Wishful Thinking

by BlossomsintheMist

Summary

Things have been building between Steve and Tony for a while, but after a battle where Tony is injured, they come to a head in an unexpected way. Was originally envisioned as a post-credits scene for Age of Ultron, but probably won't end up fitting the movie well, so feel free to envision it differently.

Notes

Written based off of this post on tumblr, as a potential Age of Ultron credits scene. I'm aware I'm too late to beat the movie, and, well, this doesn't necessarily have a lot to do with it, so you don't have to take it as potentially Age of Ultron related, just as Steve and Tony coming together after a big fight with the Avengers that ended with Tony injured. As you can see, some of the dialogue comes from dailysuperhusbands (thank you so much for letting me use your idea to write this!), though most of it is original, as I tried to work the original post into the fic pretty organically, if I could. Written without knowledge of any spoilers. Thank you to cyborgcap and doctoranthony stark for serving as my betas!

The beeping of the monitors and machines was almost too loud to Steve’s ears. It was hard not to be on edge, after what they’d been through. There was adrenaline still pounding through his veins. Or maybe it was just worry, for Tony; he’d look half dead when they’d taken him into surgery, and he was still terrifyingly pale and washed out against the sheets. Steve wasn’t sure anymore. It felt
like days since they’d first gotten him here after the battle, hours since Tony came out of surgery, but he knew, realistically, that it hadn’t been that long. The grime of the battle still clung to Steve’s skin, a heavy layer clinging to his face so that he could feel it on his cheeks and chin whenever his facial muscles shifted, gritty in his hair. He should wash up, he knew he should—the only parts of him that were clean at the moment were the places where his uniform had been cut away and his skin swabbed clean for emergency stitches—but it was hard to bring himself to walk away from Tony’s side for long enough to get washed up.

He was the only one there. It hadn’t been that long, and the others were off coming down from the crisis in their own ways. Natasha had given Steve a significant look when he volunteered to be the one to wait with Tony, but—it didn’t mean anything, he told himself. Tony was just Natasha’s pet project for Steve right now, he figured, and he had an idea that she thought if the person were a teammate, Steve wouldn’t be able to find excuses not to talk to him.

Well, she might be right there. It was hard not to talk to Tony, that was true. But she had the idea that Tony was flirting with him, and . . . nah. Steve wasn’t sold on that. He’d done his best to flirt with Tony, over the last few days, whenever they had a quiet moment, and Tony had been the same as always. Clever, and—and funny, and breathtakingly seductively charming, and inscrutable. Steve never could tell what he was thinking, whether he was just teasing Steve, or it was just the way he was, or if he meant something by it, and it seemed, well, presumptuous, to assume it did. Tony was like that with everyone. Flirty. Wasn’t he? It wasn’t just Steve. He wasn’t . . . special. Whatever Natasha said. Steve knew how good she was at reading people, but. Well. She was wrong about this one. He was sure of it.

No matter how much he might want it to be true. Even if he had gotten closer to Tony over the past couple of . . . well, years, and sometimes he thought Tony really was flirting with him, and these days he’d call him one of his best friends, it—he didn’t even really know if Tony felt the same way, and sometimes he felt his dark eyes on him, deep and focused and intense enough to feel almost like a touch, but, well, he didn’t know what that meant. Tony was hard to read. And it all felt too much like wishful thinking, to think that Tony might have . . . have feelings for him, anything like Steve’s for him.

He’d told himself it was just a silly infatuation, at first, just because Tony was so . . . so handsome and sophisticated and intelligent and quick-thinking and clever, so funny and sharp-tongued and out of Steve’s league, and besides, he had Ms. Potts anyway, so he’d never look at Steve. So of course Steve would develop a little bit of a thing for him. There was no chance Tony would ever look back at him—he seemed to think that Steve was a slow, antique fossil anyway, even if, Steve hoped, one he’d developed a little bit of respect for—so it was safe. Nothing was ever going to come of it. It had felt silly, even at the time, and a little stupid, but he hadn’t been able to deny the way his heart picked up, and how good it had felt to have someone to moon over, almost, now. It had gotten him thinking about this time, at least. Using the Starkphone Tony had given him almost as an afterthought, determined to figure it out. So that had been one good thing.

Then they’d actually gotten talking. That had been where Steve had run into trouble. Then it
wasn’t just a harmless, distant crush on a teammate who maybe thought about him once in a while. Then he’d started to find out that Tony wasn’t just so smart he could think rings around college professors and other brilliant scientists, wasn’t just cutting and witty, he could be warm, and surprisingly sensitive at times, and caring, that he wrinkled up his nose when he really laughed and had a surprisingly crooked, self-deprecating smile and could be incredibly, incredibly patient, like when he first talked Steve through using Skype. They’d fought together so well when they’d teamed up on missions, and when Steve asked Tony if he was keeping tabs on him for possible team-ups, he’d given that self-deprecating little laugh and admitted he had been. “You can always use some air support, Cap,” he’d said lightly, but he’d been smiling in that way he had that was softer than Steve thought it was supposed to be, and Steve had felt warm because of it. Steve was pretty sure Tony wasn’t supposed to use his ability to hack into some of SHIELD’s files that way, but he couldn’t deny he appreciated the support.

