Here Comes the Sun

by AssistedRealityInterface

Summary

After Tony gets attacked by the Technovore and Extremis is shut down, Steve and Carol offer to bring him to Malibu and help him recuperate and repair the technology. The trio then have to grapple with the twisted inner workings of both Extremis and Tony's psyche, a good ten years of romantic repression, and the fact that while Tony is so vulnerable, Extremis is still incredibly valuable to plenty of people who would gladly kill him to get it.

Notes

So, another 616 fic! There's not much to say about the opening chapter, except that it sets up the plot points of most of the fic. As to where it stands within the canon, this is pre-Bumblebee Armor, and while evidently Extremis doesn't go by Extremis anymore, for the conveniences of writing, Tony still refers to it as Extremis, as does the fic.
Oh, and references to Dog Cops. Is it bad that at this point I'd be totally cool if Marvel made a cartoon out of that? There's no way it's not a kids show, let's be honest.
Chapter 1

There were a lot of things that Steve could go into space for, but very few things he would come back for.

Carol Danvers calling him would have been enough.

The words, "Tony's been injured. He needs you," were just further incentive.

Steve was back on Earth and making a beeline for the Avengers Tower in two days.

He didn't even bother identifying himself at the gate; he flipped neatly over the iron bars and made his way up to the door, wrenching it open and storming through the kitchen.

"Jarvis," he said, "Tony. Where."

Jarvis took a look at the Captain's shredded clothing and decided it was better not to ask where he had been, or what was so urgent. That could be settled over a more peaceful cup of tea later.

"The medical wing, sir. Colonel Danvers is there as well, if you need—"

"Great, thanks, love you too, good to be back, jacket's at the door—"

Steve was gone before Jarvis had processed the entirety of his sentence. The beleaguered butler just regarded the kitchen, the leather jacket dropped in the foyer, and threw his hands up before he went to hang it up and sit back down with his tea. It was his day off, damn it.

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Steve stood at the door and schooled his expression, making himself the picture of placid calm. If he let his worry slip, he might let other things slip—other things he had done his best to keep hidden for far too long to let slip over what was most likely a minor injury.

Steve breathed in and out, slow and careful, re-calibrating himself and taking a long, quiet moment to think of a million things that were not Tony.

Then he opened the door.

Carol sat with her legs crossed on the chair beside Tony's bed, a magazine open as she combed her hair; she looked like a serene, mulleted Buddha. Steve nodded in quiet greeting before he asked, keeping his voice low for Tony's sake, "How is he?"

"Extremis got shut down," Carol said, her voice sharp and short, like she didn't trust herself to go further. "Some ass calling himself the Technovore. He's been like this for four days now."

Steve's entire sense of self got yanked out from beneath him at that; like a rug being pulled out from under his feet to reveal a massive abyss.

"...He...they...Tony, oh god..." Steve said, his eyes flickering up to the monitors. Not braindead. Just...sleeping. But the question still remained regarding whether or not he would wake.

"It's shut down, but his brain still functions," Carol said, confirming what he knew. "It's more like he put the computer in sleep mode than actually turned it off. I just don't know what to do to wake him up."
"So you called me," Steve said, baffled.

"Yeah," Carol said, raising an eyebrow. "Why wouldn't I? You're in love with him. That's supposed to be foolproof for this sort of thing."

"I am not!" Steve defended himself fiercely, years of keeping his secret hidden coming to a forefront. Carol just gave him a long look.

Steve slumped his shoulders and massaged his temples, trying to beat back a sudden headache.

"Look, don't bs me, Cap," Carol said, her voice softening. "I've known you long enough that I think we can talk with each other about this sort of thing. I'm no good at this, I'll be honest, but...hey. You're obvious enough even I can see it, and I've never gotten involved in this sort of romantic drama."

"Yes, you're right, it—I just..." Steve sighed. "I don't...want him to know. Don't tell him."

"'Course not. What kinda jerk do you take me for?" Carol said, huffing. "Bro code, Steve. I abide by that, boobs or not."

"Military 'bro code' is co-ed, Carol," Steve said, amused. Carol laughed.

"Man, a pun and usage of the word bro all in a single sentence? From Captain Rogers? Be still my heart," she said. "C'mon, Steve. See what you can do about him."

Steve nodded, coming closer to Tony's bedside. He was quiet as he did so, every inch the careful and concerned guardian. Carol just watched, curious, all her muscles tensed to spring into action should she be needed.

Steve put a cool hand against Tony's forehead. It was warm, but there was an undercurrent of waxy coolness to his skin that made Steve shudder. His whole face was smooth, at ease and surprisingly untroubled despite the current situation. Steve knew if he woke him up, that wouldn't last.

And yet, they couldn't make it any better until he woke Tony up.


For the first time in four days, Tony's fingers twitched. Encouraged, Steve spurred on.

"Hey, buddy," he said. "I came back. Carol said you needed me, so I came home for you. Tony? I'm right here. I've got you, Tony. Captain America came to save you."

It was like he'd sudden unlocked something within Tony, sending shockwaves through the rest of his body. A full-body shiver went through him, and Tony began to shake, quivering as his mouth opened and he began to gasp for air. It was like watching a computer of flesh and blood reboot itself—which, as Steve dwelled upon the idea, he realized that was an eerily accurate description.

After a few minutes more of twitching and shuddering, Tony opened his eyes.

"Steve," he rasped. "Hey, bud. Good...good to see you."

Steve hugged him before he could stop himself.

"Good to see you too," he said, his voice thick and heavy with emotion. "Came all the way down from Jupiter for you, Tony."
"I'm flattered," Tony said with a yawn as Steve pulled away to look at him. "Gimme a sec, I gotta re-file a few things, just—"

He stopped, his eye twitching as his fingers flexed. Steve and Carol both knew as they watched him that he was trying to access information that no longer existed.

"Steve," Tony said, his voice high-pitched with sudden panic, "Steve, please, someone turned the satellites off, turn them back on, turn me back on, please—I can't hear everyone else thinking, Steve—"

"Tony, someone shut Extremis down in your mind," Steve said, his voice soothing and low, trying to counter Tony's high, sharp panic, like the ocean wearing down broken glass. "It's still there, but Carol said it's in 'sleep mode,' and I don't know how to get you to access it. Calm down. It might take some time."

"But I need it back now," Tony rasped, gripping the sheets. "I need it back, that's my brain, Steve!"

"No, it isn't," Steve said, his voice firm. "It's a network of other thoughts and feelings that someone else put in you. You are not your computer, Tony. Calm down for me, okay? Just sit down and relax. Let your mind go, Tony. It's all yours now."

Carol gave Steve a querying look; he shook his head and gestured for her to wait as he sat next to Tony.

Tony's eyelids fluttered and his breaths were short and stuttering for awhile, but eventually, he calmed himself down enough to be able to mouth, quietly, "Captain America. That's the passcode. If someone...ever does that again."

"I'm honored," Steve said, his voice heavy with simple emotion.

"I'm relatively unsurprised," Carol remarked, a small smirk playing on her features. Steve rolled his eyes.

"I can't hear them," Tony murmured. "Not the stock reports. Not the suit. Not the 'bots. Not a single incoming call. I'm not sure if it's pleasant or terrifying. Either way, I want to puke."

Steve rubbed his back as Tony closed his eyes, breathing in slow, careful, and deep. He didn't say anything, nor did Tony.

"I'll make coffee," Carol said, cutting through the silence. "You two meet me down in the kitchen; I think we gotta talk."

"Okay," Steve agreed. "Tony? Can you hear me?"

"You're the only thing I can hear, bud," Tony said, his voice breaking as he spoke. Steve just nodded, a warm smile on his face despite the concern in his eyes.

Carol waited until she had left the room to throw up her hands, sigh heavily, and storm off. She just couldn't deal with either of them right now; any more syrupy-sweetness and she'd choke on it.

... Carol came downstairs to find Jessica cooking Avengers-style; that is, heating cup noodles and stabbing at them disconsolately with a pair of chopsticks. Like grownups did, or so she assumed.
"Hey, babe," Carol said. "Steve's back."

"Good for him," Jessica said, "and good for Tony, he needs him. Cup noodle?"

"I'll pass, thanks," Carol replied, perching on the table. "So, what's up?"

"Nothing, Carol, you know I'm fine. Been a bit busy. You've been going stir-crazy taking care of Tony, huh?" Jessica said, all sympathy and smiles. Carol sighed.

"Yeah, but it's worth it, even if it's boring. Tony needed me. Hell, even with Steve back, he'll need me; they both will. They're idiots. Steve'll fuss until Tony snaps and does something dumb, gets himself hurt again, and allows Steve to fuss until he can say I told you so. It's the circle of stupid, so I've got to supervise," Carol said.

"Sounds like you know the routine," Jessica remarked. "Not surprised, though. They've been doing this for awhile now."

"Tale as old as time," Carol agreed. "I'll get through it with 'em. Tony's a bit more beat-up than normal, though. Might have to bust out the big guns."

"Like?" Jessica asked, tilting her head and sitting down with her noodles.

"Like a bit of a vacation. Somewhere that isn't New York—someplace a bit quieter. Depends on if the boys are up for it," Carol said. Jessica nodded.

"Yeah, yeah; not a bad idea. We'll miss you up here, though. Me especially," she said. "We'll be waiting for you all to come back, okay?"

"Okay, Jess. Thanks," Carol said. "I'm gonna make coffee and head up to run it by them. We'll be okay, no matter what happens."

"Okay," Jess said, soothed by Carol's promise, so relaxed that she didn't notice how hot her noodles were until she took a bite. "Ow! Ow, fuck! I hate these damn noodles!"

Carol was still laughing as she brought the coffee back up to her friends.

..."You came back," Tony said once Carol had left. "You...you came back. From, like, Mars."

"You needed me," Steve said, like that was the end of the debate. "You needed me, Tony, so I came home."

"Oh," Tony mumbled, sinking into his pillows and looking away. "Okay. Thanks."

"You're welcome," Steve said, and both men were telling more than their words could convey, but it was better for the both of them that way, really.

"So," Tony yawned, "what now? Carol's probably gonna have us on couch detail for a week or whatever."

"Seems like a good time to catch up on Dog Cops," Steve said, a small smile on his face. "Any new episodes go up while I was in space?"

"Hold up, I'll check Hulu, just—"
Tony paused and winced as he realized his mistake.

"Okay, no I won't," he said. "Son of a bitch, I'm gonna need to go over the damage, and soon."

"Of course, but just...do me a favor, Tony? Give your body a break for a few days. How about that?" Steve said. "Just you and me on couch detail while Carol fusses. How's that sound?"

"Or, you two in Malibu while Carol keeps you both from doing something stupid?" Carol suggested, coming in with a tray full of coffee mugs. Tony's eyes lit up at the sight.

"Or...or that," Steve said. "That could be arranged too, I think."

Carol handed them both a mug of coffee, which they sipped dutifully. She sat on the bed and stretched out, flopping across the bed into Tony's lap.

"So what'dya both say?" She asked. "Tony needs to rest and re-boot Extremis, and Steve wants to fuss, and I can threaten to throw you through a wall if you do something dumb. Malibu?"

"Malibu," Tony agreed. "I'll call ahead and make sure the house is ready. Tomorrow, then, guys?"

"Tomorrow is good by me," Steve agreed. "As long as you'll be able to relax and put yourself back together slowly, Tony."

"Yeah, yeah, I'll be fine," Tony replied. "I'm not gonna bluescreen on you, Cap."

"Bluescreen?" Steve asked, tilting his head. Tony grinned.

"Geek term, don't worry 'bout it," he said. "What say you, Carol?"

"Fine," she replied. "And you two come down for dinner, Jarvis'll make something since Steve's home and all."

"It's his day off," Tony said.

"Yeah, but Steve's home," Carol said. "If not, we'll have another takeaway smorgasbord. Just meet me downstairs in an hour—and Steve, make sure he showers and gets a new outfit on, he hasn't showered in four days."

"Went for a week, once," Tony said, pride in his voice. "Was making a new suit. I smelled exactly like the garage by the time I was done."

"Good for you, Tony," Steve said, unsure whether to laugh or chastise him. "How about we don't try to break that record and you get in the shower?"

"Sure, sure," Tony agreed, stifling a yawn as he tried to get out of bed. When he stumbled, both Steve and Carol went to grab him, but for whatever reason, Steve noticed Carol back off, and so Steve caught him in his arms.

"Okay, why don't you get me in the shower?" Tony grumbled. "Seeing as my legs fell asleep on me."

"Fine by me," Steve agreed, adjusting Tony in his arms and holding him tight. "C'mon, soldier. Let's get you scrubbed clean."

"Oh, boy, he'll wash behind my ears now," Tony teased. "Don't worry, Carol, I'll be shined better than a pair of your shoes on inspection day. I will be chrome."
"You'll be clean, Tony, not the suit, but okay," Carol said. "You deal with him, Cap, I'll go see what can be done about dinner."

Steve grinned and headed up for Tony's room as Carol sighed and went to do just that.

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Jarvis must've read the frustration on her face when she came down; he smiled comfortingly and offered her a seat.

"I've already prepared dinner," he said. "What troubles you, Carol?"

"Nah, just the boys," she said. "Gonna take them to Malibu and see what I can do about this stupid dancey-dance around their tension. He is *bathing him*, for Christ's sake."

"Anthony is not willing to initiate much, this is true," Jarvis agreed. "I have known him since he was young, and I have watched him go through lovers; he does not want the Captain to turn into that. Not another one-night stand or failed relationship—not for the man he's always loved. Surely you understand, Carol."


"You are too kind, Carol," Jarvis said, amused. "They will be fine. You may simply have to pull a few strings. Perhaps if they are both alone, with Tony finally able to focus only on himself for just awhile...the seeds everyone else knows are there will finally bear fruit. Just give them plenty of sun."

"It's Malibu; they'll get all the sun they need," Carol said. "Thanks, Jarv. You're a huge help."

"You are not the only one who wants to see them happy, Carol," Jarvis replied. "Don't forget that."

Carol nodded, leaving him to his dinner-making and heading upstairs to pack her bags.
Chapter Summary

Oh look, plot.

Chapter Notes

Yes this fic actually has a vague plot to it, who'da thunk. It's still fluff-centric though, don't worry. And Carol with a Pikachu is a great idea, so there's that.

Steve brought Tony up to his room and set him down on the bed while he went to turn on the shower. As he puttered about the bathroom, every inch the worried mother hen, a thought occurred to him; he stopped and turned around, looking at Tony through the open door.

"I didn't...think it still mattered," Steve said. "Extremis, I mean. What's going on with it, Tony?"

"Nothing at this very moment," he replied, giving him a look of utter amused disdain. "But...it's not really 'Extremis' anymore. It's just...me. And my supercomputer brain."

"Well, for clarity's sake, it'll always be Extremis to me," Steve said. "Besides...I've never liked how you integrate technology into you so much. You're so much better than that, Tony."

Tony looked away, and for a few minutes, he didn't speak. Steve closed his eyes and sighed, mentally berating himself as he went to heat up the shower. It spurted to life amicably enough, the water slowly warming as Steve went to get out the body scrub he knew Tony liked. It wasn't unicorn tears, as he had teased Tony about before, but it would do.

"Tony," Steve said. "You know...even if you don't get this back...you'll still be Iron Man, right? You'll still be my partner, my friend. This doesn't make you any worse."

"No," Tony said, his voice short and sharp, "but it doesn't make me any better, Steve."

Steve sighed, his shoulders slumping as he clenched his hands into fists for a minute, trying to find strength in the feel of them.

"Okay, Tony," he said. "If you say so. But...you were Iron Man before, without Extremis. You can be that man again."

"Regression goes against everything I stand for," Tony replied, a derisive snort punctuating his words. "That's not how I work. That's not how the world works, Steve. It's okay. I'll get this up online soon, and I'll be back to normal."

"I bet," Steve agreed. "And I hope it makes you happy, too."

Tony looked up at him with such mistrust and pain in his eyes that Steve wanted to scream; he didn't know when he'd become an enemy in Tony's mind, but that had to be the case, seeing as how often
he fought against him whenever Steve got too close.

He wanted to regress. No matter what Tony said about how the world worked. He wanted to go back to before he'd died, before they'd fought, before Tony had looked at him with such wary, skittish panic in his eyes.

But whether he liked the future or not, Steve kept trudging towards it, same as everybody else. He just had to find a way to make it better.

"You shower up, okay Tony? I put in the body scrub you like. Phoenix down and gold leaf," he teased. Tony cracked a small smile, at least. "Just let me know when you're done; I'm going to go pack my bags."

Tony nodded, and Steve went for the door, watching him get up and limp awkwardly to the shower. In another time, he might've run and helped Tony up, making sure he was all right. What stopped him now wasn't a lack of desire, but a lack of confidence. Truth be told, Steve was completely unsure where he stood in Tony's life right now. The hesitancy was enough to keep him from moving forward.

Instead, he closed the door behind him.

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Across the city, as Steve, Tony, and Carol all prepared to leave, Whitney Frost sipped her drink, surrounded by a small group of men in finely tailored suits.

"So, it's true then," she said, refilling her glass of brandy, "Tony Stark's unique Extremis virus has been damaged?"

"Shut down," the man before her said. "The Technovore made good on his promise. It's not destroyed, merely inactive, and he's more than capable of rebooting it once it's in our hands."

"Wonderful," she said. "Then seek out Anthony Stark and bring his blood to me. It's worth its weight in vibranium, no matter what purpose we use it for. There is no better time than now to harvest it from him, and we must do it quickly."

"As you say, Big M," the man replied, bowing gracefully. "It will be done as soon as possible."

"Very well," Madam Masque replied. "Do it quickly; we'll have buyers lined up for his flesh sooner than we can consider their bids."

They nodded, dispersing from her with the slow, elegant grace of panthers.

She smiled and poured herself another drink. This time, she had Tony Stark at his most vulnerable, and she liked it that way.

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Tony ate dinner that night settled neatly in between Steve and Carol, the three of them taking bites off of each others' plates and drinking from each other's cups, largely unaware of what belonged to whom.

"Anthony, I want you to keep in contact while you're gone," Jarvis said. "You know I worry."

"Yeah, Jarv, I get it," Tony promised. "I will. Or Steve will, if I forget. I probably will."
Jarvis rolled his eyes, sighing with exasperated affection as he looked at Steve, gesturing with his fork.

"Call home every so often, am I understood?" He asked. "I want to know if Anthony's getting himself into trouble."

"Of course, Jarvis," Steve replied with a small smile. "I'll call. And if I don't, Carol will."

"Carol will not," she cut in, taking a bite off her fork. "Carol will slap one of you upside the head and make you do it."

"We'll get it done," Steve said with a long-suffering sigh. Jarvis just chuckled.

After dinner was a quiet affair—a rare and curious thing for their household. Still, it was much appreciated, due in part to Carol making a run for ice cream while Steve put a movie on.

When Tony fell asleep that night, he fell asleep on Steve's shoulder.

The quiet, hesitant love in Steve's eyes made Carol sigh, shaking her head and nudging his head with the toe of her boot as she floated above him, crosslegged.

"You're ridiculous," she said, her voice warm and gentle with affection. "You know he's not gonna say no if you ask him."

"I don't want him to say yes just because it's me," Steve murmured. "I want him to tell me he loves me because he means it. And if he doesn't, then it isn't worth it. Because I'm his friend. And I'm glad for just that, Carol, because there was a time when that wasn't true."

"Nah," Carol said. "You two were always friends. Sometimes you just fought. Don't get too bent out of shape over it; you made up, right?"

"Yeah," Steve agreed, remembering the bickering and the fights—and, sometimes, the all-out wars, the bond between them pushed and pushed...but not broken. It couldn't have been. He still sat here. "I guess we did. We'll do it again if we need to. For now, though...I should probably put him to bed."

"Nah, Cap; you've been on your feet all day. You get some sleep, and I'll take care of Tony. He'll get his ass in bed just fine if I do it," Carol promised. "You give yourself a break, okay? You two got some time out in Malibu to talk about it. Don't try to make it more complicated than it is."

"What?" Steve said, baffled. "Carol, after all we've been through—"

"You're still the same people who led us into battle," Carol cut him off. "No matter what armor Tony hides under, he's still the Tony you thought was worth being with to accomplish all that. And no matter how well you hide behind that shield, you're still the same Steve he made himself fight so hard to stand beside on equal footing."

"...Okay," Steve agreed. "Okay. The question is, how do I make him see that?"

"You make him see himself," Carol said. "For who he is, not who he hates." She poked Steve in the chest and gave him a stern look, a strand of her hair flopping down in her face as she smiled. "You sleep too, Cap."

"...All right, Carol," he murmured. "I'll get some rest. See you tomorrow."
"Yeah, Steve. Take care and sleep well," Carol said, nuzzling noses with him before picking Tony up, slinging him over her arm and carrying him upstairs. Tony slept on, content;

Steve just smiled, catching a glimpse of his face, serene and sweet, as he went upstairs. He let that image comfort him and soothe him for the rest of the night as he went to bed, thinking only of the little house out in Malibu, where he would have Tony, alone and safe.

