

The Rainbow Bridge

By
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Gary Helgeson, holding an ancient amulet, watched in bafflement as the mirror and picture jumped off the wall for no discernable reason. After a blast of thunder rattled the dishes piled in the sink, the wall exploded inward, shattered by a solid-looking rainbow that stopped at the floor of his apartment. Gary dove under the kitchen table with the amulet still in his hands. A cloud of sheet-rock debris filled the air, dimming the brightness of the rainbow. Quaking in terror, Gary coughed at the pungent stink of ozone and dust. He covered his nose and mouth with a hand towel.

Two figures grappled on the rainbow. One, tall with a slender build and wind-blown reddish-brown hair, held a second in a headlock, pulling him along. The second struggled and bleated.

Once they stumbled off the end of the rainbow, it disappeared and the wall reassembled itself, like a film run backwards. The mirror and picture flew back onto their hooks and the dust disappeared.

The first visitor released the second, a short figure with a fierce expression and a paunch that protruded from a sleeveless, open vest.

"Truce?" the first said. "We have business here." The speaker looked at Gary and raised an eyebrow. "Thrall! Why are you holding my amulet?" The man wore a sky-blue tunic, red hose, and a forest-green cloak. Heat radiated from him in waves.

Gary gawked at them.

"Don't be stupid," the short one said. "Look at the treasures in this hall. He can't be a thrall."

"Well, he can't be a warrior. Not with that scrawny build. And warriors don't cringe under a table."

Gary pushed his fears aside and, with some trepidation, climbed out from under the table. "Wh...who are you? Where did you come from?"

"Bah! Why the questions?" the first replied. "After all, you summoned me."

"I did?" Gary understood the visitors even though they talked an unknown language. The words he heard were out of sync with their lip movements, as if he watched a dubbed movie.

"Of course. You used my amulet to summon the crafty Loki, and here I am. I dragged him along," Loki jerked a thumb at his companion, "so he wouldn't steal treasure from my hall while I'm gone."

"Andward the Dwarf." The second figure, only as tall as Gary's belt, bowed from the waist. "I am renowned as the owner of the Rhinegold that this despicable wretch stole." The dark-eyed dwarf was the hairiest creature Gary had ever seen; brown hair and beard flowed in all directions. An enormous hammer stuck out of his belt. "I'm sure

he still has some of it.”

Gary groaned. Loki! Andward! And the Rhinegold! The tale of the gold hoard was the aunt’s favorite opera. As a child, he often listened to her opera tales about the gods and myths from her birthplace in Northern Germany. But those tales were fictional. So, how did a mythical god get into his living room?

“I told you. I used the gold to ransom my brother Wodan. All of it.” Loki turned to Gary. “What’s the quest?”

“What are you talking about?”

“When called by the amulet, the great Loki undertakes a quest for the summoner.”

“I . . . I don’t have a quest.”

“Then, why did you summon me?”

“I didn’t know I was doing it. I just wiped some dirt off this thing I found in my aunt’s attic,” Gary indicated the amulet, “and you showed up.”

“Your aunt!” Loki’s face darkened. “A woman possessed the amulet of the noble Loki?”

“Let’s go back to Asgard.” Andward looked around the apartment. “I don’t like it here. It’s too . . . too light and airy. I like dark caves.”

“I can’t call the Rainbow Bridge.” Loki spoke through clenched teeth. “Not until I complete the mission for which I was summoned. If this fool doesn’t have one, we’re trapped.”

“Trapped?” The dwarf clutched the handle of his hammer.

“I know.” Gary had an idea. “Your mission is to clean the kitchen.”

Loki’s eyes smoldered and threads of steam issued from his ears.

Gary cringed and edged toward the phone in the living room to call 911.

“You dare to suggest that the immortal Loki do kitchen drudgery,” he advanced on Gary, “as if I am a *serf*?”

“Don’t!” Andward grabbed Loki’s arm. “We need him to come up with a quest.”

“Not to worry. The amulet protects him from my wrath.” Loki turned from Gary and paced the apartment. Electric cords popped out of sockets as he walked. So did the phone cord.

“I have a quest!” Andward said. “Give us the location of a treasure and we’ll steal it.”

“Excellent!” Loki stopped pacing and grinned at the dwarf. “I like stealing treasure. Reminds me of all the fun I had stealing yours.”

