In A Parallel Universe (Maybe You Could Be Mine)

by ems_specter

Summary

Steve never thought watching his best friend, his brother, marry the man he’d loved more than life itself would have the potential to kill him.

Sequel to this.

Notes

This isn’t edited so I'm apologizing ahead. Also, this feels a little wonky, so. Idk. It just feels a little off to me, so.

Inspired by this song.

See the end of the work for more notes

In a parallel universe

Everything in reverse
Maybe you could be mine
In a parallel universe
Where timing is kind to us
Maybe we would be alright
I put myself to blame
I let you get away

Steve isn’t new to losing people he loves—his dad, his mom, that cat he loved so much even though she was bad for his asthma, Bucky, Peggy and the Commandos. He should be an expert on losing people by now and yet. And yet here he is, seeing a man so broken and hurt and just so lost who has no one to blame but himself.

He slowly takes a lungful of air, shaky as it is, to try and stop the tears from falling. There’s a sting in his eyes that’s practically unavoidable. His reflection stares at him, eyes shining bright, as he takes himself in in his sharp suit and perfectly coiffed hair. He knows people are waiting for him, but he just needs a few more moments to compose himself, to be the Steve who’s happy for his best friend, to be the Steve who moved on. He just needs a moment to be the Steve who has accepted that the person he was, is in love with, he should really stop lying to himself, is marrying his best friend.

So, yes, losing people he loves isn’t new. Losing Tony, though feels like he’s never experienced lost before.

Falling in love with Anthony Edward Stark was both the easiest and most difficult thing Steve has ever done. He had no trouble with people of the same gender having a romantic relationship, he had one with a student when he was younger but Tony was aggravating and condescending, he had no boundaries and he was ridiculously tactless. His words were always his best weapon and he always knew where to hit for the attack to be fatal, and yet, Steve wasn’t ashamed to admit the brunet was probably one of the kindest and most generous people he has ever known.

Tony used to randomly appear in Steve’s apartment as their friendship developed, a VHS tape or a tablet on one hand and some takeout enough to feed five people and they would watch a movie through the night, even though the older—younger? Let’s go with younger—man had numerous errands to do the following morning. Whenever Steve looked like he desperately needed company, Tony was willing to drop everything for him and, when they formed a romantic relationship, the younger man would simply hold him and stay silent, aware words couldn’t help.

(In his weak moments, and honestly, he has a lot, he would close his eyes and remember the feeling
of Tony’s arms around him, and how the younger man just made him feel safe and cherished and so, so loved. During these moments, he would let himself cry until he fell asleep.

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Steve didn’t mean for the fight to go as far as it did. He never meant to hurt Tony and he sure as hell never meant to betray him.

(He shouldn’t have kissed Sharon. He and Tony may be on the outs at the time but it was still wrong. He wasn’t going to makeup excuses for his behavior.)

He could try to fool himself he kept his suspicions about Howard and Maria’s death a secret because he wanted to spare Tony the heartbreak of remembering what he lost but really, it was so he could spare himself the ramifications of his best friend killing his partner’s parents all those years ago. He knew his fears were baseless but emotions have never been rational.

He could also try to convince himself he fought back against Tony to protect Bucky when in truth, he was simply running on instinct, his mind telling him to fight back because Bucky was in danger.

(And wasn’t that shameful, that his first instinct when handling a person in shock was to punch back.)

When he had the time to cool down, as Prin—King—T’challa flew them away from Siberia, away from Tony, Steve realized if the younger man truly wanted, both he and Bucky would have already been dead within the first few minutes.

(He remembered quiet nights in the lab, Tony telling him just how much firepower the Iron Man armor possessed.

“In the wrong hands, this armor could be really deadly.” Tony has started, his hands pausing in their movement, looking back at Steve, “And I don’t mean the usual bullshit about a weapon or some other tool being in the bad guy’s possession.” He gestured absently at the armor blueprints floating around them, “If you don’t know how to operate the armor, no matter how good your intentions are, dozens, maybe even hundreds of people can get killed—whether they be baseline humans or enhanced, the armor will finish them off.”)