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Tony was not a morning person. Steve wondered how he ever could have forgotten that. He certainly was reminded now, as Tony stumbled through the kitchen, grumbling and growling at anything that so much as whirred funny, including their fridge and an erstwhile pigeon that had come to roost on the open windowsill.

"I made you coffee already," he said. "I think I know how to make your coffee better than I do my own."

"French vanilla, dark roast, five sugars," Tony said, sitting down and taking his coffee from Steve, slugging half of it back in one go. Steve blinked, baffled.

"That's not your coffee," he said.

Tony snorted, taking another sip.

"No," he said, "it's yours."

Steve just fell silent, looking at Tony for a second. It took all his willpower not to smile.

"Okay," he said, "then I'll get that made, and then we'll head down to the airport. Do you have something for the plane ride?"

"Coupla tablets, my computer, my notebooks, and an iPod. Without an internal music system at the moment, I have to go back to the Middle Ages, it seems," Tony complained, sipping his coffee before getting up to make another. "Shit, what do you put in this?"

"The same thing you do," Steve said, making his own coffee and trying not to roll his eyes at what Tony called 'Middle Aged.' "Hazelnut, dark roast, two sugars."

"...If you say so, Cap," Tony said. "Man, either I just saved that to my hardware, or I really didn't know. Both options are equally terrifying. Glad you saved the day."

"It's in the job description, and you're welcome. Would you like me to make it for you?" Steve asked. Tony nodded, putting the mug down and letting Steve fuss over his cup while he took a quick, sly sip of Steve's own coffee. He winced; too sweet.

"Sure," he said. "It tastes like freedom when you do it."

"I'm flattered," Steve said, his voice dry as he set the beans to grind and watched the coffee brew. "Carol needs a cup, you know."

"Nah, I'm good," Carol said, breezing into the kitchen, a grin on her face. "I already got dressed and packed and went out for a run before breakfast, so I grabbed coffee on my way home."

"Well, you can go fuck yourself," Tony grumbled, finishing his first cup of coffee as Steve made his second.
"I'm sorry some of us enjoy a routine in the mornings. And being pleasant, for that matter," Carol said. "What if I told the press this was how you acted in the mornings?"

"They'd probably say I was a secret terrorist," Tony said, his voice almost fond as he recalled the tabloids. "Once I got told I was getting my blueprints from aliens."

"You know, with the life we lead, that's not entirely far-fetched," Steve mused as he made himself a second cup alongside Tony, proffering an apple to Carol and a bagel to Tony as he sat back down at the table to dig into his own enormous, super-soldier mandated breakfast. "We've seen enough alien races that it's plausible."

"Really? I'm hurt," Tony said. "They're all primitive compared to me. Might as well fight with their sticks, for all the good it'll do."

"Be nice," Carol said. "As the only sort-of alien representative here, I guess I gotta pitch in."

"Nice is not a degree from MIT at fifteen, and nine doctorates," Tony said, sipping his coffee. Steve tilted his head.

"Wait, nine? When did you get nine?" He demanded.

"You were off-world for a few days. A lot happened," Tony said.

Steve sighed and decided to let it drop, considering he wasn't sure whether Tony was joking or not.

"So, Cap, eat quick; the plane leaves in two hours. You guys got stuff to do?" She asked. Steve nodded.

"Yes, I do; it'll be nice to sit and draw again. I brought an easel and some canvas for the beach, too!" He enthused. "I haven't ever painted Malibu's beaches, only New York's. It'll be an interesting contrast."

"Dork," Tony said, eating his bagel after Carol glared at him to do so.

"Coming from you, I'll assume that to be a compliment and act accordingly," Steve replied. "Carol, you've got something to keep your hands busy?"

"One of the kids lent me a copy of *Pokemon Blue* and a Gameboy. They told me I was too old to play, so I took 'em up on it. It'll be fun," she said. "At least, I hope so, or I'll never hear the end of it."

Steve nodded, eating the last of his breakfast before looking up at Tony, halfway through his bagel.

"Eat," he said sternly. "If I can finish a four-course breakfast, you can eat a bagel."

Tony grumbled something about metabolic exchange and the energy cycle, but another glare from both Steve and Carol got him cramming the rest of the bagel in his mouth as Steve got up and gathered their bags together.

"We ready to go?" He called from the foyer.

"Yeah, sure!" Carol said. "C'mon, Tone. Time to go have an adventure."

Tony did not look entirely pleased, but he didn't have much of a choice in the matter; that much was plain. Besides, even though they were trying to keep him from repairing Extremis...there was only so much they could stop. They forgot how good he was, sometimes.
Tony smiled, content. He'd handle it on the plane.
Dog Cops

Chapter Summary

In which I draw relationship parallels using children's cartoons.

Chapter Notes

What I find funniest about Dog Cops is that, according to the few things we're given regarding information about the Avengers' favorite show, the names do not sync up to a serious drama, nor an Animal Cops style show. No, it's like Lethal Weapon+My Little Pony, from the look of things, and so I went with that. Also Carol went a little bit Tumblr on the characters for a bit, oops.
Is it bad that I'm actually tempted to design how they'd all look for this show? It is, isn't it.
Anyways, hope you enjoy this chapter!

Except, he didn't.

Steve sat next to him on the private jet, with at least ten other seats for him to relax in, and blabbed to him about artwork and his sketches and a bunch of things Tony only vaguely understood as he tried in vain to reach for his notebook. Within that lay all the equations for Extremis; he could maybe try to work something out if Steve would just—

"Tony, you're here to relax," Steve said about halfway through the flight, making Tony freeze on the spot. "No Extremis work for at least a few days, okay? For me?"

"Why does it matter to you?" Tony retorted, harsher than he should've as he dwelled on it. It was too late now, regardless. Steve sighed.

"Because...when we enjoy ourselves here, I'd like to enjoy you. Not Iron Man. Not the CEO of Stark Industries. Not anyone but Tony. And if Extremis comes back online, you won't let yourself do that," Steve replied. "Please."

Tony slumped in his seat, sighing. Steve ruffled his hair and slumped beside him, the two of them reclining for a little while.

Then, Steve started talking about art again; to Tony's surprise, as he listened and tuned in for the entire flight, wholly focused on what Steve was telling him...he understood a lot more than he thought he had.

There was a smile on his face, befuddled and tired though it might have been, by the time they touched down in Malibu, going and grabbing their bags.

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"He's landed in Malibu, then?" Whitney Frost said, regarding the man before her with a careful eye. He nodded, shifting from foot to foot in nervous worry before the leader of the Maggia.

"Yeah," he said, looking away and hunching his shoulders, bracing himself. "Yeah, he and a couple other people got on a plane to Malibu this morning."

"A couple other people could mean a lot of things, dear heart," Whitney said, regarding him carefully. "It might mean two pretty debutantes, eager for a taste of Tony Stark. It might mean two bodyguards. Or it might mean two superhumans. Which will it be?"

"Uh, I—I dunno," he said. "One was kinda beefy and blond, big guy. The other chick was blonde too, but she didn't really look like the type of woman Stark normally plays around with..."

"Superhumans, then. Have to be. Captain America was his friend, once. It's... plausible. I don't know about the other woman, but if she's not ringing a bell, she's no threat," Madam Masque said.

"Arrange for my best men to arrive in Malibu as soon as is possible. I know where Tony keeps his vacation home there; I will send them the coordinates once they've arrived. Let them know they're going, won't you?"

The other man bowed, still cringing just a little, and left the room hurriedly to go seek out Big M's inner circle. Whitney watched him leave with a tired sigh.

She'd been with him in Malibu, once. It was lovely. For a little while, she had been happy.

But the buyers didn't care about her happier days with Tony Stark. They wanted his blood, one way or another. And that, she could sell them with ease.

Whitney sipped her drink and tried not to dwell on the thoughts before her as she listened to the sounds of her men making arrangements to leave.

... 

Tony stretched out, catching the sun on his skin and smiling, content, as seagulls wheeled over the three of them, cawing in a cacophonous welcome. Steve just tilted his head and regarded them, curious, as Tony waved them off and set out for the car.

He drove, the convertible letting wind whip through their hair as Tony casually sped through the streets. He knew the place well, well enough that he could navigate the back roads and make his way effortlessly around as Steve and Carol took in the sights.

Eventually, Tony was driving them up a rocky outcropping, towards the edge of a cliff well-worn by ocean tides. A squat, short house, like a crisp white seashell left to bleach on the beach, stood before them. Tony grinned, opening the door and gesturing for the two of them to get out and observe, which they did so eagerly.

"It's beautiful," Steve said. "I don't think I've ever been here..."

"Renovated the whole place after it got trashed awhile back; you probably just were at the old one. 'Sides, I need a place to get away by myself sometimes. I just happen to like you two enough to share," Tony said.

His tone was flippant, but they both understood the meaning behind it; they smiled, content, and nodded at him as the two of them both shouldered all the bags between their super-strength, making their way up the crushed seashells that formed the driveway and heading inside.
Tony unlocked the door and went right for the couch, flopping down on it and closing his eyes.

"I was up much too early for any of this," he said. "Rooms are upstairs. Night."

With that, he was out, jetlag sinking in quick. Steve and Carol just sighed and gave him an indulgent smile each before going to put bags upstairs.

"Oh, Steve, I'll get them! Really, it's fine, it's not a far walk," Carol promised, suddenly realizing an opportunity. "You go get something set up for lunch, I'll get this done."

"Er, I—sure, all right, thank you," Steve said with a warm smile. "I'll take the car and run down for food—I doubt Tony left groceries here. Please watch over him while I'm gone, okay?"

Carol nodded, shooing him off with a big smile as he went downstairs and headed out, the crunching of seashells letting her know he was gone.

She rearranged the bags and put hers in one of the bigger bedrooms near the sea; then, with a bright, cheerful grin, she dumped both Steve and Tony's bags on the master bedroom's floor, leaving the room and whistling cheerfully to herself in triumph.

...  

Steve went down to the little produce market nearby and felt incredibly out of place in his jeans and plain white shirt; he saw everyone flitting past him in bright pastels and worn-out denim shorts and just smiled and tried not to look below any woman's neck.

He observed the food before him and smiled as he spied a box of fresh blueberries; he picked a bunch for Tony and grabbed Carol a few peaches, and, despite wincing at the cliche, got himself a few apples. Aside from that, the store had a small deli; he got the three of them cold cuts, cheese, and a loaf of fresh bread before paying for everything.

The woman at the counter regarded him with bright, hazel eyes, her wrinkled, tan face creasing further into a smile as she regarded him.

"You come up from Mister Stark's house?" She asked. "He hasn't been around lately."

She surveyed him with an amused grin, a few tidbits of gossip clicking in her head as she sized him up. "You're not the kind of person who usually accompanies him."

Steve shook his head and put his purchases up on the counter. She rung them up, clearly still waiting for an answer; Steve had a sinking feeling he was about to become part of the town gossip very soon.

"We're just friends," Steve mumbled, ducking his head graciously. If she didn't know he was Captain America, he wasn't going to bring it up. "He and I needed a break from the city, so we visited here to take a bit of a vacation."

The smile on her face said she didn't quite believe him; Steve just sighed and gave her one of his winning, bright 'press smiles;' America's Golden Boy grin. He hoped it was enough as he handed over the cash and wished her a good day, but he highly doubted it as he got in the car and headed home.

He came home and smiled as he went to the kitchen, sighing fondly as he regarded Tony, snoring contentedly on the couch as he clutched one of the throw pillows, cuddling it with a tight, fierce grip against his chest.
Steve put everything away in the fridge or stored it in one of the food drawers before looking at Tony and shaking his head, crossing the room and standing over Tony, shielding him from the sight of anyone who might walk in with the way he stood, like an angel regarding him from high above.

"Hey, Tony," he murmured. "Get up, okay? Or you'll never sleep tonight."

"Who says I want to?" Tony mumbled, but Steve knew he was awake; he smiled, took the throw pillow out of his hands, and tossed it onto the other couch. Tony whined piteously and grabbed for it, raising a hand and clasping his fingers in and out of a fist, as if it would summon the pillow back to his grasp once more.

Steve just patted his hair and settled in on the big couch, turning on the television as Carol came downstairs, dressed for the beach in a white cover-up and a black and red bathing suit.

"Oh, are we going out?" Steve asked, gesturing to her outfit. Carol shook her head and grinned. "No, I am; you two are not. One of us is gonna stay in the house at all times with Tony, 'kay? Right now, you're on babysitting detail. Both of you get something to eat, I'll be back in a coupla hours," Carol said, ruffling their hair before opening the enormous bay window and leaping out, soaring off for the beach as a cool sea breeze skirted around the room, giving it a sense of vitality it had lacked without anyone to traverse its halls and tamp down its dust for months now.

Tony waved idly goodbye as Steve flipped through channels, finally settling on a re-run of *Dog Cops* and getting up to go make sandwiches as Tony focused intently on the television.

"Police Captain Barkley is getting flak from Mayor Meowskowitz," Tony remarked. Steve sighed as he spread mayonnaise on the bread, laying down layers of turkey, cheese, and lettuce for himself, taking out Tony's preferred roast beef, salami, and mustard mix as he did.

"Those two have never gotten along," he said. "Ever since Barkley let Sargeant Gruffles go after the Biscuit Kingpin on his own..."

"Well, Gruffles was becoming too much of a loose cannon," Tony said as Steve put their sandwiches together, piling a heap of blueberries on Tony's plate and slicing up an apple for his own. "I guess it was sort of understandable after his friends got sick from the Biscuit Kingpin's poisoned biscuits."

"True," Steve agreed, bringing their plates over and sitting down beside Tony. "You still like blueberries, right?"

"Always," Tony enthused. "Thanks for remembering, Steve."

"Of course," Steve said with a smile. "I like getting to know these things. They make you so human."

Tony glanced away, shrugging with quick hesitance that made Steve's heart ache. He didn't know how to get the point across to Tony that he loved him, the very human and fallible Tony Stark, not the Iron Man suit that shielded him from the world at large without, well, telling him that he loved him. And *that* was out of the question.

Tony leaned against his shoulder and sighed, taking a bite of his sandwich and sinking deep into thought. For a minute, Steve fussed, in a bit of panic about what might be wrong with him; Tony only ever got like this when he really had something on his mind.

Finally, Tony leaned in close, and in a gentle, lowing whisper, asked, "Hey, do you think Barkley and Meowskowitz are going to hook up?"
Steve threw up his hands and started laughing, over Tony's confused protestations of the total legitimacy of the relationship. He just shook his head and smiled, shrugging his shoulders and remaining neutral as they continued to watch. He had his own relationship to worry about.

... Two hours of Dog Cops reruns later and Steve was starting to feel jetlag creeping in on him, too; the sun was setting and he was feeling a rather persistent ache in his bones. Tony looked up at him, the picture of concern.

"Hey, bud," he said. "Tired? Do you need to go to bed?"

"No," Steve said, his voice firm. "Not until you do. I can hold it off until then."

Tony sighed, shaking his head and leaning back in the chair.

"You're a dumbass sometimes," he announced. "Just trust me on this one, Steve. I've never met a man so stubborn or overprotective. Or fussy. You fuss so hard I'm routinely surprised you haven't begun to cluck or grow feathers."

"Thank you, Tony," Steve said, utterly straightfaced. "I really appreciate the compliments."

Tony looked at him for a second, his head tilted and, Steve privately thought, looking adorable.

"You're a real enigma sometimes, Rogers, you know that?" Tony said, amused. "I'll assume that was a joke. Even you aren't that obtuse."

"Thanks," Steve said, a note of dryness creeping into his voice. Tony chuckled and ruffled his hair, settling in beside him just as they heard the whipping of wind and someone perching on the windowsill.

Carol had come home, dripping wet and crisped by the sun, grinning with delight as she shook her hair out, making her way across the kitchen floor and into the living room.

"Hey, guys," she said. "You two okay?"

"Tired," Tony said. "Watchin' Dog Cops. You think Captain Barkley and Mayor Meowskowitz would make a good couple, right, Carol?"

"What? Ew, no. Captain Barkley and Sargeant Gruffles, guys! Look how concerned the Captain was when Sarge went off and made a bunch of stupid decisions over the Biscuit Kingpin! Would you be that concerned about your teammate if you didn't love them? I think not," Carol said. Tony groaned.

"Ugh, but Gruffles doesn't deserve him. He made a bunch of stupid mistakes and got people hurt, no way he can atone for that!" Tony protested. "He was an idiot and he got what he deserved by turning the force against him."

"Tony, hey," Steve piped up, "don't forget, Captain Barkley forgave him. He understood. And he wants to get Sarge back on the force and get the team to trust him again, right?"

"Right," Tony mumbled. "Still, he was an idiot."

"Happens sometimes," Steve said. "And the Captain shouldn't have taken him off the case in the first place, I think. It was important to him. I'm just glad this time, no one was hurt."
"This time?" Tony asked, baffled. Steve blinked, shaking his head.

"Uh, sorry," he said. "This season, I mean. Don't know what I was going for there."

"It's okay," Tony said, a hesitant smile on his face. "Hey, we all make mistakes, right?"

"Right," Steve replied, a goofy, sweet grin on his face.

Carol just rolled her eyes and went to make a sandwich, waiting until her back was turned to smile for just a second.
Ruminations

Chapter Summary

Tony thinks. Pancakes are made and awkwardness is had.

Chapter Notes

Sorry about the gap in updates, going to DC threw me off. I'll be right back on track now!
If I had a quarter for every time I got emotional about Tony, I could probably buy him from Marvel at this point.

About ten minutes later, the three of them had settled in on the couch; after a bit of light bickering, Tony and Steve had agreed to bed at eight, and Carol was exhausted after being battered around by the waves, and so nodded in assent despite her mind internally whirring with glee over what Steve and Tony would see come eight.

The *Dog Cops* episodes were over, and so they settled on watching a re-run of the *Golden Girls*, content in their sitcom-centric celluloid ennui until Carol finally checked the clock and shoved them both up and off the couch, tutting, "Up to bed, both of you. I'll clean up down here."

The two of them sighed and nodded, getting up and stretching out as Steve ran a quick scan over Tony's body; no sign of external issues, but he couldn't know what was going on in Tony's mind, and...well...

No. Steve trusted him, he *did*; if he'd asked Tony to refrain from messing around with Extremis for a few days...Tony would. He *knew* that.

He smiled, then, to brush away the worried insecurity as he gently nudged Tony towards the upstairs hallway. Tony knew the way to the master bedroom, so he led Steve from there, opening the door and slipping inside, opening up windows to accept the warm, sweet summer breeze that seemed to lurk at the cusp of every windowsill in Malibu.

"It's beautiful in here," Steve said, impressed at the elegant furniture, (definitely picked by someone who was not Tony), and smiling, pleased, at the big bed; it looked comfortable, which was exactly what Tony needed. "Do you know where there's a guest room, or...?"

"Well, you put your stuff in here, so I'd wager you liked this room an awful lot, Steve," Tony remarked, nudging his suitcases.

Steve stared.

"...I didn't..." He trailed off, shaking his head.

*Carol.*
"I'm sorry, I'll move them; I don't know how they got in here—"

"No, wait." Tony cut him off. "Hey, aren't you guys here to like...supervise me or whatever? It's not a big deal. It's a damn big bed, Steve. Unless it bothers you or something—"

"No! No, oh god, no, it really doesn't. I was more...concerned on your behalf," Steve said. "Right. Sorry. I'll stay in here then. Mind if I change in the bathroom?"

"Sure," Tony said with a yawn, going to pull his spare pajamas out of the dresser even as he spoke. "You go get dressed, I'll meet you out here in a bit."

Steve nodded, gathering up his pajamas before heading into the bathroom, dressing quickly and rushing right back out to Tony, who was already sprawled out on his side of the bed. Steve smiled, looking at him; he was the picture of contentment, and it soothed him in ways he couldn't explain to see Tony so at ease.

He climbed into bed, murmured, "Goodnight, Tony," and, feeling like his job had been accomplished at seeing Tony safe and sound, fell asleep soon after.

Tony waited until he could see Steve's chest rising and falling in slow, careful measures before he grinned, dove into his bag, and took out his tablet, tapping away at some blueprints for awhile. What Steve didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

Besides, Tony had other things to think about for awhile.

...

It was an open secret that Tony Stark was in love with Steve Rogers. At least, if you listened to the kids and read the message boards.

In the halls of the Avengers mansion, it was a bit more muted; everyone could see it, but no one wanted to acknowledge it, for fear of effectively recreating one of those baking-soda volcanoes; a single drop of vinegar and the whole thing was awash in messy white gunk.

The last thing any of them needed was a mess like that, either literally or emotionally, and so the entire team watched them dance around one another and try so hard to put the pieces of what used to be back together for each other.

Sometimes, it worked. Sometimes, they saw the proud-papa Captain they used to know, bickering with Clint and ordering people to get rest and dinner when they needed it. Sometimes, Tony was by his side, intervening in his arguments and cooperating with Steve when he needed that sort of support the most.

And sometimes...

Sometimes, Tony thought, he didn't understand what he was doing wrong. He didn't understand why Steve pulled away from him lately, even when he didn't think he'd messed up, or why the Captain would sometimes just...look at him, in ways Tony didn't understand.