“You are *not* stealing treasure,” Gary said.

Loki resumed his pacing. After a few minutes, he looked at Andward. “The wily Loki knows how to settle this.” He plopped down on a chair. A puff of smoke rose from the fabric. “You! Make a list of enemies. Andward and I’ll slaughter them.”

“Why do I have to work?” Andward crossed his arms on his chest. “I’m not the one who was summoned.”

“That’s barbarous,” Gary said. He tried to get the phone jack back into the wall socket, even if he couldn’t think of a way to explain the situation to the 911 operator. “Besides, I don’t have any enemies.” How was he supposed to get rid of these two maniacs? They’d probably all end up in jail sooner or later.

“We’ll never get out of here!” Andward wailed. He stamped his feet and spit in the

direction of a trash basket. He missed.

“Hold on.” Gary felt a surge of relief. “I have a quest.”

“Yes?”

“Find your way home.”

“Good one.” Andward nodded his oversized head.

“It’s a stupid quest,” Loki said. “Only a lackey could come up with it.”

“What’s wrong with it?” Gary asked.

“I can’t go back to Asgard until I complete this quest and I can’t complete this quest until I go back to Asgard. It’s circular, that’s what the problem is.”

“Well, it’s the best I can do.”

“I hope you’ve laid in a large supply of mead,” Loki said. “We claim guest-right until we can return to Asgard.”

“I like boar meat,” Andward added.

Loki and Andward refused to leave the house because of cars. To them, a wagon that moved without an animal pulling it was necromancy. However, they accepted light bulbs as magically ensnared sunlight and television as an advanced form of scrying.

On the third day of their stay, Gary came home from his job as an architectural draftsman. He kicked his way through empty cans to get to the bathroom where he gagged at the stench and flushed the toilet. Loki and Andward liked the indoor facility but claimed that removing night soil was slave work and refused to flush.

In the living room, a red-faced Loki sat on the sofa, twitching. Steam issued from the can of ale he held while a soap blared from the TV.

“By Thor’s Hammer,” Loki growled. “How dare that *nothing* take orders from an insignificant woman.” He threw the can over his shoulder, made a rune, and changed into a falcon.

“Loki!” Gary called. “Don’t!”

The falcon flapped to the TV and deposited a blob of white droppings. It squawked in victory, returned to the couch, and changed back to Loki.

“Damn it,” Gary said. “Stop doing that.” He fetched a paper towel from the kitchen.

“It’s artistic criticism.” Loki plucked a gray feather from his hair.

“So is changing the channel.”

“What’s for dinner?” Andward asked. “Pizza, I hope.” Both visitors had abandoned their demands for boar meat after tasting pepperoni pizza.

“You’re almost out of ale,” Loki said. In place of mead, they each drank a case of ale a day while watching TV.

Gary cleaned the TV and sighed. “I’ll go out and get both. Have you figured out how to leave?”

“No,” Loki growled. “This idiotic quest is destroying my reputation. That stupid Thor will laugh himself sick when he learns of this. Everyone in Asgard will be saying I’ve lost my edge.”

“Everyone there says you never had an edge,” Andward said.

“It’s all your fault.” Loki shook his fist at Gary. “But the wily Loki will succeed.”

“Don’t hold your breath,” Andward said.

When Gary returned from shopping, they watched a wrestling match, their favorite sports show. Gary dropped the pizzas on the living room floor and sat down. His visitors grabbed pieces without taking their eyes from the screen where two over-muscled men danced through their programmed match.

When it was over, Loki said, "The next match is the one I've been waiting for."

"Why?" Gary asked.

"It's two women and one is named 'Vikki the Viking Vixen'. I'm sure she's an impostor."

Once the commercials ended, the TV showed a long shot of the arena from a high angle. In an aisle, a fur-robed woman brandished a bull whip, cracking it over the heads of the crowd. The camera closed in to show a tall and robust figure. Near the ring, she snapped the end of the whip around a post and hauled herself into the ring. She had a gorgeous face with blonde hair braided into buns around her ears.

Loki sprayed a mouthful of ale. "Andward! Look who it is! *Gerhilde!*"

Andward stared at the screen, then at Loki with disbelief on his face. "Gerhilde?"

"Who's Gerhilde?" Gary asked.

