

Jumbled

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Jumbled

by [analogueAssassin](#)

Summary

Steve is tired of staying up in that tower, even if Loki keeps saying it's for his own good. This year, he's going to check out those floating lights that aren't stars, and nothing's going to stop him. And Natasha's coming too, no matter the threats his guide makes.

Tony- well, he really needs to look before he leaps.

Notes

So, because I saw the idea floating around on my dash about a week ago and just finished both the movie Tangled and a bout of STony fanfic, here's... Well, this, a Tangled!AU. Also hosted on my [tumblr](#), right [here](#).

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

As of 11/23, I'm combing back through to do some minor editing.

This is the story of how I died.

But, don't worry, it's actually a very cool story! And the truth is, it isn't even mine. This is the story of a boy named Steve.

It starts with, of all things, the sun.

Now, once upon a time, a small drop of sunlight fell from the Heavens, and where it landed grew a beautiful golden flower. (Or so they tell me, anyway.) It (supposedly) had the ability to heal the sick and injured, and was rumored to enhance the magic power of anyone who possessed it.

Remember that. It's important.

So, a hop, skip, and a boat ride away, there grew a kingdom. It was ruled by a beloved King and Queen, and equally beloved was their young son, the Prince. When a war started, the King went to lead his army into battle- and, well, he never came home.

Things just got worse from there. The Prince grew up to be small, and scrawny, and frankly, a bit weak. (And, yes: that's Steve.) The war, which had stopped for a short time, started up again, tearing a lot of families apart. And it was about that time that the Prince got sick. Really sick.

He was dying, and the King was dead. The war was taking a turn for the worse. Much worse.

That's usually when people start to look for a miracle. And- for once- they found one, in the form of a magic golden flower. A group of doctors led by a refugee from the other kingdom found the flower and made a serum out of it. Once they gave it to the Prince, he grew like, a foot, and got really, really ripped. He got, like, super strength and shit. To celebrate his health, the Queen and him launched a flying lantern into the sky. But because he was someone really nice, and wanted to help people, he decided to go to war.

He put together the greatest team of soldiers, the Howling Commandos, and led them into battle after battle. Suddenly, we were winning again, and it looked like everyone was going to come home soon. For a moment, everything was perfect.

And, as everything always does, that moment ended.

The Prince went on a solo mission- even succeeded, winning the entire war!-, but, he never came back. And just like that, he was gone. The kingdom searched and searched, but they couldn't find the Prince- now known better by his rank of Captain- for deep within the ice, deep within the mountains, he was frozen.

A century passed. The legend of the price was handed down, never forgotten, and every year on the day he'd gone missing the kingdom would launch thousands of floating lanterns, remembering their Captain's, their Prince's sacrifice.

Around this time, a traveler from a distant land (and isn't that cliché as all hell?) was searching through the mountains for the flower- and found Steve. He was a sorcerer named Loki, and he was looking to increase his magical power with the flower. (Told you it was important.) But Loki wasn't picky. He knew that Steve could also help him gain power. So he defrosted himself one Capsicle, to go, and hid him away in a tower, sans memories. Loki told Steve that he and Loki were brothers, and that Steve had almost died. That Steve had to stay in the tower, for his own protection. And so, for almost four years, Steve did.

Steve pushed open the shutters on the window, letting the sunlight in.

“Natasha! Natasha, we're you go? *Natasha!*“

A shockingly red cat slinked around the corner of the balcony rail and into view, the spider-like pattern on her back plainly visible. She gave Steve a bland stare, as if to say, *Really? I wasn't even gone that long.*

Or, at least, that's what it looked like to Steve, so he replied to it. “You were gone that long. A whole week. Where do you even go, Natasha? How do you even get *down?*”

This seemed to amuse Natasha, because she tossed her head and flicked her ears in a way reminiscent of a woman tossing her hair and saying, *I have my ways.*

“I'm sure you do,” remarked Steve dryly. “And that's all well and good, but I've got things to do today. Are you going to keep me company?”

Natasha gave what had to be the cat equivalent of a shrug, before lightly jumping down off the railing and walking over to Steve.

“Great, then let's go.”

Way over on the other side of town (so to speak), I stood on the edge of the castle roof, looking out over the kingdom. The view was, quite frankly, amazing. I decided the Ringsten brothers needed to know this.

“I could get used to a view like this,” I said, not even turning to look at them. I knew what I'd see: two tall, tan-skinned men, with shaved head and rough looks. One didn't even speak English, had the other brother translate for him. (Though I kinda suspected he understood it.)

“Iron Man! Come on,” the one who *did* speak said, wanting to hurry.

Just to piss them off, I continued. “Hold on- yup. Used to it. That’s it guys, I want a castle. A cool one, too, not, like, a castle knock-off or a manor or anything.”

“We do this job, you can buy your own castle,” he said, sounding strained and forcefully patient. Like one might sound like talking to a petulant toddler. Not that, you know, I act like a toddler or anything. “Now let’s go.”

“Alright, alright, don’t get your panties in a wad,” I said, smirking behind my mask. I didn’t have the full armor that I dreamed about, but my awesome mask was enough to hide my identity and give me a kickass nickname. They handed me a rope, which was easy enough to loop around my waist. Quickly (but quietly), they lowered me into the room where the Captain’s iconic shield was kept. Legend said it was made of a unique metal, and I just *had* to have it. To examine it.

It was child’s play to grab the shield, slip it onto my arm. The guards weren’t even looking my way- they were facing the door. ‘*This is too easy*,’ I mused. Then, as if on cue, a guy sneezed.

Oh, I could *not* pass this one up. “Bless you.”

The guard turned to me. “Thank you.” Then he turned back around, and I signaled the Ringsten brothers to pull me up. I just caught a glimpse of his doubled take as I was being lifted out the window, and then it was all running. Like, hardcore running, me in the lead, Ringsten brothers behind us, the Royal Guard behind them. I laughed with exhilaration, babbling about how it was only eight in the morning and castles and oh, it was a big day!

Really, I had *no* idea.

Chapter 2

"Today's kind of a big day, Tash," Steve said, flipping through his paint and pencil sets. "I'm going to ask Loki to let me out for tomorrow. I'm a big fella, old enough to take care of myself. And I want to see those lights. I know they mean something, I know it. I just don't know what."

Natasha listed to Steve, giving her (most of) her attention. She only began cleaning herself once and while. For a cat, she was remarkably polite.

"Brother! Let down the rope!" Called a man's voice from outside the window.

"Coming!" Steve yelled back. Moving quickly, he gathered all his supplies together and put them in the box before jogging to the balcony. It wasn't much effort to throw the rope-secured close by inside the window for just that purpose- over a special hook and down to Loki. A loop had been tied at the end that hung just a few inches off the ground; Loki put his foot into it and allowed himself to be pulled up and over the side by Steve.

"I don't know how you can do that every time, brother. It must be exhausting." Loki said, clapping Steve on the shoulder and walking past him into the room.

"It's nothing," Steve said, trying not to pant as he watched Natasha hop onto his desk, and from there, the top of his wardrobe. She didn't like Loki much.

"Then I don't know why it takes so long." Loki's words were soft and cold, and Steve turned to him just quickly enough to see the haughty smirk on his brother's face before he turned his back on Steve.

Steve, for his part, pushed down the flare of anger he felt at that one, and decided to just take the plunge and ask his older brother. "Loki, you know how tomorrow night, there are those floating lights?"

His brother, still not looking at him, let out a small, short, condescending chuckle. "Do you perhaps mean the *stars*, Brother Steve?"

Again, Steve swallowed back his anger, although he could see Natasha flick her tail in annoyance out of the corner of his eye. "No. I mean the floating lights. The stars are constant; I've charted them. These only happen once a year- tomorrow. And I want to go and see them. I want to find out what they are."

Loki laughed, cold and mean. "You mean leave the tower?"

"Yes."

"No. Steve, you cannot leave the tower. For one, there is nothing special going on tomorrow, why should these stars be so specific to it? And why is it so important to see them?" Loki didn't wait for an answer. "There is no reason. None."

Steve knew, he *knew* this was going to make Loki angry. But he wasn't stopping. No, sir. "I can take care of myself."

"Yes, I remember the last time you said that. You almost died. There is no reason for you to risk your life like this, Steve, not now." The words were just this side of rational, and Loki was just this side of seething.

Well, Steve was angry too. "If not not now, Loki, when? When will I be *worthy* enough to-"

"This is not a question of *worthiness*, Steve. This is a question of whether you'll *come back home*." Loki hissed.

"Whether I come home? Don't you trust-?"

"TRUST? Do not speak to me about *trust*. I fed you, clothed you, bought your *pencils* and *paints* and let you keep that *wretched* cat, I *SAVED YOUR LIFE*, and you wish to speak of *trust*? I trust you will be dead within the first hour of leaving here!"

"You can't keep me here forever!"

"I *CAN* AND I *WILL*!" Loki screamed, shocking Steve into silence.

For a moment, nothing and no one moved in the room.

"Great, now I'm the bad guy," Loki said softly, breaking the silence. He rested one hand on his hip, bringing the other up to massage his forehead with the tips of his long fingers. "I have to leave again in an hour- I cannot avoid it." He seemed almost apologetic, but that vanished with the icy cold anger underlying his next words. "If you leave while I am gone... I will make you sorely regret your decision." This barely-controlled beneath-the-surface anger was much more frightening than the screaming variety.