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Becoming Tony’s friend was probably one of the most challenging experiences in Steve’s life. It was slow-going, seeing as there were too many landmines to be avoided and Tony has too many walls surrounding himself. Surviving the landmines and tearing as many walls as he can around the younger man was extremely satisfying, though as he saw parts of Tony no one else has ever seen.

The younger man was kind to a fault but he constantly felt he had to keep a façade, to keep on playing a role everybody else has forced on him. He was generous and never thought twice about giving to people he loved and to everyone else around him.
(What Steve could never really forget was how Tony anonymously paid for psychiatric help for the repentant criminals they’ve caught, giving them a second chance but not rubbing it on their faces either. It was Natasha who discovered this little tidbit, yes, but Steve couldn’t be more proud of Tony’s endless kindness.)

Slowly and predictably, Steve fell in love with Tony. Finding out Tony was falling for him as well was probably the best moment he has experienced since he woke up from the ice.

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Getting the people who sided with him in the fight out of prison was already a given. With how fast everything went, Sam was truly the only one who didn’t fully follow him blindly. They both made the decision to keep Tony’s team out of the loop and that was on them.

He took the team to Wakanda, as suggested by the king himself, to a safe house T’challa has wanted them to stay.

(He wasn’t naïve, he knew the king only offered the sanctuary to keep an eye of them. Out of all his teammates, only Lang seemed to be wary of the offer, everyone else took the offer as apology from T’challa.

It was then he realized how shielded they were from the world under Tony’s protection.)

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“So.” Steve could practically hear the insecurity bleeding out of the word so he simply hummed, content to just lie there, eyes staying closed as he forced himself to focus on Tony’s words and not the younger man’s finger playing around his naked chest. “What are your thoughts on marriage?” came the hesitant question.

Steve kept his eyes closed but he let his lips curve into a wide smile. “Tony Stark,” he gasped theatrically, “are you proposing?!” Tony’s hand left his chest and he felt the air move before a pillow hit his face hard. He let the laughter escape as he opened his eyes, immediately finding Tony’s whiskey ones.

(They were heterochromatic, Tony’s eyes. Steve didn’t realize until much later when he realized he could never get the color of the younger man’s eyes right—they were constantly changing depending on his environment.)

The younger man’s face was flushed but there was still a giddy tint in his eyes, a sign he didn’t take the joke the wrong way.

Steve rolled on top of Tony, fitting perfectly between the younger man’s spread legs as he practically caged him with his body. Tony’s arms immediately wrapped around him, as if he was afraid Steve would go anywhere.

Steve gently traced Tony’s features with one hand, eyes roving with his movements, memorizing the
contours of the brunet’s face, the soft and the hard lines, the crow’s feet at the corner of his eyes, the
smile lines beside his soft, plump lips, these clear signs the younger man was happy.

“Not to scare you away, but you’re it for me.” He kept his voice soft, the sanctity of the moment was
clear to him and he didn’t want to ruin it. He looked at Tony straight in the eye, a proof to show him
he’s serious. “If you want to get married, let’s do it,” he chuckled breathlessly, ecstatic at the thought
of exchanging eternal vows with Tony, making the younger man smile in return, “but I’m happy just
knowing you’re mine and I’m yours. I’m happy with just the knowledge that you’re in love with me,
too.” He leaned down, taking the younger man’s lips in his, feeling Tony’s eyelashes flutter against
his skin.

He wanted to stay in this moment forever.

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After helping the team get settled in the safe house, Steve went back to the palace, where he knew
Bucky was frozen. He was aware he could have stayed with them but he couldn’t handle their
hostility regarding Tony, how they’re blaming him for everything when they were all responsible for
what happened. They all made decisions leading to the fight, to being arrested and now being on the
run. Steve was seeing that now.

(I saw young Americans killed by the very weapons I created to defend them and protect them. And I
saw that I, I had become part of the system that is comfortable with zero accountability.

Steve remembered watching the first press conference Tony held when he returned after
Afghanistan. He saw Tony struggle to keep true to his words when he started destroying his own
weapons and started attacking those who obtained them illegally; but he also saw Tony become a
better man, to be a man who slowly learned to admit his faults and be accountable for the mistakes
that stemmed from said faults. He knew there were moments Tony still slipped, but he has also seen
the effects it had on the younger man.