"A Valkyre who was exiled to Mid-Garth by Wodan," Loki said.

Vikki the Viking Vixen – née Gerhilde – pranced around the ring, snapping her whip at the referee's feet. Beneath her robe, she wore a silk outfit patterned to resemble armor.

"Why was she exiled?" Gary asked.

"She had an affair with a hero in Valhalla."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Wodan is very straight-laced. At times."

"What happened to the guy?"

"Nothing of course." Loki gave Gary a puzzled look. "He's a hero, after all."

"Why am I not surprised?" Gary replied. "Hey! Wait a minute! Can a Valkyre call the Bridge?"

Loki looked stunned for a moment. "Hah!" He pounded his right fist into the palm of his left hand. "The cunning Loki does it again! I'll command her to summon the Rainbow Bridge."

"What a fraud you are," Andward said. "You never have any ideas. You always steal someone else's and claim it's yours."

Loki glared at Andward.

Gary jumped up and walked over to his computer. "Let's see if I can find her on the Internet." With any luck, he would soon be rid of them.

Vikki lived in northern New Jersey, only a few towns away from where Gary lived. The web site listed her wrestling schedule. They had just watched a match taped a week ago, and she had no more scheduled for a few days.

"We need to hire horses," Loki said.

"We should walk," Andward said. "Horses are too big for me."

"Get in the truck," Gary said. "It's the only way to get to Vikki's house."

Loki and Andward exchanged apprehensive looks.

"To get back to Asgard, you'll have to ride in my truck," Gary said. "Make believe

it's an old-fashioned wagon, with a few extras added."

Loki reluctantly agreed and dragged the squealing Andward into the SUV.

Not long afterward, Gary parked outside the stone-walled gate of Vikki's estate. Both Andward and Loki climbed out of the truck and staggered around like kids after their first roller coaster ride.

"Vikki has a lot of money," Gary said, looking at the large colonial house and the formal gardens.

Loki sketched a rune on the gate lock. It turned cherry-red and melted. He kicked open the gate and led them to the front door. "She'll be stunned to see her old friend, Loki."

After he pounded on the door a third time, Vikki, in jeans and a sweat shirt, opened it. She wore her shoulder-length hair loose and cradled a white and black kitten in one arm.

The closeness of Vikki turned Gary's brain to mush. He had trouble thinking. Besides the physical beauty of her face and figure, she exuded an aura of self-assurance and vivaciousness.

"Loki?" She looked puzzled.

"At your service." Loki grinned and bowed.

Beyond Vikki, Gary noticed an enormous room with a white rug and white, overstuffed furniture. A stereo played Wagner.

Vikki placed the kitten on the rug and shooed it away. She stood and smiled. "At last!" She grabbed Loki's tunic and yanked him into the room. While holding him with her left hand, she punched him in the stomach with her right. Loki folded up, and Vikki clouted him on the side of the head. He fell to the floor. She turned back to the doorway. "Andward, you little shit! Helping your arch-enemy, are you?" She grabbed him by the beard and threw the dwarf against the far wall. Facing Gary, she growled, "Who the hell are you?"

"I'm just the driver." Gary held up his hands and backed away. "I'm sorry I brought them." Gary's hopes of getting rid of Loki crashed in the face of Vikki's hostility.

Loki jumped on her back and wrapped his arms about her throat. Vikki whirled around twice, pried loose his grip, and threw him over her shoulder. Loki landed on his back and Vikki fell on him, knees first. She climbed to her feet and lined up Loki's quivering body for another blow.

Gary rushed through the doorway. "Wait!" He had to do something to calm Vikki down. "He came here to ask a favor!"

"Loki?" Vikki blinked. "He wants *me* to do *him* a favor?"

Loki staggered to his feet and clutched her arm. "Listen to me for a moment."

Vikki glared at him.

He pointed at Gary. "This thrall summoned me by mistake, and I can't get back to Asgard unless you call the Rainbow Bridge. That's all I want you to do for your old friend."

"You want me to help you out, do you?" Vikki gave Loki a ravishing smile.

"You'll have my eternal gratitude." Loki returned her smile and loosened his grip.

"Sure, I'll help you out." Vikki grabbed Loki and slung him over her shoulder. She ran to the door and heaved him onto the lawn. "You sleazebag! How dare you ask me for help!"