Not for the first time, Steve was scared of his brother.

Before he could really process that, Loki was turning, his cape swishing behind him as he strode out the door.

Okay, this whole "running for my freedom" thing was getting really old. We'd made it out of the city, me and the Ringsten brothers, and were dashing through the woods, Royal Guards still right on our heels. I was in the lead, so I picked the path. Dash through here, duck through there, that will be harder for the horses, yes, good-

Ohshitno that's bad-

I rounded a tree, barreling forward, not really looking ahead, distracted by the shield still hanging from my arm and the fact that we maybe had a five minute lead on the guards now, or would, if there wasn't a massive wall of rock right in front of me. And to both sides.

There was only one way out, and that was up and over. "Guys, give me a boost!" I called, skidding to a stop and turning around. Had to keep the lead, had to keep the lead.

The Ringsten brother looked at me like I was nuts. "Give us the shield first."

"You don't trust me?" I asked. Mostly, really, to irritate them.

They said nothing.

"I'm hurt, guys. Here, catch." I threw the shield at the one who spoke English. "Now give me a boost!"

He and his brother nodded. In no time, one brother was standing on the quiet one's shoulder, me on top of his. I could just make it up and over the top, wasting no time in turning around.

"Alright, Iron Man, help us up." I shrugged, and reached for his hand; idiot was wearing the shield on that same arm. Well, I didn't like them much anyway, and feeling was mutual. I grabbed the shield and tugged it off his arm. Ringsten wasn't prepared, didn't react in time to grab it. I held it out of reach, and couldn't resist a parting shot. "Sorry. My hands're full." I smirked, even if they couldn't see it, before turning tail and running into the woods again.

A couple guard would stop and capture the Ringstens, but just in case they kept coming after me, it was best to keep moving.

My fears were confirmed as a man on a horse jumped the fucking cliff and his damn dog (also almost as big as his horse, tannish and tough looking) came running out with him. That was just great. I had to find- yes. A nice, study, low hanging branch was all it took to get the Royal Pain off my ass, although he shouted "GET HIM CLINT" from where he fell, so I kept going. The dog caught up to me quickly, though- had it just jumped off a tree? When had it gotten up there?

The damn thing took advantage of my confusion to bite at the sheild. I yanked it back, starting a frantic tug-of-war between me and the dog. There was another canyon to our right that we kept rolling towards, but neither of us would let go of the shield, until finally it bounced off of a rock and went flying over our heads-

To snag on the very end of a thin branch of a tree that was, wouldn't you know it, hanging over the canyon. We both took a second to process the fact that *yes, that did just happen*, before scrambling for it. I wrapped my legs around the trunk, scooting forward until the damn dog bit my calf so hard I almost fell off. As it was, I flipped upside-down, dangling over the canyon.

Well. If you start something...

I crawled forward, upside-down, with the fucking canine snapping at my hands the whole way. I finally, finally had a grip on the shield when I head the crack.

I just had time to think 'uh-oh' before we were falling down. There was a river below me, and the water felt as hard as a rock when I hit, half the tree landing right on fucking top of me. I

was out from underneath it in a flash, though. Adrenaline, very handy stuff. The dog hadn't died in the fall, either, though, so I hid behind the first thing I saw- a rock. It must have hurt it's nose in the fall of something, because it didn't seem to smell me when it passed.

I would feel a little bad for the thing, if it wasn't so damned evil.

Well, first thing's first- I needed somewhere better to hide. I scanned the area around me. What was there... An ivy curtain? Well, that looked more promising than the fucking rock, I supposed. I ducked behind it, finding a nook to press into when the dog made it's second rounds. When it left again, I had time to actually look at where I was.

The rock thing was some sort of archway, and completely hidden from the other side, was this huge, beautiful clearing. In the middle of it was a proportionality big tower.

What. The hell. Really. What was a tower doing out in the middle of nowhere? I could *not* just let that pass.

I walked all around the base, but there didn't seem to be any door. That was probably even more odd. Okay, now I *had* to know. I searched in the bag at my waist for my toolkit- I always have my toolkit. Then I hit jackpot- two sharp crossbow bolts I thought might come in handy, a dagger, and a knife. That would work. But in the damn mask, it was getting hard to see, so I pulled it off and shoved it in my bag.

I reached up, seeing if I could push the bolt far enough into the cracks between bricks to hold my weight. Miraculously, it did, and I set to work climbing the tower.

It. Took. Hours. Like, at least three hours. But I did it. I had to know, so, so bad. Finally, I reached a balcony. By that point I was a mix of exhausted, relived, and happy. I swung myself over the railing and onto the small thing, opened the window shutters, and was promptly knocked out by a damn good right hook.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

I'm making sex jokes, so the rating goes up to teen.

Also Natasha is scary, even when she's just a cat.

Loki had left earlier, just like he'd said he would. He hadn't said a thing, just threw the rope over the balcony and slid down. Steve hadn't said anything either, ignoring his brother in favor of his sketchbook. The floating lights were his subject, mostly to make a point to Loki (who had probably noticed and just not reacted). But once he was sure Loki was gone, Steve pulled the rope inside and slammed the shutters. It was petty, but Steve was still angry, and it felt good.

If he also felt a little guilty, well, Natasha wouldn't tell anyone. (Mostly because she couldn't really talk, but still.)

He was still standing by the balcony doors, working on his drawing again, when a man half-walked, half-stumbled into the room, panting. Instincts Steve didn't know he had took over. He threw his sketchbook and pencil case behind him as his fist swung out, catching the man off guard and knocking him out. The man fell to the floor with a comical thud.

Steve stood there, confused, while Natasha calmly padded over to the man and began investigating. (Which translated mostly into sniffing him and throwing him dirty looks, but who wants to argue semantics with a cat?) It took a few moments for everything to really sink in for Steve, who joined Natasha for a moment to check and make sure the guy was still breathing before taking a step back again. He needed to sort things out.

"Okay, okay, I knocked out a guy. I knocked out a guy," he said, mostly to himself, as if saying it out loud would help him understand. Apparently, it did work, because then he realized. "I knocked out a GUY!" He laughed triumphantly. "I would dead within the first hour of leaving? Tell that to *him*!" Which brought his train of thought back to the unconscious man on his floor. He wouldn't stay knocked out forever. Steve had to do something with him... Tie him up? That felt mean, tying someone up and leaving them on the floor. No, he wouldn't do that. Tie him *to* something? Like... a chair? He had wooden chairs. That stuck a chord in Steve, something about people being tied to chairs and getting hurt, but as soon as he thought of it it was gone, leaving only eerie sense that tying people to chairs was very, very bad. But what else could he do? He kind of had to. Didn't he?

Steve even went as far as getting the chair and rope, setting them in the middle of the room, before really looking at the guy. He was tall, but not as tall as Steve was; maybe six inches shorter. He had dark brown-black hair, and carefully styled facial hair, and looked absolutely

exhausted, with bags under his eyes and a gauntness in his cheeks that one might get from not eating for a day or two. Steve took a peek in the bag strapped to his waist- some tools, some weapons, a metal face mask, painted red and gold. Actually, the guy was wearing a lot of red and gold. And black. He took the bag, to be hidden later, just in case.

Really, Steve had every right to toss the man onto the chair and tie him down. The man had climbed up the tower, the whole tower, for some reason. To hurt him? Why would this unknown guy want to hurt Steve? It didn't really make sense. There was something going on here that Steve couldn't figure out.

Which was probably why he tossed the man onto his own bed. It felt kinder than the chair and floor, at least he would be somewhere clean and comfortable. But Steve wasn't dumb- he used the rope from earlier to tie the man's wrists and ankles to the corner posts. Gathering up the art supplies he'd thrown earlier, and tucking his sketchbook (which had some bent pages, but that was okay) under his arm, Steve pulled the chair nearer to the bed so he could both keep an eye on the man and draw at the same time.

When I woke up, I was tied to a bed and my head hurt, so naturally I thought I was hungover from a hell of a good time. This would not be the first time it had happened, and it wouldn't be the last. I even got as far as trying remember last night (because it must have been *awesome*) before I remembered stealing the shield, double-crossing the Ringsten idiots, climbing up the tower, and getting knocking me out.

I immediately started pulling at the ropes, but they were tied well, and I wasn't going to be slipping out of them anytime soon.

"Struggling is pointless," a strong, male voice informed me. I turned to look at the source of said voice- a tall man, seriously, a *big* guy, with muscles, lots of them. Very nice muscles. Very nice looking guy. In fact, suddenly, I was okay with being tied down to a bed by him. Yup. "Who are you, and how did you find me?" He asked.

"Aha," I replied. Most my brainpower was devoted to the hot man, and what he would look like undressed. It was a very pretty picture, so far.

"Who are you, and how did you *find me*?" He asked again, looking a little frustrated.

I cleared my throat. "I know not who you are, nor how I came to find you," I said, laying it on thick. "But may I just say, *hi*." I put on the face that made all the girls (and guys) buy me drinks in the tavern. The hot guy looked confused. "How you doin'? The name's Iron Man. How's you day goin'?"

He still looked confused, stepping closer to me and staring down. Tied to a bed, right. That was probably diminishing the effect.

"Who else knows my location, *Iron Man*?"

