To Infinity, Beyond, and Back Again

by fanfictiongreenirises

Summary

“Be happy, Steve,” Tony said.

Steve and Peggy stepped through the portal, and the Avengers went home to Stark Tower.

In which Steve realises he made a mistake.

Notes

This time last year, my friend and I had just come back from watching Endgame, and were both reeling from it. I guess I wanted to sort of...not really commemorate, but move on from it with this last fic that I wrote a few months after that. This is also a sort of response to Toy Story 4, because I've always seen Woody and Buzz as reflections of Tony and Steve (platonic, romantic, idc), and that ending after watching Endgame was like another punch to the gut. (I have a lot of feelings about what they did to Buzz in that movie lol.)

Hope you enjoy!

Disclaimer: I don't own Marvel or Toy Story.
“It’ll be okay,” Tony said.

Steve nodded, glancing back towards the portal where Peggy stood. She gave him a small smile, mirroring the one he’d seen years ago when he’d kissed her for the first and only time as he’d left for his suicide mission. He didn’t have it in him to say anything, the lump in his throat too great.

“Steve,” Tony said, and Steve turned his head back around. The faceplate was down, hiding Tony’s face from him. “The world will be okay. You can go. We’ll be fine.”

Steve looked at him in surprise, something like dawning hope rising within him. He searched Iron Man’s impassive face, wishing he could look into Tony’s eyes and see for himself what was in them. “Are you…are you sure, Shellhead?” he asked.

Tony nodded.

Steve didn’t know what his face looked like at that moment, but when he glanced back at Peggy, her face broke out into a grin, and she began running over to where the two of them stood. Steve met her the rest of the way, drawing her into a hug. They weren’t there yet, with a kiss, but maybe now that they had time, they could explore what they could be.

The rest of the team were stood behind Tony. Steve made his way over to them, but before he could say a word, Natasha spoke.

“Tony’s right, Steve,” she said. “We’ll be okay.”

“Natasha,” Steve said, not knowing how to respond to that. “Thank you.”

Maybe this was how his story was always meant to end. He was a relic of the past; it was where he belonged.

He hugged Natasha, and then Clint, and Thor and Sam and Bruce and even Vision. Then he got to Tony.

He didn’t know how to thank Tony for all he’d done for him. He didn’t know how to say goodbye.

Tony saved him the trouble. Tony was always saving him. He pulled Steve into a crushing hug, and Steve wrapped his arms around the armour, wishing once again that Tony would come out of the suit and he could hug his friend.

“Be happy, Steve,” Tony said.

Steve and Peggy stepped through the portal, and the Avengers went home to Stark Tower.
Peggy. He deserved a rest. He deserved to go home and to build a life and a family. Even if it was a life without Tony in it.

When Peggy had arrived, he hadn’t really thought about losing Steve. He hadn’t thought that Steve would want to leave. He’d known that Steve considered her a what-if, but goddamn it, Steve had been living here with them for four whole years. Tony thought this was his home now.

Remembering Steve’s face light up when Tony had told him it was okay was simultaneously a balm and a stab wound.

Steve was happy. That was enough.

“Tony?”

Tony looked up. Natasha stood at the entrance of the workshop, holding a plate of sandwiches and another plate balancing two mugs.

Tony could feel his eyes well up at the sight, because just two days ago that figure in the doorway had been Steve, and he’d come right up to Tony because this was their routine, damn it, and he’d sat there on the bench with his feet swinging and eating a burger that Tony was sure he’d actually just ordered from that place down the street.

Before he could stop himself, Tony sniffed harshly. Mortified, he turned away from where he faced Natasha, squeezing his eyes shut tight in an attempt to force down the burning at the back of his eyes.

There was a soft clatter as Natasha placed the food on an empty spot on Tony’s workbench. She circled Tony, placing her hand on his arm as he moved to walk away. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I know what he meant to you.”