Andward ran after Loki and Gary followed but Vikki grabbed his shoulder as he ran past. "You summoned him? *Why?*"

Gary's heart threatened to break his ribs. Her musky fragrance short-circuited his brain. "I...it was an accident. And now I'm stuck with him in my apartment."

"Too bad." Vikki shook her head. "I can't imagine what it's like putting up with that arrogant bastard." She gave him a gentle push towards the door.

A few minutes later, leaning against the truck outside the gate, Loki said, "I know women have long memories, but this is ludicrous."

"I recall," Andward said, "something about you being involved with her exile."

Loki looked annoyed.

"What did you do?" Gary asked.

"It was so long ago, I don't remember."

"You never forget anything," Andward said. "Tell us why she hates you."

Loki cleared his throat. "I'm the one who told Wodan about her affair."

"That's nasty," Gary said.

"Well, it was a dull evening. I thought I'd liven things up with a little gossip." He winced as he touched his ear where she had punched him.

"If you're a god, how come Vikki could hurt you?" Gary asked.

"It's the price we pay for assuming mortal form."

Gary felt depressed. Without Vikki's help, he looked forward to a life of fetching ale for these two. What would happen once he ran out of money? "How long has she been exiled?"

"Since that crazy guy was running around," Andward said. "What's his name? Something Hun."

"*Attila?*"

"That's him."

It explained Vikki's antagonism. "That's a long time to be exiled."

Loki snapped his fingers and a spark landed on the grass. "Clever Loki does it again. I know how to convince her to help. Back to the house."

Andward snorted.

"Are you nuts?" Gary said. "She'll kill you...if she can."

"Nonsense. Even a woman will understand my offer."

On the porch, Loki banged his fist on the door. Andward shielded himself behind Gary.

"Come in," Vikki called out in a pleasant voice.

Loki opened the door. "My dear, I have an off—"

The bull whip whirred through the air and wrapped around Loki's neck. Vikki jerked it. Gurgling, Loki stumbled into the room and fell to the floor. Vikki released the whip, placed a foot on Loki's chest, and glared at Gary and Andward. The dwarf whimpered and clutched Gary's arm.

"I have no quarrel with you two. Stay out of this and I'll leave you alone." She reached down, grabbed Loki's throat in her left hand, hauled him upright.

As much as Gary feared going near the furious Valkyre, he entered the living room and waved a hand to get her attention.

"What?" she growled to him, her right fist cocked.

"Loki has an offer he wants you to hear."

“He does?” She gave Loki a puzzled look. “What?”

“I’ll make it worth your while to call the Bridge,” Loki said.

“How?”

“Once I get back to Asgard, I’ll tell Wodan that you’ve been exiled long enough. You can come back.”

“This is his offer?” she said to Gary. “Can you believe this idiot?” Vikki grabbed Loki’s shirt in both hands and shook him. “Listen to me, stupid. I wrestle because I want to. I can do anything I want. I’m the richest woman in the world, and I have been for centuries. I live in luxury no one in Asgard can even dream about. I’m not going back to live in a mud hovel and follow the orders of that one-eyed wimp. Here, in Mid-Garth, I’m free. But you wouldn’t understand that. So, you can take your offer and stick it where the sun don’t shine.” She stepped towards the door and threw Loki back out. He landed on the sidewalk with a body-crunching noise.

Before she closed the door, Vikki winked at Gary.

After returning home, Gary and Loki discussed the events for hours. Loki couldn’t understand why Vikki wanted to stay here instead of returning to Asgard and why she wouldn’t help him. “Doesn’t she realize she’s damaging my name?” He stopped pacing around the living room and looked at Gary. “Women are so selfish. They only consider their own interests, no one else’s.” He raised a hand with one finger extended. “Her refusal cannot be ignored. She must be punished before I return to Asgard. My reputation demands it.” He resumed his pacing.

“If you want Vikki to help,” Gary said, “you’ll have to find a way to apply pressure on her. You have to convince her it’s better to call the Bridge than to have you around.”

“I suppose your right. The tricky Loki will have to outfox her. But how?”

Gary had different matter to ponder. Why did Vikki wink at him? He hoped it meant she wasn’t mad at him. Maybe she wouldn’t try to get even with him for summoning Loki. Maybe they could exchange e-mails or something when this was over.