“Hero complex.” Tony mumbled against his mug once while they were having breakfast. Steve
simply raised a brow, urging the brunet to continue. “My psychiatrist,” he placed the mug down to
make a vague gesture, “she said I might I have some sort of hero complex. Thinking back on her
explanation, I think we all have some sort of hero complex.”

Later that day, while Tony was in a meeting for SI, Steve looked the meaning up, saw the most
likely definition Tony was talking about and thought, this is too tame to define us.

Looking back, he was right that it might be too tame and, perhaps, too positive a definition for them.

We’re a chemical mixture that makes chaos, we’re—we’re a time bomb.

Bruce’s definition of them all those years ago seemed to fit perfectly.)
After Tony opened up about marriage, Steve couldn’t get the idea out of his head. He wanted that, wanted to call Tony his husband, to know they were bound not just in the eyes of god but in the eyes of the law as well. He wanted everyone to know Tony was spoken for, that Tony was Steve’s and vice-versa. He wanted Tony to wear a ring the blond bought himself, to see the younger man absent play with said ring and smile that soft sweet smile he always did whenever he remembered Steve when he thought no one was looking.

He just didn’t realize how hard finding the ring could be.

He wanted the ring to be absolutely perfect, a reminder of what they’ve been through and what they will still go through, a symbol of their strength when they faced hardships together yet simple enough to show how content they were with each other, how the simple things were what mattered most to them because they were fleeting moments that brought happiness in their hearts. At the same time wanted the ring to would embody Tony—filled with layers and strength but pure and naïve deep down. He wanted the ring to show the different personas Tony wore like armor.

Steve was ready to forego the ring when Jarvis spoke, “Captain?”

“Yeah, Jarvis?” He locked his StarkPad and threw beside him as he leaned back, rubbing his eyes. He’s gone around different stores during the first month, when nothing caught his attention, he started to rely on the internet. Sadly, there was still nothing.

“I couldn’t help but notice you have been looking at engagement rings. Is it safe to assume it’s for Sir?” the AI phrased it as question but Steve could tell Jarvis was already aware it was for Tony.

“Yeah.” He breathed, roughly rubbing his hands on his face. “But somehow nothing screams Tony.” He let out a frustrated sigh and picked up the sketchpad he left lying on the coffee table, going back to the sketch he was working on earlier. He only needed to add a few finishing touches and he would be done. He has been doing better and better with color pencils.

(When Tony has first told him he loved him, Steve was the happiest he has ever been. He never thought someone of Tony’s stature, someone as intellectual and kind and charming and powerful, would fall in love with someone like him, a relic of the past, a soldier whose greatest asset came from an experiment. Since then, he’s been drawing and drawing different portraits of Tony, portraits of a future he dreamed for the two of them, a child or two he imagined and hoped would be more Tony than him.

When Tony talked about marriage he realized including the sketchbook in the proposal would be a great idea.)

“I may have a suggestion, Captain.” His StarkPad lit up, a few windows opening—two were from Amazon, showing two different stones, ruby and sapphire, a website with the title Custom Rings, and an image of a ring with five stones lined up in the middle. “You can change the stones to your liking. I do highly suggest using a portion of the still unnamed element Sir has given you.”

Steve looked around the website for a moment, knowing he would follow Jarvis’ advice and still use the ruby and sapphire—expensive as they may be—to have the ring made. “Thanks, Jarvis. I think I know what I’ll do.” He opened one of the apps stalled in his StarkPad for when he wanted to draw some digital art and started to work.

He would modify the ring Jarvis showed him, maybe change the alignment diagonally, symbolizing how Tony didn’t need to follow anyone’s path because he created his own, of how the brunet would never let anyone’s condemnation slow him down. He placed the ruby on the outermost sides, a symbol of love and protection, followed by the sapphire to symbolize peace and happiness in their
relationship. Lastly, he placed the unnamed element in the middle, to show that Tony will remain as
the center of Steve’s universe no matter what hardships they would encounter.