And it was nice, flying pressed up against Tony’s side, the metal-encased arm of the armor around his waist. It’d taken them a few tries to find the best position. Steve liked balancing against Tony’s shoulder, his foot braced against Tony’s foot, the best. Maybe that was a little selfish, though, he thought. After all, it meant Tony had to hold him, almost like an embrace.

Tony slept on in the bed, shifting just slightly, breathing out in his sleep. Steve sighed and crossed his arms over the back of the chair he was sitting in, resting his chin on top of them and watching Tony’s chest rise and fall, lightly. It was soothing, at least a little, to see it.

And then Tony had come to DC. Steve had been lonely, after he’d moved there. In a way, it felt more open than his cramped SHIELD-provided apartment in Brooklyn had, like he wasn’t trying to fit into a skin that no longer fit him, that he’d left somewhere in the past, but he’d also felt alone, lost. He didn’t know anyone other than Natasha or Clint, and the members of STRIKE, and they weren’t the most . . . friendly sort of fellas. And while Natasha was always fun, she also wasn’t really open for spending a lot of time off together. And Clint had his own things. And then Tony was there, and somehow he was showing Steve the Smithsonian exhibits, and Steve was watching him get excited over explaining things to him in the Museum of Natural History, his eyes glowing, and they were going to baseball games and getting coffee in the morning, and Tony was always making him laugh, and Steve realized that this was getting . . . to be a little bit more than a stupid hang-up on Tony’s movie star looks and brains and smart mouth and big, stunning eyes.

And he’d felt like a fool, like he was poaching, too, on top of it, because Tony had a gal, and he was out of line, falling in love with a man who was taken like that. It was the first step toward wanting Tony to turn away from her, to cheat with him, and Steve wasn’t going to be that guy. Wasn’t going to wish a breakup on Tony, either. He just wasn’t. He’d wondered, then, if maybe he should pull back, pull away—but that would mean giving up watching movies together and Tony’s head heavy on his shoulder and his fingers all messy from popcorn, tossing a baseball back and forth in the park, getting a cup of overpriced coffee together while Tony laughed at Steve’s face when he had to pay four dollars for it (four dollars! He still couldn’t believe it, every time), Tony’s warm, rough chuckle and the way he could make Steve laugh, no matter what.
But Tony was happy with Ms. Potts, and in love, and Steve didn’t want to be the one to ruin that. So he’d let Tony keep up his work for SHIELD and didn’t call him quite as much to spend the days together and told himself it was for the best. Steve was still his friend, he wasn’t putting an end to that, it was just . . . he needed to do this right.

He thought he saw hurt in Tony’s eyes after that, in his voice when Steve turned down an invitation or two, but . . . he told himself it wasn’t that big a thing. And more than that, it was the right thing. Even when it made his stomach clench up painfully, and his chest feel tight. Which happened all the time, when he saw something he wanted to tell Tony about, and then remembered that he shouldn’t text it to him, or send him a message. Or walked past their favorite coffee places or restaurants. Or the gym where they’d started sparring together. Or just all the time. They kept up the weekly sparring sessions, and those started to be painful, too. Touching Tony, seeing the way his answers were shorter, terser than how they had been, the way the light had gone out of him a little when it came to talking to Steve, and his jokes were back to that brittle flippancy they’d had at the beginning. Steve hadn’t wanted this, he wanted to say, wanted to break down and ask Tony to go to the park with him after they’d practiced, beg him if he had to—but in a way he had wanted it, this had been the plan, so he’d left it.

Things had stayed like that for a while. And then Tony had called him, out of the blue, out of nowhere, drunk and not making much sense, his voice cracking, broken, and he’d said, sounding so lost, so alone, that Steve felt a pit opening up in the bottom of his stomach because he knew that feeling, he knew how it felt to feel exactly how Tony had sounded, and Tony had said that Rhodey was deployed on a mission somewhere and Tony didn’t know where, and he didn’t want to bother Steve, and he knew Steve didn’t want to see him, and all, and this was probably a big pain, but—and then he’d stopped, like he hadn’t known what else, and he said, with the crystal clear distinctness of a man who was very, very drunk, “I’m going to hang up now.”

Steve had rushed to stop him, to assure him that he did want to see him, throwing caution to the wind because Tony sounded like that, and he could backpedal, he could find that distance he needed later, tomorrow, after this. He’d ended up finding Tony at a club, covered in glitter and stumbling over his own feet, with lipstick smeared along his neck and other people’s hands all over him. Another man had been palming his ass, two seconds away from putting his tongue down Tony’s throat, and Tony was looking at him with big, glassy, unseeing eyes and grinding on his thigh when Steve got there. Steve had wanted to punch the other man out, but he hadn’t, put on his most innocent face and drawn Tony away with a bright, “There you are, mister, I was looking all over for you!” He’d almost punched the guy anyway when he wouldn’t let Tony go easy, even when he was clearly actually struggling, but he’d contented himself with a rough shove into the wall and a glare. He hadn’t needed to start a brawl, not with Tony in that state. Tony had fallen into his arms a sweaty, uncoordinated drunken mess, wide-eyed and reeking of alcohol and grinding up against Steve now, and Steve had felt just about the dirtiest he’d ever felt for the thrill that shivered through him at the feel of Tony’s hot cock against his thigh through their slacks and the way Tony was pressing his face into Steve’s shoulder.