Gary spent the night dreaming about Vikki. He couldn’t clear his mind of her gorgeous image. When he got up, he found Loki sitting around, too depressed to watch the soaps. He slumped on the couch and stared at the wall. In his black mood, he refused to drink or eat. Andward, in his own fashion, cleaned up the apartment. He hammered ale cans into flattened metal circles and saved them in a plastic garbage bag. He planned to nail them to a piece of wood to make a shield that would be unique in Asgard.

In mid-afternoon, Loki leaped up, seized Andward, held the dwarf over his head and spun around a half-dozen times while shouting a battle cry. He body-slammed Andward onto the floor and pranced around in a victory dance.

“Loki does it again! I know how to get that bitch to help.” He put his hands on his hips, threw back his head and laughed. “After I’m finished, she’ll beg to help me. Only the brilliant Loki could come up with such a plan.” Loki grinned. “Find out when her next match is.”

Gary parked his truck in an open lot a few blocks from Madison Square Garden in Manhattan. He had spent another night dreaming of Vikki. This time they were on a dance floor and spent hours doing the tango, the rumba, and the waltz, which was strange because Gary couldn't do any of those dances. When he awoke, he was exhausted as if he hadn't slept at all and his legs hurt.

They found their fifth row seats in the partially-filled arena and watched three matches before Vikki and Lucita the Latin Lumberjack came on. Vikki made her whip-snapping entrance while Lucita swung a long-handled axe to loosen up. The black-haired Latin Lumberjack wore calf-high boots and a checkered flannel shirt.

Once the match started, Gary gnawed his fingernails waiting for Loki to act. After a few minutes, he drew an air-rune, changed to a falcon and swooped down to the ring.

Gary bit his lip. He had to act. He stood up and yelled, "Vikki! Watch out!"

Vikki shoved Lucita away and glanced towards the sound of the warning. When the falcon swooped into the ring, she swatted it. The bird tumbled backward, losing a few feathers. It recovered and landed on a post. The wrestlers and the referee stared at the bird. Vikki turned to her manager and said, "Give me my whip."

Lucita gave Vikki an elbow to the windpipe. Vikki collapsed to the canvas, gasping for air. The falcon cried out and flew to another post, dodging beer containers and balled-up hot dog wrappers thrown by the fans. They shrieked in delight. Vikki climbed to her feet, holding her throat. The falcon flew down to Vikki's head and grabbed a braid in both claws. Vikki screeched as the bird flew away with a chunk of hair. Blood oozed from the side of Vikki's head. Red with fury, she shook her fist at the bird darting around the ring. Lucita charged Vikki, leaped in the air, and hit her in the back with both feet. Vikki exploded forward and tangled herself in the ropes. Lucita pounced on her. Less than a minute later, the referee declared Vikki too dazed to continue. From Vikki's stunned expression, Gary didn't think she realized she had lost the match.

Lucita danced around the ring.

The falcon returned to its seat and changed back to Loki. "You shouted a warning to her! Treachery is punishable by death. Only the amulet shields you from Loki's vengeance." His mood brightened. "Later tonight, we'll visit Vikki again. This time, she'll help me."

In the early morning hours, Gary drove his truck to the mansion. The living room lights were on. "Vikki's going to rip your head off, you know," Gary said to Loki.

"She can try." Loki chuckled as he opened the truck door. "I'm too smart. I have a plan to get inside the house without her touching me. This is my most delightful victory. I can't wait to retell it in Valhalla. I can already hear the cheers of the heroes as they raise horns of mead in my honor."

Loki strode to the front door and rapped his fist on it.

The idea of seeing Vikki again made Gary's breath ragged.

Andward followed with his bag of flattened ale cans.

Vikki, in shorts and t-shirt, threw open the door. She had a bandage on the side of her head. "You sonuvabitch!" She lunged at Loki.

Loki changed to the falcon, flew underneath her grasping arms, and landed on

the blade of a ceiling fan.

Vikki looked bewildered at Loki's disappearance and Gary saw she had been drinking. "You brought him back! Why?" Her face contorted with rage. "Why are you helping him?"

"I'm not *helping* him, I just want to get *rid* of him!"

"Oh." Her face relaxed. "Where'd he go?"

Gary pointed to the fan. "Up there."

