Left or Right?

by why_not_jane

Summary

Steve falls down the rabbit hole, into a rainbow world of deceit.

(Full summary inside)

Notes

PROMPT:
Steve gets sent to a parallel universe (A little warning next time, Stark). It is even more terrifyingly different then where he first arrived in the future- it has taken the things he knows, and twisted them almost beyond recognition. Stumbling through the deceptively cheerful forest, he meets a girl, sitting at a table set for a tea party, all alone. Introducing herself as Darcy, she becomes his guide to a world full of talking flowers and disappearing cats. Only later does he find out she is the Princess D’Arcy Rose, daughter of the Queen of Hearts, whose passion is crushing the hearts of those in love.
When he fails to save her in this world, he is sent back to Earth, only to meet one college
student and intern, Darcy Lewis. Noticing parallels between the two worlds, he sets out, determined not to fail Darcy this time. Even if she doesn’t know who on earth he is…

This story is based on a prompt I wrote ages ago. A lot of the characters in Wonderland are ‘mash-ups’- neither one character nor the other (each is a mash-up of an AiW character and an Avengers one), but somewhere in between. Please enjoy!

Special thanks to beta readers, amazon-x and moisturizzzemeeeee, my biggest fan and best friend.
Wonderland belongs to Lewis Carroll and company. Avengers and characters to Marvel. Some ideas stolen from Once Upon a Time (The heart thing). But the writing is mine.

See if you can guess which Avengers characters are crossed over with which AiW characters.

See the end of the work for more notes

The silence was ear piercing. At first, Steve thought that the explosion in Stark’s lab had sent him to the hospital, but as he listened intently, fighting to keep his breath even, something was missing. The bustling of people in the corridor, the murmuring of concerned friends. The buzzing and beeping of machines.
There was nothing. Just his heart, beating steadily.

He definitely wasn’t lying on concrete. It had to be a bed of some sort, the way it cushioned his body. Smells floated in the air, flowery, fruity scents, of roses and citrus. And was that- lavender? It had always been his mothers favourite. She used to put lavender under his pillow when he slept, telling him it would chase away the bad dreams as she kissed his forehead goodnight.

But the only thing he could hear was his increasing heartbeat.

And he opened his eyes.

The colours nearly blinded him, vibrant, almost sinfully so, enveloping him. He was in a forest, or maybe an overgrown garden, lying on his back in soft green grass. Sunlight twinkled through the trees, illuminating the beautiful plants and flowers, the deep purple of a lavender bush practically glowing in the soft light.
A soft titter danced through the air.

“My goodness, thought the fellow was never going to wake! Talk about sleeping beauty, eh?”

Steve jumped to his feet, swinging around. He couldn’t see anyone, which probably meant speakers. Trying to spook him? Or scared he could beat them in a close quarters fight?
“Don’t be silly, Crimmy! Aurora was a girl. Though I don’t believe I’ve ever seen a human with such blue eyes! And those lashes... oooh, he looks like a prince in, well, a fairytale!” This spurned on giggles, and Steve spun around again. He couldn’t see any cameras, or speakers, and he had no idea where he was, though no one seemed to actually be keeping him there. The only thing making him resolutely stand his ground was curiosity. He hoped he didn’t go the same way as the cat.

“He doesn’t look too bad from the rear end, either!” another voice chimed in.

The little garden started shaking merrily, filled with naughty giggles and rousing hoots.

Steve bristled. It was like he was a picture on display in a museum, reminding him of the way people used to talk behind his back when he was younger and smaller, laughing at all his faults, never matching their idea of the perfect man. But now he did (or so he was told) and yet the laughter didn’t stop.

“He’s just like that Alice! Can’t see past the end of his nose!” the first voice snapped.

“His nose is rather charming, too, in a crooked sort of way.” Another voice giggled, and Steve had to fight against instinctively raising his hand to clamp over his nose.

“Where are you?” he called out, while backing into an old oak tree, glancing up, almost unconsciously, just like he was talking to JARVIS. He couldn’t help but look up.

“Oh, he’s just like that Alice! Can’t see past the end of his nose!” the first voice snapped.

“His nose is rather charming, too, in a crooked sort of way.” Another voice giggled, and Steve had to fight against instinctively raising his hand to clamp over his nose.

“Please reveal yourself, this doesn’t have to get ugly,” Steve said unwaveringly, despite his confusion. Whomever the voices belonged to, they didn’t sound particularly malignant.

“Down here, you ginormous nincompoop!” the first voice called. Not exactly crippling material, Steve thought.

He looked down, seeing nothing but roses and pansies.

He was about to ask again, when one of the roses moved, in a distinctly un-plant like manner. Squinting, he bent down further. Was that? Were they tiny, little… Then he yelped, something slapping very thoroughly on the backside. He jumped around, and saw a branch moving back up into its original position.

“Serves you right,” snapped the voice. It came from the large crimson Rose staring up into his face. Steve could just make out little eyes and a mouth, all carefully formed by petals.

“Now, young man, how do you think Willow felt, with a nasty, sweaty human shoved up against her? One would think you were raised in a compost heap!” she huffed angrily.
“Flowers don’t talk,” Steve blurted, stunned.

“Well, what do I look like?” the Rose roared, looking a bit miffed, “A bloody lamppost?”

“Uh, no, it just-” Steve paused and shook his head, “I’m arguing with a brainless flower... I am going to kill Stark.” Steve laughed breathlessly, rubbing his forehead.

“Excuse you! We are not figments of your pathetic imagination,” she sniffed, “And just because I, we, do not have brains, doesn’t mean that we can’t think, and feel.”

“And talk!” interrupted a purple Pansy.

“And talk!” roared the Rose. “Some people do an incredible amount of talking without a brain.”

Steve leaned down so he was face to face with the plant. “You’re not helping your argument that you’re not from my imagination, ‘cause I’m pretty sure that line is from The Wizard if Oz,” he informed it.

“I’d get back if I were you. At that distance, she could probably rip your eyeballs right out of their sockets,” a voice said chirpily.

Steve leaped back, just as the Rose swung a thorny branch.

The voice belonged to a young woman in her early twenties, Steve guessed. She was the most familiar looking thing he had seen since waking up in this vibrant dream world, and at the same time, the oddest.

Dark chocolate hair framed her face, the tips turning a deep blood red. Her stripy red and black tights and floaty red pinafore dress were at odds with a worn black leather jacket and heavy boots, one crossed lazily over the other. Her eyes, swirled a strange blue that seemed almost metallic. Perhaps it was just a trick of the light.

But she was human.

“Thank you, ma’am,” Steve said politely.

She raised an unimpressed brow.

“Darcy,” she said.
Steve blinked.

“My name. Darcy. You’re not talking to my mother. But if you ever do have the crappiest of luck, use your best manners. Seriously, she gets pissy real easy,” Darcy tilted her head and smiled mischievously.

Steve must have looked blanker than a piece of paper, because she tried to explain. At least, that’s what Steve assumed she was doing.

“Eyeballs,” she forged on seriously, “They get these clamps, and they just yank. And the screams...” Darcy shuddered, frowning at the ground. She blinked, and a blush spread over her cheeks.

“Hey, I told you, I’m not my mother. No bowing, or any of that worshiping crap. I’m not a dictator.”

To Steve’s bewilderment, she was speaking to the flowers. He tilted his head down to see the entire garden bowing their tiny petaled heads, even the thorny Rose.

Was this Darcy important? Should he be bowing too?

But logic won out. It was all in his head, so how could it matter what he did or did not do? It was just a matter of time until the dream ended. He pinched himself on the arm. It hurt, but he did not miraculously wake up.

Maybe the SHIELD doctors had finally found something strong enough to keep him asleep while his body fixed itself up? Or maybe it was something much worse. Pinching yourself had always seemed like a silly idea anyway.

“You okay?” Darcy asked, eyeing him oddly.

“Pardon?” It was like waking up in the twenty-first century all over again. Though this place had a more surreal, dream like quality.

“You pinched yourself. Is your arm going numb or something? Don’t tell me Poppy got to you. Her pollen can have a weird effect.” Darcy did look concerned, but there was no erasing the twinkle of mischief in her eyes.

“He thinks we’re all in his head,” Rose informed Darcy.

“What?” Darcy sniggered, “like a dream or something?”
“Exactly,” she said, before lowering her voice to a carrying stage whisper.

“Apparently, flowers don’t talk.”

Darcy raised a brow at Steve. “Oh really?”

Steve swallowed. “Last I checked,” he said determinedly.

“Crimson seems to disagree. Quite boisterously, in fact. I think you might even find that she has an excellent vocabulary if you braved the thorns to stay for a chat,” she smiled.

“I’m not saying she can’t talk,” Steve said, frustratedly, “Just that in the real world, flowers don’t have the... necessary equipment to have a conversation,” Steve crossed his arms resolutely.

“In the real world?” Darcy scoffed, copying his movements, “Still think we’re all in your head?” she frowned. “So if I hadn’t been here, and Crimson did rip out your eyes, you wouldn’t have felt a thing? Did it hurt when you pinched yourself?”

A flash of smugness crossed her face as Steve froze. That... was an interesting way of looking at things. She might not be entirely incorrect. If Steve were to be completely honest with himself, his dreams weren’t usually this vivid. They played out in black and white like an old film, which was suitable, considering their subject.

Darcy slowly walked up to Steve, so close that their chests nearly touched, and she had to tilt her head up to look at him.

Despite towering over her, Steve felt utterly out of his depth. Something to do with her knowing smirk and electric eyes.

“Do you mean to say,” she asked slowly, and Steve could smell honey and chocolate on her skin, “that I’m not real?”

Steve was finding it hard to think properly when faced with her infuriating grin. Or perhaps because Darcy was in such close proximity.

“I guess not,” he said boldly.

She finally stepped away, placing a hand over her heart, pouting.

“That hurt. And I don’t even know your name. Weird, huh?” she said.
Their audience, who had been watching with heated whispers, burst into loud sniggers.

“I’m Steve,” he said.

“Just Steve?” Darcy asked, putting her hands in the pockets of her pinafore and shifting her weight onto her left foot.

“Just Darcy?” he returned, careful not to trip over his words.

“Oh, a wise guy. Guess I’ll have to watch my tongue around you,” she quipped, turning around and skipping away into the shadows of the trees.

“Are you coming, Steve?” she called over her shoulder teasingly.

“Where?” he asked.

Darcy stopped, and turned around with a little pirouette.

“You’ve managed to dream up the most beautiful, magical world in all the realms, and you don’t want to explore? For shame,” she frowned at him, but when Steve hesitated, she laughed.