Tony looked away. “He meant a lot to all of us,” he said. At least his voice was stable.

“You know what I mean.” Natasha, who Tony had never seen being physically intimate with anyone who wasn’t Clint, hugged him. The shock was probably why he let her comfort him at all, before he wrapped his arms around her in return.

I didn’t think he’d go back. Tony didn’t want to say it, but he did anyway, because what did it matter now? He’d have his bitterness and grief for tonight, and then after that he’d be firmly in the land of sadness and nostalgia. Those were acceptable emotions. Maybe they’d throw a Captain America remembrance party every year on this day.

Natasha didn’t respond for a long time. She released him, and led him over to the couch, bringing a blanket over and the food. Tony wrapped his hands around the coffee mug and stared into it, as though its dark depths would provide him with an answer as to how in the fuck he was supposed to go on without Steve.

Natasha settled herself beside him, holding a bowl of soup. “C’mon, I skipped dinner for you. At least eat something first before you put caffeine into your system.”

Tony obediently grabbed his own bowl of soup. “So, should we have a vote for who’s going to be co-leader with me?”

“We had one,” Natasha said casually. “Or rather, they all shoved the job at me.”

Tony huffed out a humourless laugh. “Yeah, that sounds like them. God knows I wouldn’t want to
fill in Cap’s spot. I was going to vote for you, too.”

“Tony, I can’t do this without you, you know that, right?” Natasha turned to him, face serious. “I need you. The team needs you. We promised Steve that the world would be fine so he could go and have his happy ending, and we need to uphold that promise. We can mourn him, but we need to do our jobs too. We can’t—”

“Fall off the rails, I know,” Tony cut in. “Believe me, I know. And don’t worry, I have no plans of falling into anything.”

Conversation dwindled down as they ate. Tony was suddenly immensely relieved that Natasha had come down to keep him company. He didn’t know what he would’ve done without her there.

“You know,” Tony said, “we can dig through history books at any point to see what Steve ended up doing.” Would he be able to handle that? He didn’t know.

“Not tonight,” Natasha said. “Maybe in like a year’s time. Or five.”

“To Steve, then,” Tony said, raising his mug in toast.

Natasha smiled, a soft, sad smile. “To Steve.”

The liquid went down harshly as Tony swallowed against the tears rising up in his throat.

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The first few months were fun. The war was over, and now no one really cared about Steve anymore, or how he’d come back. He’d done his part and had become martyred for it. They decided to keep it quiet – after all, no one had known Captain America’s secret identity. Steve resumed his own identity, after Peggy had pulled a few strings, and they even had the money to move in together.

It was a small one-bedroom house, and most of it was falling apart. Steve spent most of his time fixing it up, working odd jobs here and there while he figured out what he wanted to do with the rest of his life.

Steve was in his mid-twenties and he knew nothing else outside of war. He thought that was a little depressing. Maybe he’d go into art. He could apply for a position on that magazine that kept writing Captain America comics.

Peggy, meanwhile, was experiencing the opposite. She knew exactly what she wanted to do but…

“Those bloody men,” she hissed as she threw open the front door.

“Hello to you to,” Steve said. He put the paintbrush down and walked over to see what the issue today was. “Was it Thompson again?”

“Believe it or not, it wasn’t,” Peggy told him. She’d hung her coat up, and was rooting through their cupboards in search of something to eat. For some reason, she kept forgetting that Steve cooked.

“Dining table, Peg. Just wash up.”
Dinner was always over rather quickly. Peggy scarfed down her food, a habit made during the war that she hadn’t broken out of yet. Steve did the same, but mostly because the food didn’t taste the same anymore. He missed the flavour that Bruce’s cooking had. He missed the variety and choice.

He’d been spoiled in the twenty-first century.

There were times during the day when he’d turn around, intending to talk to one of the Avengers, but remember that they weren’t there. They didn’t exist yet. They weren’t even a thought right now.