Okay, he was not amused. "Look, blonde-"

"Steve."

"Steve. Here's the deal. I was in a situation, gallivanting through the forest. I was almost drowned trying to get the- *oh shit*-" I began trying to move around on the bed, trying to look at the room. The shield, had I grabbed it after the fucking mutt had almost drowned me? Oh fuck, I hadn't. Had I? "The shield, where's the shield?"

Steve looked confused. "Shield? You didn't come with a shield. Just a bag full of tools and a ma-"

"My tools! My *mask*! Where is it?"

"I've hidden it. Somewhere you'll never find it. Now, what do you want with me? To hurt me? Kill me?" Steve asked, crossing his arms. Somehow, he just wasn't frightening to me.

"*What?! No*," I said, emphatically.

"So... you're not here for me?" I couldn't read Steve's face.

"No. All I want to do with you is-" *climb you like a tree* "-get out of your hair."

"Really?"

"Yes. Look, I was being chased, I saw a tower, I climbed it. End of story." I would have shrugged, but my hands were tied. Literally.

"You're... telling the truth?" He seemed less agitated now. And a lot confused. I wondered if this was his natural state. Which I might be okay with, because it was cute.

"Yes."

A cat jumped onto the bed. It was all lithe and red, with a pattern on its back. *Holy shit why did it have a black widow pattern on its back*. That was scary. It glared at me, growled, showed me its claws, and looked at my crotch, to Steve, and my crotch. The cat's message (seriously, the thing is too smart to be just a cat) was loud and clear. If I messed with Steve in a way it didn't approve of, it would claw my nuts off.

I believed it.

It jumped off my bed, walking over to Steve, who crouched down to talk to it. I heard a few snatches of the conversation. "I know, I need someone to take me... I think he's telling the truth too... He's not going to hurt me, I can take care of myself... But what choice do I have?" He sighed.

For about half the conversation I thought Steve was crazy, but then I remembered two seconds ago when the cat had offered a castration threat, and figured he was probably pretty sane.

"Okay, Iron Man, I'm prepared to offer you a deal," he started, and picked up a... sketchbook? "Do you know what these are?" He asked, showing me a page.

"You mean the lantern thing they do for the Captain?" That was a little odd. But then, this who situation was odd.

"Lanterns," Steve muttered to himself. "I knew they weren't stars."

What the hell? Of course lanterns weren't stars. Whatever, not my problem, I wouldn't get involved.

"Tomorrow night, they'll light these lanterns, and I want to see them. If you act as my guide and bring me to the lanterns, I'll give you back your bag."

"But what about the shield?"

"I'll help you look along the way."

Help against the mutt would be nice. And an extra pair of eyes. An ally. But... The city wanted me. They hadn't seen my face, at least. That was good. And I could totally do this without getting caught. I was sure.

"How do I know I you're not lying?"

Steve stopped, and sighed. "Look, something brought you here. Fate, destiny-"

"A dog."

"So I have made the decision to trust you."

"A horrible decision, really." What? It was true.

"But trust me when I say that you can take this tower apart brick by brick and not find your bag. So, you do your part, and I'll give you back the bag, and help you look for the shield. Deal?"

"Deal."

Steve untied me, and I rubbed my wrists- they weren't badly hurt, or even that numb, just a little chafed- as he packed some supplies. Food, a few shirts, some pants, some underwear too probably, but the cat glared at me until I looked away. Damn cat. I'd tried to convince Steve to leave it here, but apparently it ("*she*", he insisted) was coming, end of story.

I was regretting this already, and we hadn't even left yet.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Coulson is a little OOC. I blame Clint, who's even harder to control when he is a dog.

I bet he pees on paperwork.

When we were finally ready, Steve threw a rope out of the window for us to slide down. Yes, that's nice, it's not like I'll get, you know, *rope-burn* or anything. Sighing, I tugged my sleeves down over my palms. Better a little bit of protection than none, right? I went down the rope first, the cloth keeping my hands mostly safe. Steve followed right behind me, and Natasha appeared out of nowhere, leaving us to wonder how the fuck she got down.

We walked all through the morning, and Steve seemed very moody. At times, he was cheerful and happy, asking me lots of questions (was my name very common, was *his* name very common, what was the city like) or fooling around (he tried to climb a tree, wanted to sketch some flower, wanted to see if the butterfly would crawl on his hand). And then, all of a sudden, he'd get quiet, and not say word to me, preferring to mutter to the cat. (Which was either crazy or insulting, I'm still not sure which. Natasha, for her part, seemed a good listener, though, so who know?)

And It continued after we stopped for lunch. After awhile, when the sun was beginning to get kinda low in the sky, I got tired of the persist angsting, especially since I hadn't been able to find the shield and I got bored easily without my tools. "You know," I remarked to him, "I can't help but notice you seem a little at war with yourself here."

Steve obviously hadn't been paying much attention, because his oh-so eloquent response was, "What?"

"Now, I'm only picking up bits and pieces, of course. Overprotective brother, forbidden road trip, I mean, this is serious shit. But let me ease your conscience, okay? This is part of growing up. A little rebellion, a little adventure, that's good! Healthy, even."

Steve looked down, at me, beginning to smile. "You think?"

"I know," I reassured him, reaching out to pat him on the shoulder. I had to reach up to do it, which was completely undignified, but whatever. "You're way overthinking this, trust me."

Steve's smile grew, and Natasha approving, and looked a little less scary than normal. "Thanks, Iron Man."

I waved it off, before my stomach started to growl. There was only one restaurant I knew of in these parts, and we'd eaten all of the food earlier (Steve had a huge appetite, and I hadn't

eaten since two days ago, okay?) It was a bit of a rough place, but Steve was a big guy. He could totally handle it. I hoped. Also, the restaurant's bourbon was the fucking best, and they made some damn good bacon sandwiches.

"I'm really hungry, are you hungry? 'Cause I know a great place for dinner." I said at Steve. For his part, he seemed to be getting used to me and the way I just rambled on about everything. He smiled at me again. Damn, he had a nice smile, it made my heart do little flip-flops every time I saw it. Which was *so bad*, as I would go back to being an ass who liked to invent and steal things and Steve would go back to his tower and damn, this was just a bad idea the whole way around.

But off the Snuggly Duckling we headed.

Elsewhere in the woods, Loki was on his way back to the tower, about to trip over a conspicuous red, white, and blue shield. He would find Steve missing; he would find my mask; he would go after us. But we didn't know that, so we laughed and I tried to remember where exactly the Snuggly Duckling was.

"Garcon, your finest table!" I said, swinging the door open and waving Steve in as if I owned the place. "Ignore the smell, Steve. And the patrons. They have some really fine alcohol here. And really awesome bacon sandwiches." Steve shook his head, and I rolled my eyes. Natasha was balancing on Steve's shoulders, glaring as if this was all my fault. "C'mon, Steve, live a little," I whined, trying to get Steve to stay. Now *he* was glaring. "Okay, sheesh, we'll go." Grabbing Steve's arm, I pulled him back towards the door- which slammed in my face. A big guy stood in front of it, arm slung out to prevent me from going anywhere.

"Iron Man, hello. Why don't you stay for a while."

That was one of the worst, cliché lines I'd ever heard, ever. "Ivan Vanko, nice to see you again, how's your bird? Oh, that's right, I don't care. I was just on my way out, so if you'll just *excuse me*-"

A grating laugh sounded from Vanko's left. "No, please, Iron Man. Stay. Or better yet-" The man turned to his lackey. "Would you notify the authorities that Iron Man is here?"

"Nice to see you you, too, Hammer. How about you go and fu-"

I was cut off by a man (whom I'd probably pissed off at one point or another) grabbing my wrist. "He has a bounty on his head, and I want the money!" This sentiment seemed to be shared, as more and more men- including Vanko and Hammer- began to grab at me. I went for the knives I had stashed in wrist sheaths and boots, but couldn't get to them before people grabbed at my arms and legs. "Gentlemen, please, there's enough of me to go aro- *oof*-"

Steve was yelling, too. "Put him down!" Well *that* helped.

Then Steve punched a guy. Hard. The noise the man made as he hit the ground was loud and intimidating, carrying over the sound of the *fucking mob* holding me. "Put. Him. Down." Steve sounded eerily, creepily calm. As in, I'm-going-to-kill-you-all-and-they-won't-find-the-bodies calm. He was probably taking lessons from the demon cat.

They listened, and set me down. Not too gently, but hey. At least they did it.

Me and Steve (and Natasha) walked over to a table and sat down. (Natasha sat on top of the table, and glared as if daring me to tell her to get down. For the sake of my dick, I kept my mouth shut.) Unsurprisingly, a dark-haired man with glasses followed us to the table.

"If you're here to try to snatch him away for bounty money, beat it," Steve said, venom in his voice.

"No, no, no," the man said, pulling up a chair. "It's just that there is a story there. You're a wanted criminal-" He pointed at me, and I nodded as if this was a huge compliment. He moved on to point at Steve. "-and you're a mystery. You obviously don't belong here with this lot, no offense. But what is going on? I've got to know. The name's Bruce, by the way. Bruce Banner." The guy, Bruce, sat back in his chair, expectant. Steve, of course, obliged him.

