van and Thor promptly yelled, "Up yours, a**hole!"

"Hey! My kids are in the car!” Loki scolded. "Watch your language!"

"You're gonna get in trouble!” sang Aleta.

"Me? What about your mouth, brother?” Thor refuted. "You forget, I know what you're saying!"

"Well, at least they can't repeat mine,” Loki pointed out.

"I can,” Belle spoke up.

"You I don't need to worry about, raven," her father stated. "Unless you really lose it, and even then nobody on Midgard would even know what you said."

"On Asgard, they would," Thor remarked.

"Thank you, Captain Obvious!” Loki rolled his eyes.

They were nearly at the halfway point, and had been on the road a total of two hours and four minutes, when Loki decided they needed to have some kind of game to keep the kids who were awake-like Max, Aleta, Lucy, Serena, Belle, and Sam-from growing bored and fighting. Sam suggested a sing-along to the next song that came on the radio. As luck would have it, Bon Jovi's "Livin' On A Prayer' came on and Sam, Lucy, Serena, and Belle began singing the lyrics.

Luckily all of them could carry a tune, though Serena had the best voice of the four.

Sam sang, "She says we've gotta hold on to what we've got . . ." she held the "microphone" which was Serena's purple brush out to her sisters.

Lucy and Serena chimed in with, "It doesn't really matter if we're naked or not!"

"WHAT?” Sam began laughing hysterically.

Thor spit his coffee all over the windshield.

"Oh . . . Oh . . . damn . . . I gotta pull over!” Loki was biting his lip hard as he carefully pulled into a gas station right off the highway. Then he put the van in park and began cracking up, his head nearly touching the windshield.

"What's so funny?” Serena asked, puzzled.

Lucy shrugged.

"Eeww! This song is 'sgusting!” Aleta cried.

"Why are they singing about naked people, Dad?” Max wanted to know.

This just made poor Loki laugh even harder.

"OMG, I'm gonna pee myself!” Sam gasped, holding his stomach.
"Gross! Get a Pull Up!" Aleta frowned.

"Brother, I need a towel," Thor said between giggles.

Belle regained control first and explained, "Max, the song isn't about-err-naked people . . . Rena and Lucy heard it wrong."

"We did?" Lucy frowned. "But my friend's brother said that was what he said."

"No, sunshine," Loki corrected. "Here's what they said, It doesn't make a difference if we make it or not," he sang slowly enough to be understood.

"I like the other way, Loki. It's funnier!" Thor said, trying to wipe up coffee with some napkins while still snickering.

"It is . . . if you haven't had too much soda," admitted Sam. "Dad, I need the restroom."

"Go ahead. I'll wait," Loki said. "Max, do you need the potty?"

"Uh . . . yeah," his youngest said.

"C'mon, little bro," Sam beckoned, and Max unbuckled his seatbelt and let Sam carry him into the gas station.

Belle turned to Aleta, "You have to go too?"

"Okay. Can you come with?"

"Sure! otherwise you could get kidnapped," Belle said, and took her baby sister into the gas station.

"Loki, why don't you let me drive so you can sleep?" Thor suggested.

"Are you sure you're up to it?" Loki asked. "Sometimes these highways can be tricky up here."

"I'm good. I have the GPS if I get lost, but really it's just a straight road till we get to the last exit, right?"

"Pretty much. But we'll need to stop before we get there so we can eat dinner," Loki told him. "Once the rest of my zoo wakes up from their sugar comas they'll be starving."

"Not a problem. Should I wake you up too when we get dinner?"

"No. Just bring me something to eat. I'll eat in the car once I get some sleep." He looked at his watch. "We have another two hours without traffic."

"Okay, let's do this."

Loki gave Thor his remote and they switched places.

The Mischief God settled into the passenger seat and closed his eyes, pulling his jacket about him and curling up with the travel pillow.

"Uncle Thor, you're driving?!" Aleta exclaimed when she and Belle returned.

"Yes, princess. Your dad needed to sleep."
"Do you know the way there?"

"Yes. I promise I won't get lost," her uncle laughed.

Once Max and Sam came back, Thor pulled out onto the highway again and they continued.

Max and Aleta dozed for about thirty minutes, then woke and they colored quietly for a time. The rest of the Laufeysons slept, so Thor drove without distractions and listened to classic rock while drumming a hand on the steering wheel.

Forty-five minutes later everyone else, except Loki, woke up and as predicted were hungry and thirsty. Thor was also, so he read the signs for the next rest stop, and saw they advertised S'barro's, Chick-Fil-A, and Arbys. "Let's stop here, kids."

"What about Dad?" Belle asked.

"Let him sleep," Thor advised. "I'll bring him back something."

"Dad likes Chick-Fil-A," Belle said. "Chicken sandwich with honey mustard and a salad with honey balsamic, extra pecans."

"I'm glad you knew that," Thor said gratefully. He counted the children as they entered the rest area.

Then he handed Hunter and Sam some twenties and said, "Go take a few of your brothers and sisters and order what you want. Belle, Max, and Aleta will go over to the chicken place and order for Loki and whoever else wants it."

The Laufeysons scattered, splitting into three groups.

Once everyone had gotten what they wanted for dinner, Thor herded the entire group into the dining area. There weren't enough tables for all the Laufeysons to sit right next to each other, so Lucy ended up with Serena sitting at another table next to a girl her own age and height named Megan O'Connor. They began discussing their vacation while eating.

Serena went to throw her trash out and use the restroom, when she came back, Thor was getting ready to leave, and holding Max and Aleta by the hand. He did a quick head count and they all trooped back to the van. Loki was still sleeping, and Thor placed his bag of food by his feet and then got into the driver's seat. "Is everyone ready?" Thor called.

"Let's go, Uncle Thor!" they chorused.

Max put in The Little Rascals remake, and Thor drove slowly down the highway, as there was now traffic up ahead.

Thor beeped the horn as a red car cut him off, growling, "Learn how to drive, you sh!hole!"

Loki woke up. "Nice, Thor! I feel like we're in the same place we were when I fell asleep. What's going on?"

"Traffic sucks!" piped up an unfamiliar voice from the backseat.

Loki turned around. "Who are you?" he asked upon seeing a strange little girl sitting next to Aleta. She was strawberry blond with big indigo eyes wearing a Disney princess dress and glittery shoes. "Megan,' she replied.
"She's our new friend, Daddy," Aleta told him.

"Thor, you took someone else's kid in our car?" Loki was horrified.

"No! well, I counted and there were nine kids when we left the rest stop," his brother protested. "I didn't know we had one extra."

"Uncle Thor, are you good at math?" Serena asked.

"He's very good at math," Loki interjected. Then he did his own head count and came up one short. "Where's Lucy?"

"She's with my grandpa and grandma, going to Florida," Megan said brightly.

"Excuse me?" Loki blinked.

"We traded places. Lucy said she wanted to see Belle in Disney World and I wanted to go camping cause I always go to Magic Kingdom. So we switched places."

"And Daddy, Megan doesn't have a TV in her car," Aleta informed him.

"Thor, turn the car around," Loki ordered. "Megan, honey, what does your grandpa's car look like?"

"It's a red Chrysler mini van. With a Buccaneers sticker on the back." Megan said helpfully. "I was so bored in the car. All my grandpa does is listen to old fogy music and yell at all the sumnab'tches and crazy bastards driving next to him. They all seem to go wherever he drives."

Loki and Thor started laughing hysterically.

"Hey! I don't think you should say that word!" Aleta scolded.

"My grandpa always does when we're in the car," Megan answered honestly. "Then Grandma says he's gonna go to H-E-double hockey stick."

"Are you sure you aren't one of mine?" Loki chuckled. "What's your last name, darling?"

"O'Connor," Megan replied.

Suddenly, a red mini van drove alongside, flashing some red and blue lights.

"Loki, I think we're being pulled over," Thor moaned.

"No, that's just my grandpa. He used to be a policeman," Megan told him.

"Oh, great! You kidnapped a cop's granddaughter, Thor!" Loki face-palmed himself.

"Are we getting arrested?" Max whimpered. "I don't wanna go to jail! There's a creepy guy named Bubba there!"

"Nobody's getting arrested," Loki reassured him. "Megan's grandpa is here to bring Lucy back."

"Aww! I really wanted to go canoeing!" Megan sighed.

They all pulled over on the shoulder and Loki and Megan got out and so did Megan's grandpa and Lucy.
"I was asleep when this happened, sir," began Loki. "My brother was supposed to look after the kids . . ."

"No harm done, Mr.-err-I dinna catch your name," Megan's grandpa said.

"Laufeyson, sir. Loki Laufeyson."


Loki managed a smile, then turned to Lucy and shook his finger at her. "Lucy, you have some explaining to do!"

"Aye, and you too Megan, darlin'!" Mikey coughed. "Seems the lasses thought they'd switch places."

"Like on The Parent Trap, Dad," Lucy said.

Loki groaned. "Why did I ever let you watch that movie?"

"Grandpa, can we get a TV in our car?" Megan wanted to know.

"We'll see." Mike said. He handed Loki a business card and Loki did the same. "If you're ever over in Florida and and want to do Disney, look me up. I can get you a discount."

"Thanks, Mikey. If we go on another vacation after this one, we'll do that." Loki said. "And if you're ever in Manhattan, look up Laufeyson Tech and I'll give you a tour."

"Bye, Megan!" Lucy waved to the little girl.

"Bye, Lucy! Your car is the bomb!" Megan waved too as she skipped off beside her grandpa.

"Lucy, what am I going to do with you?" Loki asked, gazing up at the heavens. "You scared me half to death with this stunt."

"I'm sorry," the little girl whimpered. "I just thought it'd be cool to see Disney World and Megan was real nice and so was her grandma. But her grandpa has a mouth like Uncle Thor!"

"Valkyrie, next time come and talk to me first before you do anything crazy like that again!"

"You were sleeping."

"I knew I should have taken some Jolt," muttered Loki.

"Are you mad?"

"No, just disappointed." Loki sighed. "When we get to the campgrounds you can join your three brothers doing punishment detail."

Lucy groaned. "I promise I'll never do it again."

"Good, but that doesn't count for this time," he replied, then he hugged her and they got back in the van.

Her brothers and sisters greeted their missing sister with hugs and asked how much trouble she was in. "The same as Nate, Vince, and Max for whatever they did," she replied.
"What did you do?" Hunter asked.

"Tell ya later," Vince said.

Up front Loki was having a field day. "I cannot believe you left Lucy behind, Thor!" he scolded the Thunder God. "Don't you know your own nieces and nephews?"

"Loki, it was an accident!" Thor protested.

"An accident?! Thor, you took someone else's kid along for a joyride and didn't even know Lucy was missing!"

"Okay, okay. I'm sorry, Loki! I'm never gonna live this down!" he groaned.

"Nope. We'll be telling this to your grandkids," Loki grinned. "The Time Uncle Thor Forgot Lucy."

"How about The Time Lucy Tricked Uncle Thor," Thor groused.

"Do you want me to drive?" Loki asked.

"No. I'm fine. Eat your dinner," Thor pointed to the bag.

While Loki ate, Thor drove the rest of the way to the final exit off the thruway.

He took the exit marked Catskills and then drove down a rather lonely country road for about five miles.

"Uncle Thor, are we almost there?" asked Serena.

"Uh, yeah. Soon as I find the road to turn off. I know it's here somewhere," Thor said, puzzled. "The GPS says it's a quarter of a mile."

He drove down the road a ways then nearly came to a halt because a big elk was standing beside the road.

"Thor! Watch the elk, by the Nine!" Loki cautioned. "Don't startle it!"

"I'm not," Thor said evenly, and drove by.

"Mimir's Well, that was close!" Loki said in relief. "But we really ought to have seen the turn off by now."

"I don't understand, Loki. The GPS says it's here, but I don't see anything," Thor said, frustrated.

"Maybe you'd better turn around."

Thor turned the car around then went back up the road again. As before, the elk was still standing at the side of the road. They drove slowly past and Thor scowled. "I wish that elk would go back where it came from. I feel like it can't wait to jump out and commit suicide as long as it can take us with it."

They drove repeatedly up and down the road.

"I knew you should have let me drive!" Loki remonstrated.

"I got this, brother!" Thor argued.
The GPS beeped. "Recalculating."

"Oh, recalculate your ass!" Thor snapped.

"Daddy, are we lost?" Aleta asked.

"No, sweetheart. We just don't know exactly where the campgrounds are," Loki explained.

"in other words, we're lost and Uncle Thor won't ask for directions," groaned Belle.

"Who can I ask?" Thor wanted to know.

"Google," Nate replied.

"Loki, this stupid GPS says the turnoff is right here!" Thor stabbed a finger at the elk.

"Wait. Where?"

"Turn right onto Mystic Way," the GPS announced.

"See? And there's nothing there except a big fat DEER!"

Loki looked thoughtful. "Yeah but what's behind the elk?"

"How should I know?"

"Thor, stop the car. We need to move the elk," Loki said abruptly.

"You're kidding right?"

"No." Loki conjured up some carrots and a sugar beet and then teleported out of the car a few feet from the elk.

"What's Dad doing?" asked Nate.

"Being Loki," responded Thor. "Crazy like a fox."

Loki went and dropped a trail of carrots and put the sugar beet at the end of it. Then he cupped his hands around his mouth and made a strange deep warbling call.

"What the heck's that?" Hunter asked.

"It's an elk mating call,' Vince said excitedly.

"I don't even want to know why Loki knows that," Thor moaned.

Just then the elk quit looking at the van and turned, nostrils quivering. Its ears flicked back and forth. Then it began to move towards the trail of carrots.

As it lumbered down the strip of grass, the turn off was revealed.

"Nine Hells!" Thor shouted. "That miserable deer was in front of it! I wish I had my rifle! Or a bow! We could have venison steaks!"

"Noo! You can't eat Bambi!" wailed Max, Aleta, and Lucy.

"Just kidding! Loki, get your lovesick butt back in the car!" Thor yelled out the window.
Loki teleported back inside and they took the turn off. In a few moments they parked beside a serene lake that glistened in the light of the setting sun and there were five white canvas tents mounted on concrete slabs next to a large picnic table with benches and some wooden square garbage bins. A sign read WELCOME TO MYSTIC SWAN LAKE!

"Finally!" cheered Hunter.

Everyone began clapping and Loki let out the breath he'd been holding.

The kids seemed like they were in good moods as they piled out of the van.

Until Aleta reached for her crayons she had left on the rear dash. "Daddy! My crayons melted!"
Spiders, Raccoons, and Bears, Oh My!

Chapter Summary

The campsite is not all it's cracked up to be . . . and wildlife invades it!

30

Spiders, Raccoons, and Bears, Oh My!

When camping, be prepared for the wildlife to visit you whenever and wherever~ Loki

“We’ll buy you new crayons, spark,” Loki soothed the agitated child. “In the meantime, Max will share, right, Max?”

“Yeah. I have the big box in my backpack,” her brother pointed out out.

“Dad, where’s the bathroom in this place?” asked Serena.

Loki led them a few feet beyond where the tents were to three wooden port-a-potty structures with a crescent moon on the door. “They’re similar to what construction workers use when they’re working on a job site.” He picked up a key on a bright blue string hanging beside the door and unlocked it.

As he pushed open the door and a small motion-sensor light came on, a disgusting odor wafted out.

Serena coughed. “Gross! What died?”

“Stay here,” Loki ordered, though the smell was turning his stomach. He entered the tiny cubicle and saw to his dismay a dead mouse on the floor. “Nine Hells! Disgusting!”

“Dad, what is it?” Serena asked.

“A dead mouse,” he replied.

“Eewww!” Serena shrieked.

“What is it? What is it?” Lucy and Sam came rushing over.

“Calm down, girls! It’s a dead mouse.”

“Gross! I’m not peeing in there!” shrilled Lucy.

“Daddy, how did it die?” came Aleta’s question.
“Who cares?” Sam cried in disgust. “Get it outta here!”

“Okay, relax!” Loki ordered. “All this fuss over a dead rodent!”

“I wonder how long it’s been dead?” was Vince’s question.

“Long enough to stink up this bathroom,” Serena answered.

Loki waved a hand and the dead mouse was transported into the woods, where some animal would make a meal of it. “There! It’s gone. Hunter, bring me the Lysol and gloves and the green bucket.”

“Was that why you packed those cleaning supplies, Loki?” Thor asked, amused at his nieces’ reaction to the dead mouse.

“That’s exactly why. Because you never know how the last bunch of campers left this site.” He took the bucket from Hunter and filled it with water, dumped in some Lysol lemon cleaner, pulled on gloves and took a soft rag and quickly washed the floor where the mouse had been, the small sink and the toilet. “Belle, bring a candle over here.”

Belle summoned one of the small votives that smelled like strawberry fields and floated it over to her father. Loki lit it with a snap of a finger and placed it on the counter in the corner. “There! In two minutes you’ll smell strawberries in here.” He took the cleaning supplies outside and made sure there was toilet paper, paper towels, and soap in there as well. “Go on. It’s safe to use.” He gestured to it.

Serena looked doubtful. “Are you sure?”

Hunter rolled his eyes. “Oh for Godsake, Rena!” He walked inside. “I’ll use it and then you’ll see it’s fine.” He shut the door.

“All right, let’s see how the rest of them are,” Loki said.

None of the other ones had dead mice in them, but were dusty from disuse, and he turned to Vince and said, “This is your punishment for that inappropriate prank by the lamp post. You clean one and Nate cleans the other.” He handed the boy his gloves, rag, and the bucket with Lysol.

Vince sighed. “Okay. But Dad—”

“You aren’t going to get out of this,” Loki interrupted.

“No, it’s just . . . these bathrooms are like closets. . . you know how I get with small spaces . . .” His son reminded.

“Right.” Loki nodded in understanding. “And none of these are equipped with handicapped facilities either.”

“So what do we do?” Vince asked. “I can pee in the woods but Nate can’t.”

“Nobody is peeing in the woods,” the magician said. “I’ll fix it.”

“Okay. Now what?”

“Stand back,” Loki ordered, and concentrated.

The wooden structure suddenly doubled in size and bars appeared on the walls and the toilet
raised slightly. The doorway became wider, as did the door, so Nate could wheel himself inside without worrying about hitting the wall.

“There! How’s that?”

“Better,” Nate said.

Loki handed him the cleaning supplies.

“All right. Put some paper towels, toilet paper, soap, and a candle in here too,” instructed the Asgardian. “Vince, you do the same in the other bathroom.”

Vince and Nate set to work and in about seven minutes the bathrooms were clean.

Loki turned to see Max standing behind him, looking upset. “Come with me, scamp.”

He led his youngest to a small flat rock near what looked like a firepit and said, “Sit here. You’re in time out for four minutes.”

Max obeyed, looking woebegone.

Loki shook his head. He disliked punishing his children, but knew it was necessary, and he turned away and began timing Max with his watch.

Aleta came up with her backpack and Minx and asked, “Daddy, why is Max in time out?”

“Because he did something on the way here he shouldn’t have,” Loki replied.

“Like what?” his too curious-daughter demanded.

“That is between me and your brothers,” her father said. “Now go and play over there,” he waved at the picnic table. “Max will be able to join you soon.”

Aleta huffed and then walked over to the picnic table and took out her art supplies.

Loki’s watch beeped and he said, “Okay, Max!” He hugged his small son and said, “Next time don’t listen to your brothers when they tell you to do something like that.”

“’Kay,” then he ran over to his sister and said, “Aleta, didja find the crayons in my backpack?”

“Yes. But why were you in trouble?”

“Cause I did something I shouldn’t have that Nate and Vince told me to. Well, Vince told me to and Nate just watched.”

“What did you do?” his sister asked.

“A bad thing,” was all her brother would say.

Thor tapped Loki on the shoulder. “Will you at least tell me what the Hel went on?”

Loki whispered in his ear, “Vince bet Max he couldn’t pee on the lamp post at the rest stop. And Max did it, and Nate and Vince just watched. I saw and made sure nobody else did.”

Thor started laughing.

Loki rolled his eyes. “Sure, go ahead and laugh. But you wouldn’t have been laughing if some
cop had seen and slapped me with a fine for letting my son expose himself and pee in public.”

“They’d fine a kid for that?”

“Not him—me,” Loki corrected.

“If they did that in Asgard, every drunk coming home from a tavern would be fined and broke,” Thor snickered.

Loki made a face. “Here they’re more civilized, brother. Okay, let’s start unpacking the van.”

He enlisted the help of his seven older children to do so, and soon all their bags, suitcases, and boxes were unpacked and lay in piles all over the campsite.

“Dad, who put these tents up?” Belle wanted to know.

“The people who own this campsite did,” Loki explained. “They’re permanent tents so we don’t have to pitch our own. Saves us time and money.”

Serena and Lucy unzipped a tent and walked inside.

Suddenly blood curdling screams erupted from the tent.

“Holy crap!” Hunter cried in alarm. “Who’s being murdered?”

Five seconds later both girls raced from the tent, still screaming.

“What in Hel happened?” Loki cried.

“There’s . . . animals and dirt and bugs in there!” Serena yelled. “Some kind of brown thing with yellow eyes growled at me!”

Lucy ran and nearly climbed up Loki, half-incoherent with terror. “D-dad . . . spiders . . .!”

Loki immediately picked her up and held her. “Valkyrie, it’s okay, baby!”

Lucy buried her face in his shoulder, quivering with terror. “Spiders . . . everywhere . . .”

“There’s no spiders here, darling,” Loki soothed, stroking her golden hair.

Thor gaped at them. “Loki, why is she so scared of little bugs?”

Loki didn’t answer for a few moments, he was too busy comforting his daughter. Then he said quietly, “It might seem silly to you, Thor, but when Lucy lived at the orphanage, the matron in charge of the girls on her floor used to lock her in the basement as punishment. In the dark for hours.”

“That’s crazy! Why?”

“For stupid things. Talking too loud, and having nightmares and the Norns know what else. And in that basement were hundreds of spiders . . . and they crawled all over her in the dark . . .and she would scream herself hoarse and nobody would come to let her out,” Loki declared grimly.

“She f-forgot me and I was there all night,” Lucy whimpered, still clinging to Loki.

“Wicked evil woman!” Loki growled. “I ought to have cursed her for it, but she was gone by the time I came and adopted Lucy.”
“Was she fired?” Thor wanted to know.

“No. She left and found another job,” Lucy replied.

“I’d have made sure she never was allowed near children again,” Thor said angrily.

“Thor, take a broom or something and go into the tent and get rid of all the spiders and critters inside,” Loki said. “They’re probably squirrels and raccoons that made a home in there.”

“But what if they come back, Dad?” Lucy shivered.

“They won’t. I’ll make sure of it,” Loki murmured and continued to hold and rock his arachnophobic daughter.

Thor took a large broom and then called Vince, Hunter, and Sam, told them to get sticks, then follow him inside the tent the girls had been in.

“Are we going to chase whatever’s inside out?” Hunter wanted to know.

“Yes, nephew. So let’s get going!”

The four charged into the tent and began evicting the small animals which had taken up residence. As Loki had predicted, there were mice, raccoons, and squirrels. Debris and dropping littered the floor once they had chased the animals away. The spiders they killed.

“Let’s sweep all this out,” Thor suggested.

So that was what they did.

The other two tents were treated the same way, then Loki and Thor went into the woods and found some pine trees and cut off branches and wove them into mats which they put on the floor of the tents. “This will make your sleeping bags softer and also smell nice,” Loki explained. “I cast insect repellant spells on the tents so you don’t need to worry about ants and spiders crawling into your bed or your clothes. But you will need to be careful about crumbs, so don’t eat in the tents. That will bring wild animals, like mice and birds and squirrels to see what they can eat. Also, no leaving trash around the campsite. Any garbage goes in those big bins. Who knows why?”

Vince, Belle, Sam, Nate, and Hunter all raised their hands.

“Tell me, Nate.”