There were days where Peggy would get back from work and mention Howard, and even though Steve knew that this Howard wasn’t the one who’d made all those decisions and choices that would hurt Tony, something in his didn’t sit right about staying at home and doing nothing. This universe would be different, he told himself. He’d be there for this world’s Tony and he’d make sure that Howard treated him right.

Steve had thought that once he was back, everything would fall into place. He’d come here, come home, and it would feel right, like he belonged here. He’d get that white picket fence life he’d dreamt of during the war.

But in this time and era, in a world still reeling from the aftereffects of the war, there was nothing for him to do, not now that no one knew who he was.

Perhaps everything would’ve been alright had he and Peggy worked out romantically, but they had quickly realised after their first official date that they weren’t meant to be. Steve loved her, of course, and maybe they would marry one day if they were old and tired and had found no one else. It was a running joke between them by this point.

One night, Steve woke up in bed from a dream that slipped from his grasp as he tried to remember it. All he could think was, *I’ve made a mistake*.

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Tony was dealing. It had been a year. A long year full of telling himself to remember to guard his back as he fought, and then forgetting most of the time anyway and taking on hits as villains realised that Captain America had left the Avengers a shield shaped hole in their defence.

Carol Danvers had come onto the team and Tony had been quick to affectionately dub her ‘Captain 2.0’. They were rebuilding the team after losing one of their strongest pillars, and Natasha had even stopped glaring at him on a daily basis.

“Iron Man,” Sam called over the comms. “We’re coming in hot. You ready to play fetch?”

“Kid, I was born ready,” Tony said, finding himself letting loose a laugh when he heard Sam grumble.

Ever since the Kang incident, Sam had been harder to read and slower to smile. Tony’s subconscious had apparently been looking for something to focus on, and honed in on him.

He dove down from where he had been keeping watch from the air, looking down at the situation below. There had been a bank robbery happening, complete with hostages, and to make matters worse, there were also alien weapons involved.
Apparently someone in the city had an off-planet supplier. Rhodey had been inside working on making a deal (i.e. keeping the robbers distracted) while Scott Lang (who they’d brought in for this) had shrunk the hostages to get them out aboard ants.

Now the real chase had begun. Tony peered down, the HUD helpfully zooming in onto the street. His boot jets were on standby as he waited for the robbers to come outside.

There was a flash and the door flung open, black streaks as they did their best to outrun Clint and Thor. It was a shame, really, Tony reflected. It would’ve been worth watching Thor and Clint chase the two of them.

But they needed this to be done soon – it was a Thursday, and Thursdays were movie night.

“Sorry, lads,” Tony said as he grabbed the first robber around the waist, pulling upwards with him. “Today just isn’t your day.”

“We’ll see about that, Iron Man!”

There must’ve been something else on him that their sensors hadn’t detected, because one second the armour was flying towards the roof where they’d positioned a police squad, and the next, everything went black.

Tony groaned. “An EMP? Are you kidding me?” It would normally take thirty seconds to reboot, but this wasn’t a normal EMP. This one was infused with alien technology, and he had no idea how much it added to the waiting time. Either way, he was a sitting duck where he was now. Tony switched to an analogue channel built specifically for this reason, thankful that it hadn’t also been busted. Who knew what sort of alien tech they were dealing with? “Marvel, pick up!” The armour had definitely made a sizeable dent in the concrete, and Tony wished he’d brought out the lighter version today.

“Tony?” Carol’s voice was staticky. “What the flerk happened?”

Carol had a way of making him feel optimistic despite the situation every single time. “Danvers, he’s still got some tech on him. Works like an EMP. The suit’s down and I lost eyes.”

Carol swore. “Hang in tight,” she said to him as goodbye before switching channels. “I’m sending Sam to you.”