“Oh, come on, what’s the worst that could happen? You wake up?”

Steve ground his teeth, but followed after her into the forest.

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“So if the flowers in your world don’t talk, what do they do?” Darcy asked, frowning at her feet. She was placing each foot exactly on a paving stone, careful not to step on the cracks.

“Are they just... part of the scenery?” she asked.

“Yeah, pretty much,” Steve said, pulling her out of the way of an overhanging branch. He overestimated the strength needed, and she bounced against his chest. She beamed up at him.

“Thanks.” She linked her arm through his, and took over-exaggerated steps to keep up with him. He smiled, and took an even bigger step, and Darcy laughed. “I always wondered where ‘wallflowers’ came from,” she mused.
“Sometimes they’re used as ornaments, or presents. And in perfumes, I think,” Steve said, eager to keep the smile on her face.

Darcy snorted.

“Imagine giving a talking flower to your betrothed. Sitting all pretty at the dressing table, then, ‘My goodness, that dress with those shoes? Darling, are you colourblind or were you just raised by a mole?’”

Steve laughed, feeling warmth spread through his chest.

Darcy’s eyes widened, and she bit her lip as she gave an unsure smile back. She almost looked surprised that he laughed.

“You’re world seems a lot less interesting than mine,” she frowned, “and possibly quite more peaceful.”

“Believe me, if my world was more peaceful, I wouldn’t be here,” Steve muttered. Then he frowned. “What do you mean, more peaceful?” he asked.

An odd expression graced her face, one Steve couldn’t place, before she gave a brittle smile.

“Mum’s the word,” was all she said, eyes glinting in the strange light that filtered through the leafy canopy.

Steve was about to question what she meant when he paused.

Something was wrong.

He pulled Darcy to a stop, and gestured for her to be quiet.

The vegetation was no longer pretty emerald, but a poisonous, blackened green, with black fruit dangling from twigs. They were apples, so red they appeared black. The leaves which had rustled in the wind stood silent. Except for Darcy and Steve breathing, the sound rasping through the silence, everything was quiet.

“Oh,” Darcy murmured, her eyes widening. The light illuminating her face rippled, like he was viewing her through water.

“We took a wrong turn,” she whispered.
Wind whistled behind Steve. He ducked, pulling Darcy along with him, flattening her to the ground. A huge branch swung over them, leaves tugging as it swiped the top of Steve’s head.

Darcy felt warm and soft beneath him as they lay, breathing deeply.

“Get up!” said Darcy suddenly.

Steve rolled off her, missing her touch even before he let go.

“Up, up!” she yelled, scrambling to her feet.

The air filled with snaps and creeks.

Steve saw a branch hurtling down out of the corner of his eye, and flattened himself again. Something slithered over his legs, constricting with crushing force.

“Steve!” Darcy yelled, trying to pull the rope-like roots off his legs. He rolled onto his back and sat up, wishing for his shield, a knife, something. He and Darcy yanked and tugged, but it didn’t yield. The root was tough, wrapped too tightly to get a good grip.

The forest, previously statue still, was now waging war with deadly delight. Darcy yelled as roots crept up her own legs, yanking her onto Steve. The roots encircled them, binding them tightly together. Steve could no longer sit up. Darcy whimpered as it squeezed her ribs.

Shrieks filled the air. The heavy beating of wings mixed with the creaking of living wood.

“What’s th-” Steve panted.

“Shut up!” Darcy hissed.

She lay deadly still on top of him, barely breathing.

Steve followed orders, trying to concentrate on the war that was being fought around them, rather than the warm weight on his chest.

“It’s migrating season,” Darcy whispered softly in his ear, warm breath like honey.

“The trees here don’t like to be used as a resting stop- they get kinda tetchy round this time of year,” she explained.

Steve felt the root around his chest loosen.
“arrows thought we were birds?” Steve whispered as the binding round him continued to loosen.
“I said the plants new how to talk, not that they were particularly smart,” Darcy hissed, “Now, when I say run, run!” she murmured.

“Wh-”

“RUN!”

They scrambled to their feet, ripping at the loosening roots. The trees were concentrating on the enemy from above, and mostly ignored the escaping humans, except for a cheap parting shot where a root rose from the ground, tripping Steve.

Racing down the path, the trees became lighter, less dense. Wind against their faces, feet thumping, they didn’t stop till they were far away from the cluster of hostile trees.

Darcy slowed down, coming to a stop before collapsing on the badly paved path.

“Sorry… for getting you… into that. I should have known… to go another… way,” Darcy huffed out between large gulps of air.

Her cheeks glowed red with exertion, and her dark eyes twinkled with energy.

Steve smiled down at her, waiting for her to catch her breath.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said.

“At least I didn’t pick an apple. Then we never would have gotten out alive,” Darcy said, “Not that you could eat one without spewing up your intestines,” she grumbled.

“Because you don’t like little green worms?” Steve muttered, mouth quirking slightly.

“True, but I’m pretty sure a worm would eat its own poop before going anywhere near those trees,” said Darcy. Steve decided not to inform her that it was a line from The Wizard of Oz. He knew how obnoxious it was having references explained to him.

“I think they do that anyway,” Steve contemplated instead.

“Gross,” Darcy frowned, “No wonder they’re such disgusting little shits. Well, I am sorry for going the wrong way. Though your voice does have a kinda hypnotizing quality,” She grinned, “No wonder I got distracted.”

“Are you saying I talk in a monotone?” Steve tried to will his blush away, but Darcy’s eyes
flickered to his cheeks, and her eyes twinkled. She shrugged mischievously.

“You think whatever you want to, honey.”

“Anyway,” Steve coughed, “No harm done, and I’ve got an interesting story to tell.”

“Will you tell it?” Darcy asked, “Or if this is all in your head, will I stay there?”

Steve had to look away. He told himself it was because he didn’t know the answer.

But he’d never been very good at lying. Especially when he was beginning to resent the truth.

“Why do the birds go to those trees if they know what’s going to happen?” he asked awkwardly, shoving his hands in his pockets.

Darcy sighed, and gave an odd smile, crossing her legs.

“You know when a kid says mum-mum-mum, and even when their mother says ‘yes’, they just keep going on?” she said.

Steve nodded. “Very annoying.”

“Exactly,” Darcy grinned, “But that’s what makes it so much fun.”

She threw her hands up in the air. Steve offered a hand to help her up, but she ignored it, jumping to her feet.

“Come on!” she said, skipping down the winding path, “I want to introduce you to a friend.”

Steve smiled, and jogged to catch up with her. “I feel like we’re off to see the wizard,” he said.

Darcy gave him an odd look. “Wizards don’t exist.”

Steve nodded, brow furrowed. “Right.”

Then she frowned. “Do they exist in your world?” she asked.

“No-” Steve paused, “well, I’ve never met one, but I guess it’s possible,” he muttered, sighing. Aliens, magic, and talking plants, oh my! he thought.
As they walked through the forest, neither noticed a glint of silver metal through the trees.

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Darcy and Steve came to a crossroad, signs pointing every which way. One pointed up, saying ‘Good Luck’, another down with, ‘Shovels Located To Left’, the one to the left said, ‘BYO- No Alcohol, Please’. The right arrow simply said, ‘Careful.’

“Left or Right?” asked a sultry voice. Steve turned to see a cat, no, a panther, hidden in the trees. It almost blended in to the shadows, high up on a branch, except for luminous green eyes, and sharp white teeth that almost glowed in a sly grin. Steve didn’t think that a cat could smile. Or talk. But then again, flowers weren’t supposed to talk, either.

“Go away, Cat, we know which way, and we don’t need you to confuse us!” Darcy snapped.

The panther rolled onto her back and began licking her paw.

“Left - or - Right?” she asked again, absently.

“Left,” Darcy grumbled, crossing her arms and glaring.

If panthers could raise their eyebrows, this one did.

“Are you quite sure?”

“Of course I’m sure! I’m taking my- Steve, to meet the Hatter and the Hare.” she said, and Steve was surprised at how venomous her voice was.

“But not Right?” asked the Cat, peering upside down to examine Darcy’s face. “I’m sure your mother would just love to meet your Steve,” the panther grinned impossible wide. She turned her green eyes and sharp teeth to focus on Steve.

“Oh sweetheart,” she murmured, and her eyes softened infinitesimally, “Didn’t anyone tell you not to talk to strangers?”

Steve blinked, looking back and forth between the Cat and Darcy.

“Don’t go spreading lies, Cat. Especially not to Her,” Darcy threatened.

The Cat bared its teeth in a snarl.
“It’s not me you should be worrying about, Princess.”

Her black coat seemed to fade into the shadows of the dark forest canopy.

Steve blinked.

“Who was that?” he asked.

“Someone who should keep their nose to them self, before lightning strikes them dead,” Darcy scowled. Steve placed a gentle hand on her shoulder.
“Forget it,” Darcy said, shrugging off his hand and marching down the left path. “I’m going to introduce you to some friends.”

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Eventually, they came to a gate. It was built in between two trees, and there was no fence surrounding it- just the gate, each plank of wood painted a different colour. Steve thought they must once have been garish, but now the paint was faded and chipped.

“Come on!” Darcy said, pushing open the gate. A little bell tinkled.

At the bottom of the path there was a little garden, and in the little garden there was a table set as if for a tea party. Though the table was set for many, there were only two occupants. A large, human sized rabbit, and a man with a very big, very odd hat. But like the paint on the gate, the colours were faded.

Darcy took Steve by his hand and sat him down in a large armchair. She sat next to him on a cushioned stool.

“Hatter, Hare, this is my new friend Steve. Steve, I hope you can guess who’s who.” She smiled.

“Yeah,” said Steve, eyeing two very furry ears.

“Would you like a cup of tea?” the Hatter asked politely, peering through small half rimed lenses at Steve.

“Oh, um,” Steve eyed the eclectic collection of teapots, cups and saucers.

“How ‘bout half?” suggested the Hare. He poured a cup, and grabbed a butter knife off a half buttered piece of toast. With careful precision, he sliced the teacup in half before Steve’s eyes. Strangely, the tea stayed in each half of the cup, and the Hare offered one side to Steve.
Baffled, Steve accepted, staring at it. He turned to stare at Darcy, speechless.

“What?” she asked, accepting the other half from the Hare, and taking a sip, eyes quizzical.

“Flowers talk,” Steve muttered to himself, and took a sip.

The Hare suddenly jumped onto the table.

“Change places!” he cried.

The Hatter jumped up on his seat. “Move along, move along, move along!” he cried, his hat bouncing agitatedly on dark brown curls.