“Cause garbage brings bears. They like to eat our food.”

“And people!” added Serena.

“No, bears don’t eat people,” argued Vince. “Right, Dad?”

“True. Bears don’t seek out people to eat,” Loki affirmed. “But they will attack a person if threatened or if they are sick or starving. Which is why you don’t ever leave food around.” He indicated the nets high in some large oak trees. “See those? We will put our food coolers and boxes in them, so bears won’t be able to get to them and eat everything while we’re away from camp.”

“Will we see a bear, Dad?” Lucy wanted to know.
“Possibly. But they’re shy. They usually won’t come where people are. Just like the deer and raccoons and other wild creatures. However, if you do see a wild animal remember three things—stop, watch, and above all be quiet. Don’t scream, don’t try and touch the animal, and never ever run away. That will scare them, and a scared animal can attack you. Remember, this is their home, kids, and we are only guests in it. So please be respectful.”

“Uncle Thor said he was gonna shoot Bambi!” Aleta said crossly.

Thor held up his hands. “Whoa, spark! I was kidding! I don’t even have a rifle. Or a bow. Just Mjolnir, and that’s just in case I need it to protect you.”

“We aren’t here to hunt,” Loki said. “But if we were, we would only hunt for food. Neither of us believe in sport hunting. That’s wrong. You hunt for food, or you don’t hunt at all. But we’ll be doing other fun things, like going on hikes and nature walks and canoeing and horseback riding.”

“Where’s the horses?” asked Vince.

“Well there’s a stable down the road from here and they do trail rides,” Loki explained. “We can do that one day. Won’t that be fun?”

All the kids nodded, though Max said, “Dad, we don’t know how to ride.”

“I’ll teach you,” Loki said. “Both your uncle and I ride well.”

“Your father rides like a centaur,” Thor told them. “He’s the best rider out of me and your Uncle Balder.”

“How come?” asked Nate.

“Because I love horses,” answered Loki. “I can also shift into one, so that helps me understand the way a horse reacts and thinks, so when I ride I can anticipate the way the horse feels and understands. But I’ll explain more when we go riding.”

“And fishing, and canoeing,” added Vince.

“Your uncle here is the fisherman,” Loki pointed out. “And we’ll speak to someone about renting canoes and taking them out on the river. But right now we need to unpack the rest of our stuff and build a fire then get ready for bed.”

The older Laufeysons helped the younger ones unpack and put things inside their tents. Loki had purchased lanterns that were battery operated and hung them inside each tent’s pole. He also built a fire and lit it with magic.

They divided the tents into girls and boys, with Samantha opting to sleep with her sisters. The last tent was one that Loki and Thor shared.

They made tea over the fire and drank it along with roasting marshmallows.

Then Vince wanted to tell ghost stories, but Max and Aleta were afraid, so Loki took them into his tent to read them a story about a bear and a honey tree, while the rest of the kids scared each other silly around the fire.

Once Loki got his two youngest to sleep, he came back and rejoined them, telling a story of The Drowned Maiden’s Hair, which made everyone shiver.

“Okay, it’s bedtime for the rest of you,” Loki announced.
The kids groaned, but obeyed because they knew they would be getting up early tomorrow to go hiking and feed the swans on the lake—which was why the camp grounds were called Mystic Swan Lake.

“I wonder if they’ll go to sleep?” Thor speculated.

“Not right away. They’re probably too scared from those creepy stories,” Loki chuckled.

The two stayed up for two more hours, Loki drinking tea, and Thor drinking the mead he brought with him. The mead casks were beside their tent.

As the moon rose, Loki eyed the pale orb and said, “I need to go and fly, Thor. The night is calling.”

His brother smirked, made sleepy with mead. “Go on then, Loki. Just don’t get lost out there.”

The shifter snorted. “I won’t. I always know my way back home.” He shut his eyes, breathed out once, twice, thrice then blurred into the form of a brown barn owl with a white heart shaped face and a cream-colored breast. He spread his wings and glided up into the night sky like a spirit. He gave a soft hoot then flew off through the trees, leaving Thor beside the fire sipping his fourth cup of mead.

Loki let the night wind caress his feathers, enjoying the way it rustled his pinions as he flew through the trees. The night was alive with sounds, and with his acute hearing he heard every one of them as he glided through the air. The soft croak of the frogs down near the lake, the whisper of the wind through the trees, the leaves rustling as a fox stalked prey. The soft chirrup of a raccoon as she led her babies down to drink at the river.

The barn owl also heard the heartbeat of a field mouse crouched beneath a fern. The mouse was sniffing the air, trying to determine if it was safe to venture out of the fern’s shadow.

Swiveling his head, Loki allowed the owl instincts to rise to the fore and as the mouse crept from hiding he swooped silently down and snatched it in his talons. “A midnight snack!” he hooted, and then flew up to an oak tree to eat, making short work of the mouse in minutes. Once he had cleaned his talons, Loki went to investigate the river.

He found a low hanging cottonwood right beside the river and landed on the branch. He watched as the mama raccoon he heard earlier supervised her youngsters as they fished in the river for crawfish. The small coons grabbed the red crawfish with their clever hand-like paws and bit them to kill them and then washed the crustaceans before they ate them.

Loki observed the charming domestic scene serenely from the cottonwood, thinking how similar the coon family was to his own human one.

Suddenly two of the three coon kits began to quarrel over a crayfish, growling, trilling, and pulling the crayfish back and forth between them.

Mama Coon was washing her own dinner and looked up and gave a warning growl.

The two kits continued to fight over the crayfish, their quarrel escalating into biting. They tumbled over each other, the crayfish forgotten in their eagerness to hurt the other.

Their sibling picked up the discarded crayfish and ate it.

On the branch, Loki chirruped in amusement at that.
Uh oh. Here comes Mama. And she’s not happy, he thought as he watched the angry mama coon come over and grab the two battling kits and pull them off each other with her paws. She growled angrily at them, shook them, and then gave them a swat on the rump with her paw.

The kits yelped and cringed.

Ouch! That’ll teach you not to listen when your mama says stop fighting.

Then Mama Coon trilled and licked her naughty offspring, then made an odd little call and her other kit came and fell into line with his siblings and they followed their mother back into the forest.

The barn owl watched the river for a while, finding the water flowing over the rocks soothing. The river glistened like molten silver and small fish leaped in and out of the water. The sound of cicadas filled the night, and Loki let the peaceful noises sweep through him, releasing the stress he had developed on the car ride up here. He half-closed his eyes, listening yet at the same time in a state of utter calm, similar to when he meditated.

He remained that way until the moon began to set, then he flew on silent wings back to the campsite.

The fire still crackled and danced in the firepit and Thor still sat before it, his snores rattling the netting with the food above his head.

Norns! Do I really have to sleep with that? Loki thought, then flew down and screeched right in his brother’s ear.

“Whoo-Whoo-who-hooo!”

Thor sputtered. “Huh? Wuzzat?”

Loki flew around to the other side and screeched again.

“Whoo-hoo-whoo!”

“Wut the Hel!” Thor cried, and woke, rubbing his eyes blearily.

Loki flew up into a tree branch.

“Daddy, something’s screaming!” cried Aleta, and she ran to the front of the tent and unzipped it.

Thor peered at his little niece. “S’okay, Leta. Jus’ an owl.”

“Where’s Daddy?” the child asked, coming beside him.

“Uh, he went walking,” Thor answered. “Aren’t you tired?”

She shook her head. “The owl waked me. I gotta go potty.”

“Yeah. Me too. C’mon.” He took her little hand and they walked over to where the outhouses were.

Aleta ran inside one and Thor went in the other.

When the little girl emerged from the outhouse, Loki was sitting beside the fire in his normal shape. “Daddy! It was dark n’ a owl waked me up!”
Loki held out his arms and she ran and climbed on his lap. “It did? Were you scared, sweetheart?”

“No. I wanna see it,” she replied frankly.

“Well . . . the owl is probably sleeping,” Loki teased. “Like you should be.”

Thor came out of the bathroom, saw Loki and said, “Oh you’re back. Good because I was asleep by the fire and this owl kept screaming in my ear.”

Loki raised an eyebrow. “Really? Screaming in your ear?”

“Uh . . . well it was loud . . .” Thor yawned. “Woke up the little spark too.”

“Uncle Thor, I wanna see the owl,” Aleta said from her father’s arms.

“Maybe tomorrow night. Right now the owl is tired and went home to bed.”

“Aww!” she pouted. “I wanna pet it!”

“It would bite you,” Thor said.

She looked up at Loki. “Would it?”

“Yes, a wild one would,” Loki confirmed. “They aren’t like your pets, Aleta.”

“But I wanna see one!” she insisted stubbornly.

“If I show you an owl, will you go to sleep?” Loki coaxed.

“Uh huh!” she agreed eagerly. “Where is he?”

“He is right here,” her father said, and set his daughter on the ground and shifted into the barn owl.

He whirled his head around in a circle, until his head was facing backwards, and Aleta clapped her hands. Then he blinked slowly.

“Oooh!” she squealed. “Can I pet you, Daddy?”

Loki trilled gently, and walked near enough for his daughter to gently stroke his back and chest.

Aleta’s gray eyes were wide with wonder. “Soft! Like velvet!” She petted the sleek feathers again. Loki allowed her to rub his head, then he backed away and spread his wings.

“Fly!” Aleta cried, and Thor hushed her.

Loki launched himself into the air and flew about the fire, slow enough that his daughter could see him. He made two circuits and then glided down for a landing. He shifted back, saying, “Okay, spark. Now you got to see and pet an owl. It’s bedtime for little girls.”

This time Aleta came into his arms and snuggled there, falling asleep a few moments later. Rather than attempt to put her back in her sleeping bag and wake up her sisters, Loki opted to take her into his tent, and put her on his sleeping bag. He quickly undressed into his pajamas and went and curled up beside his daughter, falling asleep almost immediately.

Thor joined him soon after, falling asleep as soon as his head hit the air mattress. He had the mattress because they didn’t make a sleeping bag large enough for him.
While everyone was sleeping, Hunter, Vince, and Belle woke up. They crept outside where the fire had died down to embers and Hunter whispered, “You think they’re asleep?”

Belle nodded. “Don’t you hear Uncle Thor snoring? It sounds like rocks falling down a mountain.”

“Or thunder grumbling,” Vince added. “What about Dad?”

Belle concentrated. “He’s asleep too,” she assured them, feeling through the spirit link that Loki was slumbering. “So the coast is clear.”

Hunter pulled a rope and a small pulley out of his backpack and Belle had a bucket which she conjured some water in. Hunter tied the rope to the handle and then they crept into the tent and with Vince standing on Hunter’s shoulders, they tied the bucket to the pole above Thor’s head. Then they went and tied the remainder of the rope around his wrist.

Belle moved over to Loki and took out a roll of toilet paper and wound it around her father as he slept, winding it about him like a mummy. Too late she saw Aleta inside the sleeping bag next to Loki and thought, *Oops! Sorry, little sister!* She made sure that the toilet paper wasn’t around Aleta’s face, though she carefully wound it about her dad until only his eyes and tip of his nose showed.

Then they crept out of the tent.

They gave each other high fives and whispered, “Mischief Managed!”

The next morning, everyone slept until the sun rose, and Hunter and Vince woke up and remained lying in their sleeping bags, allowing Nate and Max to go outside and use the outhouse first. In the girls’ tent, Samantha, Belle, and Lucy woke up and Lucy asked, “Where’s Aleta?”

Belle shrugged. “Probably with Dad. She probably got scared during the night and went to sleep with him.”

Samantha went and shook awake Serena. “C’mon sleepy head! Get up! Before we leave you here for the bears.”

Serena groaned. “Let ‘em eat me, Manthy!”

Her sister grinned. “You want me waking you up, or Dad?”

“I hate you,” her sister growled, then reluctantly crawled out of her sleeping bag.

Belle got dressed, keeping an ear out for any stirring in the tent where her dad and Thor were. “I’ll go and fill up the coffee pot,” she offered, and took the large metal pot to where the large four gallon bottle of water was and ran the water into the coffee pot.

As she did so, Max, Vince, and Hunter ran over by Loki’s tent and began to sing the Laufeyson wake up song at the top of their lungs.

Belle winced and covered her ears because of Hunter.

Thor groaned. “What the Hel animal is dying? Someone needs to put it outta its misery!”

“I think cats are mating,” Loki muttered, then realized he couldn’t move. “By the Nine!”
Aleta woke up and cried, “Daddy, what’s this stuff all over me?” Then she turned to Loki and screamed. “Ahhh! It’s a mummy!”

She tried to get away, but the toilet paper wrapping held her trapped in the sleeping bag.

“Aleta, it’s me!” Loki tried to say, but the wrapping over his face muffled his words and they came out all strange and garbled.

“Help! Uncle Thor!” Aleta wailed.

Thor sat up and stared at Loki wrapped up and began laughing. “Hang on, spark! I’m coming—ahhh!” he yelled as his wrist pulled the bucket of cold water down onto his head.

Meanwhile, the boys were still singing, and then Hunter poked his head into the tent and said, “Thought you were gonna get up early?”

Loki made muffled laughing noises.

Thor scowled. “Did you do this, Hunter?”

Max walked in and cried, “Whoa! Uncle Thor, who gave ya a Frost Giant Freeze?”

“That’s how Dad wakes up Serena,” hooted Vince. “Well . . . if she won’t wake up with the song.”

“You could wake dead people with that song,” Thor grunted. He wiped his face with his T-shirt.

The girls came in and everyone started laughing at the mummy Loki and the soaking wet Thor.

“Admit it—we got you two good!” laughed Samantha.

“You did this, Samantha?” Thor frowned.

“Nope, but it’s hilarious!”

Until Aleta whimpered, “I gotta go potty!”

“Nine Hells!” Loki cried, and then he used his magic to vanish the wrappings. “Hang on!” he said, and scooped up his youngest and ‘ported to the outhouse.

He set Aleta down inside. “You need help, sweetie?”

“No,” she cried and shut the door.

Loki breathed a sigh of relief. While he had to admit the prank was funny, he was sure glad he hadn’t woken up to being peed on. Not that it hadn’t happened to him before. When younger, Aleta had often fallen asleep and wet the bed, and once she had been sleeping next to him in his bed . . . and he had never been so grateful he had magic until then.

Aleta appeared in the doorway of the outhouse. “Who did that to you, Daddy?”

“One of your brothers or sisters. Probably more than one,” he said, his emerald eyes dancing.

“I almost had a accident!” Aleta said indignantly. “Cause I couldn’t get up!”

“I don’t think they knew you were there, spark,” Loki said ruffling her hair. “C’mon, let’s go and have breakfast.”
He showed Samantha and Belle how to make cinnamon flapjacks in a cast iron skillet over the fire and bacon. He also brewed coffee. While they all ate breakfast, he pulled out the Dutch oven and put water, beans, molasses, brown sugar, mustard, and barbecue sauce into it, stirred it, and added chunks of cut up ham. Then he heated it up with his magic and shoved it over the fire on a metal grate.

“What’s that, Dad?” asked his eldest.

“Ham and baked beans. Or it will be tonight, when it finishes cooking. I’ll do cornbread in another pot.”

He showed her how to mix the cornbread with some honey, put it in a second smaller Dutch oven and shove it into the fire. “It will cook slowly until it’s done sometime tonight.”

“How will you know?”

“Trust me, butterfly. I always know how long fire burns. That’s one of my Aspect powers,” her father explained.

Once everything was washed up and put away, Thor got out his fishing gear and asked who wanted to come fishing. Hunter, Nate, Serena, and Samantha volunteered.

The rest of the children wanted to go with Loki and hike up to the river and see what kinds of animals, birds, and different leaves and trees they could spot. Belle had several small laminated guides to flora and fauna, and she brought them along with binoculars. Loki packed some snacks in his backpack, saying that if Thor caught some trout they could have a fish fry for lunch.

Before they left, they all headed over to the lake with some cereal and bread in their pockets to feed the swans that were swimming there.

The swans were haughty and proud, but they allowed the kids and the two Asgardians to feed them, accepting their offerings in a dignified fashion. Loki took several pictures on his phone of them. “All right. Does everyone have their amulets? Yes? Good! Keep them on. Belle, Lucy, Vince, Max, and Aleta follow me.”

For this excursion, Loki wore his black jeans, hiking boots, green and gold shirt and black leather jacket. He carried his green backpack over his shoulder, and wore his daggers in a belt about his waist.

His children all wore jeans, long sleeved shirts, sneakers or boots, and light jackets. They all had water and granola bars in their messenger bags. He had made them all rub on sunscreen and spray on some insect repellent so they didn’t get fleas or ticks on them.

“Before we go into the woods, I want to show you how to walk the right way,” Loki told them. “If you want to see animals on this hike, you need to be quiet and watch closely. You also need to walk very softly. Like this.”

He demonstrated, walking so lightly across the grass he made no sound. “Now you try.”

His little ones picked it up right away, they were so light they barely made noise walking normally. Vince and Belle got it after a few false tries, because they were used to sneaking about and then Loki beckoned them into the woods. “If you see an animal, make this sound—shhhh! And then point to it.”

They walked quietly for a time, with Loki pointing out the different trees and collecting samples of
their leaves to make a leaf collage later. Max found an unusual green rock and put it in his bag. Lucy found a feather from what looked like a bluejay and put it in her pack. Belle and Aleta found some wildflowers and picked some to press into bookmarks.

Loki led them down the same trail he had flown over last night, and then paused and whispered, “Shhhhh!” And pointed at a baby rabbit feeding on a patch of clover.

Aleta opened her mouth to squeal and Loki put his hand over her mouth and put his finger to his lips. She nodded and he took his hand away. They all watched the tiny bunny nibbling the clover, frozen still as statues so as not to startle the little thing.

But after a few minutes, the rabbit hopped away, and they continued down the trail. A few feet further on, Belle pointed to a mockingbird in a tree and gave the signal. They all took turns looking through the binoculars at him.

They saw several other birds, a goldfinch, a cardinal, and some sparrows. The Vince spotted a skunk walking slowly through the ferns, and they all halted to let it cross the trail.

“Flower!” whispered Aleta.

Loki smirked. “He looks a bit like a cat, doesn’t he?”

“Uh huh, but he’s got a fluffier tail than our kitty.”

The skunk quickly vanished into the underbrush. Max asked, “How come he didn’t smell? I thought all skunks smelled bad.”

“Only when they spray,” Vince told him.

“And they only do that when they’re frightened and cornered,” Loki said. “They will run away first. They only spray if they have no other choice. Because they only have enough for five or six times before they need to produce more and that takes over a week to do so.”

“What would be dumb enough to attack a skunk?” asked Lucy.

“Odin would,” Vince said. “And great horned owls. They eat them.”

“An owl eats Flower?” Aleta cried. “That’s mean!”

“No, sweetie. That’s his food. Like we eat meat and vegetables,” Loki explained.

“But he kills Flower!” objected his toddler.

“I know but all animals that eat meat—like us—kill another animal to live.”

“We don’t! You get meat at the grocery store.”

“Hon, that meat was once a cow. Or a chicken. But when we buy it, it’s all cut up and packaged.”

“What’s bacon from?” asked Max.

“A pig,” Belle answered.

“I wanna see Bambi,” Aleta stated.

“Well, maybe we will. But you have to play the quiet game,” Loki reminded. “No yelling.”
They walked on, and soon reached the river, which burbled and foamed in the sunshine. Loki had them halt beside the large cottonwood he had perched in last night as an owl and watched raccoons.

“Wow! The river sure is fast,” Vince said.

“This is actually mild compared to the rapids,” Loki told him. “But we’ll be fine as long as we wear our life vests and the canoe doesn’t flip over.”

“Can it do that?” Lucy asked worriedly.

“Yes, but only in certain cases,” Loki reassured her.

Max was watching the river and he saw something amazing. He pulled on Loki’s jacket sleeve. “Daddy! Shhhhh! A bear!”

Everyone turned to gape at the large black bear coming through the trees to fish at the stream. She was trailed by two cubs, and the cubs splashed and played in the water while mama bear fished upstream.

The children and Loki all felt a sense of awe and delight at seeing this rare sight, something they had only watched on Animal Planet. The cubs were roly poly fuzzy little critters, with bright eyes and adorable black noses. They seemed to enjoy jumping on each other and chasing each other into the water. But they didn’t go in far, just enough to get wet, then they would run and slide on the grass on the river bank.

Meanwhile the mother bear was happily scooping three large trout out of the river and throwing them on the bank.

The cubs saw and ran over to the flopping fish and pounced on them and began to eat.

Mama lumbered out of the water and took the fish left and ate it rapidly.

Then she gave a kind of huff once she saw her cubs were done and they followed her as she walked back into the woods.

As soon as they were gone, the kids burst out with exclamations.

“Did you see the babies?” Lucy squealed. “They were so cute!”

“Dad, there were three bears like in the story!” Max pointed out.

“I can’t believe we saw a mom and two babies!” Vince was over the moon. “I hope you took a picture, Dad.”

“I did, son.” Loki held out his phone so they could all see the pictures he had snapped.

As they were looking at the pictures, a loud explosion roared through the trees.

Aleta, Max, and Lucy screamed in terror.

Loki shoved the phone in his pocket and grabbed his children and shoved them behind him. “Down, kids! On the ground!” he snapped. He drew both daggers and held them read to throw, all his instincts going into battle mode.

“Dad! That sounded like a gunshot!” Belle gasped.
“It was, little raven. One that was too close for my liking. Stay still! I’m going to see if I can find where it came from.”

“Daddy! Don’t go!” wailed Aleta.

“Hush, spark! I’ll be back soon. Now stay here and be quiet! Pretend you’re a little kitten hiding from a big nasty dog,” Loki whispered. Then he stalked into the trees upstream from where the bears were fishing.

This was not hunting season, which meant whoever had fired that shot was a scummy poacher, illegally hunting some poor animal. Loki clenched his jaw, his eyes a lethal viridian shade. Those fools had frightened his children to death and worse meant harm to the wildlife here. Loki meant to teach them the error of their ways—with a lesson they would never forget.
Loki crept through the underbrush, silent as a stalking cougar, his feet making no sound on the forest floor. He had learned over years of hunting wild creatures as well as becoming one himself how to move through the woods like a ghost. Indeed, that was what he intended to do to punish the poachers who had scared his family and could have even shot one of his children if their shots had gone awry.

Like he had done to Jorunne back in Niflheim, he was going to scare the crap out of them.

The wind changed as he caught the scent of something which made his stomach turn. Blood.

"No!" he thought as he moved faster and heard the frightened growls of the cubs.

He moved by the trees while the cries grew louder and he snorted air through his nose.

"Did you get it?" a voice asked when he came to a clearing and kneeled in the underbrush.

"I got the big one. The cubs are in the tree," the other voice said.

Loki swore savagely in Old Norse as he saw the mother bear lying still on the ground, blood leaking sluggishly from a wound in her shoulder. Her twin cubs were bawling up in a sycamore tree.

The poachers crouched just beyond the clearing on the opposite side, wearing camouflage leggings and jackets and caps. They had sniper rifles in their hands.

He watched the men as one of them pulled out a silver flask and took a long drink. Loki slowly stood up when his body shimmered and he changed into a large black bear. The fur was long and
shaggy and the claws were blood red with jagged edges. Two long fangs poked out from the upper lip.

He looked at the world through blood red eyes and tilted his head back, roaring.

"What the hell was that?!!"

Casting a protection spell around himself, the mama bear and the cubs, Loki stormed out of the underbrush and the poachers gasped.

'Stan, do you see that?!!' one cried.

"It's--it's a ghost come back from the dead!" yelped Stan.

Loki snorted and growled as he clawed deep gouges in the ground and Stan swallowed hard.

"No. That's no ghost. That's a-a-a-a demon bear!"

"It's prolly got rabies!" cried his companion. "Let's put it outta its misery!" He raised the gun and shot at Loki.