“Thanks.” Now there was nothing to do but fidget, mind already planning out how to safeguard the armour against future attacks. He hoped they wouldn’t destroy the device in the process. What he wouldn’t do to get his hands on that—

Someone’s voice was talking to him, but Tony could only hear the words as though they came from a great distance. “Tony, I’m going to manually remove the armour.” Sam was finally here.

“Beside the chest plate,” Tony said, hoping his words got through.

But almost before he’d even spoken, deft fingers were working at the armour. Tony heard the clicks and then the hissing as the chest plate fell away, and then the shoulder guards and gauntlets. He wriggled his fingers, revelling at the freedom, before he removed the helmet.

“Thanks, Fal—” he began to say, before he looked at the figure standing before him. All air in his lungs left with a whoosh of breath.

This wasn’t Falcon. This was Captain America, complete in costume and shield.
Steve knelt there beside him. At Tony’s voice, he looked up and gave him a blinding smile. “Tony,” he said. *Oh*, Tony thought. He’d forgotten how it felt to have Steve’s smile directed towards you. His heart flipped in his chest, a stupid physiological reaction he thought he’d gotten under control. “Hi. I’m back.”

“I—I see that,” Tony managed.

He sat there, clad only in the underarmour now. Steve sat with him and for a moment the two of them were silent, each gazing at the other.

“How?” Tony finally asked. He wasn’t sure he was mentally equipped to deal with ‘why’ right now.

Steve shrugged. “I watched you and Reed mess with that portal for hours, and apparently memorised the notes at some point. So I copied down everything I could remember, and took them to a scientist, who was more than happy to build me my own time machine portal.”

Tony couldn’t stop staring. His curiosity finally got the better of him. “Why?”

“Because I realised that this is where I belong. I was with Peggy for a year, and there were things that I enjoyed, but more than anything I missed this time. I…” Steve leaned closer to Tony, eyes beseeching and wide and so, so blue. “I missed you.”

Before Tony even knew what was happening, Steve had pressed his mouth to Tony’s, lips soft and warm. Tony froze, having absolutely no idea what was going on. Before he knew it, he was kissing back. Steve’s hands were cradling Tony’s face. His heart was beating wildly; when was the last time he’d felt this alive?

Tony’s fingers closed around the gauntlet, and, praying that the armour had finally rebooted, he shot a repulsor set to stun directly into Steve’s chest.

“That’s one way to reject someone,” Carol said, letting out a low whistle.

She and Tony were standing outside the Tower’s medical bay, watching through the glass as Steve sat on the bed with his legs swinging, undergoing extensive medical evaluation.

Tony sighed. “My reaction was perfectly logical.”

Carol gave him a sympathetic smile. “It was, which makes this situation all the more depressing.”

“Yeah,” he said, snorting. “What even is our life?”

Carol let out a little hum of agreement. “So?” she said.

“So what?”

“Are you going to ask him out? Are you two officially dating?” Carol crossed her arms, leaning against the wall. “Because my bank account will look great with seven hundred dollars in it. Not that that’s important,” she added hastily at Tony’s confused glance.

“I don’t know, Carol,” Tony said, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “Why would he even want to
date me after I shot him for kissing me?"

“Because, like we just established, it was a perfectly reasonable thing to do.”

“I just…” Tony almost didn’t want to say it, but over the course of the last twelve months, he and Carol had confided much worse to each other. “Part of me can’t help thinking, what if he gets bored of me again – of this whole time again – and decides to leave? He’s already done it once. What’s to stop him doing it again, every time he gets sick of it?”

After a while, Carol responded. “Time travel, and in this case, dimension hopping as well, is a tricky thing that scientists in the 50s didn’t have the knowledge or equipment to accomplish. We barely have it today. For Steve to go to all that trouble to get back here, to you, means this isn’t something whimsical. He made a mistake and he saw that and he did everything he could to fix it. I think that’s worth giving this a chance. He didn’t come back just for your dick, Tony. He came back to the Avengers, too.”