"My name is Steve, and you seem to know Iron Man by reputation." His tone of voice was disapproving, but did I care. (Well, actually, I did, a little, but you could never get me to admit it.) "He's my guide to the city. I've always wanted see the lanterns, the ones they do tomorrow night, but I've never been to the city. I've been dreaming about going to see them for years...." Then, I guess he reviewed what he'd said in his head, because he added, "Is that weird?"

Bruce looked like he was about to answer, when another man- blond, this time- pulled up a chair and took a seat. "Nay!" He boomed. "Many of us here have dreams. I wish to marry my love Jane and find my brother again, and Banner-"

Bruce didn't look angry. "Thank you, Thor. Steve, Iron Man, meet Thor."

Thor just continued as if no one had interrupted him. "-and Bruiser knits, Killer sews, Fang does little puppet shows, Vladimir collects ceramic unicorns-"

Bruce seemed unruffled. Apparently, this was common. "Thor. Let Iron Man talk. I want to know his part of this story."

I put my hands up. "Woah, no. Stop. No. I don't do touchy-feely talks about dreams, or tell stories, or narrate any type of madcap adventure. Nu-uh. Not me. Move on."

Bruce, Thor, Steve, and Natasha all looked like they'd gang up on me and make me talk, but the door banged open and Hammer lackey shouted, "I found the guards!"

I was up in an instant, and Natasha was right with us as I grabbed Steve and hid in the first place I could find- under the far side of the bar.

"Where's Iron Man? Where is he?" yelled the Captain of the Guard. This time I saw him, and I recognized him as Phil Coulson. Great. "I know he's in here. Find him!" He ordered, and the rest of the guard came in. Lovely. "Turn the place upside-down if you have to!"

I turned around and peeked over the bar, in time to see the Ringsten brothers be led in on chains. Could things get any worse? Oh, bad thought, bad thought! As soon as the thought crossed my mind, the damn dog jumped through the door. (Coulson yelled, "Clint!", sound a bit frustrated. I didn't care.) Now that I wasn't preoccupied, I saw that the tan dog had slightly darker markings around its eyes, and lighter ones around its nose, giving it an altogether weird look that made me think '*hawk*'. Don't ask why, I just did. I ducked back behind the bar again, closed my eyes for a second. I could think of a way out of this still.

I opened my eyes to see Bruce crouching down in front of me and Steve. "This way," he said, and crawled to the right. As we followed him, we saw a bit of the floor paneling give way and lead into a secret passage. He motioned us forward. "Go on, Steve. Live your dream." That was a line that only belonged in musicals. I rolled my eyes accordingly, and slid through the opening.

Steve smiled brightly. "Thank you. I will," he promised, and then him and Natasha we crawling into the secret passage.

How was I to know Clint the Holy-Pain-In-The-Ass Dog would also find the secret passage, and lead Coulson and Co down through it? And leave the Ringsten brothers an easy way to escape, and that Loki would threaten one of the people at the bar into telling him where it let out...

Instead, I was making small talk with Steve.

"Didn't know you had that in you, back there. That was impressive," I said, smiling. Guy deserved some credit, he took out that mook like a pro.

He shrugged modestly, and I was probably smiling fondly, dammit. After an awkward beat, Steve seemed eager to change the subject. "So, Iron Man, where are you from?"

"Woah! Sorry, Blondie, but I don't do back-stories, remember? Although, I am becoming increasingly interested in yours. I know I'm not supposed to mention the brother-"

Steve shook his head, but was still smiling. "Nope."

"-Or, probably not the fighting skills-"

Again with the head shake. "Uh-uh."

"And frankly I'm too scared to ask about the she-beast."

Steve crossed his arms over his chest and raised one eyebrow. "You mean, Natasha?" The cat in question tossed her head and licked her paw, showing off.

"Either-or. Here's my question, though. If you want to see the lanterns so badly, why didn't you ever go before?"

Steve's playfulness vanished in an instant. He looked like he wanted to say something, but we heard the crashing of footsteps, and Phil's voice. "*IRON MAN!*"

Phil sounded unhappy. And as if he was promising me great violence. Steve must have picked up on that, because he grabbed my arm. "Run!" I yelled (and that was probably not the best decision I ever made), but run we did, Natasha right behind us. The nearest opening dumped us out into what was probably a mine of some sort- lots of rocky cliffs and tunnels, some mining carts and tracks, a dam, a water wheel. It... didn't look good, and probably worse because it was almost dark now, but we ran all the way up to the first canyon drop. It looked even worse when the Ringstens came running out of another tunnel exit below us.

"Who're they?" Steve asked, turning to me.

"They don't like me," I informed him.

Phil and his guard groupies came running out from the tunnel behind us. Steve tried again. "Who're they?"

"They don't like me either."

Steve took it in stride, though, even if Natasha looked murderous. (As per usual, though. I was getting used to it.)

And then came Clint.

"Who's *that*?"

"Let's just assume that no one here likes me!" As if this was new information to anyone. Well, Steve, but I knew it, at least.

Steve reached around into his pack, and pulled out rope. Throwing that under one arm, he pulled out and starting bending things that looked suspiciously like my pliers, my screwdriver, and a dull knife into rounded "L" shapes, then tying the rope around them to make a grappling hook. He threw it, and it did it's job, wrapping around one of the support beams hanging out from the dam. Steve wrapped the rope around his hands before taking a running jump over the canyon edge. The grappling hook held, and Steve made it easily across. I wasn't watching him, too busy pulling the knives from my boots as Clint approached me. The fucking dog had a crossbow in it's mouth, and was shooting at me. Coulson was reloading the damn thing for it, in between taking potshots at me, too. I dodged the bolts to the best of my abilities (I felt a pain in my hand one, but ignored it). "You should know that this is the strangest thing I've ever done!" I yelled, still dodging.

"Iron Man!" Steve yelled, throwing me the rope. Less worried about rope burn right now, I gave Clint and Coulson a cheeky salute and the finger before wrapping the rope around my hands and jumping. The lowest swing of the rope brought me too close for comfort to the Ringsten brothers, but thankfully I swung further up to Steve, who grabbed my arm and yanked me up to where he was. Good thing too, because the grappling hook unwound off the beam and we had to haul it back to us. We couldn't waste too much time; Clint and Coulson were trying to break down a support beam so that they could cross over to our side of the

canyon. I pushed Steve into a miner's cart that was nearby, and found Natasha lying at the bottom. I had no clue how she got across, and no desire whatsoever to ask. Once me and Steve were both in the mining cart, I threw my weight forward, to the front of the car. "What are you doing?" asked Steve. Loudly. "Saving your ass, and mine. Just trust me!" I threw my hip against the front of the cart one more time, and gravity took care of the rest, pulling us along the downward-sloping track at an increasing speed.

"Um... Iron Man?" I looked back- Clint and Coulson had knocked down the beam, which meant *the entire dam was collapsing and we were all going to drown*. I could swear I could hear Phil's voice yelling at Clint. I guess maybe Coulson had been trying to stop him then?

Whatever. I whooped, throwing my fists in the air. Steve screamed. Natasha looked terrified. A rock behind us had been knocked down by the fucking tsunami of water crashing down from the dam, and was about to crush us. There was nothing we could do but throw our weight forward on the cart, and scream. Just in time, the track sped us into a tunnel and stopped, and the huge boulder crashed over the entrance. We were, for all intents and purposes, trapped.

The water was rushing in around the edges of the boulder at an alarming rate. I dived under it, trying to find a hole that we could swim through. Steve felt around the top of the cave, looking for an escape, pushing on rocks to see if they'd give. Natasha even pawed at the ceiling from her perch on Steve's shoulder.

It's no use," I told Steve, as the water rose. "I can't find a way out."

He moved to dive into the water and try to find an exit, and Natasha looked about ready to do it herself. I grabbed him by arm. "Steve, no, it's no use! Don't hurt yourself!"

He sighed, and pressed a hand to his forehead. "This is all my fault. He was right. I never should have done this, and now we're doing to die over a few lanterns. I'm so- I'm so *sorry*, Iron Man." Steve wasn't crying, he was sobbing without tears, all gasps and caught breath. He looked so broken.

I sighed, then gave in. "Tony."

There was a beat. "What?"

"My real name. It's Tony Stark. Someone might as well know." *Before I die* I silently added, and I knew Steve did too.

Steve smiled sadly, and shrugged. "I have super strength and speed."

That... actually made a lot of sense. "No wonder you knocked me out."

Steve laughed, and then... "Where's Natasha?"

Both of us looked around, trying to locate the cat. A few seconds later there was a crack, and all the water started to rush out as silvery light poured in from beneath our feet. Totally unprepared, Steve and I were pulled under by the current, with the rocks, before being

deposited on a river bank. It was dark now, but the moon was full, which explained the light we'd seen from the tunnel.

Haha. Light. Tunnel. Ha.

I coughed, spitting out water, and started looking for Steve. "Steve! Are you okay?"

"Y- Y- Yeah!" Came a sputtering reply from behind me. When I looked though, it seemed like the sputtering was less from nervousness and more from inhaling water.

Natasha was sitting on a rock jutting out of the river, calmly cleaning herself.

"Steve." I shouted at him.

"What?"

"I think Natasha saved us."

He laughed. "I think so too."

"Steve?"

"Yes, Tony." Tony. I'd have to get used to that, now.

"I think your cat is evil."