Vikki saw the bird, ran to a wall switch, and punched a button. The fan whirled into high-speed action. Loki held on for half a revolution and slipped off. His wing caught on the following blade. It hurled him into a corner. He smacked into the wall and slid down behind a couch, leaving a cloud of gray and white feathers drifting in the air.

Seconds later, Loki – no longer in falcon form – climbed off the floor, clutching the couch for support. "Wait?"

"No!" Vikki pulled a baseball bat out of a closet.

"Call the Bridge!"

"No way." She took a few practice swings and advanced towards the couch.

"Call the Bridge!" Loki held up a hand. "Or, I'll show up at every match until you do."

Vikki stopped wagging the bat, scrunched up her face, and pondered the threat.

Gary felt sorry for anyone who crossed Loki. The guy had a mean streak in him. Vikki had suffered enough for an indiscretion so long ago.

To Gary's surprise, a fleeting look of delight flashed across Vikki's face, but immediately gave way to a solemn mien. "All right. You win. I should have know better than to try to beat Loki."

"That's right. No one beats the sly Loki. I'm the master of trickery."

"Do you want to leave right now?"

"Yes!"

"We'll use the back yard."

They followed her through the house and came to a large, fenced-in area with a pool, a cabana, and a patio. Vikki leaned against a patio chair, closed her eyes and mumbled a few words while etching runes in the air.

An ozone stench filled the area. Thunder boomed. The air shimmered and took on substance and colors. The Rainbow Bridge touched the ground at Vikki's feet. The hump, hundreds of feet high, disappeared into a cloud.

"Andward should go first," Vikki told Loki. "To prepare Asgard for your return. And to tell them to start a feast in celebration."

"Excellent! Do it, Andward."

Andward gave her a deep bow, hefted his clanking bag of ale cans, and trotted up the Bridge.

Gary couldn't pull his eyes away Vikki's face. She struggled to conceal some deep emotion. Perhaps, the pull of Asgard still had some strength.

After Andward disappeared from sight, Loki cackled and smacked Vikki on the backside as he passed her. He climbed the Bridge but stopped after a few paces and turned to Gary. "Don't use the amulet again, if you know what's good for you." He continued up the rainbow.

Vikki giggled.

"I guess you're happy to see the last of Loki," Gary said.

Wide-eyed, Vikki looked at Gary while her body shook with stifled laughter. She etched a rune and the Bridge disappeared. Vikki guffawed, hiccupped twice, and finally broke into a belly laugh. Tears filled her eyes. She held on to the table to maintain her balance.

"What did you do?" Gary asked.

Vikki took a deep breath to regain some control and said, "I withdrew the Bridge." She went into a paroxysm of laughter again.

"But...Loki was on it."

"I know." Vikki wiped tears from eyes. "He's trapped until someone calls it again. And that sure as hell won't be me."

"I guess Loki isn't so crafty after all." Gary laughed with her.

"Finally," she said. "I get even with him for lying to Wodan."

Gary's mouth dropped open. "Loki made up the story?"

"He told you about me? About the so-called affair?"

Gary nodded. "What an evil creature."

"He made a pass at me." She crossed her arms. "That's why he lied to Wodan."

"That's terrible!"

"But now, everything has changed. Thanks to Loki." Her smile made his knees buckle.

"How so?" Gary shook his head, trying to make sense of Vikki's comments.

"The worst thing about my exile is not having anyone to talk to. I'm always afraid I'll let something slip so I don't get friendly with people. I get so lonely at times. But now you know about me, about Asgard, about Loki. You're someone I can talk to."

Gary had trouble breathing. She wanted to be friends? Even in his wildest dreams that hadn't happened.

"And you aren't like those boring heroes in Valhalla. All they ever talk about is the battles they were in. They make them sound like wars when they were nothing but cattle raids." She took a deep breath. "I have a match tomorrow night at the Garden. Want to go?"

Gary stared at her. For all his dreaming of Vikki, did he really want to get involved with another being from Asgard? Didn't he learn from Loki to stay away from the gods?

Vikki saw his hesitation and sniffed. Her eyes watered.

Gary felt like he had been punched in the stomach. His indecision disappeared. "Sure...I'll go."

"Great!" She took his arm and squeezed it. "I'll leave a ticket for a ring-side seat at the box office. And after the match, we'll have dinner and then go dancing. But now, let's go for a swim."