A month later, after the back and forth between him and the online shop, after paying an extra
amount of money for the ring to be done faster, Steve was now in possession of the ring he would
offer Tony for his hand in marriage. And yes, he was aware of how cheesy that sounded.

(Then he found out Bucky was alive, S.H.I.E.L.D. fell, he discovered the Winter Soldier was
responsible for the death of Tony’s parents. He was afraid of the consequences of his discovery and
avoided telling Tony the truth for as long as he can, in spite of Natasha’s insistence it was best the
younger man learned the information from him.

He was busier than ever as he looked for Bucky.

When he was ready to tell Tony the truth, maybe take a couple of punches and curses and the cold
shoulder to come, hoping to come out of it stronger than before, Ultron happened.

Then they were on a temporary break, needing to get their bearings on their own, when the Accords
happened.

Steve had never hated fate more than he did in that moment.)

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He came clean about Siberia—how could he not? He was sick of their disdain of Tony that he had to
remind them the genius was human, too, just like all of them.

(Lang—Scott—was surprisingly the most open-minded of them, the one who didn’t badmouth Tony
as badly, even though Pym had ingrained it in his head that Starks were not to be trusted.

“People often dismiss me quickly but I do know how to read people.” Scott has said once, when they
had the chance to talk alone. “I saw how broken Stark was when he came to the Raft.” Steve saw the
other man shoot him a glance. “I’m actually surprised no one else in your team saw what I saw.”

He was actually wondering the same thing.)

Steve watched as Wanda’s knees buckled but remained standing, her hands shaking as they covered
her mouth. He could see her eyes glistening from where he stood. Out of all of them, he could tell
she was the one who would be able to relate to Tony most.

“He became an orphan because of a man,” she whispered. He wanted to defend Bucky but she was
still right. “He lost the most important parts of himself and he watched it happen while you knew the
truth all along.” She swayed from where she stood then quickly walked away with a shake of her
head. Clint, as expected, followed her.

He heard someone—Sam—sigh after a moment. “Anything else you’ve been keeping from us?” He
sounded tired and Steve couldn’t blame him. He was exhausted himself.

He took a deep breath to steady himself. He didn’t know how Sam would react since at the time, the
information didn’t matter much to him; he already made up his mind back then, just like Tony had.
“Tony offered to make our actions in Bucharest legal if we signed the accords.”
Sam looked like he wanted to ask more but simply deflated in the end.

Steve could practically read the other man like a book. He knew the other man wouldn’t have signed no matter what. He was the first one to speak out against the accords and he was also the one who discouraged Steve from telling Tony and Natasha about the other Winter Soldiers.

Steve left them with that particular information and left them to process it on their own.

Honesty was the first step to trust.

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When Steve walked out on Tony, Bucky’s weak body in his arm, he immediately regretted it. He wanted to go back and beg the genius for forgiveness but the look on Tony’s face flashed in his head. *I’ve never seen him so broken, so betrayed*, he thought as he took one step after the other, *I did that, I put that look on his face.*

So he did the next best thing when T’challa found them—he sent an alert to Friday to contact Fury. He might not be as close to her as he was with Jarvis but he knew she shares her predecessor’s protective instinct towards Tony.

(Later, much later after he’s had the time to just stop and think, he’ll have an extensive list of regrets regarding Tony, lying to the brunet would be at the top of said list.)

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Steve has been in Wakanda for four months when news of Secretary Ross’ arrest was announced.

Even though Tony wasn’t there, hasn’t even been seen in weeks, it has the genius’ name written all over it. As the thought entered his mind, he slumped on his seat. He felt as if all his strings have been cut at the same time. *Tony had a plan,* he thought to himself, *he had a plan all along.*

(Three and a half months after Ross’ arrest Bucky’s pardon was announced. He should have known Tony would see Bucky as the most innocent one among them.)

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Discovering Bucky wasn’t actually responsible for Howard and Maria’s death was the most liberating moment in Steve’s life.