The door beside them opened, and Steve walked out. It’d taken Tony months to train himself to not instantly hone in on Steve when he walked into a room, to not turn to him like a moth to light, but after a year of zero Steve in his life – and zero chance of him ever being in it again – Tony was out of practise.

“Hey, Army,” Carol greeted. “I take it you’re definitely you?”

“Air Force.” Steve’s smile at her was warm, but he kept glancing to Tony. Tony kept him hands deep in his pockets to hide his urge to fidget. “Yeah. They confirmed it. Not a Skrull, shapeshifter, or alien of any other kind, and there’s no external force influencing me.”

Carol nodded. She reached out and clapped a hand on Steve’s shoulder. “I’m going to go inform the rest of the team and let you two catch up.” She gave Tony a meaningful look as she exited the room.

With that, Steve and Tony were left alone.

“So,” Steve began.

“So,” Tony echoed, unsure of what to say. “Um, I’m sorry I shot you?”

Steve shook his head as he began speaking. “No, you did the right thing. I’m the one who’s sorry. I came onto you with no regard for how you feel, and I shouldn’t have done that. I wasn’t thinking – all I could see was that you were down and then I got you out and I…”

“Steve, it’s okay,” Tony said. “I wasn’t…” What was it that Carol had said? “I wasn’t doing it to reject you. I just honestly thought someone was impersonating you, because no way would everything that I’ve wanted this past year since you left actually be coming true.”

“I can’t apologise for leaving,” Steve said, “because if I’d stayed, I would’ve second guessed that decision at every turn. I wouldn’t have been able to see what I have – had – here right in front of me this whole time. I can’t ask the team to take me back, but…what?”

Tony was staring at him incredulously. “Are you kidding? Of course the team will take you back. You’re—” He almost said you’re Captain America but hearing that would make Steve’s mouth twist into a grimace. “Once an Avenger, always an Avenger, remember?”

Steve looked up, a flicker of hope passing his face. “And…us? What about us?” Are we okay? his eyes asked.
Tony sighed. “Steve, you gotta know how I feel about you. There’s no way you don’t know.”

“Tony, humour me for a moment. We aren’t all geniuses here.” The look Steve gave Tony was soft, but his eyes were nervous.

Tony shrugged. “I’ve been in love with you for as long as I’ve known you,” he said, facing Steve head-on. “I think at this point everyone probably knows that.”

“For as long as you’ve….” Steve’s voice trailed off. “Tony, we’ve known each other for five years!”

Tony cracked a smile. “Yeah, we have.”

“Why did you never tell me?”

“What good would it have done, Steve? Would it have stopped you from leaving? Would you have been happy here, if I’d confessed and you’d decided to try things out with me? Or is it more likely that one day you would’ve woken up, and just like with Peggy, realised that you’d made a mistake in staying here with me and the team, and regretted it for the rest of your life?” Tony’s heart was pounding, hands clammy. Then he sighed. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be blaming you for coming back. That’s the last thing I want to do. I’m happy you’re back, I really am. It’s just….”

“You don’t trust I’ll stay,” Steve finished for him. His eyes were sad. Tony hadn’t intended to make Steve sad. Steve walked forward, reaching out for one of Tony’s hands. His fingers were warm to the touch where they cradled Tony’s. “Tony, I promise you, I’ll do everything I can to make you see that I’m here for good, with you and the team and this time.”

Tony searched Steve’s eyes, but it wasn’t as though he was going to say ‘no’ in the face of anything Steve said. This was Steve. Tony had always been a goner wherever he was concerned.

“Okay,” he said. “Let’s give this a shot, then.”

Tony could feel Steve’s relieved smile against his lips when Tony kissed him. He was more prepared this time. Tony wrapped his arms around Steve’s neck, kissing him like he’d always wanted to, with full reckless abandon like at the end of a film.

End Notes

Thanks for reading! Let me know what you think!

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