If people had been able to look deeper into their lives, into their dynamic, they would've noticed something important. Tony threw himself with abandon into atoning, into scourging his sins like some kind of twisted penitent. The important thing about that was this; Steve had never been a confessional. He had never judged him, never condemned him—but never forgiven him, either.

And so neither of them seemed to realize what was wrong with the other, because now, as had
happened before, so many times, with armor and ideology and government, they were on opposite sides of the mind, playing on two wholly different playing fields, and so they assumed it was, in fact, something wrong with themselves.

And that was why Tony never said he loved him.

Because he did. There was no epiphany to be had here, there was no deep soul-searching about his feelings for Steve. He'd spent years of his life beside Steve, formed a world-changing team of superheroes with his help, gotten his ass kicked millions of times with Steve helping him back up again.

This was no surprise to him; he'd loved him when he'd thought he would die before he ever told him, and he'd loved him drunk, and he'd loved him when he couldn't stand him, and he'd loved him when he'd been trying to hunt him down, and he'd loved him when he'd died, and he'd loved him when he had returned, even if he didn't quite remember why...and he'd loved him forever after.

And, looking at the Captain sleeping peacefully beside him, he knew he loved him now, and always would. Everyone else had just been keeping time.

But...it wasn't meant to be. Not for him. Steve deserved someone better, and maybe, once, Tony had been that man; a golden Avenger, a hero, a savior of puppies from trees or whatever, but not now. Not after the bottle, not after the war, not after...not after everything. He'd done to heroics what he'd done to the rest of his life; corrupted it with the simple fact of his existence.

Iron Man had been a hero once. And that meant maybe, just maybe, if he'd ever told them the truth, Tony Stark might've been worthy of Steve Rogers.

But that time had passed, taking any hope of Tony's worthiness with it. It hadn't been thoughtful enough to take the love with it as well; too heavy and all-consuming, perhaps.

He loved him. But...this was the closest they would ever get. Tony knew. The two of them sleeping side by side in bed, the space speaking volumes between them, would be as close as he got to curling up beside Steve at night, letting himself be shielded and protected by that much strength and that much love.

Tony never settled for less. Except for when it came to Steve. Because that was all he deserved.

Tony turned off his tablet and laid down beside his Captain, putting his hand over Steve's and closing his eyes. In the dark, he could pretend Steve had done it of his own free will.

... 

Steve awoke the next morning to Tony beside him and wondered, for a brief moment, what it might feel like to wake up like this every day; to stir awake and realize Tony was sleeping beside him, safe and content, to have a moment of peace with Tony beside him before the morning gave way to the rest of their lives. To know every day when he woke up that Tony was there.

The moment was dismissed, but not before Steve realized with a sudden jolt out of his sleepy bleariness that Tony's hand had found his in the night.

He just smiled and sat up, climbing out of bed and going to shower.

Tony awoke to the sound of Steve showering and wondered, for a brief moment, what it might feel like to wake up like this every day; to know Steve was there with him, watching over him, living his life with him and spending his morning with him—the only moment of peace they had.
The thought was dismissed, but Tony could still feel Steve's hand in his, warm against his skin.

He got up and rubbed sleep from his eyes, going to shower in one of the guest bedrooms; he thought for a second to tell Steve, but decided against disturbing him. He'd be quick.

Steve finished showering a few minutes after Tony started, and came out to an empty room.

He couldn't help but panic, but kept his cool long enough to towel off and dress. No sense in running around the house looking for Tony in nothing but a robe.

"Tony?" He called out. "Tony, are you there? Are you all right?"

No response. Steve frowned. He had to check around the house...

He made his way out into the hall and started opening doors, peeking in; nothing stood out, but he kept calling Tony's name until he eventually reached the end of the hall and walked into one of the spare rooms just as Tony was stepping out of the bathroom, a towel around his waist and his skin glistening.

"Oh, uh—sorry," Steve said, ducking his head and trying not to blush. He'd seen Tony like this before, surely? He assumed so, anyway. "I was just worried—are you all right?"

"...Yeah," Tony said, looking at him like he had two heads. "I just went to take a shower, Steve."

"Right," Steve said. "Why didn't you tell me? I thought you'd...I don't know, but it worried me."

"Well thanks, mother hen, but I'm fine," Tony said, amused. "You up for breakfast? I could go for pancakes."

"Okay," Steve agreed. "Do you want to run some scans today? On Extremis I mean."

Tony's eyes lit up; Steve sighed, knowing he had to set boundaries, and fast.

"Not for long," he said, "and don't try to repair it, please? Just maybe figure out what's up and make sure it won't hurt you. I don't want it to hurt you."

"Fine," Tony said, sighing theatrically. "I take it you'll be down there supervising me to ensure my cooperation with this stupid plan?"

"Yep," Steve agreed with a grin. "Watching you like a hawk."

"Jerk," Tony said with a small smirk on his face. Steve chuckled.

"I love you too," he said as they started downstairs. He didn't see the look of wide-eyed wonder Tony gave him, nor acknowledge the skip in heartbeat saying that did to him.

The two of them just went down to make pancakes in the kitchen; that seemed like the safest thing to do at this juncture.
The Cave

Chapter Summary

I'm sure this is all very symbolic somehow.

Chapter Notes

I was reading a lot of Joyce when I wrote this; that's really my only explanation for the imagery, oops.
As to what Tony remembers, considering I honestly have no idea of the extent of Extremis' memory deletion and if he got it back; for the purposes of the fic, he's deleted everything related to Civil War but knows about what happened during Secret Invasion and everything after that. That's what he's addressing here; Civil War comes later.

"We're going to the beach," Carol said, in a tone that said Tony wasn't allowed to argue.
He tried to do so anyway.

"Well, Steve said I could run scans on Extremis!" Tony protested. Carol gave him a look of utter amused contempt.

"Well, Tony, I said we're going to the beach. And that means we're going to the beach. If you come here just to play scientist in your lab across the country, I'll smack you one. You came here to heal, recuperate, and then repair, in that order," Carol said sternly. "Get your bathing suit on after breakfast or I'll hold you down and do it myself."

"Kinky," Tony remarked, his voice dry and flippant. "Steve, aren't you going to stop her?"

"I did want to paint the beach," Steve agreed, "and it sounds like a great idea, Carol. We can do scans tomorrow, Tony."

"You're all incorrigible and I hate you both," Tony grumbled. "Conspirators and traitors ganging up on me."

"Yep," Carol agreed. "Get your shorts on, we're going."

"At least have him eat breakfast first!" Steve protested. "Tony, sit down and eat."

Tony just gave a long-suffering sigh and went to make his coffee while Steve got up, bustling him around so he could make pancakes unimpeded.

... The beach was a quick walk, nothing they couldn't handle; the lowing of the tides greeted them as they went, urging them onward until the gentle shush had become a dull roar.
Tony glared at Steve and Carol, who were walking beside him.

"Seriously, guys, I could've carried something," he said. "I got shorted out, not crippled permanently."

"You're sick, we're helping," Steve said, carrying a mountain consisting of beach chairs, two umbrellas, a beach bag, his easel, his art supplies, five bottles of sunblock, and a beach ball precariously balanced on the tip, like the whole thing was an elaborately-constructed seal.

"I just grabbed the cooler," Carol said, making her way down to the shoreline and giving them some distance to talk. "Steve's the one fussing."

"Yeah, but I expect it from him by now," Tony sighed. "C'mon, Steve, at least the beach ball?"

"No," Steve said. "We're almost there, anyway."

"God, fine," Tony groaned, giving him a look as he slumped his shoulders. "You are such a pain sometimes."

"I'm trying to make sure you stay safe and stress-free, including physically; you just came out of a coma two days ago, Tony!" Steve said. "Trust me enough to let me take care of you this much, please?"

Tony was quiet for the rest of the walk to the shore. Steve just set everything down with a sigh, arranging it on the beach.

"There's someplace I want you to see," Tony said abruptly, just as Steve opened the umbrella. Steve turned to him, baffled.

"Now?" He asked, curious. Tony shook his head, shifting from foot to foot.

"No," he mumbled. "Not now. Wait, okay? Trust me. I'll tell you when you're ready."

Steve just nodded. Even if Tony didn't trust him yet, he would trust Tony with all he had. Hopefully that would lead to the trust being reciprocated, with a bit of work.

... 

The day passed at the beach peacefully enough; no one disturbed them, since Tony had bought the whole strip of the shore, and Carol was like a dolphin in the waves, having been deprived a good time at the beach for years now due to one thing or another. Watching her swim, flying up above the waves just high enough to let them know there were powers involved as well, filled them both with a sense of peace.

Steve painted her in a few of his canvases as he watched the waves, the first few paintings neatly laid out along the beach to dry; she was a blur of crimson and gold in all of them, a bright streak along the shoreline.

Tony sat beside Steve, watching him paint and watching the ocean in front of him. He was curious to see the difference between what the Captain saw and what lay before him; how the crest and swell of a wave differed from canvas to iris.

He was quiet the whole day, introspective; Steve didn't bring it up or remark upon it, just allowing him to do what he needed to do. Tony seemed more at ease for that, less defensive, and Steve couldn't help but be grateful; it might help him when Tony showed him whatever he was so hesitant
Steve turned to paint him, eventually; he was sitting so still and captivated by the waves that he couldn't help it. Tony so very rarely sat still enough to model, and he'd take any opportunity to paint him that he could.

Tony didn't seem to notice, still watching the waves as if he could pull an answer to whatever question had plagued him all day out of the foam and make it tangible, real, something that wouldn't elude him so easily. Steve only paused for one second in his brushstrokes to put his hand in Tony's hair for a gentle single second.

Tony didn't so much as flinch; he just continued to watch the waves. But for a second, his eyes closed, and a look of acceptance spread across his face.

Steve smiled and went back to his painting, content.

"..."

The sun was inching ever closer to setting when Tony finally stood up and looked at Steve.

"Now," he said. "It's not a long walk."

Steve nodded, wiping his brush clean and getting up, calling, "Carol? Keep an eye on the stuff, okay?"

"I will! You two be careful, okay?" Carol said. "What d'ya think about dinner on the beach? I'll get a fire pit going!"

"Sounds good! Be back soon!" Steve called back, cupping his hands over his mouth to yell. Carol waved them off as Steve trotted after Tony, keeping pace.

Tony seemed to know exactly where he was going, and there was plenty of determination in his step—but Steve could see hesitation on his face, and he couldn't help but worry.

The path was short but winding, and Tony eventually had him climbing up a small rocky outcropping, leading back down to the water, which had become an insistent, quiet slapping against the rocks. Tony stood at the edge of the outcropping and pointed down to a shallow pool that had formed from the U-shape of the rocks and the enormous cave mouth that was before it.

"Found this place when I was a kid," Tony said, "and it wasn't my house up there, but Howard's. So...that meant I had to find a place for my own. This was it."

"It never flooded?" Steve asked. Tony shrugged.

"Not enough to bother me," he said. "Only up to my shins, and I could swim. So..." He trailed off, hesitant and almost defensive. "This is what I wanted to show you."

"Tony, it's amazing," Steve said. "I'm so impressed you found this all for yourself; I bet it's beautiful on the inside, too."

Tony smiled now, gesturing to the mouth of the cave.

"Wanna go in and find out?" He asked, his tone that light, lilting conspiratory tone that all eager boys adopted; that adventurous, excited tone meant exploration and adventure ahead.

"Of course," Steve replied. "If you think we'll still fit."
"We will," Tony said. "And the whole place lights up great when the sun sets; that's why I waited until now. You're gonna wanna see it, Steve, I promise..."

Steve nodded, letting Tony skirt them around the shallow tide pool, full of a bunch of small fish and clumps of sea creatures Steve could only admire, names aside. Tony slipped inside with practiced ease; Steve ducked his head and followed in after him as Tony made his way into the depths, climbing up onto a little natural shelf and beckoning to Steve from there.

"C'mon up, Cap," Tony said, holding out a hand. "I can help you up."

"I can do it m—" Steve caught himself as he realized Tony was offering more than his hand, now that he'd showed him this.

"Thanks," he murmured, letting Tony pull him up to the small shelf, sitting beside him cross-legged as he looked out the mouth of the cave. The way the sun fell illuminated the glossy black stone of the caves, as well as the thin layer of water that was spread shallowly across the floor of the cave. It looked like molten gold, and Steve sucked in a breath, entranced.

"It's beautiful, huh?" Tony said. "I really thought you'd like it. Besides, uh...y'know. I wanted to show you."

"I'm honored," Steve said, his voice a rough, aching rasp. "Thank you for trusting me even that much, Tony."

"Hey, whoa, who ever said I didn't trust you?" Tony said, looking at him in utter shock. "Steve, I—"

He paused and shook his head.

"Wait, wait just a sec," he said. "The sun's gonna set."

Steve nodded, settling in to watch it despite the way his heart now hammered at his chest, so eager to hear more about how much Tony trusted him.

The sinking of the sun was slow, and it lit the liquid sunlight upon the cavefloor on fire; the gold hues with the fierce, brilliant red bled together until the pale, soft orange melded with the dusky hints of purple, twilight creeping in as they watched.

Tony's hand found Steve's somewhere in the dance of sunset colors. Steve didn't move his hand away.

They watched until the floor was night, the soft sweet tones of dulcet dusk blending with the first twinkling hints of stars, their shine brought in by the tides, the foam-flecked waves sending them up to the skies on the cusps of each wave.

It was quiet and soft, but constant; the waves lulled them into an odd sense of looseness, like their tightly-constructed and strictly-enforced boundaries were entirely gone as long as they stayed here.

"I never stopped trusting you," Tony said, his voice soft and thick with emotion, "I never thought...even at my worst, at our worst, that I couldn't trust you to be Steve. Captain America...that was always another story. But Captain America wasn't my friend; he wasn't the guy that helped me out of the gutter and back up to glory, or even the guy who sat and watched television with me on the couch. He was my leader, my partner, sure, but we bickered; our ideals were too at odds. But...but you, Steve..."

Tony licked his lips and hunched his shoulders, sighing as he looked at the pool of night beneath
"You were my friend," he said. "You fussed and you teased me and you played with my hair and told me when to get some sleep or eat some dinner, and I did, I did...because my friend asked me to, my best, dearest friend, who I could fight alongside and feel safe, feel strong with...and find a life with. Something that was a comfortable medium between being a superhero and being Tony Stark. How could I not trust the man who gave me all that? That's just about everything I have."

Steve went to swallow but found he couldn't, not past the lump in his throat.

"So," Tony said, shrugging hesitantly, "don't...don't worry. I know it's hard to forgive me after everything I've done, but—please, don't ever think I don't trust you, I'm just—I just—look, maybe I don't deserve it in return, and could we just—"

"Tony," Steve said, cutting him off with a loving but firm tone, "stop talking."

He fell silent immediately. Steve just cupped his cheek and shook his head, leaning in before he could stop himself.

"There's nothing to forgive," he said. "Not by me. Forgive yourself. You were the one hurt the most by all this, Tony. Apologize to yourself. And believe me—whether you deserve it or not, I don't care. I trust you."

They were so close Steve could feel Tony's breath on his cheek, soft puffs as he huffed for air, his eyes wide and his face, even in the dim light, shaded red. Steve could hear him breathe, and he wondered vaguely if there were other ways he could get Tony to breathe this heavily, this rough and ragged and raw, like he'd come undone.

He pushed the thought from his mind as their eyes met, the lights within them the only stars Steve could see, even while the night-pool shimmered beneath them.

"My friend," he said. "My Tony."

Tony nodded, his throat dry.

"Yeah," he said. "Yours."

"Goes double for me, Tony," Steve said, his voice gentle. "Don't write me off as that selfish, okay, bud?"

Tony nodded, unable to say anything further. Steve just pulled away and let him sit there in silence, the two of them appreciating the night and the low rushing murmur of the tides.

"We should...probably get back," Tony said. "Carol's gonna yell at us. And...we can come out here tomorrow, right? If you want?"

The promise of a tomorrow made Steve's heart soar more than anything else had.

"Sure," he said. "Tomorrow, Tony. I'd love to. Let's just get through tonight, okay?"

"Okay," Tony agreed, getting down and walking across the still waters of the night; he was the picture of grace and ease as he did so, and Steve found his heart in his throat before he could stop himself.

He just shook his head, smiled, and followed after Tony, letting the night cloak them both and stars
crown their brow as the two of them went back to find Carol, the waves washing over their feet, constant and content as the men who walked along their foam-flecked edges.
When all was said and done, the three of them stumbled up to the house that night around midnight, exhausted, covered in sand and salt, but cheerful and at ease.

"Gonna take a shower," Steve yawned, covering his mouth as he did. "Carol, Tony, you two gonna go, or...?"

"Nah, we can wait on you; no sense in all of us trying to jockey for the hot water. Television's on, anyway," Tony said, slumping down on the couch and sighing, content. "See you in a bit."

"Okay, Tony," Steve agreed, his voice surprisingly soft, even to his own ears. Even saying Tony's name now gave his voice a sweet cadence he had never heard from his own lips before. "See you soon."

He left upstairs, his back to Carol's smug grin and Tony's longing glances.

"So, Tony," Carol said, floating above the couch as Tony turned on the television, sinking into the leather cushions, "how was your little playdate with Steve?"

"I just showed him some stuff, don't be an ass," Tony said, looking away and hunching his shoulders defensively. "I know the game you're playing, Carol. Don't bother."

Carol was just quiet. Tony was bound to trip himself up on the truth soon.

"He's not ever going to love me," Tony said. "I'm barely his friend anymore. I'm not the man who founded the Avengers, and I know I'm definitely not...not the hero he used to partner up with. Not anymore. And after all I've done..."

He smiled, wry and dark.

"I'm a futurist," he said. "I can't go back."

Carol wanted more than anything in the world to just push the two of them together in a room and let them have at it; spill the beans and tell them the truth when they were too dense to give the other even that much leeway. But that wouldn't solve anything. Nor would smacking them around until they saw sense. Unfortunately...all she had left was her words. And she'd never been the Avengers
"You and I are a lot alike, Tony," she said. "The two of us tend to be...dense. Heedless of other people's opinions, concerns, or ideas. Sometimes that's a good thing. Sometimes that makes us brave in a way no one else can be."

Carol sighed and hunched her shoulders. "And sometimes that makes us do stupid, stupid shit, Tony. Because not heeding other people sometimes means we ignore their emotions, their worry for us or their fears, and that...that can bite us both in the ass. To put it mildly."

They thought of two different people when they spoke, but the end result was the same.

"I don't know," Tony said, frustrated. "I can't read him."

"You haven't been able to read yourself lately, Tony. Take this time off, like Steve said. Look at what's in front of you and just...re-calibrate or whatever. Focus. He's not going anywhere. Neither of us are. So...as long as you don't leave, I figure you'll have all the support you need. That's all on you at this point, though," Carol said.

Tony nodded.

He didn't say anything after that; Carol hadn't expected him to. The two of them watched television in silence, light and tinged with exhaustion.

Steve came down a few minutes later in a robe, his hair still glimmering wet; Carol and Tony both split, letting Steve make himself a bowl of ice cream and relax for a few minutes uninhibited until he looked up, surprised. Tony had come back downstairs and was standing in front of him, dressed for bed.

"Tony? Where's Carol?" He asked. Tony shrugged.

"She went to bed," he replied. "Needed some time to relax or whatever. I didn't pry. It's midnight, and she's probably tired. But...I'm not, and there's ice cream in the freezer and Dog Cops reruns on."

"Yeah, sure is," Steve agreed, holding up his own bowl. "I think there's a new episode on next weekend, by the way."

"Really? Great," Tony said, plunking himself down beside Steve and sighing, content, a bowl of ice cream in his hands. Steve just took a bite out of his; when Tony glared at him, Steve smiled and proffered up some from his own bowl in apology.

The two of them watched television for another hour before Steve's eyelids started getting thicker and heavier, weighing him down with hard stones into sleep. As he drifted off into the forgiving waves of night, he looked down to realize Tony had fallen asleep before him, nestled contentedly against his shoulder.

... Carol awoke the next morning to a missed phonecall from Jessica; she answered immediately, noting as the phone blipped in her ear that she could hear someone making pancakes downstairs.

"Hey, babe," Jessica responded, picking up after the few rings, "you okay? How are they holding up?"
"Eh, they're being high school dorks," Carol said. "Y'know, all this unfathomable love tension and drama or...whatever. This is honestly the first time Tony's ever had something this deep, and I'm pretty sure Steve only understands dating men slightly more than he understands dating women."

"Having tried to date his ex-girlfriend's niece clued me in, yeah," Jessica agreed. "So, any luck on your end?"

"I got 'em to share a bed, and if I heard right last night, neither of them came back upstairs yesterday. And I mean, it's so obvious that they're in love with one another that I really don't see it being much longer until they have some sort of passionate interlude," Carol said. "How's the team?"

"Been better, everyone misses mom and dad," Jessica replied. "Jarvis is the most stress-free I've seen him in months, though."

"I bet he is," Carol agreed with a sigh. "Tell them mom and dad are fine, and tell Peter not to eat Tony's ice cream, you know he hates that."