Chapter 5

We weren't the only ones coughing and sputtering after the whole Snuggly Duckling debacle. Miles away from where me and Steve were setting up camp, the Ringsten brothers climbed out of the tunnel's actual exit, coughing and cursing me in languages I didn't know. It probably sounded a bit like this:

"I'll kill him. I'LL KILL THAT DAMN IRON MAN."

"C'mon. We'll cut him off at the kingdom and get back the shield."

Loki, being his creeper self, listened in on them. Of course he knew what they were saying. These peasants weren't the ones he'd been waiting for, but he could use them just fine. This decided, he stepped out from behind the tree that a tree, and let the Ringsten brothers see him.

"Or, perhaps you would stop acting like wild dogs chasing their tails. I couldn't help but overhear you were looking for something." He held the shield out, letting them see it. The Ringsten brothers immediately drew their swords, but Loki just laughed. "Oh, please, there's no need for that." His tone was full of disdain, and he threw the shield at their feet. For a moment, he let them squabble over it. "Well, if that's all that you desire, then be on your way. I would offer you something worth a thousand shields, made you rich beyond belief, and that wasn't even the best part, but you have what you wanted. Enjoy your... *shield*." Loki turned, as if ready to leave.

"Wait!" Growled one brother. Perfect. "What's the best part?"

"It comes with revenge on Iron Man." Loki smirked and said the line as if it meant nothing to him. The brothers, being big, spiteful, bags of dicks, grinned at each other and made their decision.

Back at the river, me and Steve had found a nice place to camp, just a little ways into the trees. It was a nice clearing, with a large tree on one side to shield us from the wind, and a huge tree roots to sit on. I'd already made a fire, and Natasha was lounging near it while Steve and I sat together on one root.

I was looking at my hand- I must have cut it without realizing, because there was a long cut across my palm. Not particularly deep, but now that a) I knew it was there, and b) the adrenaline was wearing off, I could feel it stinging.

Steve gently took my hand, looking at it. It felt nice, like not dying. Leaving him to it, I decided to ask a question that had been bothering me. "So... super strength and speed, huh? Must be nice."

Steve didn't look up. "That's not all I can do. Just... It's easier to show you. Don't move and don't talk, okay? If you talk, I can't do this."

I nodded, wondering what the hell was going on.

Steve took a deep breath, then started to sing. His voice was a soft, strong tenor, and I figured that if he ever wanted to sing again he wouldn't have to ask me to keep my mouth shut.

*"Flower, gleam and glow,
Let your power shine,
Make the clock reverse,
Bring back what once was mine.*

*"Heal what has been hurt,
Change the Fates' design,
Save what has been lost,
Bring back what one was mine-
What was once mine."*

The last note hung in the air for a second, and I could swear Steve was actually glowing- especially his eyes- before he leaned down and gave my palm a gentle kiss. Then, immediately, he looked up at me. "Don't freak out!" He said quickly, before I had the chance to do anything besides draw in the air for my yelling tirade of "what the fuck"s or perhaps to yell for him to kiss me for real this time.

Either way, I squashed it down. "Freak out? I'm not freaking out. I'm just very interested in what the hell is happening. Would you mind filling me in on what that is exactly?"

Steve took a deep breath. "I don't exactly know myself. My brother says that I've always been like this, but I can't remember much of anything before the float- I mean, lanterns ceremony three years ago- I guess it would be four tomorrow? My brother says I almost died, and that everyone I knew died too, and won't tell me how. He just keeps saying that it wasn't my fault, I didn't mean to, but why would he say that if it *wasn't* my fault, you know? Sometimes I can remember little things. Faces in dreams, and maybe a name. I wrote a couple of them in a sketchbook, so I wouldn't forget. Drew some, too. Beyond that, all I have is that song. I remember a woman's voice singing that to me, and kissing whatever I'd hurt.

"Well, once, Natasha got hurt. Really hurt. I didn't know how, but I just wanted to comfort her, I guess." Natasha walked over from her place by the fire, jumping up on the root to sit next to Steve's hand. She rubbed her head against it, a kind of reverse petting, and Steve smiled and began to actually pet her. "I sang that song, and then I gently kissed her on the head. And then, she... wasn't hurt anymore. She was fine. And anytime after that when she got hurt, she'd come to me and I'd do this for her. For some reason, I have to directly kiss the little injuries, but the big ones, I just kiss the person. I don't think my brother knows- he never seems to get hurt." He shrugged.

"But I can't shake the feeling that my strength probably hurt people- killed people. My brother keeps saying that's not it, but I keep thinking about it, and I bet that's he he never let me.... Why I never left." He chuckled. "He scares me sometimes."

I reached out to touch his arm. That sounded pretty horrid. "And you're still going back?"

"No!" The response was immediate, angry, but then his face softened. "Yes? Probably not, it's.... It's complicated." Natasha peered up at Steve, rubbing her head against his arm. Comforting.

Steve took a few seconds, thinking, before running his hand through his short blond hair and sighing. He looked at me. "So... Tony Stark, huh?"

I rolled my eyes. "I'll spare you the sob story of poor rich boy Tony Stark. It's a bit of a downer, even though I shouldn't really complain."

Steve just looked at me, before giving me an '*Oh, really,*' face and waiting. After a moment, he raised his eyebrows, gesturing at me to go on. I sighed this time, gave a short laugh, and gave it a go. "There's this legend, you see. This guy, the Captain, he went to war, and with the help of his friends won every battle! He was handsome, and smart, and cool, not bad with the ladies. Not that he'd ever brag, of course. And for a boy who had no one, having a lot of friends and being a hero seemed pretty good."

Steve looked at me strangely. "Didn't you have a family? Friends?"

I shrugged. "My dad got wasted every night, was more interested in his things than me. He was always shooing me out of the room, wanting to be alone, and my mother was too busy trying to take care of him than me. Even my friends got fed up with me- they were my father's servants' kids, Pepper and Rhodey, but they got tired of my stuck-up sorry ass. I bet my mom was paying their parents to make them play with me in the first place. And then, when my parents died, they couldn't handle me at all anymore. I don't blame them- I was out of control. Eventually, I decided I didn't want to be me anymore. I made a mask and started stealing shit, things I wanted to examine, things I wanted to know more about. I didn't need to, it was just- It was something to distract myself with. And then they started calling me Iron Man, because of the mask, and even though a lot of people hate me, at least I wasn't ignored anymore. It just... Seemed like the better option."

We sat there a moment, just looking at each other. You could cut the tension and awkwardness with a knife. I mean, I just wanted to kiss Steve, and for a maybe a second I was going to, but then Natasha meowed and stretched on Steve's lap, and the moment was gone. I cleared my throat and stood up. "I- I'm going to get some more firewood, I'll be right back." I got up, walking into the woods.

"Hey- wait!"

I turned to Steve, half-hoping he'd just ask for a kiss.

"For the record, I like Tony Stark much better than Iron Man."

That... was almost as good, but... "You'd be the first. But thanks." I smiled wryly and headed off for firewood, flexing and looking at my newly healed hand.

Loki, as ever, had the worst timing.

"Well, he's gone! I thought he'd never leave."

Steve jumped up, sputtering and dumping Natasha off his lap. She scrambled to her feet on the root, and hissed. Loki ignored her. "Brother? How did you find me?"

Loki scoffed. "It was easy, really- I just listened for the sound of complete and utter betrayal and followed that."

Steve backed up to the tree. "Loki-"

"We're going home, Steve. *Now.*" Loki sounded angry, but Steve didn't really care.

"Loki, You don't understand. I've been on this incredible trip, and I've seen and learned so much, I even met someone."

Loki sounded about as disdainful as they came. "Yes, the wanted thief. I'm so proud. Come on, Steve." He grabbed Steve's wrist, trying to tug him along, but Steve jerked it back.

"Wait! Loki, I think-"

Loki laughed again. "You think that he *cares for* you? Why would he like you, come on now, really? Look at you! You think he's impressed? Don't be stupid, Steve, come home."

Steve tilted up his jaw. "No. I won't."

Loki raised his eyebrows, back to smiling. "Oh? Then go ahead and give him... this." He produced a shield- red, white, and blue. There was no questioning- it had to be the one Tony was looking for. Loki roughly shoved it into his hands. "Put him to test, then. And when he leaves you, I won't say 'I told you so'. I know what's best for you, but you're not listening, that much is clear. Don't come crying back to me when you've gotten your heart broken, Brother."

And then Loki backed into the trees and was gone.

Steve stared at the shield in his hands. It was so familiar... Why? But then he heard Tony's footsteps crashing through the woods. Quickly Steve shoved it in his bag. He'd figure this out later, but right now, he just wanted to enjoy his time with Tony. Tomorrow... He'd do it tomorrow.

Natasha looked disapproving, but Steve ignored her.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Sorry it took me so long to update, guys! School's started again, so I'm probably going to update less now. But I will update, so there's that.

The next morning was sunny and nice, and I woke up to the pleasant sight of an angry, mean-looking dog standing over me and growling.

"Well, I hope you're here to apologize," I said, only half awake. It became apparent that my snark was not going to save me when the dog grabbed me by my boot and started dragging me away.

"Steve! Steve, a little help here?" I yelled, trying to wake him up. And he didn't disappoint—he was up and running over to where I was in seconds, grabbing my hands and tugging me (sans boot) away from the dog. The dog just sat there, munching my boot, for a moment, before running at me again. Steve jumped in front of me.