"Nice try," Loki thought as the bullets pinged off him and he roared.

The poacher gaped in disbelief. "It-it bounced off! Stan, it didn't even hit it!"

Stan reloaded the rifle then took aim, but Loki saw Stan's hands were shaking. He also heard the little cubs calling for their mother and he glanced at them.

"Fear not, Little Cubs. I'll make sure Mama will be alright," he growled at them and the cubs blinked.

"Promise?" the smallest cub, whose name is Naru, asked.

"Yes, I promise."

Look out!" the larger cub, whose name was Benha, shouted and Loki looked at Stan.

"Shoot the damn thing already!" the other poacher yelled and Stan fired. The bullets ping off Loki as he roared and stood up on his hind legs. He stood over twenty feet in height and he flexed his claws.

Stan panicked upon seeing the monstrous bear ready to strike. He dropped his rifle and screamed in terror. "Run! We're gonna die!"

He tripped over his own feet and the foul stench of urine filled the air. Loki snarled and snapped the air just before the man's head.
"Yes! Bite him!" Naru shouted.

"Bite their butts!" Benha shouted and Loki laughed.

"You sound like my cubs," Loki said.

"They shot Mama with thunder sticks," sniffled Naru. "They deserve to be bitten!"

"Don't worry. They will pay for what they did," Loki said as he stalked toward Stan and Stan swallowed the bile in his throat.

"N-nice bear. You wouldn't hurt me, would you?" Stan said and Loki lowered his head until he was face to face with him. Stan could smell the brimstone smell coming from Loki's breath as Loki snorted and Stan fainted.

The other man lifted his rifle and fired again, but as before the bullets bounced off Loki's shield.

"Leave this place and never return!" Loki growled the words in a deep evil voice.

"You can talk?!" the man asked.

"Yes! I am the Bear King! All who dwell here are mine and under my protection. If your kind return here, I will destroy you!"

Stan woke up and he looked at Loki as Loki glareded down at him and roared.

Stan quickly got to his feet and he ran to his friend and they sprinted for the underbrush. Loki watched them leaving then he changed back to his normal form and cautiously walked to the mama bear.

"Easy, Mama," Loki said then looked up at Naru and Benha.

"You can come down now. They're gone."

"Is he a changeling?" Naru asked.

"Like in that story Mama told? Maybe," Benha said and slowly climbed down. Naru followed her brother as they walked to Loki and Naru nudged her mother's front leg.

"Mama? Wake up! A changeling sent the bad people away."

The mama bear stirred, groaning. "Hurts . . . can't move my leg."

"Don't worry, Great Mother. I'm here to help you," Loki said and she looked at him.

"Who are you?" the mama bear, whose name was Rula, asked.

"He's a changeling, Mama!" Naru said, lightly bouncing around on her paws.
"Are you?' Rula asked, her brown eyes filled with curiosity despite the burning pain. "The thunder stick has left one of its burning pellets in me. Can you remove it?"

"Yes, I can. And I am Loki Laufeyson. As for me being a changeling, I can change my shape, but I am mostly a wizard."

"Show Mama what you changed into. Please, Master Loki?!" Benha asked. Nodding. Loki changed into the demon bear and Rula's eyes widened.

"You changed into the Bear King!" Rula said. Loki was a little stunned over there really being a Bear King and he changed back, giving her a smile.

"I hope he doesn't mind me doing that," Loki said.

"He would be honored," Rula said then moaned.

Loki set his hand upon Rula's shoulder. "I need you to stay still. My magic can find the bullet, but if you move it might harm you more. Once I find it, I can remove it. You'll feel a brief sting and that's all."

"I will stay perfectly still," Rula said.

Loki wished all patients were as cooperative as the large black bear. He cast a spell to find metal objects, and soon located the slug buried in the muscle of the bear's shoulder. Luckily it had hit nothing major.

He concentrated his magic as the bullet slowly moved back the way it entered her shoulder then tumbled into Loki's hand.

"There! Now let me clean this and I can heal it." He cast a spell to block pain next and then summoned a bottle of yarrow wash and threw it on the wound. It bubbled and then settled, cleaning the germs from the wound.

That done, he placed his hand on her again and chanted a quick healing spell. The bear's shoulder was healed in an instant.

"Are you better now, Mama?" Naru asked, gently nudging her.

"Yes, I am fine," Rula said and slowly stood up.

"Thank you, Master Loki," Benha said.

"You are so welcome." Loki said then looked toward the trees. "Now, I have to go. My cubs are waiting."

"Be careful," Rula warned. "There may be others around. And sometimes snakes sun themselves on the rocks."

"I will be careful," Loki said with a nod.

"Can we go see his cubs, Mama?" Naru asked.

"Would that be alright?" Rula asked.
"Yes. My cubs would like to meet you." Loki agreed, thinking this would be a vacation to remember all right.

He placed his hand on Rula's shoulder as he led them into the trees and the cubs playfully romped around them.

"Be careful," Loki said and the cubs fell in beside them. They walked down the path when Loki saw his children and Max's eyes went wide.

"Look! Papa found the mama bear and her cubs!" Max said.

"Why is she slightly limping?" Vince asked.

"I think she's hurt," Lucy said.

Rula looked at the children then at Loki and he saw the surprise in her eyes.

"Are all those cubs yours, Friend Loki?" she asked.

"Yes," he said with a nod.

"Daddy!" Aleta cried. "Can I touch the bear?"

"Yes, Spark, but remember to be careful. They've had a bit of a scare," Loki said.

"So that was gunfire we heard?" Sam asked and he nodded.

"Did the mama bear get hurt?" Max asked as he walked to Loki and Loki lifted his son off the ground.

"She was shot, but I was able to heal her," Loki said and Naru sniffed Aleta's feet then Aleta gently patted Naru's head.

"Hi! I'm Aleta! Wow! Your fur is really soft!"

Vince rolled his eyes. "They can't understand you, Aleta. Only Dad can 'speak to them 'cause he has the gift of tongues."

"Hi! I'm Naru! Want to play with me?" Naru asked.

"That one is Naru," Loki said. "She wants to play with you."

Belle cocked her head, finding she could almost understand what the cub called, but not quite.

"Are you alright, Little Raven?" Loki asked, placing Max down so he could go pet Naru.

"I can almost understand what Naru said," Belle said

"Your Lorekeeper talent can decipher animal speech if you listen long enough,' Loki told her.

"Cool!" Belle said and Loki placed his arm around her shoulders.

Benha sniffed Max' feet when Max reached over and patted the soft fur. He smiled when Benha
barely nudged him and Sam used her phone to take photos of her younger siblings and the cubs.

"Are they going to be alright now, Dad?" Hunter asked, watching Max and Aleta chasing the cubs and Rula went to rest on her stomach.

"Yes, they're going to be fine. I'll also report those poachers to the rangers once we get back to camp," Loki said.

Vince went right up to Rula and held out his hand for her to sniff.

The female bear gently smelled him and allowed him to place his hand on her face and stroke the fur there.

"This one is bold, Friend Loki."

"Yes, he is," Loki said with a grin. "He is a regular risk taker."

"Why is one of your cubs not standing?" she asked while looking at Nate in his wheelchair.

"His legs don't work."

"Then why hasn't he died? He cannot hunt or defend himself."

"He doesn't have to. That is my responsibility."

"You are a great father, Friend Loki," Rula said as she walked over to Nate and Nate carefully patted her nose.

Thor nearly dropped his string of trout on the ground when he arrived from the lake, his pole over his shoulder. "Odin's Eyeball, Loki! That's a bear!"

"Yes, Brother, this is a bear and these are her cubs," Loki teased as Thor walked closer and Benha and Naru looked at him.

"Who is he?" Benha asked as he sat next to Loki.

"This is my brother, Thor."

"He has fish!" Naru cried, heading for the string of trout and pawed at the trout.

"Hey! Those aren't yours," Thor said, laughing.

Rula gave a soft grunt, gently reprimanding her cub. "We don't steal another's cache! We are Ursus not Corvidae, Naru."
"Sorry, Mama," Naru said and Thor reached down to pat her head.

"Where did you find them?" Thor asked and Loki told his tale about how he met Rula and her cubs. Thunderclouds rolled over Thor's face as he balled his hand into fists and looked toward the trees. "Are you sure it was wise to let them go?"

"Yes, they were so frightened, I don't think they'll come back," Loki said.

"I still think you should tell the rangers."

"I have already sent a text to the ranger station," he said and showed Thor the text on his phone.

Nodding, Thor went to clean the fish as Loki went to start dinner and Max ran to him.

"Daddy, are the bears staying for dinner?" Max asked.

"Well, we really don't have enough to feed them, Max. Unless I replicate fish like crazy."

"Oh," Max said while Rula walked to Loki and lightly nudged his leg.

"I am afraid we need to go, Friend Loki. It is getting late and we have a long walk home," she said and he nodded.

"Have a safe journey," he said then look at the children and Thor. "Alright. Come and say goodbye to Rula and her cubs. They have to go home."

The children and Thor came to give the bears a hug and one last pat as Rula growled and Benha and Naru followed her into the forest.

"Are they going to be ok, Dad?" Sam asked.

"Yes, they'll be fine," Loki said then rubbed his hands together. "Right. Who wants to help me make dinner?!"

'I will!" Sam said. "I want to learn how to cook over a fire!"

"Me, too!" Hunter said.

"I want to learn, too," Aleta said, but Loki shook his head.
"Sorry, Spark, but I don't want you that close to the fire," Loki said.

"You can help me set the table," Belle said and Aleta took her hand as they went to the large picnic table.

"Okay. Thor, did you clean those fish?" Loki asked his brother.

"Yes," Thor said.

"Good. Otherwise, we'd have to," he explained to his children. "You can't cook fresh fish without taking out the insides. But since your uncle's done that for us, here's what we need to do."

Loki started by gathering some sticks and made a tepee shaped pile at the center of the stone fire circle.

"Don't you need to add some kindling?" Vince asked.

"Yes, but I need to put in a little dry grass first," Loki said and piled some grass around the sticks.

"Do we have any kindling?" Nate asked looking around.

"Get me some leaves and any dead branches you can find. I'd use newspaper, but we didn't bring any." Loki told them.

The kids went to get some dry leaves, though Lucy screamed when a spider crawled out from under the leaf she picked up and ran to Loki. He held his frightened daughter as the other kids placed the leaves and dry branches on the pile and Thor walked over.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Lucy saw a spider," Loki whispered and handed Lucy to him. Loki removed a box of waterproof matches when he motioned for them to move back and lit the match.

"Careful, Daddy," Aleta said.

"Yeah, remember, only you can prevent forest fires," Max said and Loki laughed.

"I'll be careful," he said and placed the lit match against the sticks. He lightly blew on the fire when the sticks, leaves, dry grass and branches burst into flames and the kids cheered.

"Well done, brother!" Thor said.

Loki chuckled. "I'm going to go down in history as the guy who started a campfire." He gently began to feed the flames with some dead branches and dried leaves until the flames burned steadily.
"Now what do we do?" Nate asked.

"If we were home, we would stick the fish on the end of sticks and cook them over the fire," Thor said.

'True," Loki said. "But here we'll do it a little differently. First we'll put some butter in this cast iron skillet and melt it over the fire. Then while its heating, we season the fish with some salt, pepper, garlic, parsley, and marjoram."

He got out all the spices and sprinkled each fish with them and rubbed them into the sides with his hands. "This can get a little messy but just wash your hands afterwards."

The kids enjoyed helping Loki season the fish then washed their hands afterwards and Loki checked to see if the skillet was hot enough. Carefully, he placed the fish in the skillet as the fish made a soft hiss and he smiled.

"Now we put the fish in the pan and we cook them. I like to add a little wild onions to them also." He proceeded to chop up three scallions and added them to the fish.

"While your fish is frying, now we make flatbread."

He summoned a bowl and put flour, water, a little baking soda, a pinch of salt and a pinch of sugar, garlic power and parsley in the bowl. Then he stirred it till it was blended.

"Now we put butter on the griddle and put it on this weird metal tripod. It's called a spider." He put the griddle on the spider and pushed the spider over the other half of the fire.

"Then we take a spoon and drop the batter on the griddle, like a pancake. When you see bubbles, you flip it with the spatula."

Loki placed a spoonful of batter as he placed the batter on the griddle and it made a soft hiss. The kids watched when the bubbles appeared and he used the spatula to flip the batter over. He repeated the process a few more times as Sam held the plate with the bread on it and she tried hard not to sample one.

'Mmm! They smell so good!'
Loki grinned. "They taste even better with this fish," He turned the fish over with a pair of tongs. "You want the skin to get crispy on the outside and flaky on the inside."

"Daddy? I'm hungry!" Aleta whined.

"Me, too," Max said.

"The fish is almost done."

"Here. Have some apple slices," Lucy said and handed them the plastic container with apple slices inside.

"What smells so good?" Serena asked.

"Dad's cooking fish and flatbread," Vince said,

"Oooooo!" she said and sat next to Belle.

Loki poked the fish with a fork. "This is done." He flipped the last flatbread over. "And this is done too. Okay guys. Bring your plates up. Dinner is served!"

One by one, the kids walked to Loki as he placed a piece of fish and a piece of the bread on their plates. He used a little magic to make more fish to pile onto Thor's plate and some bread and Thor smiled.

Loki made some more fish for his plate then placed the bread on top and went to sit next to his brother.

Thor took a bite of his fish. "Loki, this is very good!"

"Yeah, Dad, this is really good," Vince said and was about to wipe his mouth with his sleeve then used a napkin after Loki glared at him.

After the fish and the flat bread were eaten, the kids placed the dishes in the plastic container and Loki placed some water in the plastic container then some dish washing soap.

"Now, whose turn is it to do the dishes?"
Vince, Belle, and Serena held their hands up as they walked to the plastic container and started washing the dishes.

Thor patted his stomach. "That was so good, brother, I am full."

"For now!" Loki chuckled. "I have s'mores for dessert I can make."

"What are s'mores?"

"They're graham crackers with marshmallows and chocolate squished in the middle," Sam said.

"Yeah, they're really good!" Lucy said.

"They're also very messy," Loki said.

"That's the fun part, Daddy," Aleta said.

"I just like the graham crackers and chocolate part," Belle said.

"Then it's not a s'more!"

"Aleta, if Belle likes to eat it that way, it's fine," Loki said.

"Sometimes you can eat what you want, and other times you eat what I want you to," Loki recited. "This time you can eat what you want."

"Sorry," Aleta said and Belle gave her little sister a hug.

"Dishes are done, Daddy," Serena said as he went to check then nodded and placed the dishes away.

"Alright, time to clean up the camp. We don't want any wild creatures coming into camp for scraps," Loki said and the kids went to clean up. "That goes for you as well, Brother."

Nodding, Thor went to help clean up and Loki placed some more wood on the fire.
The sky grew darker as Loki looked up and saw the first stars coming out. He wondered if Heimdall was watching over them as he blinked and Thor walked closer, looking up at the sky.

"It is a nice night," Thor said,

"Yes," Loki said with a nod.

"I am sure Heimdall has told Father and Mother about what you did this day."

"I hope so."

"I also wish they were here to enjoy this. I'm sure Mother would love to try a s'more."

Loki smiled. "She would. She loves sweets as much as I do."

"Then make some when we go to Asgard."

"That sounds like a great idea."

"I do have them, you know," Thor said with a smug look and Loki laughed.

When the sky became an inky blue/black color, Loki, Thor and the kids sat around the fire and Loki started making the s'mores. He had handed out wet wipes so they could clean their fingers after eating and Thor told stories about his adventures. Sam wanted to tell ghost stories, but she knew Max and Aleta would get frightened and waited until Loki and Thor put the toddlers to bed before telling the others the stories.

One by one, the kids went to bed after giving their father and uncle a hug and Thor saw Loki looking up at the stars again. He knew Loki wanted to fly and he nudged him but Loki shook his head.

"As much as I would love to fly, I am exhausted from having to heal Rula and frightening off those poachers," Loki sighed while leaning against his brother, closing his eyes. Smiling, Thor helped his brother to his feet then led him to their tent and Loki was asleep as soon as Thor had zipped his sleeping bag shut.

"Sleep well, Brother," Thor whispered then climbed into the other sleeping bag, zipped it closed and shut his eyes, drifting off to sleep.

Max dreamed he was back in the Dark Place. Where his Mommy was always mad and always smelled of gross things, like cigarette smoke and stale perfume and sweat. She yelled at Max for saying he was hungry, and grabbed a coat hanger from the closet to beat him with. Max ran out of the room, crying. "Noo! Don't hurt me! I'll be good!"
He ran down the hall and his Mommy ran after him, calling him an evil demon who needed the devil beat out of him.

As Max ran it began to snow, huge snowflakes drifting through the hallway.

Max kept running . . .

"Daddy! Daddy! Help!" Max screamed and Loki's eyes snapped open. He didn't really remember going to bed as he unzipped the sleeping bag, got up and opened the tent flap. He ran out of the tent and over to the boys' tent Max shared with his brothers and opened the tent flap. "DADDY!"

"I'm here, imp," Loki said as he unzipped his youngest son from his Loki sleeping bag and lifted him into his arms.

"Dad, what's wrong?" Hunter asked in a sleepy tone.

"Max had a bad dream," Loki said as he left the tent and tried to calm his son down.

Max shivered and wrapped his arms about Loki. "Daddy, she's coming for me!" he sobbed against Loki's shoulder. "With the hanger!"

"Who is?" Loki asked.

"Mommy! Mommy is coming!"

Loki had thought Max had stopped having nightmares about his mother a year ago. He sighed and rubbed small circles on his small back.

"No, she's not. She's dead. She can't hurt you."

"Why is it snowing?" Max asked and Loki blinked.

"It's not snowing."

"It was snowing in the hallway."

"It was?" Loki asked and Max nodded.

"This is new," Loki thought and started pacing. He started singing the lullaby while Max placed his cheek against his daddy's shoulder and his eyes slowly closed.

Loki looked at Max then he smiled and walked back to the tent. He placed Max back to bed then
returned to his tent and saw Thor awake and eyeing him.

"What happened?" Thor asked.

"Max had a nightmare," Loki sighed and got back in the sleeping bag.

"What was the nightmare about?" Thor asked.

"He was being chased by his mother and she was wielding a hanger."

"Why would she do that?"

"So she could beat him with it. Max said she told him she needed to beat the evil devil out of him."

Thor stiffened. "That's crazy!

"I know."

"What happened to her?"

"She died of an overdose."

"May the Norns forgive me, but good. She did not really do that to him, brother?"

"Yes, she did. It took a long time before Max would let me touch him after I adopted him and the nightmares were nearly every night."

Thor looked repulsed. "That is just disgusting!

"Yes, but what I wonder why he is having nightmares now."

"Maybe he overheard one of Sam's stories. Those were rather disturbing."

"We waited until he and Aleta were asleep before she told them."

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"Maybe he overheard one of Sam's stories. Those were rather disturbing."

"We waited until he and Aleta were asleep before she told them."
"Do not dwell on it, Brother. Go to sleep."

Loki watched Thor close his eyes when he sighed and looked at the top of the tent. He tried to calm his thoughts when his mind relaxed and he went back to sleep.

The next morning Loki woke early and contacted the ranger station for an update on the poachers. He was told they had been apprehended. He heaved a sigh of relief. One less thing to worry about.

He blurred into falcon form and flew for ten minutes, enjoying the solitude. He flew down to the river, observed the water wasn't too high and then flew towards the canoe rental station.

Shifting into human form, he spoke with a gray-haired man named Steve about renting the canoes, the rapids, life vests, and so on, setting up a time of mid-morning to return with the family.

Then he returned to his camp sight and relit the fire to brew coffee. While it was brewing, he got out bacon, eggs, and mixed pancake batter. After fixing himself some coffee he relaxed at the picnic table, watching some birds chase each other and two squirrels arguing over a nut.

He pondered the fact that Max’s nightmare had changed while admiring the serenity he found himself in. That thought bothered him, because in all the years Max had the nightmare, it had always been the same. He couldn’t figure out why the dream had altered. What was the significance of the snow? He chewed his lip, knowing somehow deep inside the snow mattered. Joanne, he thought. I need to talk with Jo when we get back home. I could send her a text now, but she’s probably busy with patients. And unless Max has another dream, it can wait.

Jo was his cousin on Frigga’s side, the daughter of Idunn, Lady of Apples and her mortal husband Louis Ferrara, a deceased Army physician. Jo was a doctor too, a gynecologist, and also an Empathic Healer. She lived in New York also and ran her own practice. She was half-Aesir, and so had the Aesir longevity, but she had spent most of her life in Midgard, only going to Asgard for summers to be trained in her wild Gift by Idunn and Loki as a teenager. Loki trusted her implicitly with both his own past abuse and that of his children. She looked to be in her early thirties, she was actually over a thousand by Asgard reckoning. If anyone could decipher the snow riddle, Jo could. She was also the Avengers and several other superhero groups doctor, as she could be trusted to never reveal their true identities and could treat those with different physiologies.

Thor came out of the tent yawning and stretched mightily. “Morning, Loki. You’re up with the birds again, as usual.”

“Why laze around in bed?” he responded, smirking.

“Sometimes I just do not understand you,” Thor snorted, then took his shaving kit and a plastic container into the bathroom.

The girls exploded out of their tent, all eager to start the new day, and Lucy, Aleta, and Sam all made a beeline for the bathrooms. “’C’mon, we need to get there first!”

Belle followed more slowly, reciting something to herself.
Serena, of course, was still asleep.

Then Hunter, Max, Nate, and Vince emerge from their tent. Max still looked sleepy, and Nate guns his chair towards his bathroom, which Thor is currently using. Hunter went towards one of the other ones and groaned.

“Shoot! The girls got there first! Now it’s gonna take forever!”

“If they ain’t outta there in two minutes, I’m gonna use a tree,” Vince declared.

“You’d better not, mister!” Loki snapped.

“You pee anywhere except the potty, Dad’ll put you in time out,” Max stated.

“I’m too old for time out,” Vince scoffed.

“You want to make a bet?” Loki threatened.

“Dad, I’m almost eight!” his son protested. “You can’t!”

Loki raised an eyebrow. “Really, Vince? Try me.”

Lucy came out of the bathroom. “Here, Max!”

Max ran inside.

Then Nate returned with Thor and Vince went in.

Finally Sam emerged with Aleta.

“ Took you long enough,” Hunter groused.

“Oh keep your shorts on, Sam shot back. “If you get really desperate you can use a tree.”

“Hey! What am I raising here, a pack of wild things?” Loki queried.

“Looks that way, brother!” Thor chortled.

Loki shook his head and muttered, “I live with a zoo,” then drained his coffee cup.

“What’s for breakfast, Dad?” Hunter asked.

“Bacon, pancakes, and eggs. Fried or over easy, those are your choices.” Loki announced.

Loki laughed when he went to wake his little sleeping beauty, but Serena had just opened her eyes and smiled up at him.

“Well, look who finally decided to wake up,” Loki teased.

"I smelt breakfast," she said and he led her out of the tent.

The kids all requested different eggs, so he made mental notes and then cooked the bacon and pancakes first, then did everyone’s eggs. He did his own last, making a fried egg and maple bacon sandwich rolled up in a large pancake.
After breakfast was eaten, the dishes were washed and the camp was cleaned up, Loki and Thor led the kids into the forest and they headed for the canoes. A small stream was to their right as they walked down the path and Sam lightly nudged Hunter as she pointed to the large rock at the middle of the stream. The water rolled around the large rock and the sunlight shimmered on the water.

"Hey, Dad, would it be okay if we went to look at that rock?" Hunter asked and Loki looked at the water. It didn't seem too deep, but the idea of having several wet kids made him sigh and he shook his head.

"No, Wolfling, I don't think so," Loki said.

"But, Daddy, we'll be careful," Aleta said.

"What about Nate? He can't go."