"Okay, I will. You stay safe, okay? Those two attract trouble," Jessica said. "And if I say someone attracts trouble, they attract trouble."

"Kay, promise. I will. I love you, okay? Stay safe back in New York. And don't let Peter eat my ice cream, either," Carol said.

Jessica laughed, replied, "I love you too," and hung up, leaving Carol to get dressed and head back downstairs to where Steve stood at the griddle flipping pancakes and Tony sat at the kitchen bar, flipping through the pages of his notebook and trying to find something in his notes.

"How very domestic," Carol noted internally before giving them both a broad smile.

"Hey, boys," she said. "Going back to the Stone Age, Tony?"

"All my notes on Extremis are in here," Tony replied. "Easier to do paper copies. Can't be hacked. Besides, initially, all the inner workings of Extremis and the info on them were backed up on Extremis itself, but I can't access that, now can I?"

"No, you can't," Steve said, setting down pancakes with chocolate chips in front of him, "and I only said you could do scans, not undergo a complete rehaul, Tony."

Tony actually wilted and took a petulant bite of his pancakes. Carol put her coffee down just to stare.

"I gotta figure out the source of the problem, though," he grumbled. "I won't repair yet, just lemme figure out what went wrong."

"Fine, fine. You're looking a bit too red for me to want you outside anyway," Steve said. "We'll put some aloe on your back when you're done with your breakfast.

"Oh my god," Tony said, burying his face into his hands and massaging his throbbing temples. "You are not my mother, nor my masseuse."

"Well, if you'd like to try to reach the middle of your back on your own, be my guest," Steve said, making Carol and himself a pile of pancakes.

"I've got work to do," Tony grumbled. "Go away."

"Aloe first," Steve said, his voice pleasant and indulgent. "Then we'll go down into the lab. Carol, if
you don't mind making a more bountiful grocery run? I didn't think to grab much beyond a few days worth of food."

"Yeah, no big deal," Carol said. "There's a jar of aloe in the fridge by the way; put it there last night."

"Thank you, Carol, you've been very helpful," Steve said, trying with all his might not to laugh.

"I hate you both so much," Tony said, taking another bite of his pancakes.

Steve patted Tony's head, careful not to stroke too roughly for fear of aggravating any sunburned skin, and sat down to eat his own pancakes with a small smile.

... 

Breakfast was cleared and Steve got the tub of aloe from the fridge while Tony regarded it warily.

"It's gonna be cold," he said with just the hint of a pout.

"I know, Tony," Steve said, "but it'll feel good on the sunburn. Besides, I'd like if it has time to dry so you can put your shirt on while you work in the lab. I don't want you getting injured."

"Yeah, I might get a papercut on one of my computers," Tony remarked, arching an eyebrow. "I'm not gonna be welding or anything, Steve."

"Still, lab safety," Steve mumbled, flickering his eyes away as he did his best to square his shoulders. Tony's only response was to raise his eyebrow higher.

Then, out of a sense of curiosity, he lifted his shirt up, sliding it off and stripping it carefully, sliding it down an arm and tossing it aside, arching his back and throwing his shoulders backwards just enough to display his bare chest, jutting out enough to catch Steve's eye.

He just unscrewed the lid on top of the jar of aloe, very pruriently not looking at Tony while he worked. Tony chuckled, shaking his head and allowing Steve to warm the aloe up a bit by rubbing it across his palms before arching his back and sighing softly when Steve put his cool, aloe-coated hand on his skin.

He could almost hear Steve's face sizzling red, but he didn't move his hand away. Tony smiled at that, feeling Steve's fingers stroking across the broad, lean expanse of his back. Steve was careful and attentive; each finger crossed over the scars across Tony's back with delicate touches and gentle dismay—especially when he crossed the one atop Tony's spine.

"Kathy's long gone, Steve," Tony said quietly. "I wish Extremis did something about scar tissue, but it can't be helped."

"It doesn't bother me," Steve replied, keeping his voice gentle and loving while remaining firm enough for Tony to believe him, "I just wish it would go away for your sake."

Tony shrugged as Steve spread aloe just above the waistband of his pants, his face growing redder as he did, valiantly trying and failing to stop his thoughts from going lower than his fingers.

"It has where it matters," Tony said, tilting his head back to look at him. "Really, I'm okay."

And it was possibly true; maybe Kathy specifically didn't bother him. Steve had to trust that much truth from Tony, at least. But he couldn't deny that he carried scars inflicted by plenty of other
people. Whether or not the individual wounds remained, the hurt was still there; nebulous and intangible, and all the harder to banish for it.

Still. As Steve spread cool healing salve over Tony's strong back, he could only hope that as he covered the scars, he could wipe away at the weight they carried.

Tony seemed to think so; from the way he sighed in bliss and arched his back, like a cat eager for affection, Steve knew he was enjoying every second Steve's fingers remained on his back. He gave him a few more minutes of the gentle treatment before pointing towards the couch.

"Go lie down on your stomach for a few minutes; I'll go turn the computers on downstairs, I know how to press a power button, I should think," Steve replied. "Let it dry and put your shirt back on before you come down, okay?"

"Fine," Tony agreed, stretching out and standing up as Steve had asked. "Hey, Cap—thanks. Thanks a lot. It...it felt really nice when you did that."

"I'm glad, Tony," Steve said, his smile warm as he went downstairs to unlock the lab. "It was a pleasure."

The thought that Steve had enjoyed it just as much as he had warmed Tony's heart; he grinned with delight and went to lay down on the couch, content and calm, the aloe cooling off and drying on his skin as the sweet sea breeze slided in through an open window and danced about over his skin, like angels on the head of a pin.
Toys

Chapter Summary

Steve buys Tony a present.

Chapter Notes

Sorry about the gap in updates! I sort of got my entire soul eaten by Dang Rope for a week, so I got lost. It is time to get back to normal!
Sappy fluff in this one and little else. Hope you enjoy it~!

Steve set up the computers and let them all whirl with power, smiling in content satisfaction at his work. He had a few minutes to make sure all the systems were powered up properly before he heard Tony coming down the steps, his bare feet thudding roughshod across the hardwood stairs.

"Tony, put shoes on," Steve said. "Exposed wires, you could be seriously hurt."

"There aren't any exposed wires in here, don't fuss," Tony said, coming to stand beside him.

"Broken glass, oil spills you could slip on, cables to trip over and break your neck. Put on a pair of shoes," Steve said. "Or I'll carry you upstairs and put them on you myself."

"You're absolutely awful," Tony said, throwing his hands up and storming over to the other end of the lab, grabbing a pair of shoes he kept near the cot he had down here for when he was pulling all nighters, yanking them on, and pointedly storming back over to Steve. "Happy?"

"Utterly and resoundingly jubilant," Steve replied. "You can run scans, Tony. I'll stay down here anyway; I can draw down in the lab."

"Yeah, but Steve, we're in freaking Malibu," Tony said. "Please, for god's sake, get off my back for awhile and go out and explore? Head to the beach or go shopping."

Steve was about to tell him he didn't shop when he remembered something. When was the last time anyone had gotten Tony something, just because?

"...Sure," he said. "Okay. I'll be back in a few hours. My phone's on. If I come home to a disaster you didn't call me about, there'll be hell to pay."

"Yeah, yeah, love you. Later," Tony said, opening up the files he kept on Extremis and setting up a few machines to run scans on his body.

Steve stood there for a second, just long enough to take in the unintended weight of Tony's words.

"I love you too," he said, his voice heavy enough to break his heart. "See you soon, Tony."

He left after that, out of things to say that wouldn't destroy the fragile peace they'd made for one
another between their feelings.

Steve could hear a few murmurs directed in his general direction when he went down to the shopping district, but he didn't acknowledge them or the people discussing them in hot, curious tones.

He didn't go to the gadget stores or anything he knew Tony would normally buy himself. This had to be something new, something special only he could buy for Tony. A gift like he'd never gotten.

Had anyone ever bought him a gift? Steve couldn't help but wonder. He was rich; the likelihood was that he had always been the one to buy, to give and give until he had nothing left, that he had been expected to be the one to spoil, not the one to be spoiled.

Well, Steve normally had a thing or two to say about spoiling people, but if anyone deserved at least one moment of it, it was probably Tony.

Steve didn't want to be too obvious, though. He didn't want to come in with a ring and frighten Tony off.

But then what did he get the man who had everything?

Steve sighed, throwing his hands up and walking past the stores until suddenly, something caught his eye.

In the enormous window of a toy shop, an arrangement of the officially-licensed *Dog Cops* plushies were on display. Captain Barkeley and Sergeant Gruffles were seated next to each other, and the association made something in Steve's head click.

He was darting inside before he could stop himself, and once he entered the little toy store, promptly tasked with two things—buying Tony those toys, and trying to explain why he was a full grown man in a toy shop buying two stuffed dogs.

Steve came home after a few hours, noting on his watch that it was, in fact, around lunchtime, no matter how much Tony complained otherwise. He had a bag beneath his hand, done up in stripes of gold and red with the toy store logo slapped on it; he had giftwrapped the toys, and he'd just take them out later. Surprises like *this* were ones Tony deserved.

Steve hummed, content, as he made them both lunch before going down into the lab; nothing fancy, just sandwiches and a pile of chips. He tucked the toys, wrapped up in bright red paper, making them indiscriminate lumps beneath the surface, under his arm and started downstairs carefully, calling, "Tony? Tony, I'm home! And I brought lunch!"

Nothing came from downstairs in reply, and Steve frowned, tensing despite himself as he made his way downstairs and opened the lab door, setting the tray of food down on the nearest open space as he went looking for Tony.

"Steve? Steve, I'm over here. Don't trip on me, okay?"

Steve jumped, looking down to see Tony in a veritable nest of wires and tubes, scribbling away in his notebook as he worked. He looked like a technological *bodhisatva*, enlightened and at ease, an idol in silicone and steel.
"Are you okay?" Steve said, keeping his voice gentle, muted with worry. Tony looked up at him and nodded, a small smile on his face.

"Yeah," he said. "I just went to work down here because it's less tempting to fiddle with my computers—also, it's easier to perform scans when I'm sitting like this."

"Oh, I see," Steve said, nodding in agreement. "Sorry, Tony, I was just worried. I brought lunch."

"I can see that," Tony said, as Steve knelt down to sit across from him, placing the tray down. "What else did you bring?"

"A gift," Steve said simply, taking it out from under his arm. Tony smiled and nodded.

"Yeah, great idea, Carol really deserves one for all this," he said.

"No, Tony," Steve replied, cutting him off gently as he placed the package in Tony's lap. "This one's all for you."

Tony stared at him for a second, utterly baffled; none of the normal brightness to Tony's eyes, his cleverness processing itself in such a way that made his eyes come alive, glimmered in his gaze when Steve looked at him.

"Go on," Steve said gently, patting the red paper."Open it up, Tony."

The way he opened it up was hesitant, careful—almost fearful, like he was afraid Steve would slap it out of his hands or take it away, or the package would bite him. Tony's shoulders were hunched and his fingers were unsteady as he smoothed away the paper, until finally, the gift was revealed.

He gasped, and for a second, Steve panicked, unable to tell whether it was a good gasp or a bad gasp.

Tony picked up the two stuffed dogs and looked at them, holding them up in shaking hands. Very slowly, he lowered them down enough to hug them tight against his chest as his whole body shook; he clung to the dogs for dear life, shaking his head and hunching his shoulders forward. Steve knew if he could see it, Tony would be crying, but he understood exactly why Tony hid, and so remained looking respectfully away.

Tony remained that way for awhile; Steve was patient, sitting on his haunches and eating his lunch, not asking Tony anything or trying to draw him out. He'd talk when he was ready.

Eventually, Tony unfolded, like a morning glory greeting the dawn, letting his limbs loosen up and his whole body relax, except for his arms, which still clung to the dogs like they were a life raft.

Steve just waited, nibbling at his food.

"So," he finally said, "I take it you like the gifts."

"Gifts," Tony repeated. "For me?"

"Yes, of course," Steve said. "I thought you would like something after the week you've been through. And we were talking about those two a few days ago, so I thought..."

Tony continued to stare at him, entirely baffled by what he held in his hands and Steve's honesty.

"...So...they're mine, and...you got me these? As a gift," Tony said. "Because..."
"Because I thought you needed something nice," Steve clarified. "They're all yours. Do you like them? I'll go get the other ones if you don't—"

"No," Tony said, cutting him off, "please don't. They're perfect."

"Okay," Steve replied with a warm smile. "Then eat your lunch, Tony?"

Tony nodded, taking a half of his sandwich, shifting the dogs so he could cuddle them fiercely with one arm as he ate the sandwich. Steve finished his before Tony, but remained downstairs with him anyway, waiting until Tony finished up and returned the dogs to both his arms before asking, "How did the studies and scans go?"

"Pretty well," Tony replied. "I'll need something to kickstart the system up again, but since that won't be too hard to procure, I can wait a day or two more like you asked."

"Thanks, Tony," Steve said, beaming contentedly. "That's wonderful to hear."

Tony nodded, re-arranging his notebooks and the wires around him. Steve tilted his head, something suddenly occuring to him.

"Hey," he said, "I have a question, Tony. With Extremis...can you turn it off?"

"Huh? Yeah," Tony replied, looking up. "I can shut down certain programs and the like. I just, y'know, usually don't."

"I see," Steve murmured. "Okay. That's nice to know, Tony. Thank you."

Tony nodded, standing up and stretching as he held the stuffed animals in his hands.

"So, that actually got done a bit quicker than I thought," he said. "Wanna go down to the beach? I bet Carol's out."

"I'm sure she is," Steve said, "and I'm all right with it, so long as your sunburn's feeling better."

"Yeah, I'm fine, and I'll put on more sunblock if you're gonna fuss," Tony promised. "Okay?"

"Okay," Steve agreed. "Let's go, then, Tony."

Tony grinned, traipsing up after Steve as they went to get dressed. It was a quick, hurried affair, the two of them bringing a few things with them for the beach as well. Steve only stopped Tony once he realized, as they left the room, he was still holding onto the toys.

"Tony, I don't think you can bring those to the beach," he said, keeping his voice gentle, "Why don't you leave them on the bed, okay? Just so we don't get them sandy or dirty."

Tony looked down at the toys and blinked, surprised, like he hadn't been expecting them to still be there.

"Oh, shit," Tony said, "sorry. I'll put them away. Hold on."

"You can come back and get them later," Steve reminded him gently, "I just don't want them to get all messy."

"No, me neither, sorry," Tony said, putting one on each side of the bed—Sargeant Gruffles on his, and Captain Barkley on Steve's. He turned back to him, expectant. "Ready to go?"
"Of course," Steve replied, following after Tony as the two of them went down to the beach.
"Hey, boys!" Carol said, waving at them from above the waves. "What's new?"

"Tony's going to be able to kickstart the system in a few days," Steve said. "For now, we've got time to ourselves."

"Great," Carol said, flying over the crest of the waves and landing just in front of them, the seafoam lapping eagerly at her feet. "You two feel like going out to dinner tonight? We should probably let Malibu know the great Tony Stark is here."

"You shush, I like not having girls lining up at my door," Tony said. "I don't think I could get a word in edgewise with any of them without you two fussing over me."

"No, probably not," Carol agreed cheerfully. "Still, you can get us a reservation someplace decent, so you're gonna, right?"

"Only if you brought something decent, I have a reputation to uphold," Tony retorted. "You are not coming out with me in a paper bag, Danvers."

"Fuck off, I'm always fabulous," Carol said, a cheerful challenge. "Don't you worry, I've got something. But what about Steve?"

Steve blushed and ducked his head, not exactly eager to get in between the two of them and whatever argument they were having this time. Tony smiled, fond and amused.

"Steve can wear whatever he likes," he said. "He'll find someone nice anyway, just look at him."

"I don't...want to do that," Steve mumbled. "I'm here for you, Tony. Only you. Okay?"

Tony looked at him, baffled.

"Sure," he said. "But hey, reservations, it's the least I can do to repay you after—"

"No," Steve said firmly, cutting him off. Tony tensed, and Carol backed off, watching the conversation carefully.

"No," Steve repeated, shaking his head, "that wasn't why I bought you those toys, Tony. I didn't
want dinner, I don't want anything in return, I don't want anything from you that you think you need to give me. That's not how gift-giving works. That's not how I work. You should know that."

Out of everything in his speech, that seemed to hurt Tony the most. He hunched his shoulders and nodded, despondent.

"Right," he mumbled. "Okay, sorry."

Steve shushed him and ruffled his hair, affectionate and playful as he tried to quell the look of failure on Tony's face.

"Hey," he said gently, "don't worry, okay? I'm not mad. I get it. I know you know me better than anyone. Just relax. If you want to go out, we will, but don't do it because you think you owe me."

"I won't," Tony promised, swallowing heavily. "I won't, I promise. But I'd still like to go."

"Great," Steve said with a warm smile. "Then so would I."

Tony nodded, going through their beach bag for his cell phone as Steve sighed, relieved. Carol just gave him a querying look; Steve, realizing what he'd have to explain, said,

"Tony? I'm going to go in the water for a bit with Carol. You make the call. I won't be far, I promise."

"Okay," Tony said. "Good to know."

Steve opened a beach chair up for him, so Tony could plunk himself down contentedly, digging his feet into the sand as his phone rang; before Steve had any more chance to fuss, Carol dragged him off into the ocean, playfully shoving him into the waves.

Steve slipped through the water easily, letting the salt sting his skin as he surfaced, his mouth puckered and tingling and his eyes aching. Carol was a little farther out already, floating on a bright pink rubber ring; Steve swam out to meet her, treading water as she gave him a look.

"Toys," she said. "You bought a grown man, a veteran superhero, and a world-famous engineer with more money to his name than Midas a toy."

Steve rolled his eyes.

"It wasn't—look, Carol, he's never gotten a gift in his life. Not from his father, not from his girlfriends, and probably not from anyone else. Not a gift just because he was required to receive one—I'm not talking about birthdays or Christmas or anything. He's never gotten a gift just because, and in case you haven't realized, we're not dating, and I couldn't buy him a ring," Steve said.

"Why not?" Carol replied. "Seems like that's a good way to get the ball rolling."

"No, no," Steve said with a heavy sigh. "I don't want to scare him off. He'd have either laughed a gift like that off as a joke or panicked and bolted. Besides, that's a gift he's gotten before; I'm not going to give him more jewelry, more trinkets he's gotten thousands of times. I know Tony better than that, and I want him to know it."

"Well, I certainly didn't know Tony was a toy aficionado," Carol said lightly. Steve huffed.

"He isn't," Steve said. "I was in Malibu and there happened to be a toy shop, and they had a collection of the Dog Cops stuffed animals in the window. I bought him two; Sargeant Gruffles and
Captain Barkley. That's all."

"Aw, Cap," Carol said, "you're such a romantic."

"He deserved a gift," Steve defended himself. "Just because, I mean."

"Good to know," Carol replied. "Nice way to shut him down, by the way. He'd be trying to pay you back for months if you didn't."

"I know," Steve murmured, sighing and running a hand through his dripping hair. "I feel guilty for snapping, but...he can't think I want anything in return for a set of ten-dollar toys, because he's Tony. He'll try to buy me the moon in return."

Carol laughed, ruffling his hair as she floated on the ocean, content to let the waves wash over her stomach and shoulders. Steve just kept a close eye on Tony, still talking on the phone by the shore.

"Don't worry, Steve," Carol said. "Make tonight seem like he's treating you; it might grind at your pride a bit, but play along like you're his date, and he'll treat you like one. Who knows? It might help. Or," she teased, "he might not even notice the difference."

Steve rolled his eyes and pushed Carol off her floatie, feeling more satisfied than he personally believed he should have at the sound of the splash.

...

Tony came in to swim a little while later, after Steve yelled across the ocean for him to put more sunblock on. He did so, sighing, and then swam out to join them. For a few hours, the three of them simply floated out in the ocean, content and crisp with salt and sun.

"S'probably time for the reservations," Tony remarked with a yawn. "Well, in an hour or so, and we gotta get ready. You two up for getting out?"

"Considering I'm starting to look like a pink raisin, yes," Carol said, stretching out and soaring up and away, landing lightly on the sand. Tony looked at Steve and rolled his eyes with a small grin on his face.

"Looks like we have to swim back like peasants, Steve," he teased. "C'mon, Cap. Let's go."

Steve nodded, ducking under the water and darting off. Tony sighed. God damn it, right; peak of human perfection. He was going to slap him.

Tony kicked determinedly at the water, paddling his way through and clinging to the pink floatie, promising himself as he swam back to shore that he was going to stop hanging out with superhumans.

Steve noticed as he approached shore that Tony was still far behind; he surfaced, turned around, and swam back to grab Tony. Before Tony could find the words to protest, Steve happily toted him back to shore and helped him up, shaking his hair free of water as Tony stared at him, baffled.

"...Thanks," he finally said. "Uh, shall we?"

"Sure," Steve said, giving him a pleasant grin, his tanned, lightly-freckled face creasing up as Tony smiled in reply, the three of them all heading back up to the house as Carol gave Steve a very smug look of amusement.
"You're certain he'll be offline for a few more days," Whitney said, regarding the man standing before her. He nodded.