Steve had taken Tony to the penthouse where he’d been staying, and while he hadn’t been forthcoming in the car, he was so damn drunk Steve couldn’t just leave him there alone.
Somewhere between half-bullying him into a hot shower (hoping he wouldn’t drown himself in the process but he couldn’t very well follow him into it) and making him a cup of coffee, it had come out, that Ms. Potts and Tony were over, which Steve had kind of gathered from the fact that Tony had been in a club with other people’s hands all over him, he wasn’t like that, whatever people said, and he wouldn’t have if they’d still been together—that she’d gone off to the Paris branch of Stark Industries for a while to give them some space, and that Tony blamed himself so vehemently that Steve was a little alarmed by it, by the depths of self-loathing he saw that night. Steve ended up falling asleep on Tony’s couch after they’d watched WALL-E (Tony had suggested Metropolis, but Steve had argued for the sweeter, softer film) and moved on to Star Wars, Tony’s damp hair a riotous mass of curls in his lap, Tony shivering in his fluffy robe over nothing but boxers until Steve gave in and dragged a comforter in from the bedroom to wrap him in it. He found himself idly stroking a hand through Tony’s hair, just to be as comforting as he could, as he dropped off to sleep, and couldn’t bring himself to stop. Tony’s hair was so thick and soft and curled gently against his fingers, and it felt so good.

Steve really hadn’t wanted Tony and Ms. Potts to break up. Not like that. Tony had seemed so happy with her, and so desperate to please in their relationship, to make it work for them, and his despondence, his despair, after the end of it, was hard to watch. Half to Steve’s surprise, Tony didn’t try to keep in contact with Ms. Potts, or win her back. He called her, a few times, but that was all. He seemed to have the idea then, too, that he was imposing his presence on Steve, which Steve took full responsibility for, knowing it was his own doing, even as it hurt like all hell. Steve started a project of showing just how much he enjoyed being with Tony—finding excuses to spend time with him, smiling widely in his presence, dropping an arm around his shoulders or ruffling his hair, telling him every little thing that had made him think of him—and at first Tony bristled, seemed to think it was pity and little else, but then he relaxed into it and seemed almost desperate for Steve’s company, which made him feel guilty in another way. Tony spent a lot of nights on Steve’s couch then, while Steve worried about him from the safety of the bathroom or his own bedroom.

At least, Steve thought, coming to Steve’s place to scribble calculations on a tablet and eat too much Italian food meant that Tony wasn’t out drinking somewhere, putting himself at risk in a club for who knows what, even if seeing Tony put away an entire bottle of wine across the kitchen table from him wasn’t something Steve ever wanted to see again. Tony was paying for it, most times, but Steve still made it clear that he’d rather he skipped the wine, from then on. Tony hadn’t even seemed that drunk from it—but it was the impulse Steve was worried about.

As much as he’d ached to spend more time with Tony, Steve was relieved when Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes came back. Tony’s behavior got more balanced, and he didn’t seem to depend on Steve so much. He brightened visibly, and something seemed to shift inside him, like somehow Rhodes coming back had helped him reach a turning point of some kind. Rhodes came to talk to Steve not long after that. Steve developed a firm admiration for the man just from that one talk, and he was glad, so glad, Tony seemed to have such a loyal friend. Rhodes seemed bemused that Tony and Steve had gotten close, but he’d mostly just wanted to know how things had been, and to thank Steve for his help. It was clear how important to him Tony was. Steve felt good about that.
Steve wasn’t sure how to go about things then, so he just made it clear to Tony that he was his friend, and there for him whenever he needed it. When Tony finished his work for SHIELD and went back to New York, he gave Steve a long, hard hug and buried his face in his shoulder, holding him for long moments before he pulled away and said with a wobbling little smile, “Don’t be a stranger.”

Steve had reached out before he thought, before he could stop himself, cupped the back of Tony’s neck, fingers sinking into his soft hair, and promised, “I won’t.”

And they weren’t. That was the best part. Tony ended up calling him a lot, usually late at night when he was working, and they’d talk for hours, sometimes even while Steve was on his morning run. Tony said he was a good listener; he made the work go faster. Steve was a little proud of that, though he wondered how much work Tony had to do at four in the morning, but he was always happy to hear Tony’s voice, to hear him talk about anything and everything he wanted to. When Tony didn’t call, sometimes Steve got up his courage and called him, and he only woke Tony up once (though Steve felt guilty about that, Tony didn’t get enough sleep as it was).

When he had to drop out of contact during the HYDRA crisis when he’d found out Bucky was alive, Steve had worried about that. He wouldn’t be there to take Tony’s calls. What would he think? That Steve was cutting him out again?