"I'll carry him, Brother," Thor said and Loki glared at him.

"Don't you start."

"Please!" the kids said at once and Loki rolled his eyes.

"Alright, but you are only to go look at the rock. No jumping off," Loki said. He watched the kids and Thor heading into the stream and Thor carried Nate as though he weighed nothing. The older kids got to the rock first while Max and Aleta walked with Thor and Nate and Thor smiled down at them. He didn't feel the slippery rock under his foot until it was too late and lost his balance.

"By the Norns!" Thor shouted as he fell and launched Nate into the air. Loki waved his hands as Nate stopped and he moved back toward the wheelchair.

"Are you alright?" Loki asked, a little breathless.

"Yeah, Dad. That was so cool!" Nate said.

Loki looked at Thor as Thor stood up and looked at a wet Max and Aleta. The toddlers were laughing as he shrugged, reached down and picked up the smooth black and brown rock. With a small grunt, Thor tossed the rock onto the opposite shore, picked the toddlers up and headed back to Loki.

"Brother, I am so.....," Thor said when they heard splashing and saw the older kids jumping off the rock into the water.

"What did I say?!" Loki shouted and Sam laughed.

"Hey. Fair's fair!," she said,

"Yeah, how come Uncle Thor can jump in the water and not us?" Hunter asked.

"I tripped on a rock," Thor said with a smug look.
"Get over here. Now!" Loki said. The kids headed for shore when he looked at all of them, sighed with a small eye roll, and waved his hands. With everyone dry, he softly laughed and they headed down the trail.

Soon they reached the canoe rental place, and Loki rented four canoes. The first canoe was larger than the others, and he would put Nate, Aleta, Max, and himself in that canoe. It had one large double paddle and one smaller one that Nate said he could use. Aleta and Max got children sized paddles, even though they really wouldn’t be doing much paddling, since Loki would do it all.

The next canoe consisted of Sam, Lucy, and Serena. Sam assured Loki she would be fine in the rapids, she had gone rowing before she had become an orphan.

The next canoe had Thor, Hunter, Vince, and Belle. Thor looked uneasy, but said nothing, he didn’t want to seem like a wimp.

The last canoe contained their lunch and extra clothes and shoes bundled under waterproof tarps. It was tied to Loki’s canoe and would follow his.

The sky was clear and blue and the water sparkled in the sunlight as they started off and the canoes lightly bounced on the water. Nate helped Loki paddle while Aleta and Max watched the water going by and Max leaned over to touch the water.

"Careful, imp." Loki said and Max nodded.

"Row...row...row your boat," came from the canoe behind them as Sam, Lucy and Serena sang and Loki softly laughed.

Hunter, Vince and Belle joined in the singing as they continued downstream, but Loki winced when Thor's slightly off key singing filled his ears and Loki sighed, shaking his head.

"Uncle Thor really can't sing, can he?" Nate asked.

"No, he can't, but it doesn't stop him," Loki said.

"Daddy! Look!" Aleta said while pointing to some small rapids in front of them and Loki held onto the handles of the oars tighter in his hands.

"Hang on," Loki said as the canoes moved toward the small rapids and Aleta and Max held onto each other. The canoes hit the rapidly moving waters as Loki, Hunter and Sam steered through them and Aleta and Max giggled while their canoe went up and down.

"This is so much fun!" They yelled.

"When are the big ones coming?" asked Vince.

"What big ones?" Thor looked pale.
"Soon," Loki called. "I'll wave my hand when we approach them."

"Loki, WHAT big ones?" Thor bellowed, sounding slightly panicked.

"The Serpent's Slide," Loki called back. "Relax, we have a mile to go before then."

Loki continued paddling easily, letting the current take the canoe. He saw small minnows darting through the water and once or twice a large big mouth bass moving into a pool of quiet water.

"Fish!" Aleta said.

"Yes, I see them." Loki said as he moved the paddle and Aleta leaned over a little to see them. "Careful, spark."

Max squealed when he saw a deer family drinking at the opposite end of the stream. "Look. Aleta! It's Bambi and Faline and a baby Bambi!"

"Aww! I wanna pet them!" the child cried excitedly and stood up in the canoe.

Loki whipped his head around. "Aleta Lenore, you sit your butt down now! You could fall out!"

“But Daddy!” she whined. "Look at Bambi and his family."

"Yes, I see them. Now sit down. You want to tip us over and get swept away?"

"It's like goin' on the bus. No standing on the seats," Max informed his sister.

Aleta sat down. "How do you know? You don't go to school!"

Max shrugged. "Lucy told me."

Loki began singing "Proud Mary" in his lyrical voice as he paddled.

The kids all joined in the chorus, "Rolling on a river!"
Thor felt his stomach rolling, but didn't say a word, but was caught off guard when the canoe bounced on one of the rapids.

"Odin's Good Eye," he said and Vince looked at him.

"Hey, Uncle Thor, you okay?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm...fine," Thor said with a big grin.

Nate whooped as the current snatched them. "Dad, are we by them yet?" His hair was sticking up and he looked delighted.

"Almost, Racer," Loki grinned back. "Not scared are you?" His green eyes glowed.

"No way! I can't wait!"

"Good," Loki said and wiped some of his wet dark hair out of his eyes.

"Okay, everyone check your life vests. Make sure they are on and tight," Loki ordered the kids. He shipped his paddle to reach back and grab three bungee cord tow lines and attach them to Aleta, Max, and Nate's life vest rings.

"There! If you fall you won't go anywhere," he reassured them.

Sam helped Lucy and Serena secure their life vests while Hunter helped Vince and Belle, but Thor was too concerned about not getting sick to check his.

By the Nine! he thought miserably. I'm the God of Thunder. I MAKE it rain! How can I be sick from a little river?

Loki tied a cord around his own vest, just as a precaution, though if he were ever thrown in the river he could shift into an otter or a salmon and swim without difficulty.

The water was growing wilder and rougher as the canoes bounced up and down and Loki watched out for rocks.

"Dad! Look!" Nate said and Loki looked at the Serpent's Slide.

"Nate put your paddle in!" he ordered. "You'll lose it otherwise!" He lifted his hand in the air, it
glowed with green light. "This is it!"

"Whoa!" Sam said.

"Look at that!" Hunter said.

"Sweet Valhalla," Thor sighed.

Rocks stood out of the churning rushing water as a small mist floated over the water which arched in a serpentine pattern and Loki felt his heart slamming in his chest.

"Great Euripedes!" exclaimed Serena.

"Cool," Vince said.

"Right," Loki said as he aimed the canoe toward the rushing water and started paddling.

"Are you mad?!" Thor bellowed and Loki smiled, remembering the last time he asked that.

"Maybe," he replied and slammed the paddle into the water.

Loki angled his canoe slightly, recalling the instructions of the canoe rental owner about shooting through the Slide. Spray kicked up and soaked his hair.

Hunter and Sam followed their father's lead as the water splashed around them and Thor held on tightly to the sides of the canoe.

The water frothed like a cauldron bubbling over and Loki balanced his paddle on the prow, barely touching it, because the water was going to take the canoe down without any help from him.

"Ready, kids?" he yelled. "For Asgard!"

"For Asgard!" the kids shouted.

The water snatched the canoe in its watery grip and flung it through the narrow passage between the two banks.

Nate shrieked in glee. "Yaa-hoo!"
The other canoes followed suit when Thor yelped and Hunter, Vince, and Belle turned to see him launch out of the canoe and into the water.

"Uncle Thor!" Belle shouted and Loki turned to see what was wrong.

"Dad! Uncle Thor fell out of the canoe!" Hunter shouted.

"Oh shit!" Loki swore under his breath. "Hang on! Let me get to the shallows and ground. Then I'll get him!"

He paddled rapidly into the quiet water at the bottom of the rapids, quickly grounding the canoe. "Nate, Aleta, Max, stay here! I'll be back! I have to go rescue your uncle!"

He untied the rope from his life vest and changed into an osprey and flew over the rapids, his keen eyes seeking his brother.

Thor swore as he tried to stay above water and the water roared around his ears. He knew how to swim in swift moving water, but not knowing where the shore was began to worry him.

Then Loki spotted Thor's head bobbing up and down. He shrieked in alarm as the head careened into a rock that could only be seen from above. "Thor! Nine Hells!"

Pain! Pain moved through his head as Thor's vision went black and he sank into the water.

Loki dived toward the water, his form a white blue. Just as he hit he changed into a large salmon and went into the churning water. He could just see his brother falling down into the depths. Loki changed into a large otter. He was able to grab hold of his brother then he fought to get to the surface, praying Thor was alive.

Loki’s teeth clamped on Thor's life vest and he dragged the limp form through the water, all his muscles burning with exertion from Thor's weight and the pull of the rapids.

"No! I will not let go!" Loki thought, swimming faster. He called upon all his Jotun strength and stubborn as nine hells determination and broke free of the river's deadly embrace.

"Dad! Over here!" Hunter called out after Loki and Thor broke the surface and Loki dragged his brother to shore.

Loki turned his brother over and knelt, putting an ear to his chest.

Thor's heart was thundering in his chest, but he wasn't breathing.

"Damn!" Loki said and started preforming mouth to mouth.
C'mon, you stubborn ass, breathe! Breathe for me! he thought, tears trickling down his cheeks.

Suddenly a gush of water filled his mouth as he and Thor started coughing and Loki turned his brother onto his side so he could cough up the water.

"Oh thank Valhalla!” Loki gasped, holding his brother's shoulders. "It's gonna be okay.”

Thor made a loud moan while Loki watched Thor's eyes open and gaze at Loki.

"Thank you, Brother," Thor whispered.

"Didn’t you ever learn how to swim?" he mock-growled then he hugged Thor to him.

Thor laughed as he hugged his brother and Loki sniffed, rubbing the tears from his eyes.

"Are you crying?" Thor whispered.

"No," Loki lied.

"Are you ok, Uncle Thor?” Hunter asked.

"Well, my head hurts, but I am relatively unharmed," Thor said as he let go

"Let me see. You hit that rock pretty hard," Loki said, and gently checked Thor's head. "Hmm. There's a nice goose egg here."

"Oww!" Thor yelped. "Loki, don't touch it!"

"Hush, you big baby," his brother ordered. "I need to touch it in order to heal it."

A soothing wave of healing magic flowed from the Trickster's fingers and healed the injury in seconds. "There! All done! Want a lollipop?" He held out a watermelon DumDum.

"Thanks," Thor said as he took the lollipop and removed the wrapper.

"Why didn't you fasten the safety ropes?"

"I was... I was trying not to get sick."

"You get sea sick, Uncle Thor?" Sam asked.

"It appears that I do," Thor asked, blushing.
"But you are fine when we use the ski sleds at home," Loki said.

"Aye, I am, but the movement of the water doesn't agree with me."

Loki put his hands on his hips. "And you didn't tell me why? I could have given you something for nausea."

"I thought I would be alright," Thor sighed.

Loki shook his head. "Silly warriors and their pride! Did you think I would laugh at you?"

"Maybe," Thor sighed then sucked on the lollipop. "Sorry."

"Next time say something. It's not worth almost drowning," Loki scolded. "You'd better get changed, you're soaked."

"So are you, Daddy," Max giggled.

Loki looked at himself ruefully. "You're right." He gestured and his extra set of jeans and a long sleeved pullover flowed onto him. Then he dried his hair with a spell.

Hunter handed Thor a dry pair of jeans and a long sleeve pullover as Thor got dressed then Loki went to check the canoe.

"Daddy, why were you kissing Uncle Thor on the mouth?" Aleta asked curiously.

Hunter, Belle, Nate and Vince softly giggled as Loki knelt down and smiled.

"I wasn't kissing Uncle Thor, spark. I was trying to get him to breathe."

“How?”

“By blowing air into his lungs.”

“And that got the water out?”

“Yes.”

“And it was a good thing he did. I would have been teased for all eternity if I went to Valhalla
because of drowning,” Thor said.

“Where did you learn how to do that, Dad?” asked Sam.

“My cousin Jo taught me. She taught me a bunch of EMT techniques after I adopted most of you. Just in case. She said you never know.”

“She’s a doctor, right?” Sam asked.

“Yes. She’s a doctor who takes care of women and babies,” Loki informed her. “But this was the first time I had to use rescue breathing. I’m just glad I have perfect recall and that it worked.”

Thor clapped him on the shoulder. “Thank the Norns I have such a smart brother!”

“You can say that again!” Loki laughed. “Okay, let’s find a nice spot and we’ll have a picnic.”

They found a shady spot nearby in a grove of trees and Loki spread out the picnic blanket and they placed the food on it and the thermos of lemonade. Loki watched Thor and saw to his relief he ate like his normal self—which was equivalent to three normal people.

He would give Thor a Dramamine before they headed back, he thought, then settled down to eat his maple bacon, turkey and cheese sub and pickles.

This vacation certainly was turning out full of surprises.

He wondered what tomorrow’s outing to the stables for a horseback ride would bring.
Loki and family have issues with mosquitoes then Loki is visited in a dream by someone unexpected!

Kleenex alert and lots of feels!

Those who love us never truly leave us, they are always watching from beyond.~ Loki

When they finally arrived back at the campsite, everyone was tired, hungry and thirsty. Loki started coffee brewing and the kids all went to use the bathroom and change. It was getting on to dusk and the weather had turned muggy, which meant the mosquitoes came out in full force. Soon clouds of the annoying insects were hovering over the campsite and biting everyone with a vengeance.

“Help!” Serena yelled. “It’s attack of the cloned mosquitoes!”

“Dad! Where’s the OFF? I’m being eaten alive!” Samantha cried, and batted at her arms and legs.

“Get away!” Nate yelped. “I’m not your dinner!”

“Yeah well, we kinda are, bro,” Vince reminded him, scratching frantically.

The mosquitoes seemed to like Thor best, however. Soon the Mighty Avenger was covered in red welts and muttering angrily about bugs that needed a good beatdown.

Loki took one look at him and burst out laughing.

“By the Nine, brother!”

Thor scowled. “Why aren’t they biting you, Loki?” he grumped.
Loki just shrugged and looked smug. “Because I guess they don’t like frost giant blood.” He was the only one besides Max not bothered by the pesky bugs. “But you, on the other hand, you’re like the all-you-can-eat buffet!”

He cracked up again.

“Sure, go ahead and laugh,” Thor growled. “Well, I know one way to get rid of these nuisances.” He picked Mjolnir.

A crack of thunder shook the sky and lighting flashed as rain clouds gathered.

“No, Thor!” Loki shouted, his green eyes wide in alarm. “Don’t do it!”

“Why? The rain will wash them away,” objected the Thunder God. Mjolnir was glowing and spitting small lightning bolts.

“It’ll also bring them back in droves once it stops. Mosquitoes love rain and damp,” the Mischief God pointed out.

Thor groaned. “Sweet Valhalla on a ski sled!” He put Mjolnir down. “So how do we get rid of them?”

“Insect repellent, citronella candles, and some herbs I’m going to throw on the fire,” Loki told him.

They sprayed the repellent all over their tents and the bathrooms and also on whatever parts of themselves weren’t bitten. The girls lit citronella lanterns and hung them over the trees and Loki fished in his magical pouch and retrieved herbs that would drive insects away and threw handfuls into the fire. It created a pleasant smelling smoke that hung over the campsite and the mosquitoes fled.

“Okay. Let me get out the cortisone cream and the Calomine,” sighed the Asgardian and he pulled his first aid kit out of the tent and set it up on the picnic table. “You first, Thor.”

Thor came and sat down, scratching miserably. “Brother, I itch all over.”

“Stop scratching,” Loki ordered. “You’ll make it worse.” He began dabbing pink lotion on Thor’s face and arms.

“It itches!”

“Okay! I’m going as fast as I can!” Loki objected. He put lotion on all the bites he could see. “You have any somewhere else I can’t see?”

Thor squirmed. “Umm . . . my back.”

“Turn around.”

Thor shifted on the bench until he was facing away from Loki, and pulled up his shirt.

More bites decorated his back.

Loki put lotion on them.

Thor sighed in relief as the irritating itching and burning ceased.
“Better?”

Thor nodded rapidly.

“Any more?”

The Avenger flushed beneath his pink dotted face. “No! I’m fine!”

“Okay. You’re done! Next victim!” Loki called.

Serena came over.

When all his kids had been doctored, Loki was about to put the first aid kit away when he noticed Thor leaning against a tree and trying to rub against it unobtrusively. Loki frowned. “Thor, what in Nine Hells are you doing?”

“Nothing!” his brother said swiftly. “I’m just leaning against this tree . . . and . . . err . . . looking at the sunset. Why don’t you cook dinner, Loki?”

The God of Mischief raised an eyebrow. He could plainly hear the deception in his brother’s tone and asked softly, “Why don’t you quit lying and tell me what the heck is wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong.” Thor insisted, shifting against the tree.

“Oh, so nothing is making you squirm like you have ants in your pants,” Loki drawled, getting up and moving to stand close to his brother.

Thor glanced frantically about but luckily all the kids were occupied doing other things. He blushed. “Umm . . . well . . . umm . . . the mosquitoes bit me on my ass, Loki.” He whispered.

“Oh for the love of frost!” Loki shook his head. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because!” Thor snapped.

“Come on. Let me get the lotion and we’ll go in the tent and I’ll put it on. Next time don’t play hero.”

“There is nothing heroic about mosquitoes biting your ass,” Thor muttered, and followed Loki into the tent.

Loki lit the lamp hanging on the tent pole with a quick spell then said, “Okay.”

His brother swore under his breath and removed his pants. “Hurry up, Loki! Before someone sees!”

“Oh hush!” his brother giggled. “There’s no one here but me!”

“Loki, quit it with the butt jokes!” Thor groused. Then he yelped. “Loki, that’s cold!”

“I had it in the ice chest. Don’t be a baby,” Loki began dabbing it on all the bites. “Norns, they really went and had a feast with you! You have polka dots like you caught chicken pox!”

“A pox on these lousy mosquitoes!” his brother growled. “Are you done yet?”

“Almost. You do want me to make sure they’re all covered, right?”

“Yes,” Thor sighed. “How many were there?”
“Enough. Okay, done. I’ll put some more on before we go to sleep.”

“I’ll just get drunk,” Thor told him. “I won’t feel anything then and it’s less humiliating.”

Loki just rolled his eyes. “Like I haven’t seen your naked ass before, brother. You flashed everyone in my house when you ran down the hallway during the bubble incident.”

“I was two!” Thor grumped. “That was different!”

“Only difference is now it’s bigger,” Loki drawled.

“Shut up, Loki!” Thor fixed his clothes. “What are we having for dinner?”

“I thought we should have smoked pork butt with beans.” Loki smirked.

Thor glared at him. “Very funny. I oughta beat you.”

“You do and who’s gonna put more lotion on your butt?”

“Never mind! When the kids go to sleep, I’m breaking open the other keg!”

“Don’t drown your sorrows too much. We have to get up early to go riding at the stables,” Loki reminded him, then went outside to start dinner, which was a simple beef stew with bacon, vegetables, and flatbread. He made caramel popcorn for dessert.

As promised, Thor did open the next keg of mead once all the children had gone to bed. Loki shifted into his owl form and went flying while the Thunder God sat by the fire and drank, gazing into the flames sleepily. As sometimes happened, he began to sing a few old drinking songs from Asgard.

Luckily he sang them in Norse so none of the kids could understand the naughty lyrics.

Aleta woke up to use the potty and on the way back heard Thor singing. “Uncle Thor, what’s that song?”

“Just a song about a maid and a soldier,” Thor replied, gazing at her blearily.

“How’s that go again?” she asked, curious.

Thor sang the line again, and drank some more mead.

Aleta frowned and repeated it. “Like that?”

“No, like this,” Thor corrected.

They sang the same line over and over until Aleta yawned and said, “I’m tired, gonna go back to sleep. Nite!”

“G’nite, spark!”

Aleta trotted off to her sleeping bag, leaving her uncle beside the fire.

Loki returned from his night flying to find his brother snoozing by the embers of the fire. “Thor! Wake up!”

Thor muttered something, lost in an alcoholic haze.
Loki tried to wake him up again without success. The half-Jotun sighed. “Really, brother?”

He took the empty glass from Thor’s hand, cleaned it with a spell and sent it back into the tent. He made sure the keg of mead was closed, then he lifted Thor over his shoulder and carried him back into the tent.

He set Thor on his sleeping bag, pulled off his boots, and rolled him into the sleeping bag. He positioned the Thunder God on his side, just in case he woke up sick to his stomach.

“Sweet dreams, brother.”

Then he sought his own bed, falling asleep almost instantly.

He dreamed he walked through a forest covered in snow. The trees were burdened with the glistening white powder and the frost left icy trails in the bark and coated everything with a brilliant sheen. He gazed up at the stars as he walked and to his astonishment saw a star fall to the ground.

He trotted through the trees, heading towards where the star had fallen, until he emerged into a meadow which was dotted with blue frost flowers. In the middle of it was a woman upon a thick white fur, holding a goblet of fine craftsmanship which steam curled from.

Loki halted, saying softly, “Hello. May I join you?”

The woman looked up with a smile gracing her face, and he felt his breath stutter in his chest.

For she had dark hair the color of a moonless night that tumbled in riotous curls past her shoulders and eyes that were the same emerald green as his own. She was dressed in a gown that seemed to glimmer like starlight and the moon illuminating her skin made her appear to glow slightly.

She gazed at him silently and in her eyes was warmth and love such as he had never seen in all his life.

“Hello, Loki.” Her voice was soft, like velvet, and he could swear he had heard it once before, long and long ago.

“Do I know you?”

“No, but I know you. Mine was the first face you saw when you opened your eyes the day you were born.”

He gasped for now he knew why she seemed so familiar. She was the portrait he carried in his pocket and he bore the same hair, eyes, and mouth.

“Mom!”

“Yes, Loki. I am your mother, Astra.” She patted the fur. “Come sit beside me, my son.”

Loki felt his feet moving, but it was almost as if he were sleepwalking. He sat down next to her, realizing he was taller than she was. “You’re here!”

She laughed softly, the sound like bells chiming. “Yes, I am.” She gazed at him, and her eyes glowed. “Let me look at you. The last time I saw you, you were blue and crying with hunger. I had no time to feed you, because I needed to send you away to protect you.”

“Protect me? But I ended up in the temple as a sacrifice. Odin said so.”
Astra sighed. “Odin, my old friend, does not know everything. You were never intended to go there. I sent you with one of my handmaids to hide you. But Kythra, the High Priest, intercepted her and took you. I could not stop it, I was fighting for my life against the Aesir soldiers who had invaded my home.”

“Was that how you died? I always thought you had died in childbirth.”

“No, Loki. Your birth did not kill me. A mage’s Final Strike did. I sacrificed myself to keep you and my handmaid Vika safe. I died as I had lived, a war mage and the last Archmage of Asgard, Queen of Jotunheim. Odin found me as I lay dying on the battle field and I made him promise to find you and raise you as his own.”

Her hand reached out to stroke his cheek and a crystal tear fell from her eye.

“He kept that promise, in his own way . . . but not as I would have liked . . .”

“No,” Loki said, tears glistening in his own eyes.

“I am so sorry, Loki! If I could have, I would have required him to swear it on his magic but there was no time. My soul was drifting to Valhalla.”

His hand closed over hers. “You have nothing to be sorry for, Mom. It wasn’t your fault. You did what you could. At least I didn’t die. He did save me. And I was raised a prince. The least prince, but still . . .” He told her what Odin had confessed to him at Easter and how he had apologized.

“That does not change what was done. But at least you have forgiven him. Now you can begin to heal.”

“I have already begun to,” he said sincerely. “How are you here now? And why did you never come before?”

She smiled at him, her smile bright as the sun, like the stars at midnight. “I never came before because it was not allowed. I had to earn my position as a Star Watcher and that took many long years. But I have always watched you, Loki. You could not see or sense me, but I was there. As for why now, because it was time. I could finally walk your dreams here, in this place of peace, and bring to you a measure of comfort.”