"Yes, madam; the surveillance we've enacted says as much. Plus, one of our men gained some intel—he'll be out at the Mistral tonight for dinner," he offered. "Should we try to capture him?"

"If you can't capture him, don't worry about that. I just need his blood. We don't need him alive for that," she said, a twinge of guilt running through her at the realization. "Do what you think best in that regard."

"Very well, madam. We will prepare," the man promised, bowing. "Until then."

"Until then," she agreed, dismissing him with a wave of her hand. He left her in peace, to drink her wine until she could forget the weight of her actions.

Back home, Steve, Tony, and Carol were all preparing for their dinner. Steve had taken his clothes into one of the spare rooms and taken one of those bathrooms, more for vanity purposes than anything, though he'd never admit it; he wanted to surprise Tony with his outfit.

Tony was the first one done, the most used to this ritual. He was standing downstairs all ready to go in a crisp black suit, a red silk button-down beneath it, his black tie gleaming as he adjusted his sunglasses and waited for the other two to come downstairs.

Carol's muffled curses reached his ears and he smiled, amused, waiting for her to make her way down the stairs.

Eventually, she just threw her hands up and flew down, the dress trailing behind her; when she dropped to the ground, a long red dress going down past her ankles, Tony quirked an eyebrow.

"That's not your type of clothing," he remarked. Carol huffed.

"That's because it isn't mine," she said. "I borrowed it from Jess. Frankly, I'm starting to regret it, because I can't move."

"Shame," Tony replied, thoroughly amused. Carol looked like she was going to kick him, if she could figure out how. "Don't worry, they're all supposed to do that. Float a few inches if you've got to and everyone will just assume you're wearing heels."

"Wonderful," Carol replied with a heavy sigh. "Where's the Captain?"

"Right here," Steve said, his voice small, and the two of them turned around.

Tony sucked in a sharp breath before he could stop himself at the look of Steve on the stairs. He was in white, a pale blue shirt off-setting the crisp purity of the tuxedo, a sharp red tie the focal point of the outfit as he made his way down the steps, his shoulders hunched and his face twisted in a grimace.

"It feels strange," he said. "Does it look nice, though?"

"Yeah," Tony said, his throat dry. "Passable."

Steve grinned, seeing the truth on Tony's face.
"Okay," he replied, "then it's worth it. Are we ready to go?"

"Yeah," Carol said, hiking up her skirts with a resigned sigh. "Lead the way, Tony."

He let Carol drive, in fact. If he kept staring at Steve the way he was now, Tony was pretty sure he was going to crash and get them all killed.
Mistral

Chapter Summary

A date gets interrupted.

Chapter Notes

Okay, I'm sorry about the update lag, juggling updates gets really hard and some stories get hit harder than others. My apologies. With AatA finished, it should be easier to update now! I'm gonna try to wrap this and the Borrowers fic up before I show off the newest work.
Honesty, I don't know if anyone ever told Steve all the stuff Tony forgot b/c Extremis. For drama reasons, let's assume they didn't.

The Mistral was rather low-key for such an expensive place, and the clients liked it that way. This was not like the bright, ecstasy-ridden clubs of Malibu; it was a quiet, dignified place, for a calm night out with old friends.

Steve led them in, Tony on one arm and Carol on the other, smiling shyly at the host. Tony just gave him a look; that was answer enough. The man bowed deeply and beckoned for them to follow, setting them aside upstairs at a table by the window, so that they could look at the bright lights and the Ferris wheel tilting back and forth.

"This place is lovely," Carol said, opening the menu up. "Not your normal haunt, Tony."

"No," Tony agreed. "I was waiting for the right people to come here. This isn't a place to look for dates, you know? It's a place to court them."

"I'm flattered," Carol said, her voice dry. Tony chuckled.

"Sappy, isn't it? But, y'know. I'd rather bring you two here than anyone else," he said.

"I'm flattered," Steve said, his voice warm and genuine. "Thank you, Tony. I'm truly, truly honored."

"No big," Tony said, ducking his head and looking away with a shy, tiny smile. "Glad you two like it."

"Of course we do, Tony," Carol said. "You're gonna relax here and we're gonna enjoy ourselves. Why wouldn't we?"

Tony smiled, and the three of them started to peruse their menus.

Steve didn't have the faintest idea what to order, so he stuck to what he knew; whatever French (or maybe German, Steve was at a loss) words preceded the steak, he recognized that word, and so he ordered that. Whether or not Tony was laughing at him while he tried to pronounce it was not his concern.
Still, thankfully, Tony ordered the drinks; the three of them drank coffee, with Steve drinking it in solidarity.

"Can I have a bite?" He asked as Tony stabbed at the salad. Tony blinked.

"Sure," he said, holding it out on his fork. Carol beamed, a Cheshire grin helped on by the three cups of coffee currently in her system.

Steve just took a bite from Tony's fork, red-faced. Tony smiled and pulled it away as their food came. For a time, their conversation was peaceful; simple things about the beach and their plans for tomorrow.

 Eventually, Tony handed them all a huge dessert menu and they spent a good ten minutes poring over and debating a decision. Finally, they came to a consensus on the specialty of the Mistral; all thirty-two ice cream favors in one enormous bowl, laced with coffee and chocolate liquer.

"Considering how Steve eats, you and I will get about a scoop each, Carol," Tony teased. Steve huffed defensively and stole a sip of his coffee.

"Hey!" Tony protested as the baffled waiter took their order. "You're sharing my coffee, you Communist! And from you of all people!"

Steve sighed and gave the waiter a long-suffering look.

"Two more coffees, please," he said.

The waiter just scribbled it down and fled. Steve gave Tony a look and smiled, equal parts frustrated and loving.

"I can't take you anywhere," he said warmly. "We need to go to McDonalds and put you in the ball pit. That's about your maturity level."

"I'm sorry, who has the eleven doctorates?" Tony retorted. Steve raised an eyebrow.

"Now I know you're lying," he said. "You said nine less than a week ago."

"You're right, I'm sorry. Thirteen," Tony said absently. "Be a dear and keep an eye out for the waiter, okay?"

Steve groaned and did as asked.

... 

The waiter was coming over to their table with the enormous bowl of ice cream just as the doors were blasted off and men in immaculate suits stormed in, guns raised.

Tony just sighed and put his coffee down.

"God damn it," he said, "and right during the dessert course."

He grabbed the suitcase he'd been forced to take with Extremis gone and opened it up as Carol's fists began to glow.

"Steve, you go get that ice cream and put it someplace safe," he said. "We'll be fine out here for a few minutes."
"Are you out of your mind? Tony, this is more important than ice cream—"

"No it isn't, just do it!" Tony snapped, suiting up and setting off the magnet rays, blasting the guns out of the mens' hands as Carol grabbed one by the shirt collar and lifted him up, raising a single glowing fist.

"You know, I've got about ten seconds left of patience with stupid men these days," she said, "so why don't you tell me who you're working for before it runs out?"

"Aw, c'mon lady, give us some credit. We got more dignity than that," the man said.

"You're gonna lack a few teeth by the time I'm done if you're not more interested in handing over your dignity, bud," Carol said. "And intact limbs, if it really gets to that."

"M-Maggia," the man replied, and Carol grinned.

"Aw, yeah. Works every time," she said, flinging him through a wall. "Tony, call the cops, I'd rather we get this wrapped up quick."

"Yeah, I hear you," Tony said. "Really, Maggia goons against the Iron Man and Captain America is an insult."

"Excuse you!" Carol said. "Hell am I, chopped liver?"

"Chopped liver with an inconsistent hairstyle," Tony agreed as he subdued the last few men. Carol kicked him forward, sending him careening wildly as he tried to avoid the wall.

"Okay, sorry, all hail the queen, Jesus," Tony said. "I'm sorry for everything I've ever said to you."

"As you should be," Carol replied. "It's okay. I forgive you in my royal name."

"I'm so honored," Tony said, his voice dry enough to absorb the nearby ocean with little fuss.

Steve just came out of the kitchen with the bowl of ice cream and a frown on his face.

"Get down here and enjoy this while I make sure you're not hurt and we talk about what just happened," he said, putting on his patented Mom Voice, "or I will carry you both home myself and leave this behind."

"Aw, killjoy," Tony said, alighting down and letting the armor fall away. "I'm fine, really."

"You could have been hurt," Steve snapped. "And what if Carol wasn't enough to take care of you?"

"Please, she's more than enough," Tony replied.

"Thank you," Carol replied with a grin. Steve growled quietly and they both fell silent, worried.

"I don't care about who fought this. I care about what this fight means. Sit. Down."

They sat.

"Thank you," Steve said. "You can eat while we talk. I'm sure the police will be here soon."

The wail of sirens proved him right as Steve took a bite of his own ice cream and tried to calm his panicked heart as he looked at Tony and Carol.
"Really, we're fine," Tony said as he stripped away the last of his armor. "Look, see? I disarmed them before they fired and Carol got to the last of 'em. The most I got was a bruise."

"You're uninjured, I'll give you that," Steve agreed, "but without Extremis online as a healing factor, I'm worried about your heart, for one. For two," he said with a heavy sigh, "I don't like the thought that the Maggia decided to show up here. That's not a coincidence."

"No, it wasn't," Tony agreed, "and it doesn't take a genius to figure out why they're here, either."

"It must take more, because I'm not seeing it," Carol said. "What do they want? Your plans are all back at home, we've got nothing special on us while we're here——"

"Exactly," Tony cut in. "But I still have Extremis. It's just dormant in my systems. Yet I'm here, unprotected and unable to use it. But it still exists, and they can still harvest it."

The breeze from outside made the room about eighty degrees. Steve felt so very, very cold.

"Tony," Steve cut in, his voice soft and worn, "finish your ice cream."

"I could've gotten both of you killed!" Tony screamed, turning on him and slamming his hands down on the table. "I'm not watching it happen again, Captain! Never again!"

Steve was silent. It was only then that he knew just what Tony no longer had the privilege to forget.

"Sit down and finish your ice cream, Tony," Steve said. "I saved it just for you."

Tony stormed out and left the restaurant; they heard the suit's whirr and knew he was gone in a matter of a minute.

Carol heaved a sigh and stood up, brushing off her dress.

"C'mon, Cap," she said, "you can drive us home."

"Not without the ice cream," Steve said firmly. "He'll want this for later."

"Okay," Carol said, defeated. "Okay."

They got in the car together, and about two minutes of silence passed before Carol said, "Did you know he'd remembered?"

"No," Steve answered. "Honestly, I didn't think. But with Extremis' systems down, everything it was keeping at bay was allowed to sink back in, I assume. Whatever Tony made it forget, it remembers."

"He forgot a lot," Carol murmured. "Most of it was about you, Cap. What he did to you."

"I know," Steve said, his voice agonizingly soft. "I know. I..."

He swallowed and shook his head, driving just a bit faster in an attempt to get home as quickly as he could and leave Tony alone for as little time as possible.

"Maybe it's better," he said. "Now he has to face it. Now I can tell him I forgive him and have him understand what that really means."

"But you don't like it," Carol said as they pulled up to the house.

"No," Steve agreed with a heavy sigh, "no, I don't."
He got out of the car regardless and looked at Carol.

"Stick that in the freezer," he said, and a chill ran down Carol's back and seeped through her bones when she realized she couldn't read his eyes or voice, "I'll make sure he gets to enjoy it when he gets back."

She just nodded, toting it up to the house as Steve strode forward, ripping open the door.

Tony sat on the floor of the living room with the stuffed animals in his hands, shaking violently as he tried to steady his breathing.

"Walk with me," Steve said, every syllable screaming 'obey.' "Tony, come with me."

Tony put the dogs down, getting up with slow, deliberate movements. Steve didn't say a word as Carol walked past them, looking away from the scene for their sake. He held out his hand. When Tony didn't take it, he nodded in understanding and beckoned for the door.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Steve and Tony have a talk.

Chapter Notes

And this is the last you'll hear of Civil War, folks. God damn do I ever hate that plotline. Anyways, the next chapter will be longer, swear to god. There are times in this story where things just either are too long or too short for a whole chapter and I am so sorry.

The two men walked down the hill and towards the beach, then made their way down the shoreline as the waves washed over their feet, as if worried about their well-being and clinging to their feet to make them stay.

Eventually, Steve led Tony to his cave; the other man nodded with understanding and waded through the tide pool, making his way in without a word as Steve did the same in kind.

They sat on the rocky shelf for a few minutes in silence, as moonlight filled the pool of night on the cave floor before Steve finally said, "You didn't trust me."

"I didn't trust myself, "Tony replied. "I didn't know what to do with all the things I'd remembered. So I didn't do anything with them. I didn't want to bring it up. I didn't want to look at your dead body on the table in front of me. I didn't want to look at your blood on my hands. I see enough death every day, Captain. I don't need to add yours to the list."

"But you didn't let me help you," Steve accused. "You didn't tell me the memories had come back, and that they were hurting you. You wouldn't let me do a damn thing. And that's what made those memories yours to keep in the first place."

Tony sucked in a shaky breath, like he'd been punched. Steve would have feared for him if he did not feel something between them breaking, like a wall was being torn down and something safe lay just beyond it. Fear was for later, when they'd made it over to the other side.

"You have nothing to fear," Steve said, "nothing to atone for or make amends for or sacrifice for. You made your mistakes and I made mine. We can walk away. The only thing holding yourself back is you, Tony. Everyone else has moved on."

"It wasn't worth it," Tony rasped. Steve blinked, tilting his head.

"Come again?" He said.

"It wasn't worth it," Tony said, his voice quavering as he struggled to breathe. "That's what I'd told you. When you were lying dead in front of me. I never...never even remembered...seeing you, or what I'd said..."
"It wasn't," Steve agreed. "It wasn't worth it. Because I lost you. I lost you and I let you fall. Nothing was worth that, Tony. Nothing could have ever been worth it. Not to me."

That resolution and forgiveness stripped away something that had scabbed over Tony's soul, letting the wounds the schism had created bleed free and heal anew, heal better.

There would always be scars, Tony noted as he buried his face into Steve's shoulder and began to sob; whether he remembered them or not, they remained, and would always remain. But to have them healed and acknowledged was enough. When it was Steve, it was always enough. Steve was always worth it, worth everything...

"I love you," Tony mouthed into his skin, silent and heavy enough to bruise with longing, "I love you, I love you..."

"Mm?" Steve said, looking down at him. "Tony, what was that?"

"Nothing," Tony said with a small, teary smile. "Hey, you feel like going back up to the house? This place is nice and all, but you saved the ice cream. I've been waiting on that."

Steve beamed in return, helping him down and leading him out of the cave, into the pale, tremulous light of the moon.

"Sure, Tony," he replied.

Tony let him go ahead, so that he could see his Captain illuminated by the night, rather than deadened and dulled by it, as the darkness had made him then, when he had laid before him on an examination table as cold as the ice they'd saved him from.

It wasn't worth it.

Not when he would just lose him again.

Tony didn't say another word as they made their way down the beach.

...

They ate together that night, nibbling at the ice cream in bed; Steve hadn't questioned the fact that Tony had allowed him in his bed, and part of him felt selfish, too eager for the other man's affection, but then he remembered the way Tony had sought comfort in him back in the cave and said nothing.

"It's my fault," Tony murmured as the last of the ice cream melted away. "It's my fault the Maggia are after you both, too. I'm sorry, Captain. I'm so sorry."

"Don't be," Steve said. "We just got through one martyr complex, don't you develop another."

That earned him a tiny smile from Tony. Steve sighed and gave him a look.

"We came out here to protect you while you healed," he said. "This is part of it. We'll have another few days of rest and recuperation before we start working on turning Extremis back online, okay?"

"Okay," Tony agreed. "Okay. Sounds good to me, I mean."

"Great," Steve said with a warm smile. "Get some sleep, okay Tony? We're gonna get up tomorrow and go to the beach again, if you're not too sunburnt."

"M'just fine," Tony promised with a yawn. "G'night, Steve."
Steve let him lie down and snuggle against his pillows, closing his eyes and sighing softly. He was asleep in minutes, peaceable and at ease.

Steve's heart ached with love as he looked at Tony, asleep, and finally, he could stand it no longer.

He leaned down, brushed his lips against Tony's forehead, and then pulled away, getting into bed as well and allowing himself the time to rest.

...

"It didn't work," Whitney said with a heavy sigh of frustration. They had gotten to their men before the police did, of course, but none of them wanted to approach her at the moment; this was, admittedly, understandable, considering how many of them she was perfectly ready to pistol-whip at the moment.

"We have another chance," she said. "The Captain hates that thing. He won't let him turn it on until absolutely necessary. It will be all right...we'll have the blood we need."

She bit her lip and watched the midnight skies, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. One more try, if they were lucky; they would have to wait a few days and let things simmer down.

Truthfully, there was no getting around it at this point; she needed to go with them. And if she had to be the one to put the bullet between Tony Stark's eyes, she would.

Whitney got up and mixed herself a very stiff drink.

She would give the order in the morning, she decided as she took a sip, and plan from there. There would be no mistakes. There would be no selfish desire getting in her way. She had a goal, and she would stick to it.

She still hated herself for it.

...

The next few days in Malibu were a beautiful sort of predictable, like the change of the tides; the three of them woke up, had breakfast, went down to the beach, ate lunch on the shores, swam and painted and sketched and talked, before finally, as the sun fell, getting up and going to get dinner at some ritzy place or another.

Steve was grateful that Tony hadn't so much as brought up Extremis as the next week began to wane; he was happy, truth be told, knowing his friend was allowing himself to relax healthily. No flings, no drinking, no partying; just staying with people who cared about him and enjoying himself on the beach.

It was about the middle of the week where Tony finally asked at breakfast, "Hey...can I start taking a look at Extremis again?"

Steve paused mid-sip and inhaled slowly, swallowing and setting his coffee down.

No, he wanted to say, because you've been the Tony I knew before this whole time, and I'm scared Extremis will take that away from me.

Something must've shown in his eyes; Tony looked away, hesitant.

"I just want you happy," Steve said, hating how his voice cracked, just a bit, when he said it. "I want
to know you're going to be okay when you do this."

"Sure," Tony replied. "I'm gonna have you down there, aren't I?"

Steve's heart was lanced with pain; he wondered, briefly, if this kind of searing, raw vulnerability that came with the agony in his heart was what Tony had felt every day when the reactor still chained him to his time as a prisoner of war.

No, he decided; even if it was, it didn't matter. Tony had endured this, and so would he.

"Yeah," Steve said, his voice soft. "Of course you are, Tony. Finish up your breakfast first, okay?"

Carol looked at Steve over the table, the picture of concern. Steve didn't meet her eyes as Tony nodded, humming pleasantly as he finished up his coffee and pancakes before going to wash his dish out and turn back to Steve, an expectant grin on his face.

"Ready to go, soldier?" Tony asked.

No. Not really.

"Sure, Tony," Steve agreed with a warm smile. "Let's go finish this up, okay?"

They walked downstairs and towards the lab. Carol watched them go with a heavy sigh.
System Reboot

Chapter Summary

Extremis is back online.

Chapter Notes

oh my god plot happens so much
No but for real, there's a bit of actual plot in this one, surprise!

Steve helped him set up the computers silently, watching as Tony arranged and re-arranged cables and fiddled with switches on keyboards and turned on monitors, a bright grin on his face as he set up the last of the stuff, picking up a metal circlet attached to all the systems and placing it on his head.

"So, this is going to transmit all the electrical pulses I need to kickstart Extremis, as well as the data needed to unlock the systems and turn them back on," Tony explained. "Just do me a favor and flip the last switch? I should probably be sitting down for this, and it's too far away."

Steve looked down at the switch, then up at Tony, who was smiling brightly back at him. In a few minutes, Steve knew, that bright glimmer in his eyes would be gone, replaced by the constant flow of information that enlightened his mind and dimmed the glow in his eyes, replaced by the steady hum of the computers under his skin.

He didn't want that. He didn't want to see Tony change. He would love him, regardless; that wasn't what worried Steve. It was that, with all the buffers Extremis allowed him, Tony might not let him in long enough for Steve to confess.

Steve swallowed. He had to be better than that. He loved Tony. This was what Tony wanted. This was what would make him happy. He had to do it. He had to... Tony's eyes were closed when he flicked the switch, so he didn't see Steve mouth, "I love you," nor the few bitter tears that slipped past the safety of his eyes and down his cheeks, open and vulnerable.

For a second, nothing happened.

Then, a steady whirring hum interrupted Steve's brief moment of relief, and the entire system began to glow a pale, iridescent blue.

Tony spasmed and inhaled a sharp, staccato breath as the blue seeped in through his circlet and across his skin, lighting him up and painting his skin in soft glowing tones, waves of blue that pulsed like the ocean as Steve watched, his hands shaking as he waited for the inevitable.

It took perhaps ten minutes for Extremis to re-assemble with Tony's commands and the electrical pulses now seeping through Tony's brain. It felt like forever.

Eventually, though, Tony lifted the circlet free from his brow with shaking hands that dripped with
sweat, his whole body shuddering and pale. Steve watched him, utterly silent.