"Hey, calm down! Hey, shhh, Clint. Easy," He said soothingly. I snorted.

"Yeah, Steve, like that's going to help!" I called as Steve started to back away from the growling dog.

"Well, then, you do something!"

The decision was taken out of our hands, though, when Natasha jumped in front of the dog, glaring. The dog, cowed, dropped the boot and began nosing around Natasha excitedly. The only thing I could compare it too was meeting an old friend. But that's ridiculous! The damn demon-cat and hell-dog couldn't know each other. Right?

But soon Natasha had the dog wagging its tail, and, (from what I could tell) was introducing it to Steve. Who explained to it (don't even ask me, just don't) the situation. And decided the dog, Clint apparently, could even come with us if he wanted, and *then* resume chasing me after Steve went back to his tower.

If Steve's voice choked up a bit over that part, I wasn't going to say anything.

"Steve! How do you know the dog's name?" I asked, once we'd set out again. He just shrugged.

"It was written on the collar."

"Oh, well that's just great. Tony the thief with daddy issues, Steve, the pretty princess from the tower-" I waved off Steve's complaints about not being a princess, which he totally *was*, come on, "-Natasha the demon cat and Clint the hellhound, both of whom totally hate me, by the way-" and here Clint just raised one shoulder in a gesture equivalent of a shrug- "Yes, thanks pooch- what could possibly go wrong?" I asked sarcastically. "Besides, you know, everything, that is."

Steve rolled his eyes, and we kept on our way.

Steve loved the city.

When we first saw it, he was excited, if a little nervous, running into the crowd to go look at things. I trailed behind, having seen it all before, but it was nice seeing Steve so happy. We did everything I could think of- I took him to the library, which he loved, running his fingers over the spines of books and telling me things about them. (Apparently, Loki had kept Steve from boredom with a lot of books.) I took Steve out to eat at an expensive restaurant, assuring him that the money I used to pay for it wasn't stolen. Clint gave me a look like he didn't believe me a bit, but Natasha swatted him with a paw and proceeded to enjoy the food Steve had convinced me to order for the animals.

After that, I decided it was time to head to the unofficial party. At the center of town, near-ish the lake that spread from around the castle, there was a monument dedicated to the Captain, standing proud with his shield. Really, I should have noticed that the jaw on the masked statue looked awful familiar, but I was too busy staring at Steve himself.

Who, in turn, was staring at the crowd of dancers in front of the monument.

"Hey, Steve, let's dance," I suggested, squeezing my hand into a fist so I wouldn't be tempted to grab his wrist.

He looked a little lost. Sad. "I... I don't know how to dance." There was something there, some sadness that I couldn't put a finger on.

But I grinned and offered him my hand. "Let me teach you."

He nodded hesitantly, and I stepped close to him, gently moving his arms into place. "When you're leading, and I think I'll let you do that, put one hand here, on my waist- Steve, are you blushing? *Ow, Nat-* anyway, one hand on my waist, and then hold my hand like this- yes, good." I could feel the warmth of him through my clothes, which was intoxicating as only the best liquor. I resisted the urge to clear my throat or lick my lips. "Now, I'll put my hand on your shoulder, like so, and then you step forward and I step back." He did, hesitantly, but no feet were stepped on. "To the side." I let him move first, and then followed him, letting him get used to the movement and the rhythm. "Step back. Other foot. Now, to the side again. Forward. Look at you Steve, you're dancing!" Not well, yet, and not quite on time, but he was leading me in little mincing squares.

Steve looked happy, if a little embarrassed. As the day wore on, I showed him more dance steps, and he learned quickly. His brain soaked up the knowledge like a sponge, and the physical aspect of dancing wasn't too hard to pick up. He knew how to fight, after all. After a couple hours, I had him dancing well enough that he could stop being self-conscious and have fun. I was never, ever going to admit to anyone, ever, that teaching Steve to dance made me happier and more proud of myself than stealing the shield. Ever.

And I danced with Steve a lot, letting him spin me around like he saw the other guys do to small girls. I didn't even call him on it, just let him twirl me without complaint. It was great, being so close to him and just laughing, having fun, not worrying. The music was rising to a crescendo, and he grabbed my waist, pulling me up to his chest. From here, I had to actively look up at Steve, and then the bastard grinned. If the music hadn't stopped the exact second that it did, I probably would have kissed him.

But nothing lasts forever, and it was time for the main attraction.

I led Steve down to the docks, where I'd rented us a boat. Earlier, I'd shoved a few things under the seats, and quickly threw in our packs. Clint and Natasha sat on the docks, apparently having decided that they weren't coming with us this time. I smiled at them and didn't question the weirdness, just got into the boat with Steve and rowed us out into the middle of the lake. Steve didn't question it, just took an oar and helped me row.

"These seats good enough for you, Steve?" I asked, letting my oar rest in its holder. The view of the castle from here was stellar, and the lanterns would look great.

"Yeah," he replied, but looked distracted.

"Something wrong?"

"No, I just... Today's been great. It has. But what about tomorrow? What'll happen then? I need to go back. I can't just... Leave Loki. It feels like that's wrong. But I don't... Tony, I don't want to leave you either."

"Steve. I can visit. It's not like I have anything better to do."

Steve smiled a little, but didn't cheer up. "I don't think my brother will like that much."

I smiled, and opened my mouth to toss off some witty reply, but it ended up being a pointed finger and "Look." Steve turned and saw the first lantern, floating up from the castle. Soon, the whole sky was going to be lit up, and already a few other lanterns were joining the first. His eyes opened wide, trying to take all of it in at once. While he had his back turned, I pulled the lanterns I'd bought out from under the seat, quietly lighting them. When he turned to see them, he looked so happy. It was probably illegal to look as amazing as he did, all smiles and blond hair, lit from the back by a thousand lanterns, every his problem forgotten for a moment.

He directed his smile at me, and I'm pretty sure I beamed back, handing him one lantern and keeping the other for myself. Together, we gave them a little push, and they flew up and into

the sky to mingle with the others. He smiled at me some more, then pulled the shield out from his pack.

"I have something for you, too. I should have given it too you before, but-"

I pushed the shield away. I had other things to be preoccupied with now, and the prospect of examining it didn't seem as exciting anymore. I could do it, and I would be happy, but I would be so lonely. Here, for once, I wasn't lonely. I was... Happy.

Before I could overthink it, and wimp out like I had at least twice before, I reached out to him. It was easier than I thought it was, cupping his cheek and pulling him in close by the back of his neck. And when we actually kissed, it was perfect. I didn't do chaste, and quickly darted my tongue out to make a sweep at Steve's lips. He opened them, and I rushed in, hungry for him. He gave as good as he got, exploring my mouth single-minded determination. Yes, the kiss was still awkward, with our noses squished together until I tilted my head, and Steve didn't know where to put his hands, it seemed, but it was still pretty perfect, in my less-than-humble opinion.

But, like I've said before, nothing perfect ever lasts.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

I pulled back from Steve, and saw the damn Ringsten brothers, standing on the shore, their dark faces eerily lit by a (normal, not flying) lantern. I ran my hand along Steve's arm, then grabbed the oars, preparing to row over to the brothers. I was putting an end to this nonsense. It would pain me to have to part with the shield- which I *still* hadn't gotten a chance to examine- but I didn't want these guys bothering me anymore, and I really didn't want them bothering Steve. Yeah, he could take care of himself, I knew that.

But no one else should have to deal with my problems but me. And if giving up that awesome shield would keep Steve from having to deal with my shit, I'd do it in a heartbeat.

Which was why I was now jumping out of the boat and pulling it up the last few feet to the rocky shore. "Steve, I've got to do something, but I'll be right back, okay?"

He nodded slowly, but Steve wasn't dumb. "Tony, what's wrong?"

I smiled wide and shook my head. "No, everything is fine, it's great, there's just something I've got to do." I grabbed the pack with the shield, and walked away. Steve wasn't happy, I could see that, but he didn't say anything, and let me go.

Tweedledum and Tweedledee were about where I'd spotted them, sitting around the lantern, and sharpening large, curved swords. Whatever. Not even caring that I didn't have my mask on, I stepped into the light and threw the pack down, letting it skid over to their feet. "Here. Take the shield, it's yours. Not much you could do with it anyways, but who am I to judge?" I snorted, and turned to walk away.

Thing 1 laughed. "Still holding out on us, Iron Man? "

I scowled. "What."

He continued. "We heard you found something more valuable than a shield. We heard you found the Captain himself." He and his brother stood, swords, drawn, advancing towards me.

I was still confused. The Captain? But the only human I'd been travelling with was-

Oh, god. *Steve*. Of course it was Steve.

"No!"

I turned, not liking my odds against the two large brothers with only the one small dagger I had in my boot, ready to book it back to Steve. He could handle himself, but I had to make sure, I had to. But then a slim, tall man with dark hair seemed to appear out of nowhere. He was holding a scepter-y staff-y thingie at me, with an ominous glowing blue stone. I got the

feeling that this was going to be bad. Calmly, he leveled the thing at me and whispered a word, followed by pain in my abdomen and the now-familiar sensation of being knocked out.

Steve sat in the boat, trying not to be worried and trying to convince himself that Tony was coming back. It'd been an hour, and Tony had left with the shield. But that was ridiculous, they'd kissed, and Tony wouldn't lie to him. He had to trust that Tony wasn't lying to him.