Steve watched as Darcy stood up on her stool, and stepped onto the armchair on her other side, then over the arm onto the straw chair next to it.

Steve felt a nudge on his back. He turned to find the Hatter right in his face, frowning.

“Move along, move along!” he cried again. Steve stood up awkwardly, abandoning his half cup, and followed Darcy across the chairs, before sitting down on an old wooden rocking chair.

“So,” said the Hatter, clasping his knobby fingers together, “tell us about yourself, Sven.”

“It’s Simon,” the Hare corrected imperiously, “but please do. If you make our Darcy cry, we’ll kill you!” he sung cheerfully, pouring a cup of tea. But instead of following gravity, the tea streamed upward, high into the air.

“It’s... Steve...” Steve drifted off, eyes following the stream of tea as it looped, and twirled, then poured itself into the cup.

“But... physics,” he said weakly.

“Physics?” asked the Hatter, peering at Steve, his brown eyes oddly warm (if slightly confused), “what the fibble-fobble is that?”

“Steve’s from another world,” Darcy explained, “Sometimes he doesn’t understand the basic workings of our world. Apparently, we are illogical creatures who do not follow the rules,” she said pompously, puffing out her chest.

Steve rolled his eyes. “I don’t sound like that,” he grumbled, a smile in his eyes, “and I don’t
remember the last time I followed the rules.”

Darcy grinned, though Steve noticed it didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“Fascinating,” said the Hatter, eyes flickering to Darcy, then quickly back to the contents of his tea.

“They do things a bit differently there. Can you believe the flowers don’t talk?” she continued normally.

“Sounds perfect,” said the Hare into his teacup. Then he beamed, placing down his cup, carefully straightening his tie and waistcoat, and then his ears. He jumped back onto the table, and Steve braced himself for another ‘move along’.

“Aaaaaaaaaa.... very merry un-birthday, to you!” he sung, bowing down to Steve, so low that his ear dipped into a full cup of tea. He danced around the table singing “A very merry un-birthday, to Sven! To Simon!”

The Hatter closed his eyes and hummed along to the tune, waving his hands in the air like a conductor. Steve turned to look at Darcy who was sniggering into her hand.

“What is an un-birthday?” he asked softly.

“You don’t know what an un-birthday is?” she said, looking horrified.

“No,” said Steve, mystified.

“Well,” said Darcy over the Hare’s singing, “There are three hundred and sixty five days in a year, right? So each year you have one birthday, and three hundred and sixty four un-birthdays.”

She shook her head in disbelief, “Are you seriously telling me you’ve never had an un-birthday?”

Steve snorted. “Darcy, I’ve rarely had a birthday party, let alone an un-birthday.”

She clasped his hand in her own, and leaned in so she could talk more softly.

“Everyone should have a time to celebrate themselves, to remind them self that they have to be able to love and accept them self first, or they’ll never be happy. Or free.” She smiled sadly.

“Sometimes, that takes more than one birthday.”
Steve smiled gently back at her, not missing her tone.

The Hatter and the Hare were now doing a booming rendition of ‘I’m a little teapot’, banging cups and saucers together as they jived and hip-thrusted on the table top.

The Hare banged together two saucers, and they both smashed, and Steve had to shield himself from the flying shards.

“They’re crazy,” Steve murmured, staring at the Hatter and Hare dancing, smashing fine china with a mad delight.

“Better to be crazy then sane in this world, sunshine!” the Hare called out, precariously balancing upside down on his ears, on the back of a large velvet armchair.

“Sunshine!” called out a minuscule voice.

“Mmm, yes, that’s a good one,” agreed the Hatter, grabbing a large gold teapot. To Steve’s surprise, it wasn’t immediately smashed or sliced up. Instead, the Hatter delicately poured it over a large red cup.

Nothing came out.

The Hatter sighed, pulled the lid off, and grabbed something in the teacup.

That something was a tail, followed by a mouse dressed in a red and gold marching band uniform.

The Hatter dumped the little mouse into the teacup, and it blinked its bleary eyes to stare up at Steve.

“Insane,” muttered Steve under his breath. He’d been doing a lot of that lately.

The mouse drew itself up, puffing out its chest pompously, just like Darcy had earlier- except the mouse did so completely seriously, no comical aspect included.

“Speak in French when you can’t think of the English for a thing, turn your toes out when you walk, and remember who you are,” he informed Steve sagely. “Do you know who said that?”

Steve frowned at him. The mouse stared back, as if he had just imparted carefully guarded wisdom. Steve shook his head no.

“Me neither!” the Mouse cried. Then he belched loudly.
“Bit earthy for my taste,” the Mouse smacked his lips, “I prefer a more fruity flavor- for medicinal purposes, of course,” he said, shifting awkwardly.

“You tart-head!” cried the Hare, indignantly falling off his perch.

“You’ve been holding out on me!”

“Medicinal purposes!” the Mouse hissed back.

“Oh!” his eyes focused past Steve’s shoulder.

“Pretty!” cried the Mouse, and Steve turned to see that it was Darcy whom the mouse was ogling.

“Eyes up top, Rat, or I’ll yank ‘em out,” she snapped, her eyes seeming to spark dangerously.

“Bit violent for a pretty little thing,” the Mouse winked.

“Princess,” the Hatter informed the Mouse, whose eyes widened in shock. The Hatter grabbed the Mouse by the tail, and after much squirming and indignant yelling, shoved the Mouse back into the teapot, clamping the lid on firmly.

Steve frowned. “Princess?” he asked Darcy.

“Oh,” she waved a hand airily, “it’s nothing.”

“Nothing?” the Hatter frowned, “You’re mother is th-”

Then he froze, color draining out of his rosy cheeks. The Hare’s ears twitched, and he froze as well.

“Away!” he cried, jumping off his chair and sprinting for the trees.

“Away!” wailed the Hatter, following after him, “Run, Darcy, run!”

“Someone’s coming,” Darcy whispered, “Quick!”

She grasped Steve by the hand and yanked him out of his chair, pulling him to a tree with low hanging branches and intense foliage.
“Climb!”

Steve recognised that tone of voice from the grove of moving trees, and so quickly followed orders.

Well, mostly.

He paused to pick Darcy up by the waist and placed her on the lowest branch. She flashed him a smile, and began climbing higher. Steve pulled himself up, racing after her.

Once both were hidden high in the foliage, they stopped, and held their breaths.

Quiet.

Then a drum filled the silence, slowly growing louder. Steve concentrated. No, that was the clop of hooves, faster and faster, closer and closer.

On the branch above him, Darcy curled closer to the trunk, wide eyes fixed on the faded gate.

Soon the sound of hooves resembled thunder, and a figure on a stallion—both the horse and the figure’s clothing were equally black—leapt over the gate, and raced down to the table, coming to an abrupt stop.

The figure clothed in black leather armor looked around, face hidden in a shadowy hood. He dismounted, sweeping his coat around him.

Carefully, he ran one gloved finger around a half cup—Darcy’s half. Then with the other hand, he gently stroke the armchair in which Darcy had sat.

Steve squinted—there was something wrong with the figure’s left arm—it seemed shinier, not matte like the rest of his clothing. On his sleeve was a red hart—not a cartoon love heart, but an all too realistic depiction of a human organ.

The figure turned, and something on his arm glinted silver in the sunlight. He placed a hand on the back of Steve’s chair, and rocked it back and forth like a baby’s cradle.

He turned and looked at the trees. All Steve could see in the shadows of the hood was a crooked half smile.

“Bad choice, Princess.”
He spoke the words softly, but in the silence, they seemed to echo.

Darcy, already pale, went white, her knuckles bloodless as her fingers grasped the trunk.

Steve wanted to hug her, or jump out of the tree and give this threatening man a piece of his mind, but he was scared to move. Not for himself, but Darcy. If he gave away their position, she might just have a heart attack.

So against his will, Steve Rogers held his tongue and hid. If the man with the red heart found them, then Steve would take him out. But the man was moving towards his horse, who was obviously growing impatient.

And then he paused.

He turned back to the table, and moved silently, the leaves under his feet not daring to crunch.

He approached the Hatter’s vacant seat, reached out for the lid of the large gold teapot.

Steve braced himself to jump down and start fighting, but as the man lifted the lid, the Mouse exited with a battle cry, and jabbed the figure through his leather glove with a sewing needle.

The figure clenched his fist, taking a swipe with his odd looking left hand.

But the Mouse had jumped out of the teapot, and dodged around cups, plates and saucers as it raced across the table.

The man with the Heart smashed a pot with his hand like one would a fly, but the mouse jumped onto a seat, then the ground, then scampered off into the long grass.

“Catch me now, you heartless bastard!” the Mouse squeaked.

Steve didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

The figure mounted his horse and left. The black stallion didn’t leap high over the gate as it had before, and its hooves smashed through the old wood. Steve heard Darcy let out a deep breath.

“Thank God,” she murmured.

They clambered down the tree, and at the bottom, Darcy collapsed against the trunk.
“So,” Steve said, “Princess?”

“I’d rather not talk about it,” she said.

Steve nodded, “Who was that man?”

“Leave it, Steve,” Darcy said.

“If this is putting you in danger, I can help-”

“I’m fine,” she snapped, “Let’s just go.”

She got to her feet and walked briskly through the splintered wood and the broken gate.

Steve followed after her, frowning.

* *

A large figure, built like a rock, sat on the edge of the path. His face was still, eyes dull, leaning back against a wizened old tree.

“Tweedledum?” asked Darcy gently, kneeling down beside the large figure.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, taking his oversized hand in her tiny ones, squeezing it gently.

“Gone,” he replied forlornly, with a sniff. Darcy frowned, looking around the forest. Steve looked too, but saw nothing out of the ordinary - which was odd in itself in this strange dream world. But Darcy had gone deathly pale, and she turned to look at the fallen giant, horror brimming in her eyes.

“Tweedledum,” she said quietly, “where is Tweedledee?”

The man raised his head, and Steve could see that his face was red, with damp tracks striped down his cheeks. His eyes were a watery blue, swimming as the man only shook his head.

“You know how it goes, D’Arcy Rose,” a throaty voice murmured. Steve turned to see that the Cat was back in the branches above them.

“You’re either with Her, like Mister Dee, or,” she gave a faint nod to the crumbled mountain of a man.
“Tweedledee’s a traitor?” Darcy, her expression determinedly blank.

“He always was the smarter brother,” the Cat said carelessly.

“And what about you?” Steve asked the Cat carefully, despite having almost no idea what was going on. The Cat leaned off her perch, the branch titling until Steve was face to face with her green eyes.