Tony got up on unsteady legs and walked over towards him; when he stumbled, Steve raced to catch him, holding him steady as Tony held onto his shoulders.

When he looked down into Tony's eyes, they still glowed as they usually did. Steve blinked, baffled. He had thought...

"It's all off," he rasped, a huge grin on his face as he looked up at Steve. "Turned it off. It's running just fine now. No reason to turn it on yet, right?"

Steve was quiet, continuing to look down at him with a slow, steady gaze.

He should have trusted Tony.

"Yeah, you should've," Tony said, and Steve jumped; evidently, he'd spoken aloud. "But it's okay. I know why you didn't. You were just scared you'd lose me...?"

He didn't seem like he knew, not really; he seemed more like he was verging on tense hesitance, as if he almost wanted to be proved wrong.

"Yeah I was," Steve confirmed for him with a huff and a smile. "I know you've gotta use it sometimes, Tony, but..."

"Not always," Tony agreed with a yawn. "Not when I'm with you."

Steve didn't know what to say to that, and so he didn't say anything as he helped Tony upstairs and into his—their—room, turning the shower on and letting Tony wash himself clean as he got dressed and waited for Tony to return so they could head to the beach.

It was going to be a normal day, just like the ones that had come before it, and Steve couldn't be happier.

... The two of them headed down to the beach; Carol was already waiting for them there, having set everything up so that they could spend the day relaxing. She gave them a warm, quick smile, and gestured to the cooler.

"Get yourselves something to eat," she said. "I take it that it went well."

"It's online," Tony confirmed, "but it's off."

Carol looked at him, interested. Tony smiled.

"I'm here to relax with you guys," he said. "It wouldn't be fair to shut down on you now, right?"

Carol just nodded, taking a sip of her soda and regarding him carefully.

"Nah," she said. "Thanks, Tony. Glad you decided we were worth sticking around for."

"Well, you and the beach. I forgot how much I missed the beach, living in New York. Lot harder to carve some space out for yourself on Coney Island, I'll give you that..." Tony sighed, throwing his hands up. Carol just grinned and ruffled his hair gently, letting Tony grin and pop open a can of soda, tossing a bottle of iced tea to Steve.
For awhile, they sat on the beach and tanned, before eventually taking their time out to go swimming. Steve swam beside Tony the entire time, unable to stay too far away; Tony had shut things down for him. Tony had let Extremis lay dormant for him. He didn't know what that meant, what it could entail, and to hope for something like what he currently dreamed of was ridiculous, surely...

Steve still remained close to him regardless, taking in the freedom with which Tony moved, as if none of his normal troubles plagued him; he loved to watch him like this, seeing him as carefree and cheerfully reckless as he had been when they'd met. It was a whole different man he was meeting now, though; a man tempered by experience and loss and love, and Steve was all the more grateful for it.

"Tony," Steve murmured, watching him glide through the water with graceful ease. "Tony..."

Tony popped up above the water and beamed at him. Illuminated by the light of the setting sun, he was iridescent as a flickering flame, lit up like some kind of phoenix with the water shining on his skin.

"Hey," he said, and Steve wanted nothing more than to pull him in and kiss him right then and there, to feel the salt on his lips and try to catch the fire shining on his skin. "What's up, big guy?"

"Uhm, nothing," Steve mumbled. "Just...wanted to..."

He figured telling the other man he just liked the way his name sounded when he said it was probably edging far too close to a declaration of love, and so he just smiled.

"Make sure you were okay, I mean," he finished. "You're not sunburnt, right?"

"No, mom, I put my sunblock on," Tony teased. "I'm fine, really. Relax for me, willya?"

"Sorry," Steve said with a shy smile. "You just looked a bit red, is all."

"He's blushing," Carol called back from her place on her inner tube. Tony turned to glare at her, splashing water in her general direction.

Naturally, Carol splashed back, and the two sparked a wild fight regarding the splashing, which Steve found himself caught up in, swimming between the two of them like he was.

He of course had no option but to wildly splash back, because getting caught between the two of them like this meant that was the best choice. Besides, he liked the way Tony laughed when he got him with water.

Between the three of them splashing one another and the lulling roar of the waves around them, they didn't hear the sounds of the trio of black cars pulling up to the house, or the slamming of doors and loud voices. Honestly, none of them would have noticed at all, had Carol not flown up to avoid a wave of water coming her way and caught sight of what was going on.

Her face hardened and she frowned, clenching her fists as they began to glow bright.

"Up and at 'em, boys," she said. "Maggia's back."

Tony grimaced, letting Steve heft him out of the water and Carol fly him back to shore; the supersoldier swam through the water on his own, and almost beat them there.

He vaulted out of the water and went for the hill, running up it as he said to Tony, "Wait, don't let
them know you've got Extremis; I'll go in and get the suit. Carol, you keep him safe."

"Got it, Cap," she said, "you hold on, 'kay Tony?"

"Fine, fine...be safe, damn it!" Tony said. Steve gave him a winning smile and vaulted for the house, running in barefoot and defenseless. Tony couldn't help but shudder in fear.

"He'll be fine," Carol promised, putting a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Give him a bit. He'll be back and we'll handle this together."

Tony had to believe her. But it didn't stop the worry that besieged him as he looked at the house from their vantage point, wishing feverently Steve would get ready faster.

...

Guns. Always guns. Like they could stop the Star-Spangled Man With a Plan using guns.

Steve would've laughed if it didn't make his job so easy.

He didn't have time for dressing in costume, it was taking away from time he could get the shield and the suit, both downstairs in the lab. He could fight without his costume, but Tony couldn't, and that took priority.

Steve bolted for the stairs and vaulted down them, wincing as he heard the thud of bullet holes in the wall. He was going to have to get out of here soon, at least for the sake of not totally destroying Tony's beautiful house.

He locked the door behind him and went through the lab, grabbing the suit case and his shield, tucking the suit case underneath his arm and hefting his shield, smashing through the door and tossing it up the steps, bouncing off a few of the men that had tried to follow him down and returning to his hand as Steve jumped over their unconscious bodies and booked it, trying to head outside as fast as was possible.

Before he could, however, he was faced with ten men, their guns bristling with ammo as they stood in Tony's living room. Steve frowned. It would take time, but he had to disarm them and get them out of the house before they brought it crashing down.

So he threw the suit case out the open door, confident they'd all go diving after it—and even more confident that he could outrace them.

With a graceful vault over the men now crammed in the doorway, trying to scrabble with frantic fingers for the suit, Steve landed on the driveway and snatched up the suit case with a triumphant smile.

The smile was broken the second they shot at him, but thankfully, he had a shield for that.

Steve waited until he'd lured them far enough down the driveway that he could safely say he wasn't going to injure too much of Tony's things, house and car included, before throwing the shield again, the whirling disc glowing crimson at the edges as it sliced through the air.

The throw only took out half the guns; at the angle Steve was at, he couldn't risk more, for fear of hitting one of the cars. He sighed with frustration as he threw his shield up to deflect the bullets coming his way before moving around across the expanse of rocky shore, trying to find a better angle for the rest of them.
It took him a few minutes, in which he apologized profusely to Tony and Carol for not being there to help them, but Steve had finally gotten rid of all the men who had come after him, unconscious on the sand and their guns shattered by the shield's blows.

Steve finally sighed, relieved, and hefted himself over the dunes, bolting down the worn wooden path towards the beach, screaming for Tony and Carol as he realized with numb horror that they weren't, in fact, where he had left them, safe and sound.

"They are from safe, in fact," Whitney Frost murmured, triumphant, as she held a gun to Tony's head, a good two dozen men surrounding Carol as she shook and glowed with rage, "I daresay, Captain, you've lost your chance at saving them."
The boys have some confessions to make.

Tony grit his teeth and ran a hand through his hair in frustration; he hated more than anything moments like this, where he was helpless and waiting on the armor. Turning on Extremis to summon it was going against Steve's orders, and besides, it would give their position away; it didn't make him feel any better about basically lying in wait until Steve returned.

"It's all right," Carol said, seeing the look on his face and sighing. "He's going to be back soon. And not that you're a slouch in hand to hand or anything, Tony, but they've got guns, and Steve would lose it if you got hurt."

"I know, but—just, Carol, he's going to be in danger, and it's kind of totally because of me, and isn't there anything we can do?" Tony demanded.

"Yes," a silky voice said, interrupting them, "die quietly."

Tony and Carol turned around to see Madam Masque with two dozen men behind her and a triumphant glimmer in her eyes.

"Oh, I'm sorry, lady, you must have me confused with the superpowered alien defender who would actually take that shit lying down," Carol said, her hands glowing and her jaw set.

"No, I believe I have the right one; Captain Marvel, the incredibly strong superhuman—who is not immune to bullets. Especially when fired at fifty rounds a second," Madam Masque said. "Nor, I believe, is our illustrious Tony Stark."

"Whitney," Tony breathed, shaking his head, "Whitney, son of a bitch, why?"

"Because your blood is valuable," she replied with a casual shrug. "There are many men, many countries, and many organizations that would be more than happy to get their hands on Extremis—which, as our intelligence has gathered, still lies dormant within your bloodstream."

Tony did his best not to show his interest in that fact as she continued, "The only way to get it in enough volume, however, to be in any way useful, would be to drain you almost entirely of your blood. Forgive me for insinuating you may not be intelligent enough to understand this, Stark, but you are going to die here."

"Well, the man with twenty-one doctorates certainly knows what the hell that would mean," Tony replied.

"Okay, now I know you're screwing with us," Carol said, keeping an eye on the men who all had their guns trained on her. Tony huffed.
"Carol, for god's sake, let me look cool in front of the supervillains," he complained. "Do I ever tell anyone you're not really a Captain?"

"I'm a Major, and fuck you," Carol retorted. "Wasn't Steve only ever a private in the army or something?"

"Hey, shut up, that was just his cover!" Tony snapped, bristling on his behalf. Carol just rolled her eyes and chuckled.

"You're so cute when you're being his defensive boyfriend," she replied.

"Yeah, if he could be my defensive totally-not-my-boyfriend-shut-up right now, I'd really appreciate it," Tony muttered. "Especially since, y'know, they've got guns."

"Quite right, too," Whitney said. "But don't worry. Annoying as your banter is, I won't shoot you yet. Not until the Captain you so treasure is here to witness it."

Tony grit his teeth and decided maybe he didn't need Steve to get here so badly after all.

Unfortunately, he didn't seem to have a say in that matter; soon enough, both he and Carol heard shouts of panic as Steve made his way over the dunes and down the shore.

Tony met his eyes just as he felt Whitney press a gun to the back of his head.

"I daresay, Captain, you've lost your chance at saving them," Whitney crowed, delighted, and part of Tony couldn't help but agree.

Steve, however, was not so easily deterred; Tony's heart soared with relief as he drew his shield.

"Use it if you need to," he muttered quietly, and Tony sighed gratefully and nodded, feeling a little less vulnerable as he sent commands across his systems to turn Extremis on; as it booted up, he could feel his armor calling to him from within the case, and he smiled, content.

"Madam Masque," Steve began, "I don't think you're going to get what you need from Tony. Not today or ever. Why don't you put the gun down and deal with me? I'm the most dangerous person here right now, and if he's as vulnerable as you say, surely you can leave him for a little while?"

Whitney seemed to consider this, long enough for Tony to pray feverently that the systems would boot up quickly; then, he felt the gun being pulled away from the back of his head and he smiled in relief.

Before the relief could really sink in, however, she pulled the trigger.

Carol screamed, a glow of power pushing outwards from her body and sending everyone else flying; Tony didn't see blood, or hear Steve cry out in pain, but he remembered—

A corpse on the steps and he'd put it there. He was doing it again. He was repeating. Tony hated repeats. Tony needed new, Tony needed—Tony needed, Tony—armor, armor—Iron Man.

Tony felt the suit fly up around him and he roared, a throat-ripping cry of grief as he grabbed Whitney by the throat, his thoughts focusing on one point, and one point only, laser-sharp as a sniper scope; Kill.

"You took him from me!" Tony screamed, his voice breaking. "You took him from me, and I swore—never again, never again—"
"Too late for that, Tony," Whitney said, and her eyes were warm, just like he'd seen them and known them before, before—all this, and no—"It's all right. I'll always be here."

"Unfortunately," Tony said, tossing her aside as the realization hit him; if Steve was dying, his place was at his side, and nowhere else. "Which means I can deal with you later."

His armor fell away from him, scattering on the sand, and he went to kneel beside his Captain. He took his hand as his own shook violently, almost enough that he couldn't hold the grip tight enough as Steve smiled up at him. There was no blood in the smile, however; Tony blinked, baffled.

"Tony, you're one of the most clever people I've ever met," he said, his voice warm and full of praise. "You deserve all those fifty doctorates, or however many it is now."

"Forty-two," Tony said, trying not to cry. "What the hell does that have to do with anything?"

"Guns operate on tech; heat seeking bullets. A.I.M.'s new thing for the supervillain market. You didn't even notice, did you?" Steve said, amused. "Extremis reached out and you deflected them."

"You're kidding," Tony said, looking down at Steve's chest—as shocked as he was, Steve was right. There was no blood on his Captain's chest, and the hand that he held was warm with life.

"Seriously? You're okay? Then why the hell did you collapse?"

"I didn't collapse, I ducked out of the way!" Steve said, his face tinged pink. "I just—sort of lost my footing, I was dodging in sand, okay?"

Tony smiled, his heart swelling with love as he looked down at Steve, safe and sound and, most importantly, alive. Because of him. He'd saved Steve. He'd stopped the past from repeating itself. And, deep down in his mind, his heart and soul and whatever else within him was tangled up in the omnipresent internal workings of Extremis, he wanted to protect Steve.

Looking down at him, smiling up at Tony like he was the only thing in the world, Tony came to a decision. There would never be a better moment than this; never another moment where he proved himself to be a hero right down to his instincts and reflexes, the basics of his brain. There would never be a moment where he deserved Steve more.

"I have something I think I need to tell you," Tony said, before being cut off by the sharp, wet splitting stab of a knife in his back.

Steve stared up at Tony as his blood fell on his chest in warm, small drops, spreading out over his skin like tears. His mind did not entirely register it until Whitney pulled out the knife and stood over Tony, triumphant.

"Not enough for all our buyers, but it'll do," she said, wiping the knife off into a vial as she spoke. "We'll just have to play competitive for awhile."

Tony just fell into Steve's arms, slowly collapsing and shaking with pain, trying to catch his breath.

Carol's entire body glowed with power, and the force that slammed into Madam Masque was like a meteor hitting Earth; she blasted her far enough away that she was thrown through a few of the dunes and rocky outcroppings as Carol swore violently and summoned blasts of power enough to take the rest of the Maggia out, tears that burned and glowed like fire running down her face.

"And I thought you got pissy on my behalf," Tony said to Steve, wiping the blood from his mouth.

"Aw, hell. Steve? Hey, Cap, you're still with me, yeah?"
"Yeah," Steve said, struggling desperately to find his voice as his entire chest constricted. "Always with you, Tony."

"Good...good," Tony said, leaning against his chest and smiling, content. "Hey, like I was saying before, this is probably a bad time to tell you, but I love you."

Steve looked down at him, holding his hand over the wound in Tony's back as his hand shook.

"You know," Steve said, trying to keep his voice flippant as he smiled, weak and watery, "we've spent ten years together as friends and comrades, fought all kinds of enemies, saved the world together once or twice, and now you tell me you love me?"

"Better late than never," Tony murmured. "But I always have, I mean. Really. Even when things got bad. It was...always you, Steve. It was worth it. Waiting, I mean. For you." He looked up at him, his eyes shining with vulnerability and pain. "I mean, you love me back, right?"

Steve tried to find all the words he wanted to say; all the confessions he'd rehearsed, all the speeches he'd planned to speak, everything Tony wanted, needed to hear, and as his best friend was dying in his arms, he found that he really just didn't have the time for them.

"Yeah," he said, "yeah, I love you, Tony. I love you so much. So...so don't go, okay? Not now, Tony, god almighty, please don't die on me..."

Tony just nuzzled him and smiled.

"Hey, is that what this is about?" He mumbled. "C'mon, Cap. Extremis. You should...know better. Didn't you just get it before...?"

"What?" Steve asked, his voice full of tears. "What is it, Tony, please just tell me..."

"Healing factor, Steve," Tony said, his voice warm and amused. "It fixed my crippling heart problem; I think a stab wound isn't going to kill me."

"Oh," Steve said, his voice shaking, "oh, that's nice."

Then he leaned down and kissed him.

Tony melted willingly into the kiss, his lips pressed up against Steve's as he kept a hand on the wound, feeling it slowly healing beneath his fingers and wanting to sob in relief. He had more important things to do, however, like kiss Tony until the two of them forgot how to breathe, and so he focused on that.

Tony's tongue was warm and sweet in his mouth; a bit coppery from the wound, but Steve sucked on his tongue lightly and washed it away, feeling Tony hum in contentment and send shivers of pleasure through them both. Steve supported him gently on his chest, feeling Tony exhale, his breath soft and hot on Steve's skin, sending a smoky burst of pleasure through his stomach that threatened to spark and ignite if they kept this up.

They would have, too, if Carol hadn't cut in, sounding much more amused than she should have, Steve thought, "When you two are quite done with your Lifetime makeout on the beach, we should probably call the cops."

"Did it already," Tony said. "Extremis has phone functions, remember?" He sat up and stretched out a bit, still straddling Steve as he spoke. "Besides, I think you took care of them pretty handily."
"Damn right," Carol said, satisfied. "No one fucks with my buds, yeah? Bro code."

"Bro code," Steve said, a huge grin on his face. "Thanks, Carol."

"No, thank you," Carol replied. "If I had to tiptoe through the freaking tulips around the two of you and your unresolved sexual tension for one more day, I was going to duct tape your faces together."

"Kinky," Tony said, thoroughly amused, and Steve just sighed in amusement, getting up and hugging them both, feeling Tony's wound re-knit itself beneath his fingers and smiling in joy.

"C'mon, then," he said, "back up the house. I gotta spackle over a few bullet holes, and Tony, you need a shower. Healed or not, there's blood all over you."

"Yeah, fine," he said. "Meet you two downstairs in an hour for pizza."

"I could definitely go for that," Steve said with a sigh of relief.

Chapter End Notes

Quick note; anguished declarations of love are literally my favorite way to do it. This isn't a sad fic, however, so you got an ADoL with a few tiny twists! Minor spoilers for IM3 so if you haven't seen it, stop here

Anyways, I hate that the movie basically took away my 'Tony saves Steve subconsciously' thing; mind you, he never GOT Extremis, which is a crock of shit, but the idea is the same. I promise you, I wrote it first. (well, before the movie came out, anyway.)
The bullet holes were spackled over, Tony showered, and Carol turned on the television and ordered pizza. As far as these sort of things went, Steve thought it was pretty ideal; they got their break and then some.

Still, he was hesitant as Tony came downstairs, shirtless and in his sleeping pants; did he push, did he ask, what...what was going to happen now?

In response, Tony plunked himself down in his lap and leaned against him, smiling.

"We'll talk this over tomorrow," he said. "About what all this means and everything. After that, hey; we'll see where it goes, all right? For now, though...I just want to stay with you."

"And you will," Steve promised, stroking his hair. "I'm never letting you out of my sight again."

"Great," Tony said, nuzzling him and laying his head against his shoulder. "Love you."

"Yeah," Steve said, his voice warm. "I love you too, Tony."

The pizza interrupted any further romantic interlude, which Carol personally thought was a damn shame. Still, she consoled herself as she went to get the pizza, she'd still have plenty to tell Jess after all was said and done.

..."Hey, new episode of Dog Cops on Saturday," Tony said as the television blared. "Cool, huh?"

"Yeah," Carol said, stretching out and yawning. "We leave Sunday, so we'll have time to catch it."

"You're staying in bed tomorrow," Steve said. "You got stabbed, and I'd really like it if you would just—"

"No, really, I'm fine," Tony promised. "Hey, trust me, okay? I'm gonna wake up tomorrow and be ready to go to the beach. Please...?"

Steve sighed and gave him a look, leaning in to peck his forehead lightly; a little giddy thrill went
through him as he realized he had the right to do that now.

"If you aggravate the wound at all tonight, you're in bed all day tomorrow," Steve warned him, his voice stern. Tony grinned.

"Aw, it'll be fine. I promise. Thanks for the concern, Cap," he said, "but I don't think you need to mother hen me on this one."

"Yeah, well," Steve said, ruffling his hair and settling in on the couch, "old habits die hard."

Tony grinned and kissed him, warm and slightly slick as he rubbed his tongue against Steve's lips, the full plumpness yielding easily beneath the firm tip of his tongue. Steve pulled away to kiss both his cheeks before murmuring, a loose grin full of love on his face, "Bed."

Tony groaned, but he knew he'd pushed Steve to the limit today on arguments; he ruffled Carol's hair, called, "Night," and let Steve pick him up and heft him into his arms, carrying him upstairs.