Finally, he heard steps coming from the direction Tony left. "Oh good, Tony, I was beginning to think you'd ditched me and taken the shield," He joked, turning to look at him-

And saw two tanned bald guys instead. One sneered, and tossed out a simple, "He did." Their swords were curved and sharp, and pointed at him. Steve jumped up, ready to fight, fists held out. Tony hadn't ditched him. These guys didn't look the most trustworthy, anyway. They charged at him, and Steve pulled back for a punch. But before he could even try to hit them, there were two flashes of blue light and they were out cold.

"Brother!" Loki was running towards him, panting, scepter at his side. "Steve, are you hurt?"

Steve shook his head, numb.

"I followed you, and then I saw your companion-" He spit the word as if it tasted bad in his mouth- "leave and go talk to those men. All I heard was him saying that they could take you instead of him. So I ran back to you as fast as I could, and- Steve, are you alright?"

Steve shook his head, and pointed out to the lake. Clearly visible was Tony, shield strapped to his arm and gleaming in the lantern light. For a second Steve thought he saw a glint of unnatural, glowing blue where Tony's eyes should be, but then Loki was grabbing his arm.

"He isn't worth it, Steve. Let's go home."

Steve nodded, ready to be done with it all, and didn't even want to bother picking up Natasha. She'd probably be better off here, with Clint, anyways. And if she wanted to find him, well, she knew the way. "Loki," He began, his voice tight. "You were right. You were right about everything."

Loki put his arm around Steve's shoulders. "I know, Brother, I know." And Loki began to lead him home.

When I came to, my hands were stuck to a boat's helm wheel, and I couldn't get them off. I wasn't tie or anything, but my body was acting on it's own, without my permission. My hands steered the boat to harbor, and I climbed out. All I wanted to do was get back to Steve, but my body wasn't listening to me! Instead, I walked along the docks, the Captain's- Steve's- shield strapped to wrist. It wasn't a surprise when a guard called for me to halt, and that I was under arrest, or that when they tried to grab me my body fought them on it's own. I struggled

against it, but my body continued to do as it pleased, and I ended up getting knocked out yet again. This time, I welcomed it.

Somewhere nearby, Clint and Natasha were watching me, and deciding on a plan.

When I woke up the second time, it was morning, and my body was mine again. I paced the small cell I was in, rubbing at my aching head and wondering how the hell I was going to get to Steve. But, truth be told, he was probably fine. He could take out the Ringsten brothers, no problem. Selfishly, though, I wanted to let him know I hadn't just skipped out on him, as he probably believed. Which was probably for the best. What was I going to do for him anyway? He was the Captain, the hero of our people, although I still wasn't sure how that had happened.

But I am the most selfish man you'll ever meet, and I wanted to be with Steve again. I sighed, resting my hand against a wall, when the cell bars creaked open. In walked Coulson, with two guards behind him. "Let's get this over with, Iron Man." He sounded tired.

"Where are we going?" For a moment, I was confused. I was already in jail, what more did they- "Oh." I rubbed my hand across my throat. Of course, I'd stolen the thing that the city-the country- valued most. They wanted me dead.

Loki unpacked the last of Steve's things. "There. It never happened. Now, wash up for dinner, it's my turn to cook tonight." Steve laid on the bed, still saying nothing, just drawing. "I did try to warn you, Steve. I told you what would happen, what was out there. The world is cold and cruel, and entire families will turn on one if given the chance." Loki sounded bitter and personally hurt, but Steve didn't notice, he was too busy penciling the lines of a comforting face that he missed, with wild, mischievous eyes and dark hair. Loki left, leaving Steve alone with his sketch book.

Steve sighed, and turned the page, drawing the statue he'd seen at the monument. He remembered it better than he thought he did, even went so far as to start coloring it, and thinking how he remembered how hot that helmet was-

What?

He stared at the half-finished picture, then quickly began leafing through the sketch book. Things came back to him, little ones at first, which snowballed, each memory and drawing leading to the next. The dark-haired man was Bucky, how could he forget Bucky, and there was Peggy, and the Howling Commandos, and his mother and Doctor Eksine and the shield and people calling him "Captain" and winning battles and losing battles and fighting and falling over the cliff after finally defeating the Red Skull and plunging into the ice and feeling it break and splashing through to the water and holding his breath until everything went black. Waking up and running to find Bucky and Peggy and finding Loki, who leveled the

scepter at him and feeling his memories wash away and screaming and then walking up again and being confused as Loki said he was Steve's brother and-

He stood up, the sketchbook falling off of the bed and landing on the floor, as Steve stumbled out of his room to find Loki. He didn't even notice as he clipped the mirror, causing it to fall and shatter- the noise didn't even register.

Loki was at the bottom of the stairs, perhaps going back up to check on Steve and the sound of breaking glass. "Steve, are you alright?"

"How long?" Steve's voice was low and threatening.

"I am sorry?"

"I remember, Loki! I'm the Captain! I fell into the ice, and you thawed me out, and erased my memories! There was a statue of me in the city." He paused, getting quieter. "An *old* statue. And the city, it looks nothing like I remember it. How long was I frozen? Where is my mother, my friends? *How long have I been gone?!'*" He was yelling now, and he was going to get answers.

Loki smiled, dropping all pretense and looking incredibly cruel. "About one hundred years. Everyone you knew, is dead."

Steve swallowed. "No."

"Oh, yes. Your mother died three years after you did. They say it was heartbreak."

"No."

"Your friend Bucky and his team died in battle. It was a rescue mission."

"No!"

"And Peggy? She waited for you. She and Howard- you remember little Howard- they went looking for you every year, until they died. He even abandoned his son and wife. And his son continued the legacy, ending up a drunk and abandoning his own son. Unfortunately, his wife also ignored poor little Tony, but that's life for you, isn't it?"

"NO!" He'd been the one to give Tony his dysfunctional family. He was the reason Tony was miserable.

He was angry beyond belief, and guilty for hurting Tony, even if he hadn't meant too. Something was going to have to change, now. Might as well start here. Steve prepared to charge at Loki.

In order to bend the universe and make it work, because a century passed and not 70 years, Howard Stark had a son who was named Howard Stark the Second, and Tony is that Howard's (Howard II's) son and Howard I's grandson. Because then everything fits a little neater, and Howard Stark Mark 1 can still be cool and not a dick and Howard Stark Numero Dos can be a complete ass. Yay, continuity!

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

So someone "respectfully demanded" I update ASAP. And I wasn't doing anything, so I did. XD

This is the last chapter, guys.

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

I let the guards lead me out of my cell, and walk me past the other prisoners. I ignored most of them, but when I saw the Ringsten brothers, I snapped. I was already literally being led to my death. There wasn't much more trouble I could get into. I swung my manacled hands under my legs, jumping high, before kicking Coulson back and using the weight of my fists plus chains managed to knock out the other two. I ran over to their cell, grabbing through the bars and onto one's shirt, *really* wishing I had their key.

"Who told you? Who told you about Steve? *TELL ME!*" I yanked him back against the steel bars for emphasis- I hoped it hurt.

"I-i-it wasn't us, it was that sorcerer guy who knocked you out! He told us!"

I remembered him, and the flash of blue before I was knocked out, and the fact that there was only one person who would know Steve was the Captain. His brother. Of fucking course! But if Steve thought I'd left then he'd probably go back home- SHIT. "Steve, he's in trouble, I have to-"

Coulson was already back on his feet, voice not even strained as he ordered another two guards to grab me. "No, wait, he's in trouble, Steve, *Steve!*" They weren't going to listen, of course they weren't going to listen. And I was going to die, and this whole entire mess was my fault.

I fought as they drug me out of the prison hall, closing and locking the door behind them, and preparing to walk me out of the one maybe ten feet ahead, but it did no good. But then, on the windowsill across from me, I saw Natasha, sitting and cleaning her paw. I stilled, letting the bastards 'escort' me, to raising my eyebrows at her. But, of course, she ignored me. And then the door in front of us slammed shut, and the click of a lock was heard.

Coulson knocked calmly on the door. "Open up."

To my complete surprise, it was Pepper who opened the little slotted window. She was almost ten years older and had lost most of her freckles, but that ginger hair and sarcastic smile were the same. "What's the password?" She asked sweetly, then closed the window again. I

could've kissed her. (In a completely platonic way, on the cheek, not in the way I would kiss Steve.)

Coulson, for the first time, lost his poker face, looking confused. "What?"

She opened it. "Nope!" Closed it.

"Open. This. Door," Coulson said, quietly. Threateningly.

"Not even close!" She sounded gleeful. At least someone was having fun. I felt a tug next to me, and saw one of the guards picked up by his arm, by the fingers of a very large, very green, man. Who smiled at me. I was going to say something along the lines of "What the actual fuck", but was stopped when I saw Thor, being held aloft by a glowing hammer, making the universal gesture for *shush*, one finger over his lips. I nodded, and let the jolly green giant pick off the other guard.

Coulson was still dealing with Pepper. "You have three seconds. One. Two." And he finally turned around. "Thr..." And stopped, looking for his men. I shrugged, and Pep opened the door to let a smiling Rhodey in. Rhodey waved, and then hit Coulson over the head with, of all things, a frying pan. He looked at it. "Huh. Handy."