“You’re assuming that I have a heart that can be broken, Mister Rogers,” she whispered, giving a tantalizing grin before fading away - the crescent of her sharp teeth last.

“Darcy,” Steve said, turning to her, “please explain what is going on here. I don’t understand, but maybe I can help?” he begged.

Darcy stared into his eyes, biting her lip. “There’s this... queen. The Red Queen. She’s sort of in charge of everything around here. She’s a little, you know,” she made a twirling motion beside her ear, and gave a sad chuckle.

“She’s also known as The Queen of Hearts. See, if you disobey her, or you promise your heart to someone else, she takes it.”

“Takes it?” Steve frowned. “Your heart,” Darcy took a shaky breath, “She reaches into your chest and takes your heart. Then you’re like a little puppet. You have to obey her every word, and you have barely any will for yourself. You lose your ability to love, and feel empathy...” She looked Steve in the eye.

“And you can’t ever get it back.”


"Because some idiot broke her heart, ages ago. And she hasn’t been able to love since. Not even her own kid,” Darcy blinked away a tear.

“And if the Queen can’t love-”

“No one can,” Steve finished for her. When she looked at him, he gave her a sad smile.

“I guess those kind of people are common, whatever world you’re in,” he said.

He wondered if that was what the Hatter had been going to say, before they were interrupted. That her mother was the queen. He remembered what she said when he asked why her world wasn’t peaceful- mum’s the word. Perhaps the phrase had two separate meanings.

He offered her a hand up, and she took it. Her hand felt soft and small and warm inside his.

“What next?” Steve asked, support and trust strong in his voice. She sighed, and dropped his hand.

“Help me get Tweedledum up. We need to take him somewhere safe and warm. With friends.” She and Steve helped Tweedledum to his feet, though Steve took most of the weight. He offered no resistance, but he did not help them. If they let go, he might just collapse.

“Where to, ma’am?” Steve asked with a cheeky salute. Darcy smiled.

“To the White Queen’s Palace!” she took a step forward, and Steve kept up the pace, albeit cautiously.
“So this White Queen is good?” Steve asked.

“She’s not the most likable person. Charm doesn’t come easy for her, like it does for the Red Queen. But she’s clever, and she’s never afraid to do the right thing.”

“Onward, my good man!” cried Darcy, taking a large step forward. Steve felt the warmth of her words flow to him, despite there being a large, and possibly comatose man between them.

The woods were getting lighter, somehow. A little way back down the path, Steve had even noticed brightly coloured birds sitting low on the branches, singing. Small, fuzzy squirrels bounced through the trees, and the trees hummed welcome. Darcy stopped, and with her free hand, pointed to a winding dirt track that led off the path.

“I have an idea,” she smiled, and they started down the track. They reached a clearing in the trees, and stopped. One of the strangest sights yet greeted them. Vibrant mushrooms, of all sizes and colours grew at random. Some were tiny, some pretty large for the average garden variety mushrooms, and others were the size of cars.

“Can you hold him?” Darcy asked. She raced off to the biggest mushroom- a poisonous pink, with dark purple spots. Directly in front of the mushroom was a flat stone, almost hidden by overgrown moss. Darcy carefully placed both feet on the stone. Then she leant left, reaching out to grab the underside of the mushroom with her hand. Rocking back on her heels, Steve could see she had a fistful of mushroom, which she placed in her right dress pocket. Darcy then repeated the same procedure to the left. Skipping back up to them, she placed half of the left part of the mushroom in Tweedledum’s hand.

“I’m not going to play birdie with you, Dummee, so eat up,” she instructed the motionless man.

Every instinct Steve had was screaming for him to rip the poisonously coloured fungus out of the man’s hand. But he trusted Darcy. Slowly, Tweedledum raised the fungus to his lips and swallowed it whole. He blinked. Steve looked at Darcy.

“Wait,” she said. Tweedledum twiddled his nose. And before Steve’s eyes, the very same nose began to shrink. The rest of his facial features followed suit, until there was only a tiny head sitting on top of a massive body. Then his arms shot inward, and he started sinking down rapidly, for his legs were doing the same. Soon, he was about the same size as Tony’s Starkphone.

“There,” said Darcy, satisfied, “Now he’ll be easier to carry.” She picked him up and placed him on her shoulder, his tiny legs dangling in the breeze.

Steve blinked. It was like the super soldier serum, except in reverse, and without losing or gaining any muscle.

“What was that?” he asked. “Mushrooms. The big pink one can make you grow or shrink, depending which side you pick it from,” Darcy explain, “Righty High, and Lefty Lower. I took some more, just in case we find need for it later.”
“But if you looked at the mushroom from the mushroom’s perspective, it’s actually the other way around. So, Righty Shorty, Lefter Higher,” Steve mused.

Darcy grinned widely, “Now you’re thinking like a Wonderlander.”

“Pardon?” Steve asked.

“Wonderland,” said Darcy, spreading her arms and twirling on the spot, leaving Tweedledum clutching at her collar for dear life.

“You’re in it! And you know what they say about Wonderlanders!” Darcy elbowed him, winking, and started across the clearing to the track that would take them back to the main pathway.

“No,” Steve said, “What do they say about Wonderlanders?”

Darcy turned around, smirking. She stage whispered, “We’re all mad here.”

Before Steve was able to fully comprehend what she meant, the clearing was full of coloured, scented smoke, so dense it was impossible to see the surrounding trees. He could hear Darcy and Tweedledum coughing, and fought the urge to dissolve into coughs himself. It brought back memories of his pre-army days. As he was about to yell for Darcy to flatten herself on the ground, the smoke began to clear.

A figure was standing on the large pink mushroom. Steve quickly decided it wasn’t human. It was too... rectangular. The smoke cleared more, and it became sharper. It was some sort of squishy looking monster, with antennae, tiny feet all down both sides, dark blue skin so strong it was almost black. It also appeared to be smoking a hookah.

It took a breath, then breathed out, crimson smoke billowing out of its nostrils.

“Oh, fuck,” Darcy hissed out between coughs, “not him again.”

“If you can’t say anything polite, shut your trap,” said the thing authoritatively.

“Hey!” Steve snapped, “I don’t know who you are, but you can’t-”

“You don’t know who I am?” boomed the thing, leaning down.

“And who are you?”

“I’m Steve,” he said, leaning in close, matching it’s posturing.

The thing blew toxic green smoke in his face, making him cough.

“Not your name. Who are you?” it said imperiously.

Steve opened his mouth, closed it, then gave an awkward half shrug.

The thing sighed wearily. “Why are you worrying about who I am, when you don’t even know who you are? Pointless and backwards, don’t you think?”

Steve was about to retort, but he stopped.

“Oh, God,” he said, “you’re a caterpillar.”

“And Who. Are. You?” the Caterpillar blew out a smoke ring with each word.
“Here we go,” grumbled Darcy. “He just asks you the same question, over and over again, until you get tired of being polite and leave.”

“And have you learnt who you are, since we last spoke?” asked the Caterpillar.

“I told you. I’m just Darcy. I’m not going to grow wings like you, heroically save people or have a better love story than Romeo and Juliet, which would not be hard, considering Romeo was a horny teenager without a single redeeming quality. I’m just Darcy. I’m normal. Just like everyone else,” she smiled determinedly.

The Caterpillar rolled its eyes. “Is that what you think of her, Steve?” he asked in a bored tone.

“No,” he turned to Darcy, smiling at her. “You helped a complete stranger from being stabbed to death by a murderous rosebush.”

Darcy rolled her eyes. “Please. Any half decent person would have done that.”

“Then,” Steve continued, “you took the same lost stranger around so that he wasn’t lost, saved him from yet another murdering plant—”

“Which I led you to in the first place—”

“Introduced him to your friends, who all adore you, by the way, then comforted a friend who had just lost his brother, and helped him back home. That all seems overly kind and loving to me,” Steve smiled, “Like an honestly good person.” Darcy blushed.

“You’re more than just anything, Darcy,” he said.

“You’re not too bad yourself,” Darcy bit her lips, smiling grudgingly.

“Now that that’s done,” The Caterpillar turned to Steve, “Who are you?” As he watched, the Caterpillar blew out several rings—blue, white and red. The Caterpillar examined them, then harrumphed, and blew the rings away.

“Why do you care who I think I am?” Steve asked, alarmed. How did these creatures know so much about him? Because it’s all in your head, his unconscious answered.

“I don’t.”

“Seriously?” Darcy hissed. “You ask us this stupid question, over and over again until we answer it, then you don’t like the answer, so you repeat the freaking question again, but you don’t actually care? What the hell, you oversized insect larvae! Get a life!”

“I don’t care,” snapped the Caterpillar, “but you do.” He blew lavender smoke out of his nostrils.

Just as Mount Darcy was about to erupt, a soft, “Hem, hem,” was heard.

Steve turned around to see a rabbit— not as large as the other animals, about waist height. Its fur was flat and coarse, more grey than white, and it was wearing a waistcoat and a pocket watch.

“The White Queen has requested their presence,” said the Rabbit to the Caterpillar.

“I’m not holding them captive,” said the Caterpillar in a bored tone.

“Miss Darcy, Mister Steve, please follow after me,” said the Rabbit, hopping down the path at a steady pace.
“How do you know my name?” asked Steve, following after Darcy.

“How do you know my name?” asked Steve, following after Darcy.

“News travels fast around here,” said the Rabbit. Darcy rolled her eyes.

“He’s been talking to the Cat,” she explained. The Rabbit’s eyes flickered, and the corner of his mouth gave a small twitch.

“Where are we going?” said Steve.

“The White Queen’s palace. We were headed there anyways,” said Darcy.

“And you were going to be late,” grumbled the Rabbit.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t know we were on a time limit,” snapped Darcy.

“Check your watch. You were given it for a reason.”

“Then I would live a completely structured and boring life! Haven’t you ever wanted to be a little spontaneous?” she said.

“Impulsivity gets people hurt,” said the Rabbit shortly.

“Thank you for yet another illuminating conversation, Mister Rabbit,” grumbled Darcy. Steve chuckled quietly.

After ten minutes, white turrets appeared over the tops of the trees. Soon, a sturdy, heavily fortified castle could be seen. There was a certain precision and symmetry to it, a moat with black water surrounding it, casting moving shadows on the white walls.

The Rabbit stopped at the edge of the lake, and called up to the armed sentries.

“W. Rabbit and guests to see Queen Mirana.”