She held out the goblet to him.

He took it and sniffed the aroma. “Peppermint hot cocoa. My favorite!”

“I know,” she laughed, and a second goblet appeared in her hand. “It is mine too!”

They toasted each other and drank.

Loki’s tongue licked the last bit of cocoa from his mouth, and giggled to see his action mirrored by his mother’s. “You are a lot like me.”

“I think you have that backwards, son. You are like me,” Astra grinned, her emerald eyes dancing.

“Oh . . . okay,” he agreed. Then he just gazed at her, as if trying to memorize her features in his mind forever. “This is . . . I never expected . . .”

Her hand reached out and cupped his chin in her hand. “You are everything I had hoped for. You are handsome and strong and yet you know enough to laugh at yourself and to make others laugh.
It seems you have inherited both my magic and Laufey’s. The best of both worlds. Frigga taught you well.”

“I certainly got your brains and your wit,” Loki remarked. “Or so said Odin.”

“He is right. You did.” Her eyes twinkled. “You have done some troublesome things, yet your heart is good. I am proud to call you my son, Loki.”

“You are?” for one moment his voice quivered, the lost child seeking approval from a missing parent.

“Always, my little mischief maker,” she murmured, then her arms were around him and holding him close.

He surrendered to her embrace, to the touch he could barely recall, to the warmth with a kiss of frost, that filled him with love and a peace such as he had never known. He rested his head on her shoulder, breathing in her unique scent—of strawberries, honey, and frost.

Astra hugged him as if she would never let him go, as she had longed to hug him for fifteen hundred years, her slender fingers carding his silky curling hair. Her lips close to his ear, she began to sing and old lullaby—the same one she had sung to him on the night of his birth.

“Sleep, my little one sleep, count the stars in the sky, watch the snow fall, and know that I love you best of all. Dream, my little one, dream, of mystic shores and musical scores and remember my magic protects you. May you always know laughter and always know love, and my arms shall hold you safe from above, this is my wish, forever for thee, my sweet baby Loki.”

Tears streaked her face and fell upon his hair, like rivulets of starshine.

Loki’s own eyes were wet, and he patted her back and whispered, “Don’t cry. I’m here. Don’t cry.”

“Starseekers, I missed you, Loki!” Astra crooned. “How I envied Frigga that she could hug you and I could not.”

“Now you can.”

“Yes, and this one hug, I hope, has made up for all the others I could not give you.”

They remained that way for long moments, each reveling in the touch of the other, until at last Astra reluctantly let her son go.

She sighed and said, “My time here is short, my son. Much as I would like to spend hours with you, I cannot. So I will tell you a few things you might find useful to know. The first is that your youngest son will surprise you one day with an unexpected gift. The second is that the one who shall be your true love awaits you somewhere over Bifrost. And last is that I am not just your Star Watcher, but your children’s as well. I am, you could say, your guardian angel. I spoke for you when you came to be judge before the Powers That Be, and I argued for your redemption.”

Loki’s eyes went wide. “You did all that?”

“I did. It was not just because you were my son, but because you deserved it.” She kissed his forehead. “You deserve any happiness that comes your way. You simply have to be bold enough to reach out and take it.”

“You were watching over my kids too?”
“Yes. And by the Nine they need it! Especially your daredevil son, Vince! I swear that child is going to drive me into a second afterlife!”

Loki laughed. “I’m surprised my hair isn’t white by now.”

“No, but I do poke you when he’s about to do something insane, so you can stop it.”

“The eyes in the back of my head,” Loki realized.

“That is me, my son! Because you need an extra set with your mischief makers!”

“May I ask you a question?”

“Go ahead.”

“Odin said Laufey stole you from Asgard when the Jotun invaded. Is that true?”

Astra shook her head. “That was how he saw it. Because I was his chief advisor and the Archmage of Asgard, and he didn’t wish me to leave and become a wife or the queen of Jotunheim. He believed I could do better than Laufey. He wanted me to choose an Aesir man. But I am a Seer and I knew that Laufey was my destiny and my heart. And I have always followed my heart.”

“Then you did love him and he you,” Loki repeated, heaving a sigh of relief.

“Oh yes. Odin did not approve, but he knew better than to forbid the marriage. He knew that if he did so I would cut all ties with him forever, and he valued my friendship. I was the one person besides Frigga who was not afraid to stand up to him in a temper and tell him he was being an utter ass.”

Loki started laughing. “Oh Norns! So that’s where I get my boldness from.”

“Now your father was no shrinking violet either, but yes, Odin always said I was the only woman crazy enough to stand atop a bridge, while the wind buffeted it from two sides, and challenge the lightning and spit into the eye of a storm and still come out with everything intact and a smile on my face.”

“You dared much then.”

“I always did. I never took the easy path, Loki. I was independent and stubborn and I vowed no man would ever tell me what to do. I would do what I wanted, and that scared half the men of Asgard spitless. But not Laufey. He loved me for all that I was, and that was worth more than all the gold in Odin’s vault. Is there anything else you would like to ask me, Loki?”

“Just this? Will I see you again?”

“I shall come to you in dreams when I am permitted. I love you, Loki.” She hugged him again.

“I love you too, Mom.”

“Remember, even the darkest night has stars. And you are loved more than you know. Look at the stars, Loki, and know that I am looking back at you.”
She released him then and faded into twinkling motes of stardust, until all that remained was a faint glittery residue upon the thick fur.

Then Loki woke, opening his eyes and looking around the tent.

Thor still snoozed on top of his sleeping bag and everything was quiet.

Loki slipped like a ghost from his tent and gazed up at the last stars glittering in the evening sky. Then he blew a kiss towards the brightest one and whispered, “Good night, Mom.”

Then he returned to his bed, and as he drifted off to sleep, he could hear a voice singing from far away, “Sleep, my little one, sleep . . .”

His mouth curved into a sweet smile as sleep embraced him.

The next morning, Thor was shocked to discover he was awake before Loki, though his brother looked so peaceful lying there he didn’t have the heart to wake him. So he tiptoed from the tent and went to start the fire and make coffee.

As he poured himself a cup and drank it with some sugar black, Aleta emerged from the bathroom and pattered over to him. “Morning, Uncle Thor!”

He turned and greeted her with a kiss on the cheek. “Hey, spark! How did you sleep last night?”

“Good. Hey, Uncle Thor, remember the saying you taught me last night?”

“Saying? What saying?”

“This one.” And she repeated the line they had sung together in Norse.

Thor spit out his coffee all over the ground. “Aleta, don’t say that!”

“But why?”

_Nine Hells, Loki is going to kill me!_ He thought frantically for a moment. “Uh . . . because nobody here will understand you.”

“But what’s it mean?”

“Uh it means . . . hello and how are you in Norse,” Thor fibbed. “You want some breakfast?”

Aleta nodded. “Where’s Daddy?”

“Sleeping. I can get you some cereal,” Thor suggested. He pulled down the plastic cooler containing their dry foodstuffs. “Look, we have Cap’n Crunch, Honey Bunches of Oats, Froot Loops, Apple Jacks, Cocoa Puffs—my God Loki what did you do, bring half the grocery store?”

“Apple Jacks!” Aleta yelled.

“Okay. Shhh!” her uncle remonstrated, putting a finger to his lips. He took the Apple Jacks from the cooler and some milk.

The cereal was in a plastic bowl, so all he needed to do was pour milk in it and give Aleta a plastic spoon.
“What kinda cereal are you having?” the little girl asked.

“Uh . . . I think I’ll have Cocoa Puffs,” Thor decided, and took a plastic bowl with the cereal in it and poured the milk in.

Aleta watched him eating it and said candidly, “You’re gonna need another two bowls.”

Thor chuckled. “What are you saying? I eat too much?”

“No. But you’re gonna need more,” Aleta predicted.

“That’s because I’m bigger than you,” her uncle grinned. He finished the first bowl, then got another one, this time of Corn Pops.

“Toldja,” his niece said triumphantly.

“You are too smart!” the Thunder God laughed. “Like your dad.” He saluted her with the bowl. “Now remember, no repeating that phrase unless you’re on Asgard.”

“Okay. I’ll remember,” she promised.

Thor breathed a sigh of relief, thinking he had dodged that bullet quite neatly and she would probably forget about it by the time she ever saw Asgard.

“Are you all set to go riding today, spark?” he asked his niece.

Aleta nodded eagerly. “Uh huh. Daddy says he’ll make sure I get a nice pony.”

“I’m sure he will. Your dad is a good judge of horses,” Thor told her.

“Did you have a horse on Asgard, Uncle Thor?”

“Yes. My horse was called Hurricane, because he could run like one and he was a big white horse. I used to ride him everyday.”

“Did Daddy have one too?”

“Your dad’s horse was a black mare, her name was Ebony. And she was fast as lightning and twice as clever. She could open stall doors with her teeth and undo latches. She had to have a special stall with a lock she couldn’t manipulate, otherwise she would let herself out and all the other horses too. She was a trickster like your dad. But Loki loved her anyway. He used to race her on feast days, and when he rode Ebony no one could catch him.”

“Not even you?”

“Not even me. Loki bred her to my stallion though, that means they were married and Ebony had some fine foals. Her first one was a gray filly called Wind Whisper, and Norns, she was fast as thought! But gentle though. Loki used to give rides to the servant kids with her, because she would never get startled and buck them off.” Thor smiled reminiscently.

“Are they still alive?” was Aleta’s next question.

“Hurricane and Ebony are, but they’re retired and your dad and I ride some of their kids now. My new stallion is called Mercury, he’s a red one with a white lightning bolt on his face.”

“Does Daddy ride that nice horse called Wind Whisper?”
“No, because she died. She got caught out in the pasture when there was a bad storm and she tired to jump the fence and got caught on a pole and broke her leg. By the time we found her she was almost dead and she was suffering so . . . we put her to sleep.” Thor said sadly.

“Couldn’t you save her with magic?”

Thor shook his head sadly. “No. It was too late. So your dad chose to end her suffering. He mourned her for a long time. But now he rides her daughter, a dapple gray with a gold mane and tale called Starflight.”

“I’d like to see them one day.” Aleta said wistfully.

“Well, maybe you shall, when we go to Asgard,” Thor reminded her.

“Yay!” Aleta said, then threw her bowl and spoon in the trash and ran and jumped on her uncle.

“Hey! What do you think I am?” he asked, putting her on his shoulders.

“You’re my noble steed and I’m the princess!” Aleta grabbed Thor’s hair lightly and shook it. “Giddyap!”

Thor tossed his head and snorted, then began to gallop about the campsite, Aleta giggling like crazy.

That was the sound that Loki woke to, and after getting dressed, walked out of his tent to see his brother playing noble steed for his youngest. Loki watched for several moments, grinning, until Aleta saw him and waved.

“Hi, Daddy!”

“Hi, Aleta! Looks like you’re all ready to go riding.”

“I am. I’m practicing with Uncle Thor.”

“I can see that.” Loki laughed.

Thor halted, pretending to be exhausted. “Brother, your imp wore me out.” Then he swung Aleta down and said, “Why don’t you ask your dad to play noble steed now. Especially since he can become one.”

Aleta jumped up and down. “Could you? Please?”

“Okay.” Loki agreed, then he shimmered into a very rare black unicorn with a golden horn.

“Oh! A unicorn!” his daughter squealed, and went to touch the silky coat.

“Show off!” Thor remarked, smiling.

Loki gently snuffled Aleta’s hair, and the child laughed.

“Uncle Thor, can you put me on his back?”

“Sure, princess.” Thor scooped her up and set her on Loki’s back. “Now you got to squeeze tight with your legs so you stay on, got it?”

Aleta nodded, sitting up and doing as she had been told. She grabbed a handful of the thick silky mane. “C’mon, Eclipse!”
Loki flicked an ear back at the name his daughter had given him.

“Eclipse?” Thor repeated.

“Uh huh. Cause he’s black and that was a famous racehorse. Vince told me about him.”

Loki whickered, then began to walk lightly about the campsite, careful of the small passenger on his back. His tail and mane flowed like ebony silk behind him and his horn sparkled in the rising sun.

Thor fished his phone out of his pocket and snapped a few pictures, thinking *Tony better never let this go viral, everyone will think it’s Photoshopped. For such things dreams are made of.*
Horse Crazy

Chapter Summary

Loki and family visit a horse ranch for a day of horseback riding and receive an unexpected surprise at the end!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

33

Horse Crazy

After they had all had breakfast, Loki shepherded them all into the van for the brief drive to Morningside Stables just down the road. When he had been picking out the campsite, he had liked the fact that the stables were close by so he could teach his kids how to ride before they went to Asgard, yet were far enough away that he didn’t need to worry about his kids running off and getting into mischief around the stable.

None of the children had ever been near a horse except the police horses that they sometimes saw around Manhattan. So this would be brand new for all of them except Thor and Loki.

Morningside was a large sprawling place, with several pastures fenced in before they even reached the barn, and in the pastures grazed several beautiful horses. Haystacks were inside the pastures in neat piles. Loki drove through the gate and up to the large crimson barn. There was a large ranch house in front of the barn and a white and gray cat was sunning herself on the porch rocker.

The cat glanced at the van then yawned and closed her eyes. She was used to visitors and gently swished her tail side to side.

The doors opened as the kids got out and Loki walked to the small lift and pushed the button. The lift lowered the wheelchair as Nate smiled and Loki gently ruffled his son's hair.

"Daddy! Look! There's a kitty!" Aleta cried and Loki smiled.

"We're here to ride horses and she finds the kitty, Loki thought and rolled his eyes.

"So, Dad, where are the horses?" Sam asked when a tall young man walked up next to her and smiled.
"Howdy," he said and Sam jumped. She noticed his sandy blonde hair and blue eyes and the deep dimples when he smiled.

"Whoa," she whispered as she scanned him with her eyes and Belle and Lucy giggled.

"Someone's in loooooooooooove," Lucy whispered and Sam glared at her.

"Shut up!" she growled through her teeth. Loki walked over to the young man when he held out his right hand and smiled.

"Hello. I am Loki Laufeyson," Loki said.

"Oh, yeah, Mike told me we were getting guests. I'm Tom," Tom said and they shook hands.

"We've booked a trail ride for around 10:30," Loki said, consulting his phone. It was 9 AM. "I figured we would get here early since my son Nate is a special needs child." He indicated Nate.

"Howdy, son," Tom smiled at Nate. "I'm Tom."

"Nate," Nate greeted and held out his hand.

Tom knelt to shake it and Sam's heart did flip-flops.

Serena giggled. Sam shot her a Look.

"So how many are you again? Ten?"

"Eleven," Loki corrected. "My nine kids and me and my brother."

Tom whistled. "Wow! Your missus didn't come?"

Loki shook his head. "No, because there is none. My kids are adopted."

Tom looked impressed. "That's cool. Where you all from?"

"Greenwich Village," Loki replied.
"That's a bit of a drive," laughed Tom.

"Yeah, you could say that." Loki smiled.

Thor got out and was helping the others out of the car. "Guys, stay here. No wandering." He snagged Aleta's pink Belle hoodie. "That means you, spark."

"Aww! Uncle Thor I want to pet the kitty."

"That's Sassy," Tom grinned. "She likes kids. Had a litter of kittens about two months ago."

"Dad, can we see the kittens?" Lucy called.

"Yes, after we ride," Loki answered.

"Any of you ride?" Tom queried.

"The kids, no. They're from Manhattan. But my brother and I have. We had horses growing up."

"That's okay. I'll make sure we give everyone gentle mounts. We have a special saddle for Nate here."

"Hey, mister," Vince queried. "You know how to rope a calf?"

Tom grinned. "I've done some rodeos."

Loki rolled his eyes. "Vince, we're not roping calves. This isn't Wyoming. He watches a lot of Westerns. John Wayne."

"I love the Duke myself. Matter of fact, that's one of our trail horses. Think he'd want that one?"

"Sure. Vince loves animals."
"Then let's go to the stables," Tom said. Nodding, Loki followed Tom as they headed for the stables and Thor noticed how Sam was looking at Tom.

"Are you alright, Niece?" he asked.

"Yeah, Uncle Thor. I'm fine," Sam said.

"She likes Tom," Belle said and Sam shot her an angry look.

"I do not!"

"Do not let your sister's quips anger you. If you fancy the boy...."

"I don't fancy him. I barely know him," Sam said as a blush moved cross her cheeks.

"Then get to know him," Thor encouraged and she sighed, rolling her eyes.

"Dad would never allow it," Sam said with a sigh.

"Oh, I think your father would if the right young man or woman comes along."

Sam glanced at Tom then she smiled and walked a little faster.

Max and Aleta were walking with Loki as Max looked at the horses in the paddocks and smiled up at Loki.

"Daddy, are Leta and I going to ride one of those big horses?" Max asked.

"No, you two are going to ride the ponies," Loki said and Max frowned.

"I want to ride a big horse."

"I said no."

Max crossed his arms over his chest and he sniffed. Loki gave him a blank look. He knew Max was angry as he shook his head and sighed.

Aleta tugged Loki's sleeve. "Daddy, do they have a gold pony like the one I saw in the circus?"

"You mean a palomino?" Tom asked. "Gold with a white mane and tail?"

Aleta nodded. "Yup! Do you have one of them?"

Tom grinned. "Well, it just so happens we do. Her name is Gold Dust, but we call her Dusty. She likes to wear flowers in her mane. So I braid it with small ones."
"Cool! I wanna ride her, Daddy!" Aleta cheered.

"Would she be a good mount for a beginner?" Loki asked Tom.

"Yes, sir. She's gentle as a lamb." Tom assured him.

Aleta clapped while jumping up and down and a big grin spread across her face.

"Which pony do you want to ride?" Loki asked, but Max just frowned.

"We have a gentle chestnut pony. His name is Maplewood," Tom said. "He likes to be fed carrots and apple slices."

"Max?"

"Ok," Max sighed, but still didn't look happy.

"Which horse is mine?" Nate asked, looking at the horses.

"Ah, that would Miss Belle. She is a gentle gray mare and she was specially trained for riders with disabilities," Tom said as he pointed to the gray mare nibbling on the grass and Nate smiled.

Nate steered the wheelchair toward the fence when he looked at Miss Belle and she moved toward the fence. She slid her head over the top of the fence so he could reach her and Nate patted her nose.

"Hey, Belle. I'm Nate," he said and she nodded her head.

Loki smiled to see how nicely the mare behaved towards his son. He looked into the next paddock and saw a red mare with a gold mane and tail standing there watching him alertly. She had a curious expression on her dished face.

Loki held out a hand for her to sniff. "Who are you, pretty girl?"

"That's Lady Minx. She has nice paces but she's a bit of a handful for a beginner. She likes to play tricks and she's a bit of a rebel."
"Sounds like you, Brother," Thor said with a laugh.

"I would like to try her out." Loki said, scratching the sorrel on the nose.

"Alright," Tom said then turned to look at Sam. She felt her legs turning into mush as she looked into his blue eyes and shyly smiled. "What about you, Miss? See anything you like?"

"You," Belle whispered and Sam nudged her.

"What do you suggest?" Sam asked and Loki noticed how she was looking at Tom.

"By the Nine, is Sam interested in him?" Loki thought and Thor chuckled.

"Looks like your oldest is smitten," Thor whispered with a grin.

"I'm sure it's nothing," Loki said and folded his arms over his chest.

"We have a black mustang. He's a little wild, but he doesn't mind beginners," Tom said as he pointed to the mustang and Sam grinned.

"What's his name?" Sam asked.

"His name is Midnight Runner."

"What do you think, Dad?" Sam asked and Loki blinked.

"About what?" Loki asked.

"About that horse?" Sam asked, pointing with her hands to the mustang.

"He looks very nice," Loki said with a nod.

"Then I'll ride that one," Sam said and Tom nodded.

Belle saw a pretty bay mare with four black stockings. "What about that one?"

"That's Jane, short for Jane Eyre. She came to us an orphan," Tom explained. "She has nice manners though."

"I'll ride her," Belle said, and went to feed Jane a carrot.

Tom chose Gypsy, a paint filly, for Lucy, she was black with white splotches. She had one blue eye and one brown.
Hunter liked a dark gray gelding called Smoke, who was a quarter horse.

Noticing Serena was shy, Tom picked the Connemara Irish Lass, who was sweet and enjoyed eating peppermint candies.

Thor pointed to a large cream gelding standing in the field pawing the ground. "What about that one? He looks big enough to carry me."

“That's Viking,” Tom told him. "He's really strong but he has a mind of his own sometimes. I only let experienced riders on him."

"I had a horse similar to him once," Thor said. "He will do."

"All right. Let me call some of my stabehands and we'll get them all tacked and ready for you." Tom said. He walked towards the barn.

A few minutes later, the horses were saddled. Loki sat easily on the well worn saddle on Lady Minx’ back and she shook her head side to side. Two stable hands held onto the reigns to the ponies while Aleta lightly patted Dusty's neck and smiled. Maplewood nibbled on the grass as Max wiggled on the saddle and looked at his older brothers and sisters sitting on the horses.

The stable hand adjusted the harness Nate wore to stay in the saddle as he smiled at Nate and Nate patted Miss Belle's neck.

"Is the harness too tight, Cowboy?" Bradley asked.

"No, Sir. It's fine," Nate said with a nod.

Tom had helped Sam into Midnight Runner’s saddle as she shyly smiled and he smiled back. She found herself getting lost in his blue eyes then shook her head and tried to stay calm.

"Ready to ride?" he asked and Sam nodded.

Belle held onto the reins as Jane swung her tail back and forth and Gypsy nibbled on the grass while the stable hand helped Lucy get settled in the saddle. Serena looked a little nervous, but her horse gave her a look to assure her everything was fine and she smiled. Hunter sat straight in the saddle while Smoke snorted and Hunter looked over at Vince. Vince was sitting in the saddle on top of a cinnamon gelding named Daredevil and Loki noticed the horse had the same look in its eye as did his son.

"No running wild, Vincent," Loki warned and Vince nodded. He could sense the wild energy in
his horse and whispered they would have to wait before going off on a real run.

Thor eyed Viking while the horse snorted and pawed at the ground with its hoof. He had known wild and independent horses in his long life and there was never one he could not train. Nodding, he held onto the saddle as he placed his foot in the stirrup and Viking snorted while looking at him.

"Hold steady," Thor said. He started to pull himself up onto the saddle, but Viking moved away and Thor hopped on one foot to keep from falling.

"Having trouble, Brother?" Loki teased and Thor glared at him.

"No! I'm fine!" Thor said. He tried again to get onto the saddle, but Viking kept moving and he sighed. He finally got on Viking’s back and he took the reins in his hands and smiled. "See!"

Suddenly, Viking reared up as Thor yelped and the horse kicked the air. Tom and the stable hands tried to keep the horse from bolting as Thor held onto the reigns and Viking snorted. The horse tried to buck Thor off its back, but the Thunder God held on and Loki and the children cheered him on. Thor felt the horse tiring when Viking settled down and Thor patted the horse's neck.

"Good boy," Thor said.

"Whoa! I have never seen anyone do that!" Tom said.

"Like I said. I had a horse similar to this one," Thor said with a grin and Loki laughed, rolling his eyes.

"Show off," Loki whispered and patted Lady Minx' neck. She looked at him with a strange stare and he arched his eyebrows up. "Don't you dare."

Minx switched her tail and whinnied playfully. Bradley turned to go back in the barn and Minx's head snaked out and she took his hat right off his head! She held it in her mouth and bobbed her head looking immensely pleased with herself.

The kids all laughed, including Thor and Loki.

Bradley turned around and saw Minx with his hat. "Up to your old tricks again, huh?" He sighed and took the hat back. Minx nudged him and he petted her. "Gotta watch her. She likes to steal hats."

Nodding, Loki patted Minx, then he looked over at Thor and the children and sat up straighter in the saddle.