He found out exactly what Tony had thought when he woke up after it all. He’d thought Steve was in trouble, since he’d shown up to the scene, suited up, hours after it had gone down, thoroughly impressing Sam in the process, and apparently spent most of the time Steve was unconscious helping with relief efforts and scouring the Potomac for Steve’s shield, which rested proudly at the foot of the bed when Steve woke up. Tony wasn’t there, but Sam gave him a handwritten note in Tony’s neat, slanted handwriting. Because I know you’re old-fashioned like that, I’ll say it in handwriting, the note started, and Steve slid down in the bed and felt himself flushing and knew his feelings had slid from whatever they had been before to a whole new level of serious. Even though the rest of the note had mostly been scolding Steve for leaving Tony out of the action.

Tony had signed it Yours, Tony. Yours. What was that supposed to mean? Steve’s stomach still felt stupid and fluttery whenever he thought about it.

But he was sure he was reading too much into it. He’d been trying so hard to flirt with Tony lately—it had been a while, now, since Tony and Ms. Potts had split up, and Tony seemed like he was on an even keel again, like it’d be fair to give it a try—and he’d just. There’d been nothing, no sign anything had changed.

Well, anyway, it didn’t matter. Now it was his turn to watch Tony in his hospital bed, he figured, to be the one afraid he was going to lose him. Even if he had no idea how Tony had felt about him.
getting hurt, not really, he just—he knew how he’d felt when he’d seen Tony go down, when Thor had torn the armor off him and they’d seen how he was bleeding—he’d thought—he’d thought he might be going to lose him. Even if Tony wasn’t his to lose.

Anyway, he really should wash up. Tony’s vitals were stable enough, and he wasn’t doing anything but lying there, breathing slowly and steadily, long lashes thick and flat and dark against his pale, washed-out cheeks. Steve stood up, running his hands back over his face, and left to find the nearest washroom.

He scrubbed himself down to the bones, it felt like, when the nurses helped him out, giving him a quiet room with a shower to do it in. They even found him some clean clothes—they were really very helpful, and he was so grateful for it. He even washed his hair with some borrowed shampoo, running his hands back through it. The last thing he expected when he stepped out of the shower was for a nurse to poke his head in and say, “Captain? Mr. Stark’s been asking for you.”

“He’s awake?” Steve gaped. He hadn’t expected that, not at all, not this fast. If he had, he probably wouldn’t have left to get cleaned up, he thought ruefully. “Can I—can I see him?”

“Of course,” the nurse said, with a bit of a grin, like he couldn’t believe Steve had asked that question. “Can you find your way back?”

“Yessir,” Steve said, and hurried up about it, too. He felt almost a little stupid for the way he burst into Tony’s hospital room. He didn’t really know what he was expecting. It hadn’t been to see Tony sitting up in bed, looking disoriented and a bit confused but very much conscious and aware, pulling at the IV in his hand idly.

“Tony, you should leave that alone,” Steve said immediately, reaching for his wrist. His hand settled over it at the same time Tony drew his fingers away and looked up at him, blinking in a way that left Steve very, very aware of the wide darkness of his eyes, the softness of his eyelashes.

“I know, Cap,” Tony said, mouth twitching a little. “I’m not an idiot.” He blinked, and his mouth quirked, moving to one side. His eyes slid away. “They, uh, told me you had stayed to keep an eye on me,” he said. “So, uh, thanks, I guess.”

Steve swallowed, suddenly wrong-footed. He pulled his hand away, but found himself moving it up, brushing his fingers along Tony’s chin, taking it in his hand for a moment, instead. Tony’s skin felt warm, his stubble scratchy between the neat lines of his beard by this point. “’Course I did,” Steve said.
Friendly, Rogers, he thought. Keep it friendly. Could that be read as platonic? As friendship? Maybe it could. He hurriedly brought both hands away.

“I wasn’t about to let you wake up here alone,” he said.

Tony blinked, and something in his mouth softened, his eyes gaining an almost unguarded look. “Yeah?” he said.

“Rhodes said he was going to be here to kick your ass just as soon as he finished with the clean-up and his ‘god-damned report,’” Steve told him. “Ms. Potts is flying in as soon as she can.”

“That’s ridiculous, you told them that’s ridiculous, right?” Tony looked pained. “It’s not that serious, really. I’m fine. I’m fit as a fiddle, Steve, you saw me. It’s not a big deal. She—they don’t have to do that.”

“I told them you might be dying,” Steve said, unrepentantly. “They deserved to know.”

Tony gave him an even more pained look. “Really, Rogers? You did that to them? Over a few bumps and bruises like this?”

“The doctors told me you might die,” Steve said, and swallowed. He looked down at his hands. “They deserved to know,” he managed to get out, again, and only belatedly realized he’d repeated himself. “Besides,” he added, giving Tony the best smile he could manage, making himself meet his eyes, though it felt weak; he knew it was weak. “Rhodes was there; saw it happen. He’d have spilled the beans to Ms. Potts no matter what I said.”

Tony scowled at him. “Stop that, you’re bringing logic into this,” he said, and it surprised Steve enough that he gave a little laugh. See? There was Tony for you, always making him laugh. Even when he didn’t exactly feel like it.


“More like Captain Snarky Comebacks Drier than the Sahara,” Tony said. “And I thought logic was my bag.” His eyes turned serious, grave, almost soft where they rested on Steve. “Listen,” he
said. “Are you all right? You took a few hard hits back there.”

“I’m fine,” Steve said. “Good as new. Or, I will be, in, you know, a day or so. Just some scuff marks.”