The wooden drawbridge was slowly lowered by a crank, and the party crossed. Steve turned his head quickly. He could have sworn he saw something scaly out of the corner of his eye.

“Brethswaetch,” said Darcy. “They’re these little monkey-like scaly fish things, with really muscular arms, and one bite or scratch from ‘em will make you be able to breath water.”

“That’s not very smart,” said Steve, “Then the enemy can just swim across.” The wooden boards creaked underfoot, and Darcy shook her head.

“One bite, and you can only breathe through the water. Like a fish. And do you know what those muscular arms are for?”

Steve shook his head.

“For pushing you back out. Horrible way to go,” she screwed up her nose. “Like drowning, but backwards.”

“How is that possible? To only be able to get oxygen through water. You would have to change how your lungs work and everything in seconds. That’s impossible.”

“And after all you’ve seen,” Darcy shook her head sadly, eyes twinkling, “nothing’s impossible, Stevie.”

They had reached the end of the drawbridge, and had come to a small room. It had brick walls to
the left and right with torches lining them, the ceiling thick stone. The heavy wooden doors at the back and front were both drawbridges, and as the door behind them cranked closed, they were trapped inside the room, only the torches illuminating them.

A voice broke the silence. “Why is a raven like a writing desk?”

The Rabbit cleared his throat and spoke, enunciating carefully, “I haven’t the slightest idea.” The next drawbridge began cranking down.

“What?” Steve muttered under his breath.

“It was the white Queen’s idea,” Darcy explained.

“Drawbridges can be really slow, and a hidden enemy can race across while you’re letting someone else in. So we have two drawbridges. Clever, right?” she followed the Rabbit over the drawbridge and into the courtyard.

“But... What kind of code is that?” Steve muttered. It appeared that no one had heard him, so he followed after them.

“Why is a raven like a writing desk?” he grumbled to himself.

The grass in the middle of the courtyard was a brilliant emerald green, but the tree in the middle only had flowers the colour of freshly fallen snow. The falling petals created a circular white carpet. The people, however, were dressed in all sorts of colours, racing about, chasing children and chickens, dogs barking at passer buyers, birds singing merrily over the din. It was one delicately organised mess.

Darcy and Steve followed the Rabbit through the chaotic, moving maze, up white stone steps, into a large hall. The hall was silent, their footsteps echoing wincingly loud through the air. At the opposite end on a raised platform sat a large empty throne, demanding attention. Except for the two people in the middle of the room, who appeared to be playing chess, the room was empty.

“Hem, hem,” said the Rabbit.

They looked up. Both wore silver armor, minus the helmet. One, a woman, had a beautiful, if severe, face, her dark brown hair pulled back into a bun.

The man sitting next to her had far more gentle features, eyes twinkling in perpetual mischief, dark skin contrasting dramatically with his shiny armor.

Darcy nudged Steve in the ribs, then delicately handed Tweedledum him. She rushed forward, the woman standing up just as Darcy came crashing into her.

“Aunty Mir!” she squealed, hugging her tightly.

“You’re late,” said the White Queen stiffly. Then she smiled, and hugged Darcy back.

“There is a reason you have that watch,” she tried to lecture her.

“Haven’t you heard of being spontaneous?” grumbled Darcy.

The Queen sighed. “This isn’t forever. Time is of the essence at the moment. No one can afford to be caught at the wrong place at the wrong time by the wrong people. Especially you.”

“I’m sorry,” sighed Darcy.
“I’m sure you are,” said the Queen dryly, untangling herself from Darcy’s all-encompassing hug.

“Oh!” said Darcy, “The reason we came here, well, Tweedledum is incredibly upset. Tweedledee is with the Red Queen.”

“He’s not the first, and I’m afraid he won’t be the last,” she said, jaw clenching.

“I know, but can’t you help him?” Darcy begged.

“Those two were destined to drift apart, I’m afraid. It’s not Tweedledum’s fault, but he can’t just give up. He has to keep moving forward. I’m afraid that is not something easily taught,” the Queen sighed.

“Bring him back to his normal height,” said the unnamed knight.

“I think I know someone who can help,” The Knight smiled. At Darcy’s nod, Steve placed Tweedledum on the white stone ground. Must be a nightmare to clean, Steve thought. Darcy gave Tweedledum a piece of mushroom from her right pocket, and they watched as he shuddered and stretched back to his original height.

The knight led him down the steps, a friendly hand on his shoulder.

“Who is your friend?” the Queen asked, examining Steve.

“Right. Steve, this is my Aunt Mirana, aka the White Queen. Aunty Mir, this is my new friend Steve. He’s from another world,” she explained cheerfully.

Steve met the Queen’s gaze. Her eyes did not seem as warm as they had previously.

“Just like that Alice,” murmured the Rabbit.

“Alice? Who’s Alice?” asked Darcy, an odd look crossing her face.

“No one,” said the Queen stiffly, glaring at the Rabbit, who stared back, pointed face expressionless.

“What is this world called?” the Queen asked.

“... Earth?” Steve said. He almost said ‘Midgard’, but remembered in time he was not speaking to aliens from another world, but rather, imaginary beings in his head.

The Rabbit’s small eyes darted to the Queen, looking for any sign of a reaction, but her expressionless face remained impassive.

“Your world is named after the ground? How... unimaginative,” the Queen murmured.

Though she stood, Steve could picture her reclining on the imposing throne, threatening her enemies with the raising of a brow.

“Steve’s world is a lot more sensible than ours,” Darcy snapped, stepping forward, “but just ‘cause they do things differently there doesn’t mean you can look down on him.”

“Sensible,” murmured the Rabbit, lips twitching.

“So I’ve heard,” the Queen muttered back under her breath. Raising her voice, she said, “I think some common sense is just what this world needs.”
“Darcy, show Steve around. And check your watch,” ordered the Queen, marching back to the table with the chess pieces, nodding for the Rabbit to join her.

Darcy scowled at the Queen’s back, then took Steve’s arm and marched him down the steps. He glanced back, and saw a piece move of its own volition. It was not a chess piece, but a miniature cannon. It wasn’t a chess game.

It was a battle plan.

* *

“She’s my favourite aunt,” Darcy said. She and Steve were strolling through the gardens, the white statues of centaurs and lovers peering out from the green foliage of vines and bushes.

“You don’t seem like you would... get along,” Steve said carefully, trying to phrase the friction he had seen as best he could.

Darcy rolled her eyes. “She can be a real butthead sometimes, but she loves me. That’s more than I ever get at home.”

Steve frowned at her words. He had been wondering since she first told him of the Red Queen, but it had never seemed the right time to ask.

“Darcy, is your mother the Red Queen?” Steve asked hesitantly. Darcy paused, and stared up into the canopy of a flowering white tree.

“Guess I should have seen that one coming. Yeah, she is. Do you know what it’s like, being surrounded by people who don’t have hearts, all day long? Everyone does exactly what they’re told, and no matter what she says, she doesn’t love you. You believe her at first, but then you eat too many cookies, or you see what she does to other people who don’t listen... Or maybe you hear them scream at night, when a frigid nurse tucked you in bed, but didn’t give you a goodnight kiss.”

Steve stared at the glassy eyed girl in horror. He may not have had the best childhood, in the Depression, between the wars era. But he was loved. He wrapped his arms around the girl and hugged her tightly. She froze, but slowly melted into him, wrapping her much smaller arms around him.

Eventually, she smiled up at him, eyes watery.

“Do I get a good night kiss too?” she asked.

“Hmm...” Steve smiled, “Wait for bedtime and we’ll see.”

“Is that a promise?” asked Darcy, one corner of her mouth lifting into a smile.

Steve looked her in the eye. “Promise.”
They stood there, smiling into each other’s eyes. Neither made a move to take it further, closer. That moment was perfect.

“Play!” cried a voice. Steve and Darcy turned around, slipping out of the warmth of each other’s arms. On the grass sat Tweedledum. He had around a dozen kids surrounding him, tugging at his massive frame, urging him to stand up.

“Larna got you it, so now you have to chase us!” a little boy in a blue hat explained, pulling at his hand.

The Knight was leaning on a nearby apple tree (a normal looking one, thank god), watching carefully. When Steve and Darcy approached, he smiled, and answered the unasked question.

“We don’t give children enough credit. And if anyone can teach Tweedledum to get back up, it’s them.”

“This is Steve,” Darcy introduced, “And Steve, this is the White Knight, my aunt’s second in command. And the man who taught me how to juggle.”

“Interesting skill,” Steve said.

The White Knight grinned, picking four apples from the tree. He threw two up in the air, and began juggling them in a tight circle, throwing them up in the air, his hands a blur. He made it seem easy.

“You ever juggled before?” he asked Steve casually.

“No, never.”

The White Knight gave him a wicked grin. “Guess it’s about time you learnt.”

He tossed one, two, three apples to Steve. Steve threw one apple in the air, catching then throwing again. All that was required was good hand-eye coordination, concentration and quick movements. The ability of which Steve had in spades.

Though he fumbled several times at first, within two minutes he had the hang of it. The Knight threw in the fourth apple, and Steve caught it awkwardly, then managed to speed up the process, slipping the last apple into the loop. It was hard, but not impossible.

The Knight whistled. “Not bad,” he said.

“Looks like you’ve got competition,” Darcy replied, smiling.

“And you’ve never juggled before?” the Knight asked, eyes following the circle, and though his smile was pleasant, suspicion was hinted in the careful once over he gave Steve.

“Never.”

In the second it took Steve to reply, he lost his concentration, and dropped an apple.

“Looks like you’re not perfect,” the Knight said, though his seemingly careless smile held the same caution.

“No one is,” Steve replied cheerfully, “But I think I’ll leave the juggling to the professionals,” he handed the apples back to the Knight.

“Still, that’s two better than me,” Darcy grinned, bouncing happily on the balls of her feet.
Still, that’s two better than me,” Darcy grinned, bouncing happily on the balls of her feet.

“Yeah, I can. It’s an incredible skill, really,” Darcy said in a no-nonsense tone, while the White Knight rolled his eyes.

“I think I’ll go talk to Tweedledum. Maybe the White Knight can teach you how to juggle three this time,” Steve said.

Darcy stuck out her tongue playfully. Steve turned, and walked to where Tweedledum was sitting.

He hadn’t moved, but the children had given up, and long since selected a new chaser. Steve sat down next to the giant man on the grass. Tweedledum’s eyes followed the children across the grass, a frown creasing his brow.

“How do they do that?” he asked Steve, his voice gravelly, broken.

“Do what?” asked Steve.