"Alright. Let's get going," Loki said and lightly tapped Minx' side with his right heel. Minx started moving as they headed for the gate which led to the trail and Thor nudged Viking with his
heel. The horse took a look back at the Thunder God then turned around and headed the other way.

"Uncle Thor, where are you going?" Hunter asked.

"I have no idea," Thor said as he tried to get the horse under control, but Viking headed back to the stable. Thor pulled on the reins, but Viking kept going until they entered the stable and the horse went into his stall. "Right."

Thor dismounted and stared at the cream-colored gelding. Viking started nibbling on the hay. He looked around then he found the comb and brush used to brush Viking after his rides. Thor started grooming the horse.

"You are a stubborn one, aren't you?" Thor said in a soft voice, but didn't stop grooming him. "I understand how that feels. I'm very stubborn myself. I sometimes feel like my way is the best way and no one can talk me out of it. Gets me into a lot of trouble. My father would end up punishing me for whatever it is I had done and I felt terrible afterwards. I learned that a true warrior knows when to listen to his betters even when he knows his way is better and he will keep his pride in check or nothing gets done."

Viking looked like he understood what Thor was saying and lightly leaned his head down. Smiling, Thor patted the soft mane then started brushing it and Viking moved his tail side to side.

"Now, are you going to behave?" he asked and Viking nodded his head. Thor got back onto the saddle, he took the reins in his hands, and they left the stall.

Loki had been concerned and had gone back to the stables. He watched his brother and Viking appear out of the barn and Thor smiled. "All is well, Brother."

"Good," Loki agreed. "Let's get back to the kids." He clucked to Minx and tapped her sharply with his heels and the mare took off, galloping like a flame down the trail.

Thor caught up on Viking and the two rode side by side until they reached the others, who were following Tom down the trail.

"It's Dad and Uncle Thor!" Serena cheered, waving at them from Irish Lass. The Connemara whickered to her stablemates and switched her tail.

"We thought you got lost," Lucy called.
"It's a straight trail, Lucy," Thor laughed. He heeled Viking up beside Sam's Midnight Runner.

Loki urged Minx alongside his two youngest children. "How are you two doing? Are you having fun?"

Aleta nodded. "Daddy, Dusty likes to look at everything when she walks." She stroked the palomino's mane.

"Kind of like you, spark," her father laughed. "How about you, Max?"

"I'm okay," his son sighed. "But why can't I ride a big horse like yours?"

"Because, son, you would fall off her," Loki explained. "Maplewood is plenty big enough for you right now. You see how your legs almost don't reach the stirrups?" Loki indicated the stirrups on the saddle. "Well on Minx your legs wouldn't even be able to reach halfway down her sides. If you can't reach the stirrups, Max, you won't have a good seat, and no seat means you fall off when the horse does this."

He cued Minx with his inside foot, and Minx spun about.

"See? If you were sitting on her and she did that, you'd end up on the ground." He patted the sorrel's neck. "Good girl."

Max chewed his lower lip. "Okay."

"When you learn how to ride well enough and grow bigger you can have a small mare similar to Lady Minx," Loki promised.

"Minx is small?" Max stared at her.

"She's about 15 hands, which isn't that big. Viking, the horse your uncle is on, is close to 17, which is quite large," Loki explained.

"Can you ride a horse like Viking, Dad?" Max wanted to know.

"I can. I can ride any horse," Loki replied. "But I like the smaller mounts. They're quicker and more agile."

He watched his two youngest for a short while, then satisfied they were okay, moved up the trail to see his other children. He noticed Sam was still looking moony eyed at Tom, who was riding a fine white Arabian mare called Freya. Puppy love, he thought and chuckled.

He gazed at Belle, Serena, and Nate. They seemed to be doing fine, their horses well-mannered and not trying to run away or unseat them. He saw Hunter and Lucy riding next to each other.

He heard a whinny and then saw Vince on Daredevil take off into the trees.
Loki’s eyes widened in alarm.

“Dad! Vince’s horse is running away from him!” shouted Serena.

“I’ll get him, Mr. Laufeyson!” Tom called, and turned Freya.

“No worries,” Loki called back. He put his boots to Minx and the red horse bolted after his wayward son.

He suspected that Daredevil hadn’t run off as much as Vince had urged him to. He shook his head angrily.

Ahead of him, Vince was laughing as his brown mount cantered perpendicular to the trail. He didn’t sound frightened at all.

"Vincent Laufeyson!" his father said as Vince turned to see Loki and Minx coming closer and Loki gave him the Look.

"Sorry, Dad," Vince said. Loki took the reigns as they went back to the others and Tom rode Freya to them.

"Is everything alright?" Tom asked.

"Yes," Loki said then looked at Vince. "Apologize."

"Sorry, sir," Vince said and Tom smiled.

"Just glad you're alright," Tom said. They rode back to the others and Vince saw the angry look on Thor's face.

"Ok, let's hit the trail," Tom said as they lined up in pairs and headed for the trail. The sun shined through the trees while they headed down the trail and Loki noticed Sam had rode up to ride next to Tom. They were chatting and smiling as Loki arched an eyebrow and Thor smiled.

"You can't stop her from falling in love, Brother. It happens when it happens," Thor said.

"I know that," Loki snapped then frowned. "Sorry."

"It's fine. Puppy love is a fleeting thing."

"Oh, like you would know."

"Have you forgotten my first tutor?" Thor asked with a puzzled look. "I told Mother I was going to marry her."

"You were five!"

"It didn't matter. I was in love."

"Then it was a good thing she married one of Father's aides or you would have married a crone,"
Loki said and Thor laughed while nodded his head.

Sam liked talking with Tom. He was funny, smart and sweet. He also had a girlfriend. Sam felt a little hurt when he told her about Kristina, but she didn't let it show and enjoyed riding next to him.

"Must be hard being the oldest of nine," Tom suddenly said.

"Nah. It's not so bad. We take turns looking out for each other and Dad's cool."

"Yeah, he does seem pretty cool."

"Have you ever played his video game?"

"He's THAT Loki Laufeyson?!"

"Yep," Sam said and Tom softly laughed, shaking his head.

"Damn! I love that game. I even got the sequel."

"Cool," she said and they nudged the horses to go a little faster.

Daredevil and Miss Belle rode side by side as Nate looked down at Vince's legs and Vince noticed the look in his brother's eyes.

"What's wrong?" Vince asked.

"Oh, the usual," Nate sighed and Vince looked at the special saddle. He knew Nate sometimes felt left out of being able to do most of the things he took for granted and smiled.

"Well, you do look really cool in that saddle."

"I do not."

"Uh-hunh! You look like some bad ass warrior chief. They always have the coolest saddles!"

"Yeah, they do!" Nate said with a grin and Vince saw Nate wanted to make Miss Belle go a little faster.

"Uh, better not. Look how mad Dad got when I took off," Vince said and Nate nodded as they headed down the trail.

Hunter and Smoke rode behind the ponies when he noticed how much fun Aleta was having as
she and Dusty looked around at everything on the trail, but Max just looked straight ahead. He
knew Max was too little to ride a big horse on his own, but he also hated seeing his little brother
when he was upset. Hunter rode Smoke closer to Maplewood when he looked at Max and
reached down to tap the top of his head.

"Hey, Imp, want a ride?" Hunter asked and Max' eyes went wide.

"Daddy said I can't ride a big horse yet," Max said.

"You can't ride it by yourself, but it doesn't mean you can't ride with me."

"Is there enough room?"

"Sure!" he said then looked at Aleta. "You want a ride after Max?"

"Nope! I'm fine!" Aleta said with a smug look and Hunter laughed. The stable hand helped lift
Max onto the saddle as Hunter slid one arm around his little brother and held the reins in the other
hand. They rode down the trail toward Minx and Viking when Loki looked at Hunter then at
Max and beamed. He gave his oldest son a nod as Max waved at him and Loki was glad to see
the happy look on Max' face.

"Hey!" Serena shouted as Irish Lass bucked a bit and turned to look at Lucy. "Tell Gypsy to stop
biting Irish's butt!"

"She isn't doing that," Lucy said, patting Gypsy's neck.

"I saw her. She did bite her butt," Belle said and Jane nodded.

"Sorry," the stable hand said. "She tends to do that."

"Well, it's rude," Serena said, sticking her chin out and Lucy and Belle giggled.

"Excuse us, Duchess Snowball," Lucy said and Serena glared at her.

"Girls!" was all Loki had to say to end the fight and the stable hand moved Gypsy back a bit so
she couldn't reach Irish Lass' butt.

Suddenly a loud barking came from the woods to one side of the trail.

Minx whinnied and tossed her head as the barking grew louder. Loki patted her gently. "Easy,
girl. It's just a dog."
The dog came closer and they saw it was an Australian blue heeler, a type of sheeodog. It wagged its tail and barked again.

Minx laid her ears back and neighed. Loki took the reins and held them firmly. The sorrel mare's tail swished.

Loki frowned and glared at the dog. "Go home!" he told it, pointing back towards where the dog had run from.

"Aww! Maybe he wants to play," Aleta objected.

"He's scaring the horses, spark," Thor explained. "Your father doesn't want any one hurt."

The dog barked as it went into play position and Tom rode up next to Minx.

"Archie! Git! You're scaring the horses!" Tom shouted and the dog whimpered. Archie slowly walked away as Loki looked at Tom and smiled.

"Thank you," Loki said.

"No problem. He lives just down that way," Tom said as he pointed down the trail. "He's harmless."

"Nevertheless, I have to think about Nate," Loki said and Tom looked over Nate and nodded.

"Yeah. He could have been hurt if Archie spooked Belle," Tom said with a nod. They headed down the trail as Loki looked back at Hunter and Max and Max smiled at him.

"Having fun, Imp?" Loki asked.

"Yeah!" Max said with a nod.

"I'm amazed Leta didn't cause a fuss."
"I asked her if she wanted a ride, but she seems happy just riding on Dusty," Hunter said.

Loki continued to visit with his other children, moving up and down the trail without difficulty. Minx curvetted playfully, but Loki moved easily with her, and she soon settled down. He stroked her neck. "Good girl."

The trail curved back to the paddock as the kids made some moans in protest and Loki assured them they could come back another time. Tom helped Sam off Midnight Runner as she smiled and he gave her a little nod. Loki saw the hurt in her eyes as he walked closer and placed his hand on her shoulder.

"Is everything all right?" Loki asked.

"Yeah," Sam said with a nod. "He's got a girlfriend."

"Oh," Loki said, but silently thanked the Norns and patted her shoulder.

"Dad, can we go help groom the horses?" Hunter asked.

"Okay," he agreed, thinking it was a good thing for him to learn.

Hunter and the kids ran into the stable as Thor walked to Loki and Loki glanced at him.

"It seems Sam has just found out Puppy Love doesn't last," Loki said and looked at Tom. "He has a girlfriend."

"Ah," Thor said with a nod.

"Don't do anything."

"I wasn't," Thor said with a hurt look. Loki softly laughed as they headed for the stable and went inside.

The children were brushing down their horses as Loki walked into Minx's stall and picked up the soft brush and started brushing Minx's mane. He smiled as she gently nudged him and he patted her back.

"Daddy, I need a little help!" Aleta called out as he placed the brush back on the peg, left the stall and closed the small door. He walked to the stall where Dusty was, but he couldn't see his daughter.

"Where are you?" Loki asked.

"I'm back here. She got me trapped against the wall and won't move."
Loki smiled as he took a carrot from the box and held it out to Dusty. Sniffing, Dusty moved toward him. She took the carrot and Aleta ran to Loki.

"Oh, spark, don't be angry. She didn't mean it," he said and Dusty nodded. Aleta patted her as she held her hand out for another carrot and Loki handed her one. She fed Dusty then Loki helped her brush the golden mare, showing her how to move the brush in slow circles, but didn't see Thor taking some photos with his phone.

Loki finished grooming the palomino, then took Aleta out of the stall and brushed the horse hair off her clothes.

"Daddy, can I see the kittens Tom said were here?"

"If you can find them. Why don't you look for them with your brothers and sisters?"

Aleta darted out of the stall as she went to find her brothers and sisters and saw Sam talking with Tom.

"Excuse me," Aleta said and they looked at her. "Mister Tom, where are the kittens?"

"You mean Sassy's kittens? They're out in the barn," Tom said.

"Can we go see them?"

"Sure."

"Let's go get the others," Sam said as she took Aleta's hand and they walked off.

"You like him, hunh?" Aleta asked as she looked back at Tom.

"Yeah, I do, but he's got someone," Sam said.

"He is cute," Aleta whispered and Sam laughed. They found the rest of the kids when they headed off toward the barn and went inside. Large piles of hay bales were against the walls and rose almost to the loft and Vince smiled at Hunter.

"You think we'll be able to climb those?" Vince asked.

"We could go ask Dad or Mister Tom," Nate said and they left the barn. Tom and Loki were chatting when Loki saw the boys and blinked.

"Is there a problem?" Loki asked.

"We were wondering if it's all right if we climb the hay bales in the barn," Vince said.

"Yeah, you can," Tom said then looked at Nate.
"I can pull myself up with my arms," Nate said with a grin and Tom smiled.

"Just don't let Max and Aleta climb up too high," Loki warned and the boys nodded as they went back to the barn.

"Mister Tom said we can climb them, but Max and Aleta can't go too high," Vince said,

"I want to see the kitties," Aleta said.

"Me, too," Max said.

They go into the barn and search for the kittens in the hayloft. But they can't seem to find them. Then Aleta sees a little black tail sticking out from the haystack.

"Look, Max! I see one!"

Max peers at the little black tail and smiles. "I see it." They run to pet the kitten, who in lying in a hole in the haystack.

The kitten looked at the two little humans running toward it as he jumped out of the hole in the haystack and headed for the safety of the box where its brothers and sister were.

"Where did it go?" Max asked.

"I think it went this way," Aleta said.

"Careful, you two," Sam said. "You don't want to scare them,"

"We won't," Aleta said and they went to find the kitten.

Hunter and Vince helped Nate out of the wheelchair as they started climbing the haystack while the girls watched and Belle was ready with some magic in case Nate slipped. She knew her daddy wouldn't like her using magic without him, but he wouldn't get angry if she was protecting her brother.

Hunter and Vince helped Nate to the top of the haystack as Nate smiled and they looked down at the girls.

"Are you going to climb up or are you chicken?!" Hunter challenged and Sam glared at them. The boys started making clucking noises as they bent their arms to make wings and the girls looked at each other. Nodding, they headed up the haystack until they got to the top of it. Serena pulled some hay out of her hair. They could see the whole barn from up there as Hunter stood up and held his arms out. "I am the king of the world!"

"No, you're not," Sam said as they laughed and Belle saw Aleta and Max still searching for the kittens.
"I wonder where the kittens are," Belle said as she started climbing down and the girls followed her. Hunter and Vince started climbing down while Nate watched then realized he couldn't get down.

"Uh, I think we have a problem," he said and they looked up at him. "I don't know how to get down."

"I'll go get Dad," Sam said and left the barn.

Sam made her way over to where Loki was chatting with Tom about Asgardian Quest 2, explaining how he used the Norse myths and some other myths for the background of the game plot.

"Dad, we have a bit of a problem."

Loki turned. "What problem?"

"Need help?" Tom queried.

"I can climb up and carry him part way down but if you could stand below us and take him from me that would be great." Loki told him.

"No problem, Mr. Laufeyson."

"Where's Uncle Thor?" Sam asked.

"Bathroom," answered her father. "Okay, let's get Nate down."

Nate crossed his arms over his chest as he looked down at his brothers and sisters and rolled his eyes. He watched his father, Sam and Tom walk in the barn. Loki walked to the haystack and looked up at him.

"Hello," Loki said with a look like he wanted to laugh and Nate waved. Loki looked at the haystack as the urge to just use magic to get Nate down nibbled at the back of his mind but he sighed then started climbing. "Where are Aleta and Max?"

"They're over there," Nate said from his perch and Loki glanced over his shoulder. Nodding, he
climbed until he reached the top and sat next to Nate. He put his arm around his son when he scooted closer and Nate leaned back against him.

"Are you ready to get down?" Loki asked and Nate nodded.

"Sorry, Dad," Nate said.

"Did you have fun climbing up?"

"Yeah."

"Then you have nothing to be sorry for," Loki said as he started to climb down and held his arm out. Nate slid down the hay then he grabbed onto his dad's arm and they headed down the haystack. Tom held his arms out to catch Nate when they nearly reached the bottom and Sam brought over the wheelchair. Tom helped get Nate into the wheelchair as Loki dusted the hay off while Thor walked in the barn and looked at them.

"What happened?" Thor asked.

"Nate got stuck on the top of the haystack and Dad had to go get him," Hunter said.

"Why didn't he use...?" Thor asked when Belle nudged him in the ribs and shook his head.

"Are you ok, Cowboy?" Tom asked.

"Yeah. Just feel like a baby," Nate said and Tom smiled.

"Hey, you are not the first person to get stuck up there."

"Did you ever get stuck?"

"Oh yeah. When I first started here, these guys dared me to climb it then left the barn. It took me a LONG time before I got down."

"Really?!"

"Scout's honor," Tom said with a wink and Nate smiled.

“Daddy! Look at the kitties!”

Loki walked over to his youngest children then he knelt down and looked into the hay pile. The kittens were awake as one of them looked at Loki then at its litter mates.

The orange and white kitten climbed out of the hay and scampered onto Loki's boot. It meowed at him then proceeded to climb up his leg.

"Hey!" Loki cried in astonishment. He knelt to pet the kitten and then the others came out and ran
over to Loki.

Before he could blink he had kittens climbing all over him.

“Look, Daddy! They like you!” Aleta said.

"Yes, Spark, I see that, but I am not a cat climbing toy." Loki said, laughing.

A kitten climbed on his head and sat there.

"I am the king of the mountain," the kitten meowed.

"Be prepared to be dethroned," Loki said in cat speak and gently reached up to remove the kitten.

"No!" the kitten mewed and dug in its claws.

"Ow! By the Norns!"

A gray striped kitten sitting on his shoulder meowed, "I'm telling Mama you scratched this catman, Skykit!"

"You're such a tattletail, Misty-kit!" hissed the brown marble kitten called Skykit.

The orange and white kitten lay on Loki's arm purring. "Hello! I'm Whisper-kit!"

Loki petted the small feline. "Hello," he replied softly in cat speak. "I'm Loki."

Whisper-kit purred loudly. "You are nice. Not like some other men who stomp and shout so loud our ears hurt. And you can speak feline."

Loki grinned. "Yes, I can. Who are your siblings?"

" The gray tabby female is Misty-kit. The marble brown male is Skykit. And the black and white male is Trickster-kit."

Loki started snickering. "You seriously have a kitten name Trickster?"

Whisper-kit nodded. "Yes, my mama called him that because he is clever and likes to play tricks on cats and humans."
"You forgot the runt," Skykit said as he glanced back at the little all black one.

"Who is this?" Loki asked and the little kitten gave him a shy look.

"I'm Tomkit," Tomkit said in a soft voice.

"Hello, Tomkit. Why do they call you the runt?"

"Because I was born last and I'm tiny."

"Well, that's no reason for them to call you that. I was born a runt, too."

"You were?!" Tomkit asked with wide eyes.

"Yes, but look at me now!" Loki said and Tomkit purred.

"Can we take one of them home, Daddy?" Max asked.

Loki sighed. "Max, we already have a kitten. You don't want Mischief to think we're replacing her, do you?"

"No," Max said with a shake of his head. Loki placed the kittens back in the hay pile when Tomkit moved closer to Skykit and swatted his tail with his claws.

"Hey!" Skykit said as he growled at the small kitten and his ears went back.

"That's for calling me a runt!" Tomkit said.

"Now. Now. No fighting," Loki said as he reached down and stroked Tomkit's head.

"He's always picking on me and won't let me feed," Tomkit growled then looked at Whisper-kit and Misty-kit. "Neither will they."

"Is this true?" Loki asked, giving the kittens a Look the kids knew very well.

"Yes," the kittens said and he looked at Trickster-kit.

"I don't care one way or the other," Trickster-kit said with a smug tone that reminded Loki of how he used to talk.

"Well, that is no way for siblings to act. Take a look at my kits," Loki said as he pointed to the kids. "Neither of them are the same, but they treat each other with respect and take care of each other. Would any of you like it if he treated you like that or called you a runt?"
"No," the kittens said and shook their heads.

Trickster-kit scooted over to Tomkit as he settled down and placed his chin on Tomkit's side. Closing his eyes, Trickster-kit sighed then curled his tail up and Tomkit looked at him.

"If they do it again, tell me and I'll lead them into those smelly piles behind the barn," Trickster-kit whispered and Tomkit purred, closed his eyes and they went to sleep.

"Aw....," Aleta and Max said as they watched the sleeping kittens and Loki looked at the others.

"Do you promise to be nice to your little brother from now on or do I have to tell your mother?" Loki asked and the kittens gave him a scared look.

"No! Don't tell Mama!" Whisper-kit said.

"We'll be good!" Misty-kit said.

"We promise!" Skykit said.

"Good," Loki said with a smile and led the children to Thor and Tom.

"Is everything alright, brother?" Thor asked.

"Yes. Just had to handle a family crisis," Loki said.

"What sort of crisis?" Tom asked.

"It appears the kittens were picking on the smaller one."

"Oh. You mean the runt. Yeah, they do seem to pick on him."

"Being a runt myself, I know what that's like," Loki said and Thor made a little cough.

"And I have apologized for that," Thor said and Loki nudged him.

"Would you like to stay for lunch?" asked Tom. "We always have a big spread, even for this crowd."

Loki coughed. "Um . . . are you sure?" He didn’t know of any mortal household, except his own, which cooked enough for Thor’s appetite.

"Sure! Come on up to the house and I’ll tell Maisy, our cook, we have company."

"Thor, what do you think?" Loki asked pointedly.

"I think that sounds good," the Thunder God said, catching on to what Loki was hinting at.

The cook made racks of barbecued ribs, steaks, hamburgers, hot dogs, and pulled chicken. There were baked beans, corn, spinach, cornbread, and coleslaw. For dessert there were cookies, a chocolate cake, and coffee for the adults and milk for the children.
Everyone ate until they were stuffed, except Thor who ate a modest (for him) amount so he wouldn’t tip off the ranch owners that there was something odd going on with a man who could eat three of them under the table.

"That was delicious," Loki said and Thor and the children nodded.

"Thanks," Missy said.

"Well, we better get going."

"Hope you'll come back soon," Tom said.

"We will.”

Loki and Thor helped the kids get into the van as Tom and Missy waved and the van headed down the path.

"That was fun, Dad," Hunter said.

"Yeah," Vince said.

"Can we do it again, Daddy?" Aleta asked.

"Well, I was thinking about going horseback riding when we go to Asgard," Loki said and the kids cheered.

Though it wasn't a long drive, the younger children fell asleep on the car ride back to the campgrounds.

Loki carried Aleta into the girls’ tent and put her in her sleeping bag for a nap while Thor did the same with Max in the boys’ tent.

The older children went about cleaning up the camp when the bushes moved and Hunter and Sam frowned.

"What was that?" Sam asked.

"I don't know," Hunter said as the bushes moved some more and they backed up. "Dad! Uncle Thor!"

Loki came out of the tent at a run. "What's the matter?"

Suddenly the bushes parted as a large bear appeared and lumbered toward them. Loki waved his hands as a large green shield appeared and Thor held out his hand.
Mjolnir sailed into his hand as lightning cracked around his hand and the bear looked at them with a confused look.

"Thor, wait," Loki said, and then addressed the bear in Ursus, the bear tongue. "Do you need help? Have the poachers returned to the forest?"

"No," the Bear King growled and stood up on its hind legs. "I am the Bear King. Rula informed me you healed her when the poachers shot her."

Loki was shocked with how accurate he was about what the Bear King looked like and he nodded.