After the announcement of Bucky’s pardon, Steve wanted to storm every remaining Hydra facility there was so his best friend could go home and be able to start anew, but T’challa has advised him against it. He wanted to protest, to scream and to simply ignore said advice but he was also aware of how much trouble he could cause Wakanda if anyone ever got wind of where he was hiding.
(He knew Tony was already aware of his whereabouts, he wasn’t an idiot.)

What really kept him firmly on Wakandan soil was the king’s assurance there were already people working under the radar for information and that Natasha was one of them.

And so he waited, busying himself with talking to Bucky’s unresponsive form and filling up various sketchbooks and watercolor pads to pass time.

(He always ended up drawing or painting Tony, as if his hands were so used to having the brunet as a model that they couldn’t create someone else’s portrait.)

Among his works, his favorite by far was a colored sketch of Tony holding two toddlers in his arms while sitting crossed-leg on the floor. One was a boy with his nose and eyes that sparkle with intellect and mischief, clearly inherited from the younger man, and a little girl with his golden locks and blue eyes, awe clearly written in them as she stared at Tony, her father.

It was also his most heartbreaking work—dreams just out of reach.

(They both wanted a big family, both intimate with the loneliness of being an only child.

“Maybe we can build our own basketball team.” Tony joked once but Steve can see the longing in those whiskey orbs.)

It didn’t take Natasha long to gather the information needed to help Bucky.

“There’s information here that I think Tony needs to know but is best learned from you.” Natasha said as she handed him a flash drive. “Besides the process for the programming, all of the Winter Soldier’s missions are there, including the Stark assassination.” His fists clenched and quickly unclenched as she looked at him straight in the eye.

He took a deep, fortifying breath and replied, “I already know that mission report Nat, so does Tony. I understand why—”

“No.” She cut him with a shake of her head. “The Winter Soldier is a ghost story for a reason and that’s because he’s good. That video should have been the first clue something wasn’t right.” He wanted to believe what she was implying but the physical evidence, a recording of the Winter Soldier killing Howard and Maria, was difficult to dismiss.

“Steve.” Natasha’s tone was hard and so was her gaze. “No decent assassin would shoot a camera after the assignment to destroy the evidence. Firstly, it would be too obvious to anyone who had half a brain, secondly, making sure nobody finds out they were there in the first place is part of the job description.”

The redhead-turned-blonde paused, as if letting the information sink in, but her gaze never wavered. He desperately wanted to believe her.

“How do you explain the video?” He asked, hoping for a decent explanation.

“According to the information we got, it was a simulation.” She started, gesturing for him to take a sit on the nearby couch—whether it was for his benefit or hers, he wasn’t sure. “The report mentioned Howard’s name triggered an odd reaction to their asset so they did various simulations.” She took the flash drive from him and plugged it into a port in the table. How she knew it was there, he’ll never know.

A holographic screen popped out of the table, the same way Tony’s own technology in the
workshop worked. She quickly scrolled through the files. “He was… malfunctioning, so to speak.” She grimaced at the word as she seemed to have found what she was looking for. “He kept on slipping up, forgetting to do certain countermeasures, missing shots he never would have otherwise.

They didn’t have anyone else good enough to do the mission so they him sent out anyway, along with his handler and two other operatives to assist in case something went wrong.” Natasha opened a folder with a few dozens of files which all read Mission Report. “The handler disabled certain street cameras earlier that day—early enough that no one would get suspicious when the assassination happens but late enough that any sort of repair wouldn’t happen until another day.”

She opened one of the files, the one consistent with the date of the Stark assassination.

*Mission Success – completed by Agent Mayhew, and Agents Marxx and Nevras*

Asset malfunction. It did not finish the mission after the target spoke of its past identity. Aconite had to be injected intravenously to the target. Punishment and reprogramming highly recommended.

Mission details are as follows:

Steve released a breath he didn’t realize he was holding. This was a great discovery, but he didn’t think Tony should hear it from him. It should come from someone he trusted.

Natasha sighed softly and placed a hand on his forearm. “Do you know why you and Tony work so well together?” She asked. She took his silence for the silent question that it was. “It’s because he knows how to win the war and you know how to win battles. While he’s looking at the bigger picture, you’re fixing the little details he’s forgoing to understand the whole.” She paused then smiled softly, “You’ve always been the dream team.”