“That little girl there,” Tweedledum nodded, “Her best friend pushed her over, told her she hated her. The other little girl burst into tears and ran away. Five minutes later she was back, playing again,” he frowned, “Laughing.”

“I don’t really know,” he shrugged. “I guess kids like being happy, having fun, playing. They don’t want to be sad forever. So they pick themselves up, and they keep on playing,” Steve glanced at Tweedledum.

“Maybe the little girl realised it wasn’t her fault her friend wasn’t nice. Maybe she realised that she could show her friend that she could have fun without her,” he said innocently.

Tweedledum’s mouth twitched. “You’re trying to teach me a lesson,” he said.

“Is it working?” Steve replied, not at all embarrassed at being called out.

“If it is, it might be, if it isn’t, it ain’t,” Tweedledum murmured.

“I am... So confused,” Steve muttered, shoving his hands in his pockets, feeling the need to do something with his hands when his mind was blank.

“That’s an uncommon state here. Everything makes sense if you want it to. And if you don’t, it won’t. That’s logic.” Steve privately thought that it was bullshit.

“Where I’m from, animals and flowers don’t talk, plants do not attack you, and there are these things called the laws of physics. The world makes sense, even of the people don’t always,” Steve said. Imagine if Tony and Bruce could see him now, begging for science.

“Oi!” Tweedledum cried. He jumped to his feet faster than Steve had thought possible for a man of his size, and advanced to where a young boy was pulling at a girl’s pig tails. He gently separated the two, checking to make sure the tearful girl was all right, before proceeding to give the little boy the scariest talking-to of his life.

“I think he’s going to be okay,” Darcy murmured into Steve’s ear. He grinned up at her.

“He’s a big softie at hart. Might not have been the smartest brother, but he always was the kindest. Kindness goes a long way around here,” she smiled softly.
“Yeah, a long way to getting you killed,” said the White Knight under his breath, just loud enough for Steve with his enhanced hearing to hear.

“Have you checked your watch?” he asked Darcy. At her look of exasperation, he frowned.

“Not trying to annoy, Darce. Just trying to keep one of my friends alive.”

“What?” Steve said. He had been seeing, hearing hints. The man at the tea party. The chess set that was not a chess set. The Cat.

Darcy glared at the Knight, but he ignored it.

“Darcy’s mother is the Red Queen. She has enormous power, and an army to match. The watch was a gift from Queen Mirana. It tells the time, and the right place to be and when,” he smiled and Steve’s expression, “And just basic reminders of commitment's she’s made,” he finished cheerfully.

“Clever trick,” said Steve, “So it’s sort of like a psychic diary.”

“That’s one way to look at it,” allowed the Knight, in the same tone Tony had said, ‘well, you’re not wrong.’

The Knight looked at Darcy, titling his head. “I’m waiting.” Darcy sighed and pulled out an ornate gold pocket watch, clicking it open. In fancy old fashioned script, it read, ‘Dinner with mother at six. Don’t be late.’

“Fuck,” Darcy scowled, “I forgot I promised to have dinner with her. The castle is such a horrible place. I try to stay away as much as possible.”

“If she’s so dangerous, why not just stay away?” Steve asked.

“Because she has a very large army, and anyone who doesn’t obey her gets found pretty soon. She’s not powerful enough to challenge the White Queen yet and be sure to win, but she’s not far off,” said the Knight.

“And she doesn’t know I’m helping Aunty Mir. I’m kind of a spy, so I have to ‘keep up appearances’,” said Darcy, as if parroting what someone had told her.

“Why does she have such a large army if everyone hates her?” Steve asked.

“You’d be surprised how many people don’t want to feel at all,” said the White Knight sadly, “and how many don’t have a choice.”

“I’ll tell the Queen you’re leaving. The watch is right, Darcy. You don’t want to be late,” the Knight nodded solemnly and turned back to the hall.

Darcy got up and Steve followed. She looked at him, shaking her head. “Stay here. Dear old mum doesn’t like my friends,” she said.

“I have to come. I promised you a good night kiss,” said Steve, “and I don’t break my promises.”

Darcy smiled up at him, disbelief in her eyes. Steve wondered if anyone had ever promised to stay with her, to keep their promises.

Together, they walked towards the double drawbridge. Steve was wandering about something though.
“Who exactly is Alice?” he asked.

“When I was a little girl, I met a girl, maybe a few years older than me, who was from another world. She was very smart and called our world strange. Then one day, she just disappeared. Later, Aunty Mir explained that lonely little kids with over active imaginations often invent themselves imaginary friends.” She sighed, “I’m starting to wonder if she was telling the truth.”

Steve nodded slowly.

“Alice was real, she was,” said a voice. Tweedledum was standing by the first drawbridge.

“I remember. You introduced us. She had brown hair, and wore a yellow pinafore dress. She was brilliant, but so confused. So confused,” he repeated.

“Just like Steve,” Darcy smiled, “the flowers didn’t talk in her world either.” Steve smiled back.

It seemed as though the White Queen had been lying. But why?

“Can’t be late, no,” said Tweedledum.

“Guess we’re all off to see the wizard,” Darcy grinned at Steve.

“The wonderful Wizard of Oz,” he laughed.

The three walked over the drawbridge towards the Red Queen’s castle.

* 

Darcy and Steve chatted and laughed on the way, Tweedledum occasionally cracking a small smile. The forest seemed brighter, birds fluttering around, chirping cheerfully.

“And then Clint goes, ‘the brown wig looked better on me anyway! Natasha’s more of a blonde or redhead, and a disguise is supposed to be believable.’ and Natasha says, ‘the way you were swinging your hips when walking in those stilettos, I don’t know if people would thought you were a prostitute or a drag queen.’ and Clint looks at everyone, deadly serious and says, ‘I was a drag queen for a mission once. And I was brilliant. I won’t apologise for being awesome.’ and Nat says, ‘he was pretty good, actually. But the time he was a magician, he almost decapitated a talking parrot.’ and Clint goes, ‘If that stupid bird told the crowd what was hidden up my sleeve one more time, it wouldn’t have been ‘almost’.”

Darcy burst in to a loud laugh. “Wait, I thought animals couldn’t talk in your world?” she said after she gained her breath.

“Some types can be taught certain phrases and things, but most can’t,” Steve explained.

“How do you almost decapitate a parrot?” she asked.

“Knowing Clint, I’m not sure I want to know.”
“No time to spare, we can’t be late!” said Tweedledum, his slow footsteps so large he easily kept up.

“Relax, we’re nearly there,” Darcy frowned. “Not a phrase I thought I’d ever say about this place. Look, you can see the building through the trees.” She stopped, and a shiver ran down her spine.

“You don’t have to do this, Darcy. You don’t have to spy on your mother. We can go back to your aunt’s castle, let professionals handle it,” Steve said.

“Would you?” asked Darcy, “Would you just give up?”

Steve smiled bitterly to himself. “No. No, I wouldn’t.”

Darcy marched forward through the trees, and Steve had no choice but to follow her. Subconsciously, Steve had been expecting a black stone castle, all plants around it dead or dying, like something out of a fairytale, or even a horror story. In reality, it was a cheery brick red, covered in red climbing roses. It was not nearly as fortified as the White Queen’s castle had been, no drawbridge, only a wooden door to the courtyard entrance. Guards in armour strolled across the grounds.

Just as they were about to enter the courtyard, Darcy stopped and picked a petal off a red rose. She tore it in half, and the centre was white. At Steve’s look, she shrugged sheepishly.

“They planted white ones, so we paint the roses red.”

She went to place it in her pocket and gasped. She reached in and yanked out the contents, some mushroom, the petals and the pocket watch, all falling into the dirt.

Steve reached down to pick up the mushroom and petals, and as he went for the pocket watch, it began glowing a hot orange. It shook, and let off a high pitched squeal like a kettle letting off steam.

“What-” The pocket watch flung itself open. Though it still read, ‘Dinner with mother at six’ in fancy black script, on top, in large, capital letters it read, ‘STAY AWAY’.

“Oh no,” Darcy whispered, looking at Steve in horror. Something was wrong.

“Too late,” said Tweedledum mournfully. Steve and Darcy looked up.

Standing not ten feet away was the rider in black who interrupted the tea party. This time he was without his hood and cloak, and his face was easily seen. His eyes were dull, with deep rings, face expressionless.

“Your mother is waiting,” he said.

“Darcy, we can just leave if you don’t want to do this. We can turn around, go back. You don’t have to do this anymore,” Steve said.

She didn’t have to spy on her own mother, put her neck on the line.

“The Queen requested her presence,” the Rider said stiffly. Steve saw movement out of the corner of his eye. Looking around him, the guards that had been wandering aimlessly around the gardens had formed a wall, spears pointed at Darcy, Steve and Tweedledum.

“Hey!” cried Darcy, and Steve turned around again to find the Rider gripping Darcy by the upper arm, tugging her into the castle. No, they couldn’t take Darcy. They’d hurt her too much already.
He wouldn’t let them touch her again.

Tweedledum roared, and launched himself at the Rider, who threw one small punch, and the gigantic man was out cold.

Steve started after the Rider, but paused as he felt something small pierce his neck. He felt around his neck, and pulled out a dart, tipped in red. Then there were small pricks of pain all over his body.

Darcy grew further away. Her shouting grew quieter.

And then she was gone.

* 

Everything hurt. His head felt foggy, unclean.

Unlike the first time he’d woken up in Wonderland, he didn’t feel like he was sleeping on clouds. The ground underneath him was solid, like a stone. It was freezing, too, the cold seeping into his bones.

He struggled to open his eyes. They felt gritty and unused. Once he had forced them open, he lay staring up at the ceiling.

It was made of dark stone, and shadows flickered across it, as if from firelight.

He sat up, groaning. He was in a jail cell. Or more accurately, a dungeon. The walls were made of the same stone as the ceiling, and iron bars covered the only opening, the door locked shut.

“Excuse me?” said a small voice. Steve turned around to see a girl, crouched in the corner, her brown hair hiding her eyes- or perhaps it wasn’t brown, just so dirty it appeared so. Her rags, hitched up around her legs, once a dress, were impossible to tell what the colour once was. As Steve stared into her wary face, he realised she was not a girl at all, but a small, malnourished young woman.

“My name is Steve,” he said slowly, careful not to frighten her, “where am I?” he asked.

Her eyes had lit up just slightly when he said his name, but when reminding her of their predicament, they dulled again.

“The dungeons, of course,” she said sadly, “Under the Red Castle. Why are you and your friend here?”

“My friend?” She nodded past Steve.

Slumped in the other corner was Tweedledum, still unconscious. Steve crawled over, shaking him slightly.

