I Can Hear the Echoes

by DrowningByDegrees

Summary

When Steve changed the past, the resulting timeline couldn't have been more different than the life he knew. There was a constant though, a single he'd have gravitated to no matter where the course of his life took him. Somehow, he always found his way to Bucky.

Someone asked for my headcanon for how Steve and Bucky got together in the divergent timelines of I, The Paradox

Notes

First of all, I am so thrilled that anyone else is as interested in the meta around I, The Paradox as I am. Thank you for indulging my nerding out over this.

A huge thank you, also, to Mari_Knickerbocker for kindly betaing this for me on pretty much no notice. <3 <3 <3 <3

The first part of this is up now. I'll be posting the second ficlet once I knock out another project that's on a deadline.

See the end of the work for more notes.

The motion that caught Steve's attention was subtle, just a brief flicker of movement at the edge of one of the warmly colored pillars lining the Cloister garden. He tensed, noting immediately the
way whoever it was ducked right back out of sight. They were bathed entirely in shadow, and
Steve only managed to relax when he caught the faint glint of sunlight against a metal plate. It
wasn't the kind of mistake Bucky made, so Steve chalked it up to a greeting.

That Bucky would show up here wasn't an entirely unsurprising thing. He came and went like the
tide, his presence ephemeral at best. It had been two months, and there was no telling how much of
Bucky had turned up this time. There always seemed to be more fragments of his old friend, even if
they were broken and hopelessly out of order. Steve selfishly held out hope that one of these visits,
Bucky might not look quite so haunted anymore.

In the meantime, he made no move to close the distance between them. The faint smile that pulled
at the corners of his mouth was the only indication he gave that he'd seen Bucky at all. It was all
the invitation that was safe to give in a place so public. There's so little safety for a fugitive
anywhere near him, and they both know it. That Bucky came to him at all is a miracle.

They were further into the Cloisters before Bucky came close enough to speak to. Steve moved
through a quiet, empty walkway, it's edges cradled by grey stone walls. The sun didn't reach this
far. Bucky's obscured presence where he sat on one of the stone benches would have seemed
completely unintentional to most anyone but Steve.

"It's been a while," Steve commented, his tone carefully neutral. It was a compliment, probably,
that Bucky didn't bother to look at him at first. Steve had seen the wary expression most people
and places got out of Bucky, but he was perfectly calm, staring out the empty garden, all lush green
and blossoming with life.

"Yeah," Bucky agreed very quietly. He dragged his thumb along the mortar where two of the
stones in the wall meet. Steve couldn't quite shake the feeling that there was something important
about all this, so when Bucky didn't move, Steve sat down at his side. The benches weren't wide,
and even through his shirt, he could feel the unforgiving metal plates of Bucky's arm.

It was often like this, stolen moments of quiet companionship before Bucky slipped out of his
grasp again. For a little while, Steve comforted himself with that. The silence though, was
oppressively heavy. Impulsively, Steve laid his hand on Bucky's metal forearm, hoping the gesture
would be enough to keep his friend from fleeing. "Bucky-"

"I'm turning myself in," Bucky blurted out before Steve could finish. Bucky didn't look over, but
Steve could make out the taut pull of distress in his features.

"Remembering what?"

"Everything." Bucky bowed his head. Steve couldn't see the pain Bucky was in, but he could hear
it. "Steve. The things I've done..."

"Weren't your fault." Steve wanted to kick himself for letting Bucky get to this point. He couldn't
begin to wrap his head around the guilt Bucky must have been living with, but he'd come and gone
and Steve had been a fool not to try and stop him. "You don't need to do this. We can find another
"Steve... This isn't the kind of thing you punch your way out of. What are you going to do? Give the whole United States government a firm talking to?" There was little humor in Bucky's teasing, and the smile he lifted his head to give was watery and thin.

"At least let me help you," Steve protested. His voice rose a fraction before he caught himself, and maybe that was why Bucky came to him here. The Cloisters were as hushed as a library, forcing Steve to keep quiet.

"How? You got a lawyer who specializes in brainwashed assassins?" Bucky asked, though there was no levity in his teasing.

In Steve’s head, he was scrambling for something to make this right. Ultimately, finding a way to clear Bucky’s name was the only alternative to Bucky living as a fugitive. "Just give me some time."

"Steve," Bucky tried, but Steve was barely listening.

"You don’t even know if they’ll let you close enough to turn yourself in." Steve’s stomach took a nosedive at the idea that they might fire on Bucky before he even got the chance to come out the other side of this.

"Steve." Bucky reached out, his hand warm against Steve’s cheek. He nudged at it, urging Steve to turn his head and forcing their eyes to meet. "I'm tired."

He looked every inch of the word, if Steve was being honest. Bucky hadn’t lost weight, but he hadn’t put any on either, and he looked pale and worn out, like he was scraping by on scant moments of sleep. Steve caved, cradling Bucky’s flesh and blood shoulder under his palm. “Just let me be in your corner.”

“You dummy. You’re always in my corner.” Bucky’s expression went soft, leaving Steve startlingly aware of how close they were. Bucky’s hand was still on his cheek, the intimacy of it only remarkable because Steve wondered when that had gotten to be so comfortable. Some of the sadness receded from Bucky’s eyes, leaving something tender behind. “That’s the first thing I remembered. It’s why I can do this, and I have to do this.”

“I lost you once. I can’t do it again.” Steve admitted, the words coming out in a hushed whisper that dissipated in the scant space between them. To most of the world, Bucky was armed and dangerous, and Steve couldn’t quite shake the worry that this might all end before it even started. “At least let me come with you?”

“I was kind of hoping you’d say that.” Steve had seen a lot of things from Bucky in the snippets of time they got together. He looked like the world was too heavy, most of the time, everything hidden under a veneer of weary resignation. This was the first time he’d seen cracks in that facade, a vulnerable pinch at the corners of Bucky’s eyes, a fretful pursing of his lips as he didn’t quite meet Steve’s gaze. Steve felt like an idiot not to have realized that as worried as he was, Bucky must have been terrified.

“I’m gonna be here when you get out too. And you will.” One way or another, Steve meant to make sure of that. Justice could never be Bucky locked away in another cage.

The abrupt way Bucky closed the distance between them startled Steve, so much so that he froze when their mouths first connected. It was brief, just a chaste press of Bucky’s lips to his, but it was
maybe the most frightfully honest thing either of them had managed in recent history.

“I was kind of hoping you’d say that too,” Bucky added, ducking his head away.

It seemed the most natural thing for Steve to follow. He took refuge in the shadows that mostly shielded them from the rest of the world. Hooking his fingers under Bucky’s chin, Steve drew closer. He caught Bucky’s mouth against his, reveling in the easy way they fit together, in the way Bucky sagged into his embrace like melted wax. Even when Bucky broke away from the kiss, he made no move to pull away. It stoked something warm and protective in Steve’s chest that Bucky felt safe enough to stay put, even for a little while.

He tipped his head, cheek resting against Bucky’s hair. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

End Notes

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