I smiled as Thor and the green guy landed next to me, and Pepper and Rhodey ran over for hugs. "Where did you guys even go?" I asked, as Pepper unhooked Coulson's keys from his belt and took off my manacles. "Tony, we told maybe eighteen times that we were going to find work at the castle, and couldn't stay, but every time we did you got drunk until you forgot. By the way, that's *not* how you deal with things in healthy way. In the end we had to just go- Stane wasn't paying us anymore, but I heard you fired him soon after, and then we couldn't find you," Pepper explained. Rhodey just hugged me tight and added, "When you disappeared, we thought you were dead, Tony."

I smiled, and relaxed into their affection, before shooing them off of me and grabbing the fallen guards' swords, and tucking a small throwing knife in my boot. They weren't my trusty daggers, but they'd do in a pinch. Thor clapped a hand to my shoulder. "Man of Iron, me and Bruce-" He waved at the large green man, and I'm pretty sure there was a long story there I didn't need to know- "-Heard you were in trouble, and came to your aid. Are you injured?"

I smiled at him. "No, I'm fine. But, if you don't mind me asking, who went and got you?"

Thor cocked his head like this was a ridiculous expression. "The lady feline Natasha, and her companion, canine Clint."

That was... too weird for words, but okay. Natasha walked daintily over to me, and Clint ran around a corner, again with that damned crossbow in his mouth. I smiled. "Thanks, guys." They preened, the little bastards. Thor, though, just nodded at them. "I believe, fine warriors, that it is time for us to do battle, and free the Man of Iron from this place so that he may help Steve!"

Our group cheered, and we began to move out.

The fight was exhausting. Bruce knocked over men like bowling pins, Thor whacked them aside with his hammer, Clint shot bolts through guard's feet, Natasha clawed faces, Rhodey used some miniature catapult, and Pepper showed me the escape route, at the end of which was a large black horse. She shoved me on. "Go, Tony, go! We'll finish up here, and then we'll go clear your name. *Go!*"

I ran the horse out of the city- it seemed like all the guards were preoccupied in Fury's castle- and through the forest to Steve's tower. He had to know that Loki wasn't his brother, that he was in danger, that I didn't leave him that I-

Cared.

Oh fucking fine, I loved him. I needed to tell him that I loved him. That I had from the moment I first saw his stupidly handsome face, even if it was the embodiment of every cliché that I loathed.

I had the horse gallop all the way to tower, not even waiting to let the horse slow to a stop, just jumping off. "Steve!" I called, and yeah, maybe this wasn't the best plan ever, but I'd committed to it. "Let me up!"

The rope was thrown out of the window, and I grabbed it, pulling myself up. Was I tired? Fuck yes, but I needed to get to Steve. I pulled myself onto the balcony, walked in through the door, and-

Steve. He was bound by glowing blue shit, and his mouth was covered by it. Unsurprisingly, he looked increasingly distressed, struggling. I could hear his muffled voice screaming. Well, shit, I knew what that meant. I began to turn, and saw the sorcerer over my shoulder, too late to do anything but raise my hands.

Loki stabbed me. I felt the sharp scepter's end like a white-hot blade, running all the way through my body, through the middle of ribcage in the center. Inches from my heart. This... This was it. I was dying. I stumbled forward, the backward, finally falling over to land on my side. Loki sighed. "Now look what you've done, Steve. Don't worry, our secret will die with him. As for us, I'm taking you back to my homeland, where no one will ever find you again."

The magic over Steve's mouth flickered as he was dragged by an unseen force. probably Loki. "Steve, stop fighting me!" Loki sounded aggravated, and it was probably because of that the magic over Steve's mouth finally broke.

"No!" He shouted. "I won't stop. I will keep fighting you every day for the rest of my life! I will never stop! I've been through a war, and I can get through this! But, if you let me save him, I'll go with you. I won't fight, I'll whatever you want! Just. Let me. Save him." Steve sounded angry, a calm, hot anger. Loki smiled.

Loki sneered. "Do you believe I am that stupid, Steve? Of course I won't let you. I know already how that would go. No, you will come with me. Fight me or not, my power is increased just by being *near* you. Do all you like, you cannot- *urk*-" He coughed and broke

off his villainous monologueing to look down, and see my knife in the gap between his clavicles. Aim and stubbornness- my two good points, even when it hurts to breathe.

"Got... You..." I crowed pathetically, from my corner. Little boot throwing-knives come in handy. The magic around Steve's wrist flicked weakly as Loki gurgled. Hell yes, I probably cut the vocal chords. But, I was dying too. And I didn't have much time, if the fact that the pain going away was any indicator. I heard somewhere that going numb was bad.

I didn't have time to waste on extra words, drawing breath was getting harder. But he had to know. "Steve. Boats- didn't... Leave you," I choked out. Already my voice was breaking and quiet. Steve wasn't crying but he looked close. I think. Blurry vision, hard to tell. Hell, I was probably crying.

"I know you didn't," He said, and his voice was breaking, too. Oh. Guess he *was* crying, after all. I could hear his struggles against the magic, not all quite gone. I wanted him by my side now, but even in death I couldn't get what I wanted.

"Steve. Miss you... Love you."

I barely heard Steve yell, "Tony, *Tony*, *TONY NO!*" as the word faded to black silence. I let out one last breath, and died.

Steve was crying. He knew it. But he couldn't stop it. At last, the last treads of magic faded away and Loki finally died. Steve scrambled over to Tony, who was so still. Tony was never this still. Or quiet. No, no, this wasn't happening. He could fix this.

"Flower, gleam and glow, let your power shine-" Voice breaking, still crying, gasping for breath, Steve still tried to sing. "-Make the clock reverse, bring back what once was mine." But it wasn't working. It wasn't working. "What once was mine... Tony!" Even as he desperately pressed his lips to Tony's forehead, he knew it wasn't going to work. Nothing he was doing was working. Giving up, Steve cradled Tony in his arms, still crying, and buried his head against Tony's bloody chest and just cried.

What he didn't see was the tear that fell off his eyelash and into the wound. And then another, and another. The wound began glowing blue, closing up. The blue congregated into a small circle, and then ten smaller circles around it. Steve moved back, watching in wonder as the blue light sealed the wounds and then settled back into it's pattern, still glowing. He held his breath, waiting. Hoping.

And I opened my eyes. "Steve?"

"Tony?"

"Please tell me you kissed me."

Steve let out a startled, breathy laugh. He was very warm, holding me close like a girl. I kissed him properly this time, long and deep, licking into his mouth and encouraging him to

do the same to me. He laughed more when I rolled over, trapping him under me, and kissed him again. I wanted to taste every bit of that mouth, to own it all. Because I'd be *damned* if I was dying again without tapping this ass.

He chuckled, and grabbed my hands, linking our fingers together. "Tony. I love you."

I smiled. "I love you, too, Steeeeeeve," I said, pretending it was joke, even if we both knew better. "Now let me show you how much!" I leered at him, and leaned in to steal another kiss.

Steve laughed, pushing me away. "I think there are a few loose ends to tie up first."

We met King Fury. We decided we didn't like Fury much.

I apologized to Coulson, and found out that Clint was actually a person Loki had turned into a dog. Also that Clint was just as insufferable when he could use his words. Those two spent a lot of time together, but I figured I'd be assassinated if I said anything.

Natasha was also a human, and scarier now that she was person-sized and deadlier than ever. She apparently *did*, in fact, know Clint, who's like her gay best friend(?), and they'd been turned by Loki in the same mission. She and Steve are still good friends, and talk a lot, or spar when one of them is having a bad day. I assume she's happy- she's never told me otherwise.

Bruce wasn't the sharing type, just shrugged and said it was his own fault. Nothing else was asked or said. But he did, apparently, like science, and that was something we could bond over.

Thor was apparently Loki's brother, and looked ready to cry when he learned the person his beloved brother had become. He simply asked if he had suffered much as he died- I lied, and said no. He nodded, excused himself, and no one saw him or his wife the rest of the day. He's fine now- him and Jane even have a little brunette terror of a son, and a pretty blonde daughter. Our group spoils the shit out of them.

Pepper and Rhodey and I were friends again. I terrorized them and they give as good as they get from me, which I expect. Most days.

Steve? He declined to be put back into the line of succession, but was instead made into a trusted adviser, and he was really good at coming up with ideas that were fair. The people loved him, and threw a party in celebration of their Captain. The party lasted an entire week, and honestly, I don't remember most of it. Steve hated the attention.

Me? I quit thieving, and started researching more, often with Bruce. I wanted to know how magic worked- specifically the mark on my chest, nicknamed the Arc Tattoo. Long story, inside jokes, etc.

I know what the real question is. Did me and Steve ever get married? Well, yes. As soon as possible. I couldn't stand that the world didn't recognize us as an official, unbreakable couple.

We even adopted the most cutest, best, most terrible kid in the word, Peter, because we could, and pretended not to notice when we all spoiled Peter, too.

And it's kind of exactly like a happily ever after.

Chapter End Notes

I want to thank each and every person who read and Kudo'd my story, and REALLY want to thank each and every commenter-you left such kind messages, and a lot of you even commented twice or three times. I didn't have time to reply to you guys, but I smiled like an idiot every time I read your kind words.

Please, if you see typos/errors, feel free to point them out to me, as I have no beta.

Thank you all!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!