“Hey! Hey, come on!” Steve hissed. Tweedledum’s head lollled back once released.
“Don’t worry,” she said crawling forward, “they never knock them out hard enough to kill them.”

“Are you sure?” Steve said worriedly. He may not know the guy very well, but he was kind and honest in this strange world.

“Of course I’m sure. They want you to suffer before you die,” she said. “Well that’s... uplifting,” said Steve.

“No, it’s not,” she frowned, “It’s horribly depressing.”

Steve blinked.

“Oh. It was a sardonic comment,” she said. “Clever. I’d blame my lack of interpersonal skills on being kept down here so long, but in actual fact, I really never was one for socializing in the first place,” she continued, matter of fact. Steve smiled.

“And you’re name is?” he asked.

“I’m Alice, Alice Kingsleigh,” she said, holding out one dainty, if horribly filthy, hand.

“You’re Darcy’s friend,” Steve grinned, shaking her hand gently.

“Darcy?” she crawled forward until she was almost in his face.

“You know Darcy?”

“She’s... a friend,” Steve said, wondering why that sentence cause a pang in his heart.

“She misses you. She would have come looking, but her aunt convinced you were an imaginary friend she dreamed up by herself.” Steve wondered how young Darcy must have been to believe a story like that. Or maybe, in a world like this, anything really was possible.


“What?” Steve frowned, itching to stand up and pace, but the ceiling was too low.

“She got rid of any chance you had of getting out of here.”

“Maybe,” said Alice, “But she kept Darcy safe. She was just a little girl... she didn’t need to know the reality of the world. Not yet.”

“She already did, Alice,” Steve said, “And you were just a kid, too.”

“I suppose I was,” murmured Alice, running a hand over the impenetrable stone wall, a faraway look clouding her eyes. Steve decided to change track.

“How long have you been down here?” Steve asked

“Years,” she said, “I lost track after the first few months. The Queen doesn’t like her daughter to have any friends, you see. Sometimes, they take me up to court, clean me up, make me put on nice clothes, and I tell the courtiers stories about my world for an hour or two. They laugh, because I’m not very good at telling stories. Then they send me back down here,” as she told her story, she seemed to curl further and further inwards in herself.

Steve hated the forlorn tone to her voice. He’d heard it before, in soldiers who’d given up hope,
who could keep fighting.

“You’re from Earth?” asked Steve gently. Alice looked up, eyes bright.

“Yes. And you?” she looked almost scared to hear his answer.

“Yeah,” he grinned. “Though I think we might be from different time periods,” and there is the fact she’s in my head, Steve thought, but his conviction was slipping, and his reasoning sounded weak, even to himself.

“You do talk awfully funny,” Alice said. “I’m from the 19th century- 1865, to be precise.”

“Twenty-first, well, twentieth, but that’s another story.” At Alice’s look of confusion, he said shorty, “Twenty-first century, 2014.”

Alice’s eyes went as round as saucers. “Oh my! Imagine the advancements...” she faltered.

“I’ve been gone that long?”

“I don’t think time works the same way in Wonderland,” Steve said, “So don’t worry about it. I could swear I’ve been here days, but it’s never been night and I haven’t needed to sleep.”

“Yes,” Alice said, “I know exactly how you feel.”

“Come on!” Steve said suddenly, crawling over to the bars. He tugged, trying to find a weak point in the metal. But there was none. The bars were as hard as rock. No matter how hard he yanked, they didn’t give in the slightest.

“The bars are made of metal from the Deep Dark mines. Once forged, it doesn’t matter how strong you are. They are unbreakable,” Alice said sadly.

Steve let go, lying on his back with a sigh. Then he spotted the stone above the iron, in which the bars were set. If he couldn’t break the magic bars, maybe...

“I wouldn’t try,” Alice said, reading his face, “there are two layers of stone, you see, and between the two is a sheet of iron.”

“How do you know?” Steve snapped, trying to shake off the feeling of helplessness. He doubted Alice was strong enough to do much of anything.

“My old cell mate. He didn’t know his name, so I called him Jack,” she sighed.

“He thought it was a ridiculous name. Had never heard of it.”

Steve laughed, “They do have weird names here.”

“I know! It’s ‘The Rabbit’ or ‘The Hatter’, and if it’s not that, it’s ‘Iracebeth’!”

“What?” Steve spluttered, bewildered.

“That’s the Red Queen’s real name. I almost feel sorry for her, with a name like that!” Alice giggled, then she stopped.

“He taught me everything he knew,” she said sadly.

“What happened to him?” Steve asked.
“He had a magical hand, made of metal. It was stronger than any humans, and it would reflect all the light from the torches. It was the only pretty thing down here,” she said sadly.

“He would never tell me how he got it. He had disobeyed the Queen, and she had him thrown in here for a while. Eventually, she decided he was too valuable to kill. And so she ripped out his heart, right here, in front of me.” Her eyes shone a horrible glassy brown.

“But he didn’t die. She held his beating, glowing heart in her hand, and ordered him to throw me against the wall. He turned to me and,” she said in a flat tone, “there was no expression in his eyes. No sadness, or apology, or anger or hate. Just blank. And he did it. He threw me against the wall.”

“I haven’t seen him since,” she whispered softly.

For a while, neither talked. They listened to the occasional stamping of guards, the squeaking of mice and the scampering of rats. Or Tweedledum’s heavy breathing. Then Alice spoke.

“It gets so dark when they turn the lights out, that I can almost imagine I’m not in a prison, but a desert, away from all civilization,” she said in a dreamy voice. “It’s a stormy night, with dark clouds hiding the stars and the moon. Then I imagine what the sky would look like without the clouds. All those stars and constellations, too many to count. Different worlds, dancing across the sky... Imagine my delight,” she said, smiling sadly, “when I learnt that one was real.”

Steve couldn’t think of a reply to that, so he said nothing. Tweedledum snored. Steve reached over and shook him awake. He really should have thought twice about shaking awake a man the size of a bear, because, still half asleep, he swiped at Steve with one massive paw, which Steve only just managed to dodge.

Tweedledum blinked his eyes blearily, sitting up slowly.

“You alright?” Steve asked.

Tweedledum nodded, then moaned, clutching his head. After a few minutes, he lifted it again, looking around the small room, which seemed all the smaller now that all three occupants were awake. He focused on Alice.

“Alice?” he asked, hope strong in his gravelly tone.

“I’m sorry, do I know you?” she asked, puzzled.

“We met before,” he said, nervous expression fluttering across his face, “I’m Tweedledum.”

“Oh,” she beamed, flinging herself into his arms, kicking Steve on the way over due to the miniature nature of the cell. She was as small as a doll in the giant’s arms.

“Tweedledum... you grew up,” said Alice, staring at him.

Tweedledum smiled sadly. “I’m afraid we both did, Alice.”

“I suppose so.”

They smiled into each other’s eyes for a while, and Steve felt an odd pang. He missed Darcy. Hopefully she was okay, facing her mother all by herself. But even if she was, Steve had made her a promise.

“So if we can’t break the bars, and we can’t crush the stone, how do we get out?” he asked. All
three inmates sat around, thinking.

“Does anyone have something long and thin?” asked Steve, “like a lock pick?” Alice and Tweedledum shook their heads.

“They took my hairpins away the first time I escaped,” Alice said.

Steve sighed. Tweedledum suddenly turned to Steve.

“When Darcy dropped the contents of her pocket out, which pocket was it from?” he asked.

“Uh, left, I think,” said Steve, frowning.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” snapped Steve, on edge.

“Then you have the left bit of the mushroom Darcy took. The side that shrinks. We can each have a bit, then slip through the bars,” said Tweedledum.

Steve felt through the pocket in his pants. Carefully, he broke it into thirds, handing out a piece to everyone.

Just as Steve swallowed his third whole, he saw Tweedledum and Alice share a look of repulse, then downed their own mushrooms. Steve was about to ask what was wrong when he felt it, the first twinge running up his back.

Shrinking was not a pleasant experience.

Now the size of a soft drink can, Steve briefly paused to wonder how his clothes could shrink with him. Deciding that asking Tweedledum would probably only give him a headache, he ran over to the bars, his tiny feet sounding like mice. He really hoped they didn’t run into a rat.

Carefully looking through the bars, he peered both ways before slipping through, Alice and Tweedledum following after him. They carefully made their way out of the dungeons, keeping to the shadows of the flickering torch light, and jumping over the large cracks in the cobblestones as best they could.

When they got to the exit, a guard was standing, eyes straight ahead.

“He’s heartless,” Alice whispered to Steve, “you can tell by the look in his eye.”

Steve felt the stone he was on shake slightly, and he almost stumbled. Alice did, and Tweedledum helped her up. Around the corner came a large bloodhound, collar spiked with a dull grey metal. With large watery eyes, he stared, nose twitching. Then he turned around, and sat upright next to the guard.

“Looks like she hasn’t gotten to everyone,” muttered Alice. They crept past the dog, who carefully looked straight ahead, and the human guard, who did not look down.

They were out of the dungeons.

As they rounded the next corner, Alice and Tweedledum jumped up and down, hugging each other excitedly.

“We did it!” said Tweedledum.
“Uh, yeah,” said Steve, eyeing their next obstacle. Tweedledum and Alice turned around to see what was causing Steve such despair.

A large flight of stairs circled upwards.

“Ah,” said Alice, frowning.

“Exactly,” said Steve, “about that.”

Stairs were a lot bigger when you are smaller.

But Steve ran up to the first step, hauling himself up. He gestured for Alice to hold out her hands, then Tweedledum scooped her making her squeal. Steve then pulled the even tinnier girl up, and Tweedledum hauled himself up after them.

“Now, only a couple hundred more to go,” said Steve.

Carefully (and very, very slowly) the climbed up the stairs to the top of the staircase. Miraculously, no one went down or up, and they made their way unseen. Once at the top, it was a different story. They had to duck and weave underfoot, quickly hiding behind vases and ornate chests. Once or twice a maid screamed ‘Mouse!’ and got out the broom, but they got to the Great Hall relatively unscathed.

Alice knew the way from when she was called upon to entertain, and she thought that was the place the Queen and her daughter would most likely have dinner together. They raced down the last hallway. At the end were two massive wooden doors, the entrance to the Great Hall, marble busts on pedestals of a beautiful woman on each side of the door.

As the group crept up, the door opened a smidgen, and out slinked the Cat. She looked at them, not a smile in sight, and disappeared.

“What-” started Alice, but Steve could feel the pave stones shaking, and he pulled Alice and Tweedledum behind the clawed foot of a pedestal.