When Natasha left, Steve has started on a sketch of the dream wedding he had with Tony.

(Steve sent the information to Friday, an olive branch of sorts with a simple I’m sorry with it.

He was tired of explaining himself, of making up excuses for his actions. Maybe, just maybe, an apology without any excuses, without any words to defend himself, was what Tony needed.

It was certainly more liberating than sending the phone with the note all those months ago.)

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It was a year and eight months after the fight when T’challa told him they could all go home. Steve wasn’t sure if he was more frightened or excited.

(When he stepped off the plane and saw Tony, he settled with terrified, instead.)

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Steve hasn’t encountered Tony since their return and he was grateful. He was aware the brunet was probably avoiding him but he wasn’t exactly seeking the genius out either.
(He didn’t realize how difficult it would be to face someone he loved—loves—after what had happened between them.)

Sometimes, he would overhear the others talking, a torrent of emotions clear in their voices. Once, he overheard Clint talking to Sam. “I feel guilty, I admit.” The archer had started, “I mean, I practically called Tony a backstabber even though he’s had my back for so long. But I still feel angry—at him, at myself.” Sam simply hummed.

When they remained silent, Steve thought the conversation was over when Sam spoke. “It’s just easier to blame him, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” Clint breathed out. “He’s smart, he’s good looking and he’s rich; it made him appear like an untouchable force that I guess,” he paused and took a deep, shaky breath, “I guess we all forgot he’s human, someone who’s struggling just as much as we are.”

That doesn’t even cover half of it, Steve thought to himself. They all forgot the negative consequences of Tony’s position, of how the expectations placed on the genius’ shoulders were much heavier, because people only see the armor, formidable and unbreakable, not the man inside who carried the weight of the armor along with the burden of the expectations.

We’ve all been blinded by the glamour, Steve thought as he walked away.

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When Tony told him it was the end of their love story, Steve felt his world fall apart.

(He kept all his sketchbooks and watercolor pads in a large box, still filled with Tony’s face, happy and in love and so, so unreachable.)

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They rebuilt their friendship, slowly but surely. The scars would always be there, a reminder of their mistakes but they would remain as that, reminders. They would talk quietly at night, not contemplating the what-ifs but trying to where they went wrong, what they could do to prevent the same mistakes, to avoid the scars that sometimes throbbed with phantom pain.

They were stronger now, Steve could see that, but they have reshaped their relationship in a way that could never be turned into something romantic, no matter how much they still loved—loves—each other.

(In Tony’s weaker moments, when he let himself be vulnerable in front of Steve, he could see the longing in those whiskey orbs but the flame that used to live there was gone, the flame Steve still saw in his azure eyes when he looked in the mirror.)

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They’ve been on US soil for months, almost a year now, when a series of extraterrestrial attacks happened. He felt they were underprepared, as if the extreme amounts of training and recruiting they did were all for naught. But then he met Tony’s gaze, determination and fear clear in his brown orbs, a certain strength in the clench of his jaws and Steve knew they would do everything to protect their home. Together.

(When the Iron Man armor was hit by the alien, Thanos, as Thor called it, Steve felt time stop as we waited for Tony to get up, to be back in the fight.

And then Bucky was there, shooting at any hostiles coming his way as he ran towards the fallen genius.

He trusted Bucky with his life, he was sure he could trust him with Tony’s.)

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The Iron Man armor managed to stand back up and fight. Tony Stark didn’t.

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Five weeks, two days, ten hours and six minutes. That’s how long Tony has been unresponsive. They all thought they’d lost the genius but Dr. Cho managed to bring him back. The look on her face told them not to ask.

(Even when he was practically in his deathbed, Tony still thought of the people he needed to protect. It was poetic, in a way, that the genius kept on proving him wrong, proving that he would be willing to sacrifice himself for everybody else.)

He only left the genius’ bedside when he needed to shower, sustenance was brought to him by anyone who was free at the moment and they all looked at him with a mixture of pity and sympathy and sadness. He was glad they let him be as they helped fix the world the alien attack has caused.