Carol just shook her head, smiled like an indulgent older sister, and got up off the couch, heading upstairs to her own room to call Jess. She would let them spill the beans to everyone else, but Jess had special rights to the first gossip.

...  

"So, you can dress in here now, if you want," Tony said, his tone soft and amused. Steve huffed, kissing his forehead and nodding in agreement, stripping down and settling on a simple pair of briefs as he climbed into bed.

"Oh, I must've been lucky today," Tony murmured, triumphant, as he climbed into bed beside Steve and smiled, kicking his way out of his own pants and letting the Captain stroke his hair, his bright blue eyes shining with affection and delight.

"So lucky," Steve agreed. "Me too, Tony. So lucky I have you."

"It doesn't feel real," Tony said, his tone wondering. "You'll...still be here when I wake up, right? This isn't going to be a dream?"

"Of course not," Steve mumbled indignantly. "Come here. Let me hold you, and I promise I won't let go."

"Okay," Tony agreed, crawling closer onto the bed before letting Steve pull him down into his arms and stroke his hair, kissing at his neck and licking the skin, just enough to redden the tanned, freckled expanse before him.

Tony grinned, murmuring, "Like what you see?"

"I ought to," Steve agreed, "seeing as it's mine."

Tony wouldn't admit to him about the spike of heat that sent hurtling towards his groin. That could come later. Though not too much later, he only had so much patience.

Tony grinned, kissed Steve's forehead, murmured, "Yeah, yours. And you're all mine, big fella," into his ear, then promptly laid his head down against the Captain's broad chest and let himself fall asleep.

Steve watched him breathe, slow and easy and entirely at peace, like a weight even greater than the suit had been lifted from his shoulders, then smiled with relief and kissed the top of his head before
following suit.

... 

The next morning, Steve's hands went instinctively towards Tony's back, checking for the stab wound without even realizing he was doing it. Elation flooded his senses when he realized that no, Tony was completely fine, the wound gone without even a thin scar left in its place.

Steve settled for stroking his back and hair until Tony awoke, nudging Steve as he stirred and making their hips brush together. Steve murmured in appreciation as he lifted Tony up, still sleepy and warm, fresh with morning, and kissed his neck as he held Tony up on his broad chest, nibbling at his collarbone and dipping his tongue into the hollow in Tony's neck.

"And a good morning to you too, handsome," Tony said, his face pink and a tiny smile on his face. Steve smiled, pleased, and kissed his forehead when Tony leaned down to nuzzle him.

"Very good morning," he agreed. "I don't feel a single thing wrong with your back, so I think another trip to the beach is in order."

"Aw, good. We still have two days here, so this won't be our last one...but I wanna leave early so I can buy stuff for the party tomorrow. Since I'm the only one of the three of us who knows the ins and outs of fine dining, I'll go," Tony said. Steve wrinkled his nose.

"Are you sure you don't want me to go?" He asked, concerned. "And didn't you want to talk?"

"Yeah, I did! And I do. But you and Carol deserve the break, and I'll know what to get, honest. I'll call you the second there's trouble, trust me," Tony said, kissing Steve's cheeks. "And hey, we're gonna talk tonight. Y'know. Out there."

"Sounds great," Steve agreed. "Good enough for me, Tony. It'll be a good day, I promise. And, hey..."

He swallowed and gave Tony a hesitant smile as his lover looked down at him, his head tilted and his blue eyes glimmering with curiosity.

"Whatever we talk about, I still want to be yours," Steve said, his voice gentle and soothing, stroking Tony's sides as he talked, "always and forever, okay? This isn't going to change the fact that I love you and I'd like to be with you more than anything. We're just going to confirm a few things and sort ourselves out, okay? Won't be hard. You've done a great job of that already so far."

Tony thought he was being sarcastic at first, but as he searched Steve's face, he found nothing there that would indicate any level of sarcasm inherent in what he said. He meant it; every last word that he praised Tony with was completely genuine.

Tony wasn't surprised, but some rotten core of self-hatred in him was shaken by it all the same, right down to its crumbling foundations.

Tony smiled when it fell and leaned down to kiss Steve, slow and sweet and welcoming, opening himself up entirely to the Captain's embrace, the Captain's love. Steve gave him all that and then some, running his hands over his back and rolling his hips up, making Tony gasp at the friction, the little sparks of bliss that ran over his body like a burst of lightning.

"Okay," Tony finally agreed, unsure of what else to say, "okay, that's good. I'll go down and get dinner first, then."
"Okay," Steve replied, a smile on his face—more mischievous than normal, which alternately made Tony incredibly happy and more than a bit worried, "that's fine by me. But breakfast first."

"Yeah, I know," Tony said with a sigh of defeat as he got up off of Steve, "breakfast always comes first."

"Damn right it does," Steve agreed, slapping his ass as Tony went for the door. Tony jumped before turning around to look at him.

"Son of a bitch, I've created a monster," he murmured, a mix of awe and worry on his face. Steve chuckled and ruffled his hair as he wound his arm around Tony's and led him downstairs.

"It's okay, really," he promised, "I'm going to kiss it better later, I promise."

"I definitely created a monster," Tony said, morose. "I feel like I fried bald eagle eggs or pissed in George Washington's apple pie."

"Tony, now after all these years is really not the time to start worrying if you've corrupted me or not," Steve said with a sigh of amusement.

"Yeah, but now I really get it, you know? God, I'm sorry. Except I'm really not," Tony said. "I mean, wow."

"You're welcome. I learned it from you," Steve said, kissing the top of his head.

Tony beamed smugly throughout the entirely of breakfast. Carol didn't even bother to ask.

Breakfast was cleared and done away with in a matter of about half an hour, and Steve saw Tony off with a wave and a worried frown, sighing heavily as soon as Tony and his expensive, flashy car were out of sight.

"Aw, hell, he'll be fine, Captain," Carol soothed him, shaking her head as she came to join him on the porch. "Do you wanna wait for him here or go down to the beach?"

"If I stay here, I'll just fuss, so beach it is," Steve said with a resigned sigh. "Let me just get my cell phone, though; if he does need me, I don't want to miss his call."

"You would know if he was in danger, you've always had magic mom-senses about that sort of thing," Carol said. "Now you add on boyfriend senses and you're like his danger bloodhound or whatever."

"He really needs one of those," Steve agreed with a small grin. "You're happy about this, aren't you?"

"Hell yeah I am!" Carol enthused. "You two have needed this since you met, honestly. You loved him a whole lot, you always did, and so did he. It was always a little weird and complicated, but you know what, so are the both of you, and you were bound to resolve things eventually."

Steve nodded, packing up their things and carrying them down the beach as Carol walked beside him, her gait slow and easy as she kept pace and smiled up at him.

"Steve, I really am proud of you," she said. "You know you did good. You'll do him some good, too, and make yourself better in the bargain. I wouldn't fuss too much about what's gonna happen,
either in public or in private; he'll deal with anything as long as he gets to stay with you, and you'd move mountains for him."

"True," Steve murmured with a huge, mouth-aching grin on his face. "We'll be okay. No matter what happens, I'll take care of him."

"Damn right," Carol said, clapping him on the shoulder. "Don't fuss about it. He's exactly the guy you needed, and you both know it. Same with you. I guarantee you this much about your relationship; nobody will be surprised."

"They will not," Steve agreed. "Don't think I didn't know about that betting pool."

"That'll probably be the most money Peter's made in months," Carol said. "And don't worry, we all knew you knew."

Steve laughed as he set all their things down, shooing her off to swim while he waited vigilantly by his phone, just in case, putting a canvas and easel up as he painted the ocean in slow, easy strokes, starting with the golden sand and thinking only of Tony as he filled it in, careful and gentle with his touch, like there was a heart held beneath his hand.
Tony came back a few hours later, toting a bag full of groceries with him, having already dropped off the dinner supplies at the house. Steve beamed with delight, getting up from his work to embrace him as he took the bag of food with him, setting it down as Tony stretched out.

"I'm fine, most certainly not dead, and did you really sit here and wait by your phone?" Tony said, thoroughly amused.

"You would've done the same," Steve mumbled in his defense, washing his brushes and getting out the sunblock. "Now come here, I need to make sure you're ready before we go swimming."

Tony muttered something unkind underneath his breath, but Steve just rolled his eyes at him and got him to hold still while he slicked him up with sunblock—at least for a little while.

The three of them stayed in the water for a few hours after that, not saying much; quiet and contemplative was the name of the game, the lull of the ocean making them relax, wholly and completely. Tony eventually swam over to Steve and floated on his chest, the two of them like overgrown otters as they hung onto their raft.

It felt good, Steve thought, to be like this. His family was in this place. His Tony. His...

Boyfriend felt too silly, too cheap; lover was too gooey, too romantic.


"Oh, god, you're going Captain Anachronism on me again, Steve," Tony said with a heavy sigh. Steve felt him smile when he went to kiss his neck, though, so he didn't think he really minded all that much.

Eventually, the sun started to sink lower and lower until it was almost setting; Carol poked her head up above the water and frowned.

"I'm gonna go start dinner," she said. "You two go have your talk, okay?"

"Okay," Tony said, sliding into the water with a splash. "Hope I didn't give you me-shaped tan lines, Steve."
"No, I'm fine," Steve said with a grin, grabbing the raft and Tony under both his arms as he swam them back to shore, helping Tony up and tossing the raft back into the pile of their things. "Carol, be careful if you're going to start a barbeque pit. We'll be back soon, okay?"

"Okay," Carol agreed. "I'll be fine, mom, go sort your shit out while I cook."

"Give me any lip like that one more time and you're grounded, young lady," Steve said, wrapping an arm around Tony's waist as both he and Carol hooted, the blonde shooing them off as she punched a hole in the sand with cosmic energy.

"That is one of the most useless application of godly alien powers ever," Tony remarked as they left.

"Just under shoving my fist up your ass, Stark!" Carol yelled back as Tony casually waved her off, heading towards the cave with Steve in tow.

"I am going to start washing everyone's mouths off with soap," Steve remarked, shaking his head and sighing heavily.

"Kinky," Tony replied, a huge grin on his face.

"Starting with yours," Steve said, patting his shoulder and kissing the top of his head.

"Mm," Tony agreed, "swallowing something thick and white? Shame on you, Captain. I thought you knew by now I had no gag reflex. No need to run tests, though the scientist in me approves."

Steve ducked his head, his face red as his skin tingled from something he knew wasn't just the burn of the sun.

"It's soap, for god's sake," Steve mumbled, "not some twisted Freudian allegory."

"Yeah, sorry," Tony said, "I think I just really want your cock in my mouth at this point."

Steve choked.

"Give me some credit," Tony protested, "I've waited ten years for this, Steve."

"Have you really loved me that long?" Steve murmured. Tony shook his head.

"Whoa, hold on a second," he said, "we are not progressing from oral sex to a deep, thought-provoking treatise on my love for you, okay? Hold up. We need a better transition."

Tony cupped his cheek, standing at the edge of the tide pool with Steve. It glimmered wetly beneath them, like a mirror reflecting only the best of them as the sunset caught the edges of the water and turned it a shimmering, complex gold.

"You're mine," Tony said, "in every way, and I love you for it. You've been my comrade and my partner and my best friend, but you're my lover now, and that means things are going to change a bit. I want you sexually, Steve; I've always wanted that, but I want to know if we can't have that, because..."

"Because then we're done for?" Steve said with a wry grin. Tony snorted and shook his head.

"No," he said, "then we need to work something out and go from there. Give me a bit more credit than that, Steve."

He hugged Tony tight and kissed the top of his head, stroking his back and running his fingers over
the scars he felt on the tanned, worn skin beneath his fingertips.

"Sorry," Steve apologized. "You're better than that, I'm sorry. That wasn't fair."

He kissed Tony's forehead and said, "Two things, Tony. First; I promise I don't care about any lovers you've had before this. I've never judged you for your relationships, and I'm not going to start now. You're mine now, and that's what matters to me. Next...I do. Want you like that, I mean. But..."

"But what?" Tony asked, tilting his head. "You'll only screw me when the moon is in the second house of Venus or something?"

Steve lightly swatted his bottom and gave him a look; Tony grinned, his eyes glimmering as he nuzzled playfully at Steve's neck.

"No," Steve said, "I just need you to know it won't really change that much. We'll share a bed and share our bodies, but aside from that...you're not going to be any different once we actually start dating, and neither am I. I promise."

"I...okay," Tony agreed, squeezing Steve's hand. "Okay, great. Thanks, Cap."

"No need, it's just...the way things are going to be," Steve mumbled, giving him a shy grin. "Should we, err, take this indoors?"

"Yeah," Tony said, "I'd like that. The sun's going to set soon."

Steve kissed the top of his head once more before leading him inside, helping him up onto the rocky shelf they both sat on before, Tony laying his head on Steve's shoulder.

"I just...want you to know I'm not going to walk away from this," Tony began. "That I'm not going to be stupid and run away at the first sign of trouble or the first spat we have over some stupid philosophical debate or another. You matter to me more than that."

Steve squeezed his hand and nodded, rubbing his thumb over the top of Tony's hand before meeting their grasps fingertip to fingertip, universes meeting; unique spirals that contained things unlike anything else in the world joining and sharing what they had. Steve didn't move his grip, entranced by Tony's fingers.

"I won't leave," Steve promised. "If you've waited all this time, Tony, then you should know—so have I. I've always loved you, too. I haven't always known quite what to do with it, and to tell you the truth, I still don't...but I can't wait until I figure it out, because I have a sinking feeling I'm never going to."

"Doesn't matter," Tony said, shrugging his shoulders, "you're with me. That's all I care about. We'll worry about what to do when we need to—but really, let's be honest. We know the ins and outs of each other by this point. What's there to worry about?"

"Another—"

"Never again," Tony cut in. "I know that's what I said before. Before the SHRA. When it was armor, not America, that tore us apart, but Steve...I mean it. Never again. I am going to be better than that, and I have faith that you trust me enough to know that's true."

"Of course I do," Steve murmured. "Do you trust yourself?"

Tony looked at him just as the sun set, reflecting like a phoenix in his eyes; something burned to
ashes in Tony's gaze, and as he nodded, was replaced by something firey and mighty in its scope.

"Yeah," he said. "Trust myself enough to know what I want, in any case. And the last thing I want is another clusterfuck like the landscape of my life itself has been for the past few years. The only thing I want, to be frank—"

Steve nuzzled him and gave him a smile.

"Don't even finish that sentence," he said. "I'm from the forties, Tony, and even I know that's cheesy as all get out."

"Fine," Tony said, "then give me what I want."

He leaned over and grabbed Steve's head, pulling the taller man down for a deep kiss, shoving his tongue in his mouth and massaging the wet, quivering roof of his mouth with the tip of his tongue as Steve shuddered and groaned in his grasp. Tony lapped at the inside of his mouth for a bit longer before pulling away with an exuberant smile.

"I want you," Tony told him, "a whole lot, in every way, for every second of time I have left."

"Likewise," Steve murmured. "I want you too, Tony. I've waited a very long time for this, and I intend to enjoy every minute."

He smiled as the night spilled across the floor of the cave like an upturned bottle of ink. Tony's eyes still burned with a bright, mythic fire as Steve pulled him in, feeling for all the world like some great odyssey he'd never even been aware of undertaking had been completed; he was home, he was safe, and here was his reward.

He kissed Tony slow and sweet, his breath warm and salty as the crest of the ocean as he nipped at Tony's full, slick lip and nuzzled his tanned cheek, almost imagining he could feel the freckles scattered across Tony's nose rubbing against his own skin. Tony licked hesitantly at Steve's lips and opened his mouth to let Steve do as he liked, as if unsure about what to do with the fact that Steve was actually a pretty good kisser.

Steve would tease him about expecting him to be all awkward sloppy makeouts later; for now, he wanted to say one last thing.

When he pulled away, he cupped his cheek and murmured, "Tony, I always knew you were Iron Man, and I always loved the both of you. But...forgive me if I love Tony Stark a little more? And want him in my life more than...well, Extremis, or Iron Man...?"

"Forgiven," Tony said, his judgement passed as he leaned in to plant a quick, light kiss on Steve's nose. "Give it time, handsome; with enough of you in my life, maybe I'll get what all the fuss is about Tony Stark, too."

Steve smiled, delighted, and nuzzled his cheek before taking Tony's hand.

"Stay here for awhile with me?" He asked. "We'll go back and find Carol in a bit, I promise."

"The fire'll be a dead giveaway," Tony agreed. Steve nodded.

"Right," he said, "so let's...just stay here for awhile. Together. Please?"

Tony knew when they went back to New York that the gossip that had no doubt started in Malibu from day one would be spreading like wildfire; that once they confirmed the truth, they'd never have
a moment's peace. He knew what this moment would mean to Steve, and, frankly, to himself.

So, with a hesitant nod, he crawled into Steve's lap and let his lover hold him for awhile, supporting him with all his strength as Tony laid his head against his chest, counting Steve's heartbeats and comparing them to his own as Steve stroked his hair.

They stayed there for as long as they needed it; there was a sudden break in Tony's thoughts, like a wave crashing down on the beach, and he knew then that he was ready to leave. Whatever was out there, he could take easily enough, now that he'd had this.

He kissed Steve gently, just a light, chaste, closed-lipped kiss; when the Captain cupped the back of his head, as delicate as he could be, Tony knew he felt the same resolution within him, too.

"Ready to go?" Tony asked, despite knowing it was almost a foregone conclusion. Steve nodded and smiled, smoothing Tony's hair back and leading him out of the cave, walking him along the cool shores and towards the great column of fire they could see in the distance, their footprints being washed away by the tides as they headed for home.

... Carol didn't say anything about their discussion, but she visibly relaxed when she saw them return with their hands still entwined.

"Made cheeseburgers already," she said. "Hey, Tony, where's the ribs?"

"Bottom of the bag," Tony replied, "let me do it."

"No, I can, you just sit down—"

"Steve," Tony said, glancing up at him with a look of exasperation on his face, "I am your...steady, or whatever the hell it is that you called me, not your infant son. Let me just put some stuff on a fire pit, for Chrissakes. I think I can handle that."

Steve huffed, crossing his arms and letting Tony and Carol toss things into the pit to roast against his better judgement, especially when he saw Tony's fingers far too close to the flames.

Still, dinner was made without injury or incident, and they settled in peacefully enough; Tony sat on the sand in between Steve's legs, eating slowly and with measured bites, the picture of relaxed contentment. Steve knew what that meant for Tony, usually so anxious at mealtimes due to plenty of uncomfortable dinners with Howard as a child, and so he stroked his hair and murmured, so soft only Tony heard, "I'm so proud, Tony."

He smiled and offered Steve one of his ribs in response; Steve plucked the barbeque sauce-smothered rib from his fingers and smiled, giving him a sticky-sweet kiss before taking a few bites from it and proferring it back to Tony.

They shared the rest of the rack, content; Carol just rolled her eyes and smiled, stretching out and laying down on the sand, a huge grin on her face.

"This was pretty nice," she said. "Though I think you two got more out of this than I did, to be honest."

"Well, yeah. We cheated, we hooked up," Tony said with a grin. "You did good too, I think. I'm still glad you came, Carol. Probably wouldn't have gotten the kick up the ass that I needed without you."
"Thanks, babe," Carol said, "love you too."

The three of them sighed and smiled, finishing up the last of the food as the moon hung overhead, fat and peaceful in its place in the sky.
Eventually, Tony and Steve walked up the beach, hand in hand. All was quiet; Carol had gone on ahead to give them some space, (and, as she had privately added, to get some sleep before the night-long lovemaking began.) The two of them had just each other, as was usually the case, and they were quite happy that way.

Tony let Steve open the door for him and carry him up the stairs, taking careful pains not to trip or jostle Tony in any way, kissing his forehead and stroking his hair.

"Only if you're ready," Steve murmured.

"I've been waiting ten years," Tony said, giving him a look of blatant desire, urgency burning in his eyes, "don't make me wait any longer."

Steve chuckled and opened their door, bringing Tony in and setting him down on the bed, nuzzling foreheads with him and kissing the tip of his nose.

"Me too, to be honest," Steve confessed, "even, er, when I didn't know what we would actually do in bed."

"Oh, bless your apple-pie upbringing, Steve, I could kiss you," Tony said, surveying his lover as he stood at the edge of the bed. He was tense, knees locked, hands straight at his sides—he almost looked like he was waiting for a superior officer to order him to ravish Tony. He raised an eyebrow and unbuttoned his shirt, giving him a look.

"So, you...know a bit more now, right?" Tony asked. "If not, really, it's fine, I didn't think you've been with a man—"

"No," Steve cut in, "no, only you. I haven't...had anyone else in a long time. Not...when I was sure you were the one I wanted forever. I was willing to wait."

Tony had absolutely no idea what to say to that level of devotion, so he just nodded, giving him a hesitant smile. Steve had relaxed somewhat after confessing, so Tony pressed on.

"I, uh...tell you the truth, I've had a few drunken handjobs or whatever in my day, but I've never..." Tony gestured vaguely, his face burning with worried shame at the confession, "never, you know,
Steve relaxed entirely at that; it was like watching a shelf of snow fall to resettle on the ground, loose and free. He climbed onto the bed, kicking off his shoes and holding Tony close, stroking his hair and covering Tony entirely with his broad, warm body.