The door was flung open, and out marched a red-haired woman. She was middle aged, but hid it ineptly behind white face powder. She was dressed the opposite of her younger sister, in a sweeping scarlet dress edged in gold brocade. Atop her red curls, which were in dire need of a re-dye, perched a gold crown with a heart shaped ruby.

“Why would she do this to me?” she said sadly. A man followed her out, and Alice let out a gasp. “Jack!” she whispered sadly. Tweedledum, brought a hand over her mouth.

“Knave! Answer me! Why would my own daughter do something so despicable?” spat the Red Queen.

“It is a matter of the heart, Your Majesty,” said the Knave, looking straight ahead.

“So?” snarled the Queen, “answer me!”

“Your Majesty, I have no heart. I know not the answer,” said the Knave.

The Queen shrieked, stomping her feet. She slapped him.

The Knave barely moved, though the blow left a nasty red hand print on his cheek, blood surfacing where her jeweled rings and nails had scratched him. Then she took a deep breath,
closed her eyes and sighed. Opening them, one perfect tear rolled down her cheek. She sniffed.

“I gave that sweet girl everything. A warm house, anything she could possibly want. She knew I tried hard to provide everything for her. I would miss her dearly while touring the land, but that couldn’t be helped,” she sighed sadly.

“Why does everyone leave me?” she cried. She threw herself on the Knave, hugging him tightly. The Knave stood, unblinking, making no move to comfort her.

Steve felt hot anger coursing through him, and all he could hear blood thumping in his ears. He’d never been this livid. This woman ruined the lives of all the people in this land, Alice, Jack, Tweedledum, Darcy, yet here she was, acting like an oversized brat. And Darcy... she must have found out Darcy was spying on her. If that horrible woman had hurt one hair on Darcy’s head, or broken her heart into small pieces, like she had been doing to people her whole life...

“Hush,” murmured a husky voice above them, making little Alice jump.

The Cat was curled up on top of the pedestal, behind the marble bust of the Queen, hidden from the eyes of its living, if slightly less alluring, counterpart. Her green eyes stared into Steve’s, and she shook her head. But Steve was furious. He’d never let a bully go on without calling them out, and he wasn’t about to start.

He started towards the Queen. The Cat jumped on him, and for a second Steve was smothered in soft black fur, and then she was gone.

They were no longer in the hallway outside, but some kind of hall, used for banquets... the Great Hall. Steve picked himself up to look into the large eyes of the Cat.

“How daft are you?” she snarled.

“The Queen could step on you, but you insist on charging after her like an enraged bull.”

“I’m not going to keep quiet while she blames Darcy for all her own problems. She was the one who drove Darcy to spy, if she’d just been a... a loving mother, or a good person, none of this-”

“That’s what you think?” the Cat asked curiously, and Steve saw a hint of tooth.

“That the Queen is angry because she spied for her aunt?”

“What else could it be?” Steve frowned, “I’ve got to see Darcy. Where is she?”

That sliver of white disappeared. The Cat let out a huff, hot air coursing over Steve. She leant her massive head down, and picked Steve up carefully by the back of the collar with her teeth.

“Hey!” he yelled, struggling as he was lifted off his feet. The Cat ignored him, padding over to a large table in the middle of the room. She jumped with little effort onto the tabletop, landing delicately. Steve stared in horror, frozen, unmoving even when the Cat gently released him. Due to his shrunken state, from the ground, he hadn’t been able to see what was lying on the table. Or more accurately, who.

“Darcy...”
She lay out on the table, red dress delicately arranged around her, hair softly curling over her right shoulder. There was a gaping hole in her left chest where her heart had been. Her blue eyes lay open, staring lifelessly at the ceiling.

“No,” Steve said.

“Why...” he whispered, “How...”

She’s mad,” said the Cat.

“But what happened? What could possibly deserve this, in anyone’s mind? Sane or not?”

There was an odd sensation spreading over his body, numb, but hot, and too cold, and he saw his hands reach out to gently close her eyelids.

“The deepest betrayal of them all,” said the Cat impartially, “She fell in love.” Steve stared.

“What?” The Cat gave him a level look.

“You know exactly what I mean. Now, say your goodbyes,” she said.

“I can’t just leave her here!” Steve hissed, hopelessness flooding through his body.

“Her mother will make sure she’s buried properly, for appearance sake. Whoever wins the oncoming war has nothing to do with you. You must go back to your Earth. I think you’ll find you have a job to do.” Her smile was set between a smirk and a snarl.

“Now, say your goodbyes. Alice will be coming in here soon. Do you think she could stand seeing this?” she asked. Steve shook his head numbly.

Why did this have to happen to Darcy? He remembered a saying that went along the lines, ‘the worst things happen to the best people’.

He slowly bent down and with his own tiny mouth, kissed Darcy’s lips, soft even in death.

“Goodnight,” he whispered in her ear. He had been carrying some hope, that perhaps a kiss would wake her up. Nothing was impossible in this fairytale world.

Except, of course, the one thing he wanted most.

The Cat picked him up by the back of the collar again, and this time he put up no struggle. She gently leaped down to the floor, landing delicately, and as Steve stood there, smaller than ever, two minuscule figures crept through the open slit of the large wooden door.

“Where is she?” Alice demanded, fierce despite her small stature, Tweedledum following close behind. She frowned at Steve’s blank expression.

“Steve? What is wrong?” she asked slowly, as if afraid to hear the answer. Steve stared at her, not sure what to say, how to tell her...

“Gone,” said Tweedledum, staring at Steve’s hopeless face.
“What?” hissed Alice, frowning at Tweedledum, then turning to Steve.

“No,” she begged softly, “Not Darcy.”

Steve could only nod. Alice’s face set, and she drew herself up to her full (if slightly lacking) height.

“I want to see her,” she said.

“Are you sure?” Steve asked bitterly, “The Queen... she took her heart.”

“Darcy was my friend, and I owe her a proper goodbye,” Alice snapped, sobbing softly on the last word.

The Cat gave an elegant shrug, as if to say, ‘suit yourself’ and carried Alice and Tweedledum up to the table. Steve could hear sobs and mumbled words from the tabletop, but could not concentrate enough on them to make them clear. He wanted to curl up in a ball, or hit something, break a punching bag.

And he realised how clever the Red Queen was.

Because he didn’t want to feel anything at all.

*

The three minuscule friends sat silent on the back of the Cat, who had taken them, in a second of darkness and cold wind, to the clearing where the mushrooms thrived. They had been unable to find the mushroom in Darcy’s pocket to turn them back to their original height, and so the Cat had taken them back to the clearing.

In fact, Darcy’s pockets were completely empty- the Queen must have taken everything.

The Cat had seemed keen to hurry them along, particularly Steve. She knew something, but whatever it was, she was not letting it up.

Steve stood on the small stone in front of the mushroom, where Darcy had stood only hours before and leaned up to the right underside of the mushroom, taking a handful of the soft flesh, and sharing the piece out between the three of them. The odd sensation of stretching and growing was not entirely unfamiliar to Steve, but just as unpleasant.

Alice looked around, frowning. “The Cat is gone-”

“Hem,” grumbled a voice. Steve turned around to see that the Caterpillar had returned to his place atop the painfully pink mushroom.

“What?” grumbled Steve after a minute of silence, “aren’t you going to ask us who we are?”

The Caterpillar frowned. “She has far more important questions to ask,” he said nodding to Alice.
“You can’t figure out who you are till you are comfortable within yourself.” He nodded at Alice to begin.

“How do I get home?” she asked, full of trepidation.

“You won’t be going home,” the Caterpillar grumbled.

“Why?” Alice asked, suddenly furious.

“Because you don’t want to leave,” the Caterpillar informed her.

“Despite Wonderland’s many faults, you love it here.” Alice paused, and frowned, blushing slightly. Tweedledum gave her a soft grin.

“Miss Alice,” said a voice. The Rabbit was back. He and the Caterpillar shared a polite nod.

“We have new information on where the Red Queen is keeping the hearts of her army. The White Queen has asked if you’d be interested in recovering the hearts, and finding out how to give them back to their owners. Alice and Tweedledum shared a look.

“Only if Tweedledum is with me,” she said.

“That can be arranged,” the Rabbit smiled thinly, and Alice and Tweedledum nodded.

“For Darcy?” said Alice.

“For Darcy,” Tweedledum agreed.

“Oh, Steve,” Alice turned, “Won’t you join us?”

Steve shook his head. “Thanks for the offer, but this place- it’s not for me,” Steve shook his head sadly.

All he wanted to do was return home, wake up and forget this nightmare. He gave Tweedledum and Alice a sad smile, politely nodded to the Rabbit and the Caterpillar, turning to go.

“Wait!” Alice cried, racing up to him and tackling him with her limited strength in a large hug. Staring into her dark brown hair, for a second he could almost imagine it was Darcy hugging him. But Darcy smelt of honey, and Alice had yet to wash off the smell of the dungeons.

They broke away, and gave each other a soft smile. “Don’t forget us,” Alice said gently.

“I doubt I could if I wanted to,” Steve said. He turned and left the clearing following the dirt track back to the main path. Perhaps he would be able to go home exactly where he got here, he thought. But without Darcy, he was lost.

“Perhaps, in another world, it could have been different. Maybe You could have saved them,” said a voice. Steve looked up to see the Cat on the road in front of him.

He didn’t reply.

Her head tilted, considering him.

“Left or right?” she asked.

“Does it matter?” he said.
She considered. “I suppose not.”

And then the world went blank.

*

This time, when he woke up, the steady beep of a heart monitor and the murmur of concerned voices were all too loud.

End Notes

Quotes
“Speak in French when you can’t think of the English for a thing, turn your toes out when you walk, and remember who you are.” - Lewis Carroll

“If it is, it might be, if it isn’t, it ain’t” - Lewis Carroll

The names of the red and white queens are taken from the Tim Burton movie, as well as Alice’s last name (Kingsleigh)

“Why is a raven like a writing desk?” and the rabbit’s answer (“I haven’t the slightest idea”) is a riddle from lewis carroll that was never meant to have an answer. Due to begging fans, he eventually wrote one; “Because it can produce a few notes, tho they are very flat; and it is nevar put with the wrong end in front!” (the incorrect spelling of ‘never’ is deliberate. This way, it spells ‘raven’ backwards.)

People have also written other answers;
"Poe wrote on both," - Sam Lloyd.
"Because there is a 'b' in both and an 'n' in neither," - Aldous Huxley

Please review. Ten seconds of your time makes my day! Hope you enjoyed!

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