"How is she?" Loki asked.

"She and the cubs are well."

"Hello, Friend Loki," Rula said as she, Benha and Little Nura walked out of the bushes and he smiled.

The Bear King went onto all fours as it walked to Loki and Thor lowered Mjolnir.

"I wish to thank you. Many humans would have just left her to die or would have killed the cubs as well," the Bear King said.

Loki smiled. "I am not like other men. I believe that all animals deserve to live free. And if you hunt you do so for food only and never a mother with young or bearing them." He hesitated then asked, "Is she your mate?"

"No, she is my daughter," the Bear King said then sighed. "Her mother was killed by poachers."

"I see," Loki said as Nura nudged him and he softly scratched the cub's ear.

"Again. Thank you for saving her."

"You are welcome."

"Mister Loki, where are Aleta and Max?" Nura asked.

"They are sleeping," Loki said.

"Oh," she said with a small moan when Aleta and Max ran out of the tent and headed for Loki.

"Daddy, Sam woke us up!" Aleta said.

"I didn't want you to miss seeing Rula and the cubs," Sam said.

"Oh!" Max said and Benha walked to him and Max gave him a hug.

"Who is that?" Aleta asked.

"This is the Bear King. He's Rula's daddy," Loki said and the Bear King walked to the toddlers.
They carefully patted him as the Bear King smiled and looked at Loki.

"Are all of these your cubs?" the Bear King asked.

“I actually have nine cubs. Well, nine adopted ones and three others that are my natural ones.

Impressed, the Bear King nodded and tilted its head to one side.

"Well, we must be going," the Bear King said and the cubs walked to Rula. They watched the bears head for the bush when the Bear King turned and looked at Loki. "Know this. You and your family are always welcome in the forest and are under my protection."

"Thank you," Loki said and the bears disappeared into the forest.

Thor stared at his brother in astonishment. “A friend of the Bear King. I am impressed. Father would be proud. That one does not give his friendship lightly, not even to shifter mages.”

Loki looked slightly embarrassed, but a glow of satisfaction and pride suffused him. Then he went to gather some food for dinner.

The first twinkling motes of stars were in the sky by the time dinner was served. Loki glanced up at them, recalling Astra’s injunction, and he was sure the brightest one overhead winked at him and a voice like the chiming of bells spoke in his ear. “Well done, Loki. I’m proud of you, my son.”

The kids were slightly upset when Loki informed them it was time to go and the van headed down the road.

"So, did everyone have a good time?” Loki asked.

“Yes!" chorused Max and Aleta.

"Yeah," the other kids said and Loki smiled.

"I had a good time as well, brother," Thor said.

"Good to hear."

A short time later, the van moved up the driveway. Loki parked the van and everyone got out. Thor pushed the button to lower the small lift and Nate steered the wheelchair toward the door.

"Hold on! Come back here and help with the luggage," Loki said.

Grumbling, Thor and the kids came back to the van and carried the luggage toward the door.

The door opened as Mandy appeared in the doorway and smiled.

"Welcome home," Mandy said.

Loki went and hugged the elderly woman. “Hi! We had a great time, but it’s good to be home again. That drive is a killer.”

"Well, come on in. I started dinner."

"How were Odin and Mischief?"

"They were little angels."
"Really?!" Loki said as they entered the house and Thor, Hunter and Sam went to clean out the van.

The other children took the luggage upstairs as Loki saw Mischief sitting on top of his favorite chair.

"Papa! You're home!" Mischief said in cat speak and Loki held his arms out. She jumped into his arms then he scratched her ears and she purred. "I missed you!"

"I missed you, too, Kit," he said and she snuggled against his chest.

A sharp bark startled her as Loki placed her on the chair and Odin came running into the room. Loki knelt down as Odin ran to him then came to a stop.

"Papa! You're home!" Odin said. Loki held his arms out as Odin jumped into his arms and Loki stood up.

"My, they sure missed their daddy," Mandy said with a smile.

"Yes, I guess they did," Loki said, placing Odin on the floor.

"Why don't you sit down and rest while I go check on dinner," she said then headed for the kitchen and Loki sat down.

"Daddy! Max isn't helping us unpack!" Aleta shouted.

"I am, too!" Max shouted.

Sighing, Loki got up as he looked at Odin and Mischief then headed for the stairs and Odin and Mischief hopped onto the chair, snuggled against each other, for their family was home where they belonged at last.

Chapter End Notes

just in case you missed it, the character Tom is based upon Tom Hiddleston in his role as Hank Williams.

So you lucky girls get TWO doses of Tom and Loki!

Hope you all liked this chapter!
Loki dreamed of gazing at a blue tailed comet with a golden-haired woman, laughing at the joy upon her face, when the “Ride of the Valkyries” theme interrupted his beautiful reverie. He slowly ascended from the realm of dreams and grabbed his phone from the nightstand and peered at it blearily. There was a text from Thor.

*Brother, I have invited Father and Mother over to celebrate Father’s Day. Can you cook dinner for us?*

Loki blinked then rolled his eyes. *And you were going to tell me when? When they were knocking on my door?*

*I just thought of it. And they said they wished to spend time with our family again. Did I wake you? You sound grumpy.*

*No, I was up all night to get lucky. Of course you woke me, Thor! It’s four in the morning!*

*You were up all night to get what?*


*Can you cook dinner? We could take them to a restaurant but I thought it might be better if we just stayed home and you grilled something.*

*Something meaning Angus burgers and fillet mignon steaks and shrimp?*

*That sounds wonderful! Will you? Please, Loki.*

*Oh . . . okay. Quite giving me puppydog eyes through the phone.*

*You can see through the phone now?*
Loki hit himself in the forehead. *Seriously, Thor? Are you drunk?*

*Only little.*

*Never mind. Tell Father to use the Bifrost to be here at six’o’clock Midgard time. The food will be on the table.*

*Thank you, Loki. I will bring the mead. And a cake from Rispoli’s Bakery.*

*That’s nice. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going back to sleep. Because today I can actually sleep in.*

*Night, brother.*

Loki yawned and turned his notifications off so he could get some sleep. Sadly, he couldn’t find the dream of the golden-haired woman again. But at least he managed to get several hours worth of quality sleep time in before Aleta and Max woke him by jumping on the bed and yelling *“Happy Father’s Day, Dad!”*

Loki groaned and opened one emerald eye.

*“Morning, scamps. Tell me something. If it’s Father’s Day, why are you waking me up?”*

We just wanted to be the first ones to wish you Happy Father's Day!” Aleta said.

"Yeah!’ Max said and Loki carefully pulled himself up so he could receive a hug from each other them.

"Thank you," he said then the toddlers carefully got off the bed.

"Now you just lay there!” Aleta said as they left the room and Loki wondered what was going on. Shrugging, he closed his eyes while trying hard to get back to the dream of the woman with flowing blonde hair when the sudden sound of the smoke alarm made his eyes snap open.

Down in the kitchen, Sam ran to open a window to let the smoke out from the burned dishtowel lying in the sink. Hunter, get the broom, quick!

"I told you to use the oven mitt, Hunter," Belle scolded.

"Is there something burning?” Loki called from upstairs.

"Nothing, Dad!” Sam called back. "It's fine!”

The smoke alarm continued to wail and Loki could smell SOMETHING had become charcoal.

"How do you shut it off?” he heard Serena yell.
"Gimme a minute, okay?" Sam answered back annoyed.

"Guys, WHAT is burning?"

"NOTHING!" his girls and Hunter chorused.

Better get up, Laufeyson, before the fire department pays you another visit because your house is burning down! He swung his legs over the side of the bed.

"Okay, I'm coming down!" he shouted.

"NO!" they all screamed.

"Dad, you'll ruin the surprise!" Belle cried, rushing up the stairs.

"Belle, what is going on down there? I KNOW I smell something burning."

"Dad, relax. Hunter turned the toaster up too high and your English muffin got charred. Now please, just get back in bed." his daughter begged.

"Are you sure that's all it is? Nothing is on fire?"

She shook her head rapidly. "No, sir. Nothing is on fire." Now, she thought guiltily. Because I put the fire out with magic.

Sensing she was telling the truth, Loki climbed back into bed and pulled the covers up. "Will breakfast be done soon?"

"Yup," Belle assured him. "Why don't you read until it gets done?" She handed him his tablet, smiling brightly.

"All right."
"I'm going to go check and see how things are going," she told him and ran downstairs.

"Phew! That was close!" she hissed to her siblings.

Hunter looked up with the broom in his hand, which he had used to turn off the smoke alarm. "Good thing, because Dad would have flipped out if he knew a dish towel caught fire."

"What did you tell him?" Sam whispered.

"The truth," Belle replied. "That the English muffins burned." She indicated the two black circles on the paper towel on the counter. "I just didn't tell him about the dish towel."

"Okay, Sam you do the English muffins," Hunter sighed. "Before the kitchen catches on fire."

"I'll do the bacon," Belle volunteered.

"You take over the eggs then," Sam said and handed him the spatula.

"What should we do?" Aleta asked.

"Has anyone fed Mischief or Odin?" Serena asked.

"I'll do it!" Max said while going over to the large bag of dry dog food then noticed neither Odin nor Mischief were in the kitchen. "Where did they go?"

"Did someone let Odin out in the backyard?" asked Serena.

"Uh-oh!" Lucy said and they looked to see the cat and dog heading down the hallway. Before any of the kids could catch them, Mischief and Odin ran up the stairs, down the hallway and into Loki's room.

"Well, good morning, you two," Loki said with a smile and Mischief hopped onto the bed. Odin knew not to go up onto the bed unless Loki said it was alright and panted when he patted the mattress to signal it was okay.
"Morning, Papa," Odin said as he settled down next to Loki and Loki could smell the scent of smoke on him and Mischief.

Mischief laid on Loki's stomach and began to groom her fur, trying to rid herself of the smoke scent.

"Did the smoke alarm frighten you?" Loki asked.

"Yes, it was very loud," Mischief said with a sharp flick of her tail.

"But Hunter killed it with a broom," Odin said and Loki's eyes went wide.

"He used the broom to turn it off," Mischief corrected.

"The smoke makes my nose tingle" Odin whuffed. He buried his nose in the blanket.

Loki smiled as he patted the dog and Odin wagged his tail.

"Well, it's over now," Loki said and Odin lifted his head.

"Why are they making such a fuss?" Mischief asked.

"Because today is a special day. It's a day for children to celebrate their fathers," Loki explained while stroking the cat.

"Can we celebrate, too?! You are our father!" Odin said with a small bark.

"Of course you can," Loki said.
Odin bounced off the bed as he ran out of the room and Loki wondered where he was going. A few seconds later, Odin returned with his favorite bone then got back onto the bed and placed the bone onto Loki's stomach.

"Happy Papa's Day!" Odin said and wagged his tail.

Loki struggled not to laugh. "That's... umm... very kind of you, Odin."

Then he added," We can share this beneath the tree in the yard later when I am in my wolf shape."

"Yay!" Odin said.

Mischief didn't know what to give Loki as she hopped off the bed and left the room. She went into her room when she spied her favorite stick toy, a wooden stick with a feather connected to a string, and she picked the stick up in her mouth. She carried the stick back into the room when she hopped onto the bed and placed the toy on his chest.

"For you, Papa," she said.

"How lovely! We can play with this later." He scratched behind her ears and she purred.

He placed the wooden stick on the floor as Mischief climbed up onto his lap and snuggled against him.

"Do you think my brother and sister are giving presents to their new papa?" she asked. Loki looked at his phone when he picked the phone up and texted Tony.

Well, they did leave me two dead mice in my slippers this morning. Does that count? Tony sent and Loki tried not to laugh.

"Yes, they left him something," Loki said and placed the phone down.

In the kitchen, the kids were almost done assembling their Father's Day breakfast.

"Right! Where's the orange juice?" Sam asked.

"Here," Vince said, handing her the glass.
"I have the coffee," Belle said. "But we'd better carry them up separately so they don't spill."

'Here's the paper," Vince held out the morning edition of the Wall Street Journal. "I want to carry the coffee!" Aleta said.

"Sorry, Spark, it's too hot for you to carry. Here's the orange juice," Sam said and handed her the glass.

"Thanks, Vince," Hunter said and placed the paper on the tray.

"Don't forget the napkin," Serena said and tucked one next to the plate.

"I'm finished with the flowers," Serena said and placed the small vase with nine little rose buds on the tray.

"I got the presents," Nate said as he turned the wheelchair around to show the presents neatly piled in the basket under the wheelchair.

Lucy set the vase on the tray. "And here's the cards." She showed them the cards in a small bag.

"Okay, Max, go tell Dad to close his eyes," Sam said and Max nodded. He quickly ran out of the room then went upstairs and into Loki's room.

"Morning, Imp," Loki said.

"Dad, you gotta close your eyes for the surprise," Max said.

"Ooooooooooo-kay," Loki said as he closed his eyes and covered them with his hands.

"He's got his eyes closed!" Max shouted and Loki sighed, rolling his eyes behind his eyelids.

The kids entered the room while Aleta and Max climbed onto the bed and Mischief and Odin moved to the foot of the bed. Loki watched while Hunter placed the tray on his lap then the presents and gift bags were placed on the bed and he smiled.
"Happy Father's Day!" the kids said together and Loki felt tears in the corners of his eyes.

Loki smiled at his children and began to eat his breakfast. "This is very good. Who made this?"

"I poured the orange juice," Lucy said.

"Sam had put the coffee maker on last night, but I poured it into the mug," Vince said.

"She had to remake the English muffins," Serena said.

"Yeah. Sorry about that," Hunter said.

"I'm just glad no one got burned," Loki said.

"I made the bacon," Belle said.

"Hunter finished up the eggs for me," Sam said.

"I wanted to bring up the coffee, but Sam said she didn't want me to get burned if it spilled," Aleta said.

"That was a good idea," Loki said and kissed the top of Aleta's head.

"I got the paper," Vince said.

"I did the flowers and Lucy put the vase on the tray," Serena said.

"And I have the presents," Nate said.

"Well, I guess I better eat," Loki said. He started eating when Max frowned and Loki wondered what was wrong. "Are you ok, Imp?"

"We forgot the Loki Charms," Max said and Loki smiled.

"This is fine," he said and Max snuggled next to his papa.

Loki ate his breakfast, finding it very good. Once he had finished, he took the paper and set it on the bed. He admired the flowers then smiled. "Okay, what present shall I open first?"

"Open mine, Daddy!" Aleta said and Nate moved the wheelchair closer to the bed. Sam handed Aleta the box wrapped in Disney Princesses paper as Loki smiled and took the box from his youngest daughter. He carefully opened the envelope with the homemade card and read what Sam had helped her write. He felt a lump in his throat as he smiled at Aleta then opened the box.
Inside were two white dress shirts and a green tie with gold flecks and Aleta looked at him, "Do you like it?"

"I love it!" Loki said and hugged her. "I can wear those to work and make your Uncle Derek jealous."

"Me, next!" Max said and Sam handed him the box with the Spiderman wrapping paper. Loki opened the envelope as he read the card and smiled. He opened the box when he saw the brown faux fur bear feet slippers and Max smiled. "Now you look like the Bear King!"

Smiling, Loki moved the bedding back so he could put the slippers on after Sam had removed the tray and hugged his youngest son.

"We're next!" Lucy said and she and Serena handed him the gift bags. Inside were some gift cards to his favorite clothing store and Barns and Noble and he read the cards.

"Thank you, girls," he said.

"These are from us," Nate said and Vince handed him the gift bags. Inside was a box set of the show 24 which he hadn't seen yet and three DVDs of movies he wanted to see, but didn't have the time to see in the cinema.

"Daddy, what is Crimson Peak?" Aleta asked.

"It's a really scary movie," Sam said and Loki arched an eyebrow. "I saw it on Netflix."

"If it's scary, I don't want to watch," she said with a shake of her head and Loki smiled.

"Well, thank you, boys," Loki said and Vince and Nate nodded.

"My turn!" Belle said. She handed him the box wrapped in blue wrapping paper and he opened the envelope. He read the card as tears appeared in his green eyes and he sniffed. Aleta handed him a tissue from the tissue box on the night table and he smiled at Belle. He opened the box when he pulled out the white t-shirt and YOU GOT LOKI'D was printed on the front. "Do you like it, Daddy?"

"Oh yes," Loki said and hugged her.

"My turn," Hunter said and handed Loki a box wrapped in green and gold paper. Loki read the card as he smiled at her and she smiled back. He opened the box when he removed the white t-shirt and a photograph of the kids and the pets were print on the front. MY KIDS ARE MY GREATEST TREASURE was printed under the photograph and Loki turned the t-shirt around so they could see it.

"Guess I'm last," Sam said and handed Loki the large present wrapped in gold paper. Loki read the card then unwrapped the present and his eyes widened. A light brown wood frame was
around a black ink sketch of the children and the pets and WE LOVE YOU, DADDY was at the bottom.

"I...," Loki said then got out of bed and hugged Sam. "I love it!"

"Great. Now can you let go? I need air!"

Laughing, Loki let go as he looked at the children and the pets and the love he felt for each and every one of them warmed him to his core.

"Thank you. Now I guess I'd better get dressed and come downstairs. Your uncle is going to be over around dinnertime with your grandparents."

"Bestefar and Bestemor are coming?!" Aleta asked.

"Yes, it was your uncle's idea."

"But we don't have a present for Bestefar!" Max said.

'Why don't you make him something? You're good at that." Loki suggested.

Aleta thought for a minute. "I know, Max! We can make him a hat! With the new kit Uncle Steve got us."

"Yeah!" Max said and they got off the bed and left the room.

"Why don't all of you make him something?" Loki said and the children left the room.

"What color hat are we making?" he heard Max ask Aleta. "I want blue."

"No, green."

"Green is Dad's color. Blue."

"How about blue AND green?!" Sam said.
"Yeah! They go together!" Max said.

Smiling, Loki shook his head and sat down on the edge of the bed. Odin snuggled next to him as Loki scratched the puppy's ear and Odin sighed.

"Would Grandpa like a bone, too?" Odin asked.

"Yes, I think he would," Loki said at the thought of his father's face when Odin placed a bone in his lap.

Mischief began playing with the wrapping paper, jumping on it and batting it all over the floor.

"What are you going to get Grandpa, Mischief?" Odin asked.

Mischief looked up from pouncing. "Uh . . . how about a mouse?"

"As long as it's alive and we can release it later," Loki warned and Mischief nodded.

Loki looked at the t-shirt with the photograph of the children and the pets when he waved his hand and a slightly larger white t-shirt appeared next to it and MY GRANDCHILDREN ARE MY GREATEST TREASURE was under the photograph.

"Ooooo! Grandpa will love that!" Mischief said.

Loki waved his hand as the t-shirt was wrapped in a box with golden wrapping paper and a golden bow on top. He wasn't sure about the card as he shrugged, picked up the box, and headed out of the room.

Down in the kitchen, the kids were in a panic trying to clean up the huge mess from making breakfast. Sam put all the pans into the dishwasher while Hunter washed the counter and the floor where the eggs had spilled. Belle threw the burnt dishtowel away and lit a candle to take away the lingering smoke smell.

Serena swept the crumbs into the dustpan with the broom.

Vince and Nate took the trash out and Lucy filled the cat and dog dishes.
"Well. Look at all of you," Loki said and was a little suspicious that they were startled.

"Hi, Dad," Hunter said, smiling a bit too widely. "You want some tea?"

"That would be nice," Loki said and watched Hunter make some tea. Loki walked to the counter when he noticed scorch marks on the toaster which weren't there before and he blinked. He thought back to what Belle told him about the English muffins burning, but it wouldn't have left a scorch mark down the back of the toaster. He then noticed one of the dishtowels was missing and leaned against the counter. "It's nice of you to clean up."

"Well, we made breakfast so we cleaned," Sam said quickly.

"You missed a spot," Loki said and turned the toaster around. The kids froze when they looked at the scorch mark and he arched his eyebrows up.

"We're dead," Vince whispered.

He crossed his arms over his chest. "Okay. Who wants to tell me how this happened?"

"Uhhhhhhhhhh..." Nate said.

"I'm waiting."

"You're not going to ground us, are you?" Serena asked.

"If it was an accident and no one got hurt, no."

"Okay . . . see I was making the English muffins only I had the toaster on too high and when I went to get them out, I grabbed a dish towel and part of it fell in the toaster and caught on fire," Hunter admitted.

Loki blinked his eyes a few times then nodded and sighed.

"Why didn't you just tell me this?"

"We didn't want to ruin Father's Day," Lucy said.
"You didn't. But you know I don't like lying."

"It wasn't really a lie. We just didn't tell you all of it," Nate said.

"Next time, tell me," Loki said with a small grin and the kids nodded.

Loki waved his hands as the kitchen became a mess and he headed out of room.

"Now clean that up before your uncle and grandparents arrive." he said and his laughter echoed down the hallway.

"DAAD!" his children wailed.

A short time later the backyard was filled the scent of Angus burgers, fillet mignon steaks and shrimps on the grill and Loki carefully flipped one of the burgers with the spatula.

The grilled vegetables were marinating in a pan, and the corn on the cob was in the pot on the extra burner. Watermelon and pineapple were on skewers waiting to be grilled.

Sam, Lucy, Belle, and Serena were making the macaroni salad as well as spicy potato salad and the boys were setting up the picnic tables and folding chairs.

"Can I help with the burgers, Daddy?" Max asked. Loki looked down at him when he carefully picked his son up and showed him how to use the spatula.

Max grinned as he looked at Loki's green apron that read I Cook What I Want --And You'll Eat it an Like It.

"I need an apron, Daddy."

Loki smiled. He waved a hand and a smaller green apron appeared on Max that read Loki's Little Helper.
Hunter and Nate put green and blue streamers on the two biggest chairs and two signs that read \textit{Happy Father's Day} on the back of the chairs.

"Did you finish your present, Max?" Loki asked his youngest son.

Max nodded. "Uh huh. I think it looks cool. Bestefar should like it."

"I'm sure he will love it because you made it, Max," Loki reassured him.

Everything was placed on trays with foil wrapped around it to keep it hot, and Loki traced runes to keep things hot without drying them out.

Hunter, Vince, and Nate filled a cooler with ice, then added soda, water, and sparkling flavored seltzer.

Loki made sure the chocolate layer cake the kids had baked was on the dining room table along with the oatmeal apple crisp Sam had made. French vanilla and peanut butter chocolate ice cream was in the freezer.

"Dad, where are they?" Sam asked worriedly. "Shouldn't they have been here by now?"

"Sam, you know that time runs a bit differently here than on Asgard," Loki reminded her. "Plus the traffic is horrendous on holidays in the city."

He then recalled something he had been meaning to discuss with his eldest and with Hunter after the incident with Tom at the horse ranch. He supposed now was as good as any to discuss this particular topic.

"Sam, go and get Hunter. There's something I need to discuss with you," Loki said quietly.

"Like what, Dad?" Sam asked, puzzled.

"Go get your brother. I'll explain in the study." Loki said and 'ported up to his study, where he could fetch a certain book, and also lock the door when his two eldest got upstairs.

Sam and Hunter climbed the stairs, looking at each other in bewilderment.

"Any idea what this is about?" Sam asked her brother.

Hunter shook his head. "Nope. I don't think I've done anything lately to get grounded for. You think it has something to do with almost setting the kitchen on fire?"

"No idea. But if it was about that, why not just lecture us downstairs?" Sam said, mystified.

"I guess we'll find out," Hunter sighed, and entered the study.
They found Loki sitting behind his rolltop, flipping through a book.

“Oh good. You’re here. Lock the door please. I don’t want any interruptions.”

“Dad, are we in trouble?” were the first words out of Hunter’s mouth.

“No. I just need to speak to you privately about something and I don’t want the younger ones coming in here.”

“Is it about Uncle Thor and Bestefar and Bestemor?” Sam guessed. “Are they not coming to the Father’s Day dinner?”