Tony’s mouth shifted, tightened a little, scrunching up, but his eyes swept up and down Steve’s body once, twice, and then something in him relaxed. “Well, you look okay,” he said.


“Let’s just say you have a tendency to underplay your hand when it comes to your own injuries, Captain Sassmaster,” Tony said. His voice still sounded loose, a little airy and soft and slurred, so he was still on painkillers, probably, which Steve was glad of.

“You’re being ridiculous,” Steve said, smiling at him. He was rambling and not making a lot of sense and dazed and pale and wobbly looking, and there were stitches over one of his eyes and his hair flopping forward into his face and a nasty bruise all along one side of his jaw and down his neck, into the neck of the hospital gown, and he was talking like he was doped up out of his mind, and he was one of the most beautiful things Steve had ever seen.

“I’m being ridiculous,” Tony huffed, shifting in the bed, looking down at the bed and fiddling restlessly with the blankets with one hand, eyes darting around the room. “You’re the one playing off being tossed into a building like it was time for bowling like it’s nothing.”

Steve swallowed, a little sheepishly. It was true it had hurt at the time, but most of that had faded, and . . . well, it hadn’t been a big deal. But he was pretty sure Tony wouldn’t love hearing that he was used to it, not just at the moment. “I came out of it all right,” he said, instead.

“And I didn’t?” Tony asked. “C’mon, Steve. Please.”

“Well, you have to admit, you were a little banged up, Avenger,” Steve said, and despite himself, his fingers wanted to drift out, brush along Tony’s cheek again. Tony tilted his head down, pushed that scratchy cheek into his palm, and Steve felt warmth suffusing through his chest, fluttery in his stomach, rising up into his cheeks. He didn’t know what to make of it, but Tony’s beard was scratchy-soft, his face warm, his skin a little rough and his head heavy.
“It’s nothing, Steve,” Tony murmured. “I’ll be fine. S’just as much nothing as . . . as your thing.”

“You were bleeding all over, Tony,” Steve said, more softly. “There was a gaping hole in your side. Your lungs collapsed and you weren’t breathing.”

“It’s not a big deal,” Tony said stubbornly. “It’s only a flesh wound, Cap, and I’m sticking to that.”

Steve smiled a little sadly, fondly, running his thumb along Tony’s jaw, feeling the soft prickle of his facial hair beneath it. “What are you talking about, your arm’s off,” he said, and Tony let out a bark of laughter, then winced, then laughed again, then curled over himself a bit, holding his side through the gown.

“Okay, ow, I admit it, when I laugh it does hurt,” he said, wheezing through another chuckle. “That’s your fault, Cap. I didn’t think you were paying attention for that movie. You said it didn’t make sense.”

“Well,” Steve said, “it didn’t.”

“But you were paying attention,” Tony said, eyes shining as he grinned up loopily at Steve. “You can’t fool me, now, Rogers, I’m onto you, I’m so onto you now.”

“But it was still a little funny,” Steve allowed. He reached out, pushed Tony gently back into his bed. “Hey, hey, shh, easy there, Tony.” He felt selfish for a moment, so selfishly glad he’d had this, these moments with Tony, before he told the others he was awake and Tony was inundated with the rest of the team, with his friends, with everyone Steve should already be telling he was awake. “How are you feeling?”


“Alive is good,” Steve told him, soft as his smile, and stepped back, forcing himself to pull away. He really should call the others—tell them—he was just keeping Tony all for himself, because of his stupid, selfish feelings for him, and he needed to—

Tony interrupted his thoughts when he looked down at the bed, then over at the wall, shifted again, almost nervously, uncomfortably, then looked back at Steve. There was something anxious
about it, and the way he said, “Uh, Steve, you, uh. You got a minute?” that had Steve’s focus immediately fixed on him, whatever his other thoughts might have been.

Tony’s eyes were wide and dark. He looked like he needed a serious response to whatever he wanted to ask, like he needed all of Steve’s attention for this. Steve crossed the room, pulled up the chair he’d been sitting in before, this time turning it around to sit in it properly instead of with his arms crossed over the back. “Sure,” he said, leaning forward, and thought, always, for you.

“What’s going on?

Tony looked away, over at the wall again, and took a deep breath. “This might sound kind of stupid,” he said, “but bear with me. I swear I’m going somewhere. Though that might sound kind of stupid, too, when I get to it, but just—hear me out.”

Steve nodded, kept his gaze fixed on Tony, seriously.

“You said,” Tony said, looking down again, then back up at Steve. He was breathing a little light and fast, and Steve pushed back the urge to lay a hand on his chest and rub gently until his breathing started to calm, to even out. “You were saying something about not having plans?” Tony finished, and his eyes flicked up to fix on Steve again.