"No, Tony, stop," Steve said, "I don't care about them. I don't want you to think I give a damn about anyone you've been with before, for any reason. They were cheap dress rehearsal for this at best. Don't be ashamed of them; they weren't me, and I know I'm what you wanted. I know I'm yours now, and I don't see that changing, do you?"

"No," Tony mumbled, nuzzling hesitantly at Steve's shoulder. "No, I don't...I'm never letting you go, Steve..."

"Good, that's good," Steve said, kissing his forehead. "If you have to acknowledge your other lovers, think of it like this; you were learning how to do this right for me."

"Okay," Tony agreed, "though, uh, with most of them...you're sort of lacking their equipment, if you catch my drift."

"It's okay," Steve said, stroking his hair. "If you don't mind, I'd like to be on top, so it's not something you need to worry about anyway."

"You sure, Steve?" Tony said, tilting his head. "I mean, you know what you're doing?"

"Yes," Steve admitted with a blush, "yes, I think I do. I, er...went and looked a few things up so I could do this for you. I wanted to make you feel good. And I wanted...to be on top...so you wouldn't have to think you needed to perform or do anything special for me—so you could just enjoy it. Is that...okay?"

Tony went dizzy with the amount of blood that suddenly hurtled towards his groin, like lightning rocketing to the Earth.

"Is the thought of you watching porn okay?" Tony exhaled, trying not to grin. "Oh, oh god. More than okay. Definitely...more than okay."

Steve's face was bright red, but as he peeked through the fingers clasped over his eyes at Tony, he felt a bit more at ease; Tony was clearly enjoying the idea, so it wasn't as embarrassing as he'd assumed, at least...

"Yeah, Steve," Tony finally said once Steve's blush dissipated, "you can top. I'd like that. Uh, did we..."

Steve got up and went to look in the bathroom, groaning softly as his insistent erection throbbed against his briefs when he walked.

On top of the sink lay a bottle of lube; when Steve picked it up, he noticed the note laying beneath it and raised an eyebrow, skimming it.

"I'm sleeping down in the lab. It's soundproof. I love you! Go get 'em, tiger. —Carol."

Steve heaved a long-suffering sigh and went back into the bedroom, a smile of amusement on his face. That changed quickly to a blush and a shy grin of arousal once he realized Tony had already stripped himself nearly naked, the only thing left on his lover's body being his black, silky-soft boxer briefs.
"Carol, er—Carol took care of it," Steve said. "She didn't think of condoms, though, so, uh—"

"Clean," Tony said. "With all the screwing around I did, I had to be sure of that. And you, I don't even think you can get those, can you?"

Steve shrugged, shaking his head. Tony grinned, content, and spreading his legs wider, his fingers skimming over his inner thighs and drawing Steve's attention to the enormous bulge that seemed to throb when he looked at it.

"Then, if that's the case..." Tony trailed off with a tiny smile, hitching his fingers in his briefs. "Come inside me, Steve. I want to feel you."

Steve moaned, a broken, staccato whimper, and crossed the room in two huge strides, undressing himself before pouncing on Tony, going for his neck in a blind desire to lick and kiss and claim. Tony stroked his back, encouraging, as Steve lapped at the skin before him, rasping over the surface and nipping at it, making short work of the entirety of Tony's shoulder, getting it slick and swollen with love bites.

Tony murmured in contentment, looking down at Steve's claiming marks. They made his cock stiffen, his balls warm and full as he shifted to pull Steve closer; it felt so, so good to be marked by his Captain, by his lover.

When he looked up into Steve's eyes, they were huge and black, a thin rim of blue like the edge of the sky about the only thing Tony could see. He stroked Steve's hair and his lover leaned into it willingly, utterly at ease with Tony's touches.

"You gonna let me up, soldier?" Tony said with a grin.

"No," Steve growled, leaning back down to lap at his chest, tracing lines of muscle and toying with his nipples, the tip of his tongue playing with the little beads of flesh.

"If you let me up, I'll suck your cock," Tony promised. "C'mon, Steve, that—ahn, god's sake, bite me right there..."

Steve obliged with a grin, nipping around the hollow in Tony's neck, nuzzling at his Adam's apple and making Tony whimper.

"You can later," Steve promised, "I'd like that, I would. Right now, though, this is all about you. Are you okay with that?"

He hated to think that Tony had never gotten pleasure; sure, he'd given it, and the nature of the acts meant he got some in return...but had anyone ever done this to him? Laid him down and made love to him, taking responsibility for Tony and treating him with care?

"Uh, yeah...if you are? This is okay, right?" Tony said. Steve grinned, giving him a sloppy, warm kiss, their tongues meeting and mingling in salt and softness, like the ocean.

"More than okay," Steve whispered when they broke away, Tony's lips shiny and swollen. "Definitely more than okay. I'm going to make you feel so, so good, Tony."

He ran his hands down to Tony's briefs and pulled them down, exposing Tony's cock to the softened lights of the room, the mix of dim light and shadow no match for the stark red passion that throbbed so insistently between Tony's legs.

Steve swallowed, a shudder passing through him as he told himself that this was his lover's cock, that
it belonged to *him*, to lavish attention upon and love until Tony was a quivering mess. This was *all his*, and he wanted absolutely nothing else out of life in that moment but Tony's cock, precum beading at the tip.

"I want to do this," Steve promised him again, "because, do you understand something, Tony? Do you realize what it means for me to make love to you right now?"

"Uh," Tony tilted his head, trying to think past the passion that permeated his thoughts and blended them into a hazy red mess, "uh, it...good stuff?"

Steve chuckled, kissing his cheek.

"Making love to you right now, Tony," Steve said, his voice low and rough with desire and a burning, all-consuming lust that made them both hot with eager need, "means I'm reclaiming what's always been mine. Do you understand that? Do you know you've always been mine? That right now, I'm making sure you know that, etching it right into your skin?"

Tony gasped, shuddering at Steve's words, his cock twitching against his stomach, straining with desire. Steve gave Tony exactly what his little gasps begged for, cupping his balls and rubbing gently at his shaft, reaching up with his thumb to smear pre-cum over Tony's tip.

"Oh, god," Tony said, "*yours*, always been yours, *always*, oh god, Steve..."

"Yeah you have," Steve said, "always been mine, no matter who else had you, who else touched you, because you belong to *me*, you *want* to belong to me, don't you, good boy? 'Course you do, look at you; panting and whimpering for me..."

"Jesus fuck," Tony managed to gasp, "who the hell taught you to talk dirty and how much do I need to pay them?"

"No one," Steve said, smiling in amusement as he went to nip at Tony's neck as he stroked his cock, slicking up the hot, tight surface with the pre-cum dribbling down Tony's penis, trailing along the pulsing vein in his shaft.

"No, Tony, no one taught me this," Steve promised. "It's just, you're so beautiful. *You* inspire this in me, this need, this desire to take and claim and possess. You've always been so vulnerable, so gorgeous. All mine, all this time, and I want to make sure you know that. I want to make sure you're protected and claimed and possessed by someone who loves you."

Steve blushed and nuzzled him, giving him a grin of hesitant love. "You know, if that's what you want."

Tony couldn't speak, his arousal making his throat so tight and his chest so hot that he forgot what words were like in his mouth.

"Fuck yes I do," Tony finally said, his voice shaking and taking all the bite from his words, "god, yes, god I do, it was *always* you, yours and *yours* and *always* and oh god please *please* keep touching me—"

"Of course, of course," Steve murmured, cutting off his trembling pleas. "Does it feel good? Does it feel so good to know who you belong to?"

"I'm going to either die or explode soon," Tony rasped, shaking in Steve's embrace as his lover cupped his cock in his enormous hand, supporting Tony on his thigh as he laid back down on the bed, letting Tony scrabble for purchase, Steve lifting him up enough that he couldn't reach his feet to
Steve chuckled at the sight of Tony like this, utterly blissed-out and trembling. It was so good to get him like this; he'd dreamed of this moment, of Tony's thick cock rutting against his skin as his lover whimpered and moaned for him, all the facades and armor peeled away to reveal the Tony he'd fallen in love with.

"So, that's a yes," he murmured. "I'm so glad it feels good, but you're not going to come yet, Tony. I'm not done with you yet."

Tony moaned, nodding in agreement as Steve picked him up, holding him against his chest and kissing Tony's forehead, stroking his hair and wiping away some of the sweat that had gathered on Tony's skin.

"So, Tony," Steve murmured as he met Tony's hazy, lust-soft eyes, "what was that about sucking my cock?"

"Oh, god," Tony said, "can I?"

"You can," Steve promised, "so long as you let me touch you while you do. Stroke your hair and play with you best I can. Just some light touching, so you don't think you're getting neglected."

"Never would, not with you," Tony murmured, and Steve's heart lurched with love at the trust that Tony put in him, "but...okay, Steve. Okay, I just want to—oh god, I want so much, I've always wanted to do this, can I just do it now or—"

"Tony, okay sweetheart, okay! I'm ready whenever you are," Steve promised. That may not have been the best thing to say, looking back, because Tony grinned with delight and immediately dove down, kissing his way across Steve's chest before taking about a second to admire the beautiful erection that throbbed before him, then promptly swallowing it whole, his lips pressing up against the soft golden hairs between Steve's hips.

Steve outright screamed; Tony smiled, grateful he could pleasure Steve like this. It felt so good to suck his cock. It was something that made him relax even though his very veins ached with the desire for sex. He was grateful he could do this, feel this. Steve's penis was hard in his mouth, firm when Tony rubbed his tongue against the underside, and the taste of his skin...

Tony shuddered with pleasure at the salt of Steve's skin, like the ocean and the sun; salt and a constant, all-consuming hot that soothed his senses and let him work his way up and down Steve's cock. He sucked, his movements repetitive and easy like the motion of waves, bobbing his head and hollowing his cheeks as he listened to the whimpers and keens Steve treated him to while he sucked.

It felt good to just let go; to not have to talk dirty or promise pleasure, to simply deliver. Sucking Steve's cock meant he could relax, let his mind go blank, and let his world narrow down to his lover's penis throbbing across his lips and in his mouth.

It felt so good Tony was shaking, moaning softly and making Steve groan in return, the vibrations making his cock twitch in Tony's mouth. Pre-cum was leaking down his throat, trickling rivers that
Tony swallowed with delight. Steve's cum was hard to pinpoint, taste-wise; something Tony almost would've called clean, but a hint of something spicy, something intoxicating that made him shudder with pleasure as he swallowed the constant, steady stream.

"S-sorry," Steve said, stroking his hair, his face red with embarrassment, "I, er...the serum, I...it..." He ducked his head.

"I come a lot," he mumbled. "Sorry."

Tony pulled away for a second, his lips brushing against the head of Steve's cock as he smiled, raising an eyebrow.

"Getting wet for me, babe?" He murmured.

Steve whimpered and hid his face, shoulders tense and shifting hesitantly; Tony huffed and kissed his forehead, before giving him a sweet kiss, slow and undemanding, entirely selfless as he let Steve hold him close while he kissed him, Steve's slick cock rubbing against his own and making him moan into his mouth.

"Don't be embarrassed about it," Tony said. "I like it. It feels so good; you feel so good. I just...like sucking your cock, Steve."

Steve blushed and smiled, stroking Tony's hair.

"And I love that it makes you so happy—and it feels good, I promise!" Steve promised. "But I'd like to make love to you too, and soon. I've waited a long time too, you know."

Tony nodded, giving Steve's cock one last kiss before he let the other man arrange them on the bed, carefully placing Tony on the covers and kissing his face as he smiled down at him, stroking his hair and spreading Tony's legs, stroking his inner thighs and rubbing at the soft skin at the juncture of his hips while Tony whimpered, eager.

Steve uncapped the lube and slicked his cock up, careful to coat himself entirely before covering his hand in the gel and warming it up between his hands before looking down at Tony with a frown.

"I don't want this to hurt you," Steve said, "which means we have to go slow, okay? I want to be careful with you. Please trust me, Tony. I'll be as gentle as I can."

"'Course I trust you, c'mon," Tony said with a smile, "I've trusted you with my heart, literally and figuratively. My ass is not that much of a stretch."

Steve blushed and kissed his forehead, embracing Tony with his free hand before he moved down, rubbing lube over the tight muscle of Tony's entrance, making him hiss with pleasure before he slipped a finger in, testing the idea out of touching Tony.

His hips jerked up and he whimpered at the intrusion, but before Steve could pull away, he saw Tony trying to relax, gritting his teeth and lowering his hips, panting.

"It's okay," Tony said. "It's fine. I know you gotta do this. Just...go slow, okay?"

"Okay," Steve promised, giving him a sweet, easy kiss.

He did; they spent the next twenty minutes simply teasing Tony's hole open, carefully stretching it out and stroking it, Steve rubbing his hips when Tony whimpered with pain. He wouldn't have drawn it out for as long as he did except for the fear that the huge cock that lay nestled between his
legs would bring Tony pain instead of pleasure—the absolute last thing he wanted for him.

Steve was satisfied after another ten minutes of kissing and stretching; he had stroked Tony's cock as well to distract him, and now a little pool of pre-cum was spread out and shining over Tony's stomach as Steve ran his fingers through it, licking it up as he smiled down at Tony.

"Are you ready?" He said, his hands shaking as he thought of the reality that was entwined against his body right now, the real truth in Tony's hands and Tony's hips and cock that he was going to make love to him, claim him deep inside and let Tony know that he was wanted, needed, loved.

"Yeah," Tony said, knowing as he looked up at Steve that he was—not just for the sex, but for the truth that this was real, this was a genuine love he was going to get to keep forever, to have and hold Steve, to belong to Steve, to belong with him, and it made him grin, helpless with love and desire as he told him, "Steve, I'm ready."

Steve didn't say anything in reply; he simply pulled Tony close and completed them in one thrust, filling Tony up and uniting them in a tangle of flesh and fingers, their bodies meeting and trembling against one another as Tony gasped, clinging to him for dear life.

"Oh, god," he managed to wrench out of his throat, "god, fuck, you're huge—"

"I'm sorry, am I hurting you?" Steve murmured, a frown on his face as he tensed and slowed his thrusts. Tony shook his head.

"No, no no no, oh god, so big, so good, please god just—just, I—oh, god, Steve..."

"It's okay," Steve said, stroking his hair, "I'm going slow anyway, so you can get used to this, okay?"

"Okay," Tony agreed, holding onto Steve as he closed his eyes, letting the feel of Steve's cock, engorged and hot in him, take over his mind. Steve didn't push him for any more answers; he knew what the chance to wind down like this meant to Tony, and it had been his intent all along to take him apart like this.

He was slow and careful, pacing himself as he worked out a rhythm that felt good for him; from the way Tony whimpered when he listened, he figured it worked out for Tony as well. Still, he remained attentive, considering Tony wasn't talking and he had to be careful.

It felt so good to be inside Tony; he was hot and slick and tight enough Steve felt like he was balanced on the knife-edge of pain, the overwhelming pleasure being enough to push the balance in the favor of feeling absolutely amazing. He had never made love to someone as beautiful as Tony, as perfect and wonderful and amazing and special and—

"You're too much, Steve," Tony said, giving him a small smile as Steve blushed, realizing he'd been speaking out loud. "Hey, a bit faster, babe?"

"Sure, uh—if you're ready," Steve said, stroking his hair. "You really are so good, Tony. So tight and so sweet, and so beautiful. I love you, I love you..."

"Love you too," Tony murmured as Steve picked up his pace, flexing his hips and holding onto Tony to keep him steady as his thrusts began to push him up against the pillows.

Tony grabbed onto the sheets, but it wasn't enough—he didn't feel grounded enough, safe enough, and so he clung to Steve, holding on as Steve's hips forced him back and made him moan.
"I need," Tony moaned, "god, I need, Steve, I'm gonna—"

"Not yet," Steve said, "please, not yet, okay? A little longer, Tony. Hold out for me, baby."

"I'm gonna," Tony promised, "I meant, just—touch me, please, I'm gonna explode, I need to be touched—"

Steve nodded, kissing his forehead and cupping his cock, stroking it slow and easy in contrast to his quick, sharp thrusts that were pushing Tony into the mattress, making him cry out in bliss when he felt the springs creak and the bed shudder.

"Mine," Steve announced, reclaiming Tony with every thrust, marking his claim when he felt precum spurting over his skin, "mine, mine. All mine, Tony..."

"Yeah," Tony rasped, shaking as he held onto Steve, "all yours, all yours...please, god, all yours..."

Steve smiled and kissed his forehead, picking up his pace as he felt his balls tighten and his cock shuddering within Tony; he wanted to make sure Tony orgasmed better than he ever had in his entire life, and damned if he wasn't going to try.

He adjusted his angles and gave a few experimental thrusts each time he shifted Tony; it took him a good few minutes of testing and teasing, playing and stroking, but finally, Tony screamed and clung to him, shudders running down his body as he cried out Steve's name in strangled bursts.

Steve hummed, content; he brushed the tip of his cock against Tony's prostate again and was relieved when he was rewarded with another moaning cry. He could work from there, he figured.

Steve let himself go as much as Tony, panting with ecstasy on the bed beneath him, had before; he fucked Tony with sloppy, bestial intensity, pushing him back against the pillows as the mattress groaned in warning. Not that Steve cared—Tony's screams of bliss drowned it right out, the rhythmic sounds of their flesh meeting doing a good job at helping. He stroked Tony's cock, feeling the crescendo of orgasm building between them, like the swell of an enormous wave.

"Hey," Steve whispered into Tony's ear, stroking his hair, "I love you so much, okay Tony? You're okay. I'm right here. You were so good, Tony, I'm so proud..."

Tony sobbed with pleasure at his words alone, clinging tight to Steve like he was the last scrap of safety Tony had left—which Steve wouldn't dispute. He stroked Tony's hair and worked his hips, keeping Tony on the edge as long as he could, to kiss him and touch him and tell him he loved him, to allow him to let go and give in to the waves of bliss that were swelling in him, making him shudder and moan beneath Steve.

Finally, with a single, severe last thrust, Steve felt his orgasm break like the crash of a wave on the shore, his mind falling into nothing as his entire being felt like it was being yanked out through his cock, cum gushing from his penis as he filled Tony, pumping semen into him and making him shudder and sigh with the feeling of being empty and hollow, yet entirely whole as he cuddled Tony close, giving his cock one last caress and murmuring, "Be a good boy and come for me, Tony."

That and the delicate touch was enough to wrench free the hardest orgasm Tony had ever had, his cock burning as it emptied itself of semen, Tony's entire body quivering from the force of his orgasm, the fluids mingling between him and Steve as he shuddered and gasped, tensing up one last time as the last few spurts coated them both, before he finally closed his eyes and relaxed against Steve's chest.

For awhile, they held one another, stroking each other's hair and kissing whatever bits of skin they
could both reach.

After a few more beats of silence, Tony murmured, "We should probably shower," and the two of them began to laugh, holding one another close as Steve finally picked Tony up and carried him out, into the bathroom and underneath the warm spray of the shower, finally setting him down to scrub him off.

"Did it feel good to be treated like that?" Steve murmured. "I wanted you to be able to relax and let me take care of you."

"Yeah," Tony replied, nuzzling his cheek. "It really did, Steve. Thank you. I...I've honestly never felt like that before."

"It's okay," Steve said. "I'll make sure you always feel like that, then, to make up for it."

Tony gave him a warm, shaky smile, full of more emotions than Steve suspected he could name.

"You're a big, sweet dope, and I love you so much," Tony said, holding him tight as Steve finished washing off his back. "Thank you, Steve. I've...never felt more loved. And I've never loved someone as much, I think."

"Neither have I," Steve promised, a small smile on his face, "on both accounts. I'm glad, though. You're too special for me to want to share that sort of love with anyone else."

"Sap," Tony said with a grin. "But to be fair, I feel the same way."

Steve chuckled and kissed his forehead, cleaning him up and cupping his bottom, giving him a look.

"Y'know, don't get too clean," Steve said as he turned the shower off. "You do know the serum means enhanced stamina and shortened refractory periods, right?"

"Oh, god," Tony said, slumping dramatically against Steve, "take me now, you savage."

Steve snorted, kissing his forehead and helping him out of the shower, throwing the top layer of blankets off and mentally promising to clean them later.

"Much later," Tony told him, "you've got enough to do over here, handsome."

Steve smiled and looked down at Tony, who laid on the bed and regarded him with such open, honest trust as he waited for him. He had never felt more love or more loved in his life.

"Yeah," he murmured, "I think I do."
Our Lives, Parallel

Chapter Summary

The end, and a beginning.

Chapter Notes

If you haven't noticed by now, I'm absolutely atrocious at putting up endings. It's very hard for me to let go. Regardless, I hope you enjoyed the fic; it was a simple, short, 616 fic I enjoyed writing. I hope you all enjoyed reading something I wrote that was largely happy and resolved itself quite well. Thank you so much for reading; I mean that every time, no matter if you finished a 30k fic or a 300k one. The fact that you, the reader, like anything I write means so much to me. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

On a less sappy note, spot all the detective/crime fiction novel references in the names of the