Rhodes, Vision and Natasha visited as much as they can but without Tony, they were the face of the enhanced and were necessary to calm the panicking public. Ms. Potts had SI to worry about and so did Happy. Peter had school to focus on, knowing that Tony wouldn’t want him letting his grades slip. Bruce had to help Dr. Cho and Thor had Asgard to think about.

Besides him, Bucky was the only constant person glued to Tony’s bedside. From how agitated the other soldier seemed, Steve had a guess as to why.

(He didn’t want to admit it but he could see the way Tony and Bucky got closer, how they formed their own inside jokes. He saw the way Bucky’s eyes lit up whenever Tony laughed, the way his eyes lingered on the genius and the way he deflated whenever Tony left. There was a spark in his grey eyes, the same one he saw in his own blue ones all those years ago, when he found himself falling in love with Tony.)
“He makes it so easy, doesn’t he?” Bucky made a noise of inquisition but kept his eyes on Tony. Steve could see the miniscule tension present around his friend’s frame, though. “Falling in love with him, he makes it so easy.” Steve clarified gruffly, as if it wasn’t obvious yet.

They both remained silent, an unspoken agreement that the ball’s in Bucky’s court now, if he was willing to take the shot at all.

In a way, Steve thought maybe his timing was wrong, but he knew in his gut that this moment, right here while they were waiting for the man they both fell in love with, was the best time to address their feelings for the slumbering genius.

“When I first met him, really met him, I thought, ‘great, another self-righteous kid whose heart is in the right place.’” Bucky’s voice was gruff, the lack of use taking its toll. “He reminded me of you, the one who was small, that I felt I needed to protect him, because he has so much fight in him to do what he thinks is right that I knew he might get lost in the way.” There was a pause but he knew Bucky wasn’t done yet.

“Then I knew him.” In his periphery, Steve could see a small smile on the other man’s face. “You have the same goals, the same desires to protect the weak, but you were doing it for different reasons. You wanted to protect people because that’s all you knew growing up, that’s what we were taught growing up. Tony, though, he,” Bucky paused and took a deep breath, “he’s doing it because he thinks, if he’s part of the solution, then maybe he wouldn’t be part of the problem.” There was a tremor in his voice and Steve had to resist the urge to place a hand on his shoulder but he knew it wouldn’t be appreciated.

The silence was longer this time, perhaps a little more as well. Steve was willing to wait it out, familiar with how difficult it was to find the right words sometimes.

“I learned all the parts of him that weren’t you until I was just looking at Tony Stark and found myself thinking, ‘I want him, I want to know more’ and then one day I just…”

“Yeah.” Steve breathed, a small smile tugging at his lips, when it seemed the other man wouldn’t continue. He knew exactly how Bucky felt.

“I tried to stop, you know?” Bucky tried to explain “To keep on seeing him the way I see you—like a little brother.” Steve snorted, because he was now literally bigger than Bucky. They’ve been friends long enough for the other man to simply ignore him, though. “But my mind kept wandering; thoughts of how it would feel to wake up with his arms around me, of how his kisses would feel like, kept haunting me so I just. I let myself fall.” There was an apology in his tone, as if he committed a sin by falling for Tony.

“Like I said,” Steve decided to ignore the hinted apology, “he makes falling in love with him so easy.” It was a blessing, in a way, because he knew Bucky would never tell Tony his feelings if he thought Steve wasn’t okay with him being romantically involved with the genius.

(He wasn’t ashamed to admit he still had nights when he cried himself to sleep, imagining Tony’s body against his like he belonged there.)
Steve thanked every god out there.

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When Bucky asked Tony out, everybody knew.

Tony avoided the compound as much as possible and Bucky was always a mixture of angry and sulky.

Steve felt something in his chest throb.

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When Tony finally agreed for a date, everybody let out a sigh of relief.

(There was only so many equipment Bucky can break before they consume their yearly budget.)

It was then that Steve knew what a broken heart truly felt like.

(Losing his chance with Peggy, hard as it was to admit, was nothing compared to losing Tony.)

*

It was Steve who realized both Tony and Bucky were ready for marriage.