For a moment, Steve wasn’t quite sure what he was asking, but then it struck him—and he, well, he still wasn’t quite sure what Tony was asking, because it couldn’t quite mean what he’d sounded like he meant. And, well, he didn’t have any plans. His plans were . . . what, sit here in Tony’s hospital room until someone kicked him out or it started looking like too much to ignore from someone who was supposed to be just Tony’s friend? Which was a lot more of a plan for that weekend than he’d had yesterday, so there was that. But none of that mattered, why Tony was asking, or anything else. Tony had almost died. He needed to sit there and rest, not go out for a burger or Thai food whatever else he wanted to do right now. Steve had noticed that Tony liked to eat after a fight. “Tony . . .” he started. “You almost died today, I—”

“That’s exactly why I’m asking,” Tony cut him off, his voice rushing and breathy, quick and almost anxious, like he wanted to get all this out before he lost his nerve. It was even trembling a little. His eyes were very wide and he looked almost scared. “I mean,” he said, with a breathless little chuckle, “it could just be the fact that I’m really high right now. The nurse gave me a ton of stuff. She almost cried when she saw me. Big Iron Man fan.” He gestured at himself, but he was still breathing a little fast and shallow, and his eyes were still wide and scared, his words too quick, tripping over themselves. He took a breath, and looked away.

Steve had almost cried when he saw him, so he knew how the nurse had felt. But he pushed that thought back and just looked at him, trying to be as reassuring, as undemanding, as he could be. Tony was really doped, that much was obvious. His pupils were tiny, so they must have had him
on some heavy opiates.

“I guess some people still feel that way, believe it or not,” Tony said, and sucked in a quick breath. “I. Uh. I mean, not my point. At all.” He blew out his breath, stared away at the wall, at the window. “You know that, that moment?” he said, softly. “I mean. You—you must. I know you do. Sorry, that probably sounds really presumptuous. But you said—about the ice. Anyway, ignore that. I mean, that moment.” He took a deep breath, and his chest heaved, once, twice, when he blew it out, shakily. “I—when you think, you think this is it. It all stops here. I’m going to die. There’s no way out of it this time. It’ll all be over in a second, and suddenly...” He looked back at Steve, and his eyes were so big, and somehow vulnerable, as if searching for something in Steve’s face, open and needing, “suddenly you’re thinking about that one person you’d give anything to see one last time.”

“Yeah,” Steve said softly, thinking about Peggy, about Bucky. And the ice. Like Tony had said. “I know.”

“Right,” Tony said, a little unsteadily, and laughed. It sounded very scared, not quite hysterical. “I mean, yeah, right. I thought so. I just. It was you.” He said that fast, then blinked, still looking at Steve, wide-eyed, eyes fixed on him like he was waiting for something, a blow, almost. “It was you,” he said again, slower. “For me. It was you.”

Steve stared at him. That... it was impossible to take that wrong, he thought, as if his mind were moving very slowly. Wasn’t it? It wasn’t just wishful thinking. There wasn’t any other way to take that. To read that. Was there?

“There were so many things I wanted so badly to tell you,” Tony said, stumbling over the words. “To have told you. And I thought you—you deserved to know. That I should have told you, after all. So here I am. Now. Telling you.” He gave a light, nervous laugh. “I’m sorry to put you on the spot, and when I’m a little less high I’ll probably regret everything about this, but. There. That’s it. I.” He blew his breath out, not taking his eyes from Steve’s face. “Tell me I’m not reading this wrong,” he said, like he was holding his breath.

Regret? Steve thought, dumbfounded. Why? And then he remembered Tony, half in tears, that night he had been so drunk, black despair, she was better off without me, she was always better off without me, I never should have let myself, I never should have done it. I always do that, can’t fucking get it right, I ruin everything, I should have known I’d fuck it up. She was always too good for me.

Right. Regret. There was so much regret there. Not just one time. So many times. And Tony had loved Ms. Potts so much. Put so much of himself in.
Steve let his eyes slide closed, feeling dizzy. He owed it to Tony, if he was going to do this, to be sure. Not to let that happen again. Tony was being so brave, even if it was fueled by drugs. It was still brave. Putting himself out there. He deserved that much. Faithfulness, and loyalty. And honesty, no matter what else.

Steve felt breathless himself, a little like he’d forgotten how to breathe properly. Was this really happening? Was Tony really saying he—he felt that way about Steve? The same way Steve felt about him? It just—he could wish Tony had made it clearer, and this wasn’t all some dramatic way of telling Steve that he meant a lot to him. As a friend. Or a captain. Or. But you didn’t bring it up like that, with all that lead in, just to tell a fella you thought he was a real great buddy. Did you? That wasn’t Tony’s style. So now Steve had to be the one with courage. After all that waiting. All that thinking it would never happen.

He’d never made a move with Peggy, not until the very end, and he’d have a lifetime to regret that.

“You’re not,” he said.

He opened his eyes as he said it, looking back up at Tony. Tony was staring at him, wide-eyed, breathless. He looked like he couldn’t believe what he’d just heard. What he was hearing. Steve knew the feeling. Tony looked fragile in that moment, terrified, more vulnerable than he ever had during the fight they’d just left, desperate as it had been. Had Tony cared, all this time, just the same way Steve had? All the time they’d been texting and talking on the phone and over the computer, had he been pining, too?

He’d have to ask him that. Later. There were more important things to sort out right now. To get it sorted out. Tony’s lips were parted breathlessly, his tongue soft against the bottom one, not moving. It looked as if he couldn’t breathe.

“So,” Steve said, feeling the words out as they came to him, bit by bit. “Do I actually get to kiss you this time?”