“No, nothing like that,” Loki said, sounding a shade awkward. “They’re still coming as far as I know.”

“Ohay. So what is all this about, Dad?” Hunter asked. “Are we moving? Did somebody we know die?”

Loki shook his head. “None of those. I . . . Sam, when we went to the horse ranch a few weeks ago, I noticed that you . . . seemed to like Tom a lot.”

Hunter’s jaw dropped. “You did? You like Tom?”

Sam went red. “Shut up, Hunter! I didn’t like Tom!” She stopped when Loki eyed her knowingly.

“Okay . . . maybe I did . . . a little . . . but he’s got a girlfriend so . . . it doesn’t really matter now. Dad, why are we talking about this?”

Loki cleared his throat. “Well, I realized that I . . . have been remiss in my fatherly duties.”

“Say what?” sputtered Hunter.

Sam stared at him, a light dawning in her hazel eyes. “OMG, Dad! No!”

Hunter looked from one to the other. “Samantha, what is he talking about? Dad, will you quit speaking Asgardian and start speaking English?”

Sam hit herself in the forehead. “Oy! Hunter, I swear, you can be dense as a fence post sometimes! He wants to give us The Talk!”

Hunter gave Loki a horrified look. “What? No, Dad. I do not need to hear this!” He squirmed like he was being bitten alive by fire ants. No, not this, please, Lord! “I already know how to get a girl pregnant!”

“Hunter!” Sam cried.

“Wait, that so did not come out right!” Hunter cried, frantically.

“Now there’s an accomplishment to be proud of,” drawled his father sarcastically. “However, I’m going to tell you how to not get a girl pregnant.”

Sam froze. “Uh, Dad? We had sex ed in school. They talked about everything.”

“Define—everything.”

“Uh, we learned about the reproductive system in men and women and where everything goes,” Hunter added, flushing. “So you don’t need to torture us.”
“Because you know how to get a girl pregnant,” Loki repeated. “What did they tell you about contraceptives?”

“That you need to use them so you don’t get pregnant or get diseases,” Sam replied. “See? We KNOW.”

“No, you don’t. I bet those teachers never showed you how to use a condom,” Loki interjected.

“That’s it, I’m leaving!” Hunter stood up and started heading towards the door.

“Hunter David Laufeyson! You get your butt back in that chair!” Loki growled.

“No! I don’t need to see this!” his son yelped.

“Oh my God, Hunter! If I have to sit through this so do you!” Sam yelled.

She dragged her brother back over by the desk and shoved him into the chair.

Loki sighed. “You know, you aren’t making this any easier.”

Sam rolled her eyes heavenward. “Why me, God?”

“Dad, I’m twelve!” Hunter objected. “My voice hasn’t even broken yet.”

“But you know how to get a girl pregnant,” Sam repeated.

“Shut up!”

“The longer you two argue, the longer you get to be in here,” Loki warned.

They quit sniping at each other.

Loki reached into the desk drawer and took out a banana and a condom. He had borrowed one from Tony, who had then winked and asked Loki to tell him if he had a good time. Loki had just shrugged and said nothing.

“Okay. Hunter, pay attention. You especially need to know this.”

“Dad, it’s a banana,” his son remarked.

Sam rolled her eyes.

Loki sighed. “Would you prefer your Uncle Bruce’s plastic model of a penis?”

“No!” Sam yelped. “The banana is fine. Hunter, shut up!”

“Dad, you don’t really need to do this,” his son began, flushing. “I can look it up on youtube.”

“What are you saying? You’d rather go online and get some wrong information rather than listen to me about the correct way to use contraceptives?” Loki queried, one eyebrow raised.

“Rather than be embarrassed into next week? Yes!” Hunter cried.

“Too bad. If I teach you, I know it’s done right.” He unwrapped the condom and demonstrated, explaining that if you didn’t know how to do it correctly, the condom would break.

“Now, before I have you try it, I think we need to discuss the differences between crushes and
actual love and what the difference is between just having sex and making love.” *Norns, I hope I’m doing this right!* Loki thought.

“Isn’t the best way to prevent pregnancy not having sex?” Hunter interrupted.

“Yes. And that is a perfectly viable option. But let’s say that you’re going out with a girl, or a guy, and he or she is pressuring you to do it and you agree or you don’t want to wait till you’re engaged or married. In that case you need to use protection.”

“Any guy that sleeps with one of my sisters is going to need protection all right—police protection from you, Dad. And Uncle Thor and the rest of the Avengers.” Hunter remarked.

“This is why we’re all going to remain virgins,” Sam muttered.

*Please, Norns!* Loki prayed fervently. *I don’t want to commit murder because I caught my daughter and her boyfriend making out in his convertible.*

“Dad, if you aren’t going to allow us to date, why are we even talking about this?” she asked.

“Hey, I never said you weren’t allowed to date. I just want to make sure they guy you’re dating—or the girl—is a good person who won’t use you or hurt you and then go on their merry way.” He cleared his throat again. “Okay, so let’s discuss how you know the difference between a crush and actual true love. Sam?”

“I’d rather discuss getting a root canal without anesthetic,” she muttered.

“Why? This should be easy. You had a crush on Tom,” her brother pointed out. “We all know you were attracted to him and wanted to make out with him in the hayloft until you found out he was dating some other chick.”

“Dad, can I kill him?”

Loki frowned at his son. “Hunter, is your name Sam?”

“No, but—”

“Then stop answering for her. Sam, go ahead.”

Glaring at her brother, Sam continued. “Yeah, I did have a crush on Tom. But I never said anything about making out in the hayloft. I only just met him, for Pete’s sake! I was attracted to his looks and how nice he was with the horses and all of us. But that’s all a crush is—an attraction. And it wears off and usually doesn’t go anywhere. But true love, that’s like when you’re attracted to each other and you have long conversations on the phone about all kinds of things—”

“While your brother upchucks in the next room,” Hunter remarked.

“My brother shouldn’t be eavesdropping,” Sam shot back. “Anyway, you spend a lot of time together and then one day you realize that you love each other and you get married. Then you go do it and that’s called making love.”

Loki was impressed with her answer as he nodded and Hunter rolled his eyes.

"Can we go now?" Hunter asked.

“No. Hunter, here’s one for you. What do you do if you are dating a girl you really like and she —”
“—she says no?” Hunter interrupted. “I do what she says. Because no means no. Dad, you’ve told me this a thousand times.”

“That wasn’t what I was going to say,” Loki told him. “I’m glad that you understand that when a girl says no it really means no, however. Because no son of mine will ever force a woman or else I will make sure he goes to jail. But, what I was going to say was what if you are dating a girl you really like and she wants to have sex but you don’t feel comfortable with that and you also realize you don’t have any protection with you. What should you do?”

Hunter swallowed. “Um . . . I should ask her to wait?”

“You sound unsure about that. Why?”

“Because . . . guys usually don’t do that,” his son admitted, flushing. “And I don’t want to seem like a wimp.”

“So you’re gonna do it with her and maybe get her pregnant?” Sam put in. “Hunter, that’s dumb! You tell her you need to wait and go the drugstore. Or ask if she’s using the pill. Because if you got some girl pregnant, Dad would kill you.”

“What if I accidentally got her pregnant?” Hunter refuted.

“How can you accidentally get someone pregnant?” Sam cried.

“Uh . . .like what if it broke? Or something. That can happen, right?” Hunter was beet red.

“Yes it can,” Loki interrupted. “Which is why you should always use two forms of contraceptives. Yours and hers. So you can prevent an accidental pregnancy. Of course the best way to do that is to refrain from actually having sex. Which is what I would suggest you do. However, I know there’s a lot of pressure these days on kids to just do it, and there’s all this stuff on social media encouraging it. But I do want to remind you that if you do make that decision, then you best be prepared for what consequences could result in it.”

“A baby.” Sam said.

“An STD.” Hunter added.

“Right. And while the one is embarrassing but curable in most cases, the other is something you will have to live with for the rest of your life. Because when you have a baby your whole life changes. Because now you are responsible for someone else and that’s your whole focus. Not your friends, or your video games, or even school. That baby is your world now. Or at least it does if you’re any kind of decent parent. Which, by the way, I know you both will be.” He smiled at them.

“I don’t want to be a dad for a long time!” Hunter said.

“Me neither,” Sam added. “Or a mom.”

“Then I need you to stop and think before you make a decision that could change your life. Hunter, I know that normally it’s not the guy who says no or we should wait. However, if you are in a situation like the one I described, you need to remember what could happen. Is one night of sex worth what follows? Because if you ever get a girl pregnant, son, you will be taking responsibility for that child and the woman who has it. You’ll be putting a ring on her finger and going down the aisle with her. So you had better think carefully before you take your pants off.”

“Dad!” Hunter was scarlet.
“Sorry to be that blunt, but you seem to need me to be,” Loki said.

“What about Sam?” Hunter fired back. “What if she gets pregnant?”

“Hey! I don’t plan on doing it unless I’m married. Or at least right before the wedding,” his sister snapped. “My name’s not Lola Lightskirt.”

Loki’s eyebrows went up. “Lola Lightskirt?” he started snickering. “That’s a new one.”

Sam rolled her eyes. “It’s an IM thing.”

“Okay, so let’s say that you did happen to get pregnant,” Loki said. “The same rules would apply to you. I’m assuming based on your personal background you would keep the baby and not want to give it up for adoption. If you had the baby with the man you intend to marry that wouldn’t even be a question. But what if that wasn’t the case?”

“I’d still keep the baby,” Sam said. “It’s not the baby’s fault this happened. And I would talk with the dad and make sure he understood that. So if he decided to ditch me and the kid, he signed off all his rights.”

“Dad would kill him first.” Hunter asserted.

“While I would want to beat his head into a wall, I would refrain from doing so,” Loki sighed. “Because that wouldn’t help anything if I went to jail.”

“Uncle Thor wouldn’t,” Hunter predicted.

“You are probably right,” Loki agreed. “But let’s not discuss that now. Sam, if you ever do end up with an unplanned pregnancy, I want you to know that you can always come home to me. I won’t throw you or my grandchild out of my house.”

“But you’ll flip out,” Sam predicted.

“Yes, for a bit. But that doesn’t mean I won’t help you in any way I can. Yes, I’ll be disappointed, but I won’t hold it against you or against the baby. I swear that. I will still love you and the baby. And the same goes for you, Hunter.”

“Dad, what if the girl doesn’t want to get married? Then what?” Hunter asked.

“Then you offer to help take care of the baby and send money and at least try and be a part of the baby’s life. And if she doesn’t want that, well, there’s really nothing you can do about it. Unless you try to get custody of the baby, which I would only recommend doing if you think she might give the baby up.”

“But none of that is going to happen,” Sam asserted. “Because I’m going to stay a virgin and Hunter’s going to keep his pants zipped or ask Uncle Tony for a Trojan and make sure his girlfriend’s taking birth control.”

“Or wait till I’m married or absolutely going to be,” her brother added. “Because I really don’t want to elope to Vegas and have Elvis marry us.”

Loki laughed. “And here’s my final piece of advice. Wait until you find someone you love. Because doing it when you don’t really love someone isn’t anything like doing it with someone who is your true love. It should be meaningful and beautiful and not just something you did because everyone else is doing it or you got drunk one night. Or because you married the wrong woman and now you’re stuck with it.” Like you and Boda, Loki.
"We’ll remember," Sam assured him.

‘Now can we go? Please?’ Hunter begged.

“What, you don’t want to see another banana demonstration?” Loki teased.

“NO!” they chorused.

“I’m never gonna be able to eat another banana,” Sam groaned.

They practically ran out of the study. Loki watched them go then burst out laughing. *You did good, Laufeyson. And you won’t have to have this talk again until Belle is fifteen, thank the Norns! Maybe next time I will borrow Bruce’s model.*

He took the banana downstairs and put it back in the fruit bowl on the table just as the doorbell rang. Thor, Frigga, and Odin had finally arrived.

"Uncle Thor, Bestefar and Bestemor are here!" Odin barked as he ran around in circles in front of the door and Loki laughed.

"Calm down and move away from the door," Loki said and Odin sat next to his feet. Loki opened the door when he looked at Thor, Odin and Frigga and smiled. Thor had a keg of mead over his right shoulder and was wearing a cotton shirt, jeans and white sneakers. Loki noticed Thor wasn’t wearing any socks, which was a fashion trend for men now, but what surprised him was Thor’s short hair. "Uh....."

"It is a long story," Thor said as he walked by him and Loki thought he caught the scent of something rotten."

"It appears there was a small accident at the Tower," Frigga whispered as she gave Loki a hug and Loki nodded.

"It is good to see you, Son," Odin said then leaned down to pat the dog’s head. "You as well, Little One."

They went into the house as Loki followed Thor outside and Thor placed the mead on the table.

"A small accident?" Loki teased and Thor sighed.

"I had gone into Bruce's lab when one of his experiments exploded," Thor said with a sigh. "We were covered with this sticky, smelly goo and the only way to get the goo off was to cut our hair. It could be worse. Bruce is totally bald."

Loki took a deep breath when he doubled over from laughing and Thor rolled his eyes.

"Do you know what a bald Hulk looks like?"

"No," Loki said, coughing while laughing. Thor removed his phone when he showed Loki the photos Tony took and Loki felt like he would pee himself from laughing.

"Well, brother, it could be worse. You could have a Mohawk and in rainbow colors!" Loki giggled.
"Loki, enough teasing your brother!" Frigga said in a stern tone and walked to them. "I am just glad neither of them were injured or burned."

"Thank you, Mother," Thor said.

"I do apologize, Brother," Loki said and Thor lightly shoved him. "I do admit I like the new look."

"Natasha seems to like it as well."

"Maybe you should think about getting a trim," Frigga said as she moved her fingers through Loki’s hair and his eyes widened.

"No, Mother. I like my hair long."

"I'm joking," she said and Loki smiled.

"Come and have something to drink. It's very hot out." He indicates the coolers with the drinks.

Frigga chose a cold can of lemonade and sits in the shade to drink it. The kids lead Odin to one of the Chairs of Honor and have him sit in it.

"Happy Father's Day!" they sang.

"Dad made you dinner," said Belle.

"And Max and I made you this!" Aleta handed him a box wrapped in superhero paper.

"For me?" Odin asked. He shook the box and Aleta and Max giggled.

"Open it! Open it!"

Odin unwrapped the box and took out a green and blue dyed baseball cap. On the front in glittering gold letters is the logo KING OF GRANDPAS with a golden crown underneath it.

“Well, will you look at that!” he exclaimed, and then put it on. “I like this better than my real crown. Thank you, Aleta and Max!”

He hugged his two smallest grandchildren.
"Here, Bestefar!" Aleta said as she placed the wrapped gift on Odin's lap and he looked at the bright wrapping paper.

"It's from Hunter, Sam, Vince, Belle, Nate, Serena, and Lucy!" Max said. Odin opened the wrapping paper when he opened the lid of the box and removed the top of the box. He looked at the white t-shirt with a photo of the kids printed on the front and MY GRANDCHILDREN ARE MY GREATEST TREASURE was under the picture. Odin looked at Loki as Loki pointed to the t-shirt he was wearing and Odin stood up. He removed his tunic then he placed the t-shirt on and the kids beamed at him.

"Thank you, children," Odin said.

"You like it?" Lucy asked.

"I love it," he said then sat down.

"I cannot wait to see you wear that during a council meeting!" Frigga whispered and Odin laughed.

"Loki, can you make the mead cold?" Thor asked. "It’s so hot out here I want it cold."

Loki made frost encase the mead keg and make it icy cold. "Try it now, Thor."

Thor tapped the keg and poured some in a stein Loki gave him. The mead was cold as snowmelt.

“Aaah! This tastes wonderful!” Thor declared, smiling. Loki handed him another stein. Thor blinked. “For you?” He knew Loki didn’t drink all that much.

“No, for Father.”

Thor filled the second stein up and brought it over to Odin. “Here, Father. Loki made it cold.”

Odin took a sip. “Oh that is good!”

The kids chatted with their grandparents, telling them about their camping trip.

Odin and Frigga laughed at the stories of the car ride, the elk hiding the road to the campground, and were impressed that Loki saved the bear and her cubs and made a friend of the Bear King. They also praised him for saving Thor from drowning on the canoe ride.

Frigga said, “I would like to try those S’mores, Loki.”

“I would too,” Odin agreed.

“We can make some for dessert,” Loki said. “I can do them over the grill.”

“Dad took us horseback riding, Bestefar,” Serena said. “So we could ride horses like you do in Asgard.”

“But Uncle Thor’s horse ran away with him!” reported Max.

“Oh, Thor!” Odin chuckled. “Not again!”

Thor gave his father a rueful look. “Yes, again.”

“What do you mean, again?” Vince wanted to know.
“He had a horse do that to him when he was boy too,” Odin snickered. “It was a stubborn black pony named Ace. And he ran right back into his stall and refused to come out.”

“What did you do?” asked Serena.

“I asked Loki to talk to him,” Thor replied. “It turned out that Ace didn’t like to see the trees shadows. But when Loki told him they were nothing to fear, he allowed me to ride him outside.”

“Okay, let’s eat,” Loki said, and removed all the foil from the food on the table. Then he sat down in the other Chair of Honor, and his kids served him and Odin first from all the food on the platters.

They served Frigga next, then Thor, and then they all served themselves. Everyone drank a toast to their fathers, and then they all devoured the delicious meal. They ate until they were full, and Odin declared this was the best meal he had eaten since Easter. Frigga agreed. Thor seconded it, even as he ate the last fillet mignon steak off his plate.

The kids then told Loki to stay in his chair while they cleaned up and put the leftovers away. So Loki rested and spoke with Odin about the trip they planned to Asgard while the kids cleaned up and then brought out the cake and the apple crisp.

Sam made coffee and Hunter brought out the fixings for the S’mores.

Loki rose to his feet and said, “I need to go and make these for you,” and he went by the grill and took two long metal skewers from underneath it. He wiped them on a clean towel, then put together two S’Mores and turned the grill on. He then toasted them over the flames until the marshmallows were melted.

“Coffee,” he mouthed to Sam, who brought out the carafe and placed it on the table along with the cream and sweeteners.

Loki carried the two S’Mores over to Odin and Frigga. “Here you go,” he said and handed them each a skewer. “Just watch you don’t burn your mouth. They’re hot.”

Odin blew on his before he bit into it. He licked the chocolate and marshmallow off his lips and said, “Loki, these are the best things I have ever tasted!” He glanced slyly at his wife. “You’d better hurry and eat that, dear. Or I am going to steal it from you!”

Frigga pulled her S’More away from him. “Get away, Odin! This one is mine!” She bit into it, getting marshmallow all over her face.

The children giggled.

“Mmmm!” Frigga sighed in bliss. “Loki, are there more?”

Her son laughed. “I can make you more.”

“Make me one too, Loki,” Thor asked.

“One?” Loki raised an eyebrow. “You ate five last time I made them.”

He grinned and took the skewers back and added another skewer.

This time he made two S’Mores on each skewer for his parents and brother and one for himself. The kids all ate the cake and the apple crisp with ice cream, and drank chocolate milk while the
adults had coffee.

As Odin relaxed in his chair and slowly sipped his coffee, his namesake trotted up to him carrying a large bone.

Puppy Odin wagged his tail and barked. “Here is a present for you, Grandpa!”

Then he put the bone in Odin’s lap and sat down, grinning his doggy grin.

Odin stared at the bone. “Loki, does he want me to throw the bone?”

Loki shook his head, his green eyes dancing with mirth. “No, Father. The bone is your gift from him. He gave me one too!”

Frigga started laughing. “Oh my! That is the first time he’s ever gotten that as a gift.”

Odin looked at the shepherd, then at Loki, and he smiled. “Thank you, Little One.” He went and petted the black and tan head.

Then he set the bone down on the grass and picked up his coffee cup again.

Suddenly Mischief came around the corner of the house, carrying a gray field mouse in her mouth. She jumped on Odin’s lap and placed the mouse in his hand.

The poor mouse nearly died of fright, fainting in Odin’s hand.

Frigga looked horrified. “Oh! A mouse!” She jumped up out of her chair. “Loki!”

Her son looked amused. “Mother, it’s okay. It’s not dead. I think it fainted.”

“Loki, is the kitten now giving me presents?” Odin chuckled, looking at the mouse in his hand.

Mischief meowed. “Happy Papa’s Day, Grandpapa!”

Loki smiled. “Yes, that is what she is doing.”

“Umm . . . thank you . . . Mischief.” Odin petted the kitten’s head.

Mischief purred and rubbed her head against his hand. “You are welcome! They make a nice snack!”

Then she jumped off his lap and sauntered back in the house, her tail waving.

Odin gently placed the mouse under the table in the grass. A few moments later it stirred and ran off under the fence.

He looked up at Loki. “Do your pets often give you gifts? My hounds and setters will retrieve game but not like that.”

Loki grinned. “Father, my cat and dog are my furchildren. And they act like it.”

“I see that. You have a most unusual household, son. But it is always entertaining.”

“And crazy,” Thor smiled.

“Whatever you call it, I always enjoy coming here,” Odin said and he gave his sons a bright grin. “Thank you for including me in your celebration.”

“You are always welcome here, Father,” Loki said sincerely. “Happy Father’s Day!”

“Happy Father’s Day to you too, Loki!” Odin said, and hugged his adopted son. Then he hugged Thor also. “When are you going to give me grandchildren, Thor?”

“Umm… well…” Thor coughed.

“Jane doesn’t want kids,” Max informed them.

“Thor!” Frigga frowned. “Perhaps you need to find another girl. You need heirs and I want some grandkids from you.”

“Yes, Mother,” Thor sighed. Then he added, “But for now you just enjoy Loki’s.”

“I shall,” the queen of Asgard said, and hugged Serena and Aleta to her.

“Now, when you get to Asgard, you will have a room—maybe two rooms?—in the palace, dear, and I shall make you lots of nice dresses to wear so you will look like princesses . . .”

“I’m a princess, Bestemor! See?” Aleta showed her the fabric helmet she wore with Loki’s Princess on it.

Frigga looked at her and smiled. “I see, dear. But do you know that your papa is really a prince? And that makes his daughters princesses?”

“You mean I’m a princess like Elsa?” Serena gasped.

“Or Belle from Beauty and the Beast,” Aleta added.

Loki looked at them and laughed. “It looks like Mother is trying to prepare them for their visit to Asgard next week.”

Odin looked quite excited. “I am looking forward to it, Loki. Although I have a feeling that Asgard will never be the same once you and your family set foot across the Bifrost.”

“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

“It is a good thing, Loki. Asgard is old and she needs change. Badly.”

Loki sighed. “I know. And you believe I am the catalyst for such, Father?”

Odin nodded. “You are both the stranger at the feast and family, the commoner and the king, all things wise and whimsical, and the Trickster who turns the world upside down and makes it anew. I am no Seer, like Astra, but this much I do know—when the Laufeysons cross the Bifrost to Asgard, the winds of change will blow.”

The Trickster stared at the Wanderer. “But what change, Father?”

“As to that, only the Norns know,” Odin shrugged. “But it is something needed.” He clapped his tall son on the shoulder. “You are always welcome there, Loki. Not as guests, but as family.”

“Thor, are you coming too?” asked Frigga.

“Yes, Mother. I would not miss it,” her son laughed.
Loki peered up at the sky, which was slowly darkening to purple dusk, and the first stars of evening were twinkling in the heavens. It was then that he recalled Astra’s prophecy, that his true love awaited him somewhere over the Bifrost, and a small grin curved up his mouth.

*By the Nine and all things magical, bring on the next adventure!*  

*The End*

Chapter End Notes

thanks to everyone who has read, reviewed, faved and followed this work.  
Please look for the sequel, Somewhere Over Bifrost, coming soon!  
With more mischief, mayhem, laughs, and romance!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!