(It took Bucky one year and eleven months to be ready for marriage. Tony took two years and eight months.)

When Steve realized Bucky was ready to build a home with Tony, one to call their own, he took the ring he has kept for over five years out of the box where he has also kept everything that reminded him of what could have been.

The ring still looked as perfect as it did when he first got it, the red with gold edges box he has stored it looking a little frayed in certain parts, from where he had rubbed it over and over when he was hiding in Wakanda, colors dulled with time.

He knew Bucky could choose his own ring if he wanted but somehow, Steve thought the ring he had made years ago would still be perfect, perhaps even more so now that Tony has found the one he has completely opened up to, someone he willingly broke down his walls for.

(When he and Bucky stopped by the coffee shop they frequented during afternoon run, Steve pulled out the ring box out of his pocket and silently handed it to the other man.

The years apart never dulled their closeness and the past years have just strengthened it, as if they
weren’t just brothers in their heads but in souls as well, as if no matter what happened, no matter where they were, they would be brothers.

Bucky took the box with shaking hands, already aware of what was inside when he caught the blond once clutching it to his chest, silent tears streaming down his face. The brunet how perfectly the ring would be for Tony.)

When they announced their engagement, Steve wanted to run, wanted to scream at the top of his lungs, asking why it couldn’t be him with Tony. But then the genius smiled at him, eyes so full of love that may be different now but was love all the same.

And so he stayed.

*

There’s a knock on his door, snapping him out of his musings, as Sam’s head pops in. The other man takes one look at him and quickly enters his room, closing the door behind him.

“Are you sure you can do this?” The concern is clear in his voice which, to be honest, is valid. Steve’s pretty sure, even with his gelled hair and straightened suit, he still looks like the world’s ending. Well, it isn’t far from the truth but he knows he’ll be okay.

“Yeah.” He breathes out. “I guess the wedding felt like I’m reading the words, The End, and I just.” He takes a slow, deep breath and lets it out in a quick heavy exhale. “It feels like all the ‘what ifs’ and ‘what could have been’ and the ‘what could have I done to be able to keep him’ just started flooding my head.”

They’re silent for a moment, the confession hanging in the air, neither of them seems to be at a loss for words.

When Sam doesn’t say anything for a long while, Steve takes a deep, fortifying breath, the small smile he gives the other man sad but genuine. “It doesn’t matter now; they’re in love with each other and I’m still too in love with Tony to hurt him more.” He walks towards Sam, the other man following his movements, and held the doorknob, turning it but not opening the door, his gaze firmly set in front of him, not looking at the other man. “Who knows, maybe in some other time or some other world,” he turns his head slightly, finally looking at Sam, “a version of me got it right.”

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In parallel universe

Maybe you'd be my first

I could be your only one

Oh this universe is a curse
Where's timing so cruel to us

I don't know how to be alright

Don't want to live in world where you are not mine

End Notes

In case anybody wanted to give me shit about the thing I said about Sam, it's true, though, that he was the first to speak up against the accords and he was the one who told Steve not to tell Tony and Nat about what they discovered. I think the latter could have really changed a lot, too. Clearly, communication is something that is glaringly absent in their team. About me taking artistic liberties and not having Bucky kill Howard and Maria, I just really find it odd that someone who's supposedly really good could make a mistake as sophomoric as that. I mean, I'm not an assassin but I'm pretty sure disabling the camera happens before the, ya know, killing? Also, I highly doubt it was for 'documentation' purposes of Hydra either because then Bucky shouldn't have shot it. So, yeah. Ooh. And I think I read somewhere that in the comics it really was accident??? Idk.

This will probably be the last MCU-related fic (unless it's an AU) I'll be writing because frankly, since AoU, it's been going downhill for me. I'm just waiting for Tony to die so I can stop watching any of their movies entirely since he was the only one who still gives me a reason to watch. (Don't judge, I was never really that big of a fan, I just liked the characters and they've even ruined almost all of them for me.)

I'll probably focus on AA stories (and AUs) because no matter how admittedly lame it is, it kind of resembles my idea of how the team would become after the first Avengers movie, so..? And don't worry, I'll always have Bucky. xD

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