He felt himself start to smile. He couldn’t help it. The thought of kissing Tony—he’d wanted to, the last time, honest to God. When Tony had opened his eyes, Steve could have just leaned down and pressed their lips together, had wanted to, taste him, his smile and sweat and the huffs of his breath. But he’d barely known him then. Now he knew him. Now he knew exactly who it was he’d be kissing, the man under that armor, under that smile—and he wanted to. God, he wanted to, more than ever.
Tony stared at him, like he couldn’t believe what he’d just said, like he still wasn’t breathing, and then, just slightly, the side of his mouth started to quirk up into a smile, a soft, disbelieving sort of smirk. “You tell me, boss,” he said, with a shake of his head, as if in disbelief still, looking back at Steve with his eyes wide like he still couldn’t believe it, holding his shoulders and body extra still, as if he was afraid moving too quickly would ruin it, or shatter something, or he just didn’t quite dare to move.

Steve leaned forward, took Tony’s chin gently in his fingers, tilted his face toward him a little more, careful of the bruising, the way his lips were puffy and battered and split toward the edges. Tony’s beard felt so soft under the pads of his fingers. “Okay,” he breathed. “I’m telling you,” and leaned forward to touch their lips together. He could feel the crooked quirk of Tony’s lips, the way his breath caught as he sucked it in, the helpless way his chest rose beneath him, and curled his hand as softly and carefully as he could around to support the back of Tony’s head, hand against the nape of his neck. He pressed into Tony’s mouth a little bit further, letting his tongue slide gently over Tony’s bottom lip, trying to coax him to let his head tilt back, rest more fully in Steve’s palm, and Tony cooperated, let him, his lips parting softly, eagerly for Steve, his mouth opening in a kind of giving surrender Steve hadn’t expected Tony to offer him, not like that. Tony moaned a little, his head rolling back against Steve’s palm so that he could sink his fingers into those thick, tousled curls, his mouth shifting as his head tilted into the kiss, softening and giving way as he welcomed Steve’s mouth so eagerly with his own. Steve hadn’t realized that kissing Tony would be so soft and slow and sweet. Tony lifted one arm, curled it around Steve’s shoulder, sinking his own hand into his hair, and moaned, more deeply, more rough and needy and almost wanton, but emotional, for all that, the sound hitching, breaking, in the back of his throat, his fingers tightening almost desperately against Steve’s scalp. Steve rubbed the pads of his own fingers gently against the back of Tony’s neck, feeling the warmth of the skin there, the way Tony moaned and went limp in his arms as he carded his hand back up into his hair.

Steve pulled slowly back from the kiss, still running his fingers gently through Tony’s hair, and Tony’s eyes fluttered back open just as slowly. “Steve,” he said breathlessly, his eyes still so wide and shocked. “I—oh, God, kiss me again.” He leaned up, and this time, the kiss was more what Steve had imagined, had expected from Tony Stark, hot and knowing and one of the most breathtaking things Steve had ever experienced. He stopped thinking. All he could do was feel. It was just Tony, and Tony’s tongue, and the pleasure he was sending through Steve’s whole body, like his skin was hyper-sensitized all over, like he could feel the kiss resonating through all of him, through his toes, with just the touch of Tony’s mouth to his, his tongue against Steve’s. This time it was Tony pulling away, because Steve couldn’t think to end it, ever, could barely think to respond, and all he could do was surge into the touch of Tony’s mouth to his, Tony pulling away breathlessly and panting, leaning forward, his eyes mostly closed, his lashes heavy over his cheeks as he leaned forward enough to touch their foreheads together. “Steve,” he said, his voice breathy and hoarse, again. “Just—tell me that was real.” His already bruised, swollen mouth was even more swollen now, kiss-stung and flushed with red, and the pallor in his cheeks was stained over with a heated flush itself. “I—I didn’t hallucinate it because I’m high on a bunch of painkillers, I’m not bleeding out and dreaming, or—or lying here dreaming or flatlining on the operating table and this is the last thing I see before I die because I was thinking about you so much or—”

“Shh, Tony,” Steve said, even as his heart clenched at that—it was true, it probably didn’t feel real, not after everything else that had happened, and in Tony’s condition, as heavily drugged as he was.
He curled his fingers gently in his hair, stroking them through it, even as he brought his other hand up to rub gently at his jaw, brush his fingers up along his cheek. “It’s real. You’re not hallucinating. You’re not bleeding out. You’re not dreaming. You’re right here. With me.”

“Are you sure?” Tony said, with that same self-deprecating smile, and a bit of a laugh. “Because this is something else, Cap.”

Steve shook his head, unable to stop smiling. “It’s Steve,” he said, “to you. And I’m sure.”

“Steve,” Tony said, so softly, without opening his eyes. He licked his bottom lip, sucked in his breath.

“You need to lie down, Tony,” Steve said, regretfully. “You’re still hurt—I don’t want to tear anything open again. Here.” He slid his arm more fully around Tony’s back, getting it beneath his shoulders, and lowered him down him down against the bed, pulling the pillow over and fluffing it up as best he could to lie beneath his head. Tony opened his eyes, slowly, stared up at him, opened his hand and slid it further up into Steve’s hair, warm and heavy against the back of his head. He was just staring up at him, eyes wide and wondering and almost questioning, as if he still couldn’t quite believe it. “Hey,” Steve said, curling one hand against Tony’s neck, cupping it there gently. “Hey.” He pressed a kiss to Tony’s forehead, more against each eyebrow, against the stitches just above Tony’s eyebrow, against his eyelids as Tony obediently closed his eyes, giving another trembling breath, left kisses down the line of his nose and over both cheeks and along his bruised jawline. Tony’s hand tightened in Steve’s hair, pulling him even closer, hanging on tightly. Love was too sudden, he thought, too big a word, Tony might be skittish, he didn’t want to scare him off. Tactics, Rogers. He traced his thumb along Tony’s damp, bruised jaw, as gently as he could. “I’m not going anywhere,” he said instead.

“What if this is a really bad idea?” Tony murmured without opening his eyes.

And there it was. Steve sighed. “Then let’s make a really bad decision for a change,” he said. “It can’t be any more stupid in the long run than dedicating our lives to getting hit in the head. Right?”

Tony opened his eyes, smirked up at him, but softly, and there was a quiver of uncertainty in the back of his eyes. “You sure about that, cherry pie?” he asked.

Steve felt himself flush. Cherry pie? Oh, God. That was—that—he was blushing, bright red, he knew it. “Positive,” he managed to return, with all the sincerity and conviction he had in him, and this time it was Tony’s turn to flush, so at least he’d managed to return the favor. He skimmed his hand up, brushed the hair back from Tony’s face, then leaned down and pressed another kiss to his
forehead. “Let’s just see how it goes,” he murmured.

“Really,” Tony persisted, but his hand was curling around the back of Steve’s neck now, “are you sure you want to do this?”

“I just got you, Mr. Stark,” Steve told him, firmly. “I’m not giving you up that easy.”

“You don’t know when to quit,” Tony told him, but he was smiling, now, eyes bright and mouth starting to curve into a smile. “You ever hear that, Rogers?”

“Nope,” Steve agreed, kissing his nose, again. “I sure don’t. Quitting’s not my style.” He framed Tony’s face with his hand, resting his thumb on his chin. “And it’s not exactly yours, either,” he said.

Tony wrinkled up his nose and laughed, exactly the way that Steve loved so much. “Ow,” he said, then, “yeah, yeah, okay. We’ll give it a chance.”

“All I can ask for,” Steve said, and sighed out happily, gazing down at him. “I should tell the others you’re awake,” he added regretfully.

“Mmm, I guess so,” Tony agreed. “I could fake being asleep, if you’d rather not.”

Steve grinned, suddenly feeling lighter than air. “No,” he said, “I think I want to.”

Tony smiled a little wider himself and, surprising Steve, pushed himself up to settle their lips together one more time, soft and wet and warm. “You’re the boss,” he said breathlessly, letting go and letting himself sink back into the bed. Steve slid his hand down the side of Tony’s neck and grinned at him.

“Then you get better quick,” he said. “I want to take you home, mister.”

Tony fluttered his eyelashes up at him. “Steve,” he gasped in patently false shock. “Is that an innuendo?”
“And do my best to take care of you until you’re feeling 100% percent,” Steve added, grinning, just to see Tony huff at him and fall back into the bed.

“Steve,” Tony said, “really.”

“This is the guy you signed up for,” Steve said unrepentantly, grinning.

“Yeah,” Tony said, smiling at him more softly. There was so much affection in that gaze that Steve found himself swallowing hard, feeling that warmth well up within him again, a little overcome. “It is.” He reached out, and Steve took his hand in his and squeezed, biting his bottom lip at the feelings welling up inside him. “We are going to have sex sometime, though, right?” Tony said after a moment.

“Oh, you bet we are,” Steve said. “Are you kidding? I’m looking forward to that.”

Tony blinked, then grinned at him, delightedly. “Really?” he said. “You are?” He huffed out his breath a little. “Well, good.”

“Oh, yeah,” Steve said, laughing, feeling a little self-conscious, now. But, well, he had been thinking about it. It was the truth. Tony was . . . very, very attractive, and, well, he. He was very aware of that. He squeezed Tony’s hand one more time. “Now you lie there and let people be happy you aren’t dead,” he told him.

“I’ll do my best,” Tony said. “But I don’t know, I might just be thinking about with sex with you the whole time.”

“Don’t get too excited,” Steve told him, knocking their linked hands gently against Tony’s thigh. “You’re going to be in that bed for a while.”

“I am very excited already,” Tony told him. “This is my very excited face. Don’t I look excited to you? Because I’m very excited. Thrilled, honestly, Steve.”

And well, he was very flushed, and his eyes were sparkling brightly, and well, he looked happy. The happiest Steve had seen him in a long time. So that was good. That was . . . that was really
good. He leaned in and kissed him one more time, against the lips, trailing his hand over his face and rubbing gently with his thumb along his cheekbone as he pulled away. Tony flushed even more and turned his face, pressed it into Steve’s hand, taking in another soft, sharp breath and closing his eyes. Steve just held his hand there for a while, before he finally got up and made himself call to give the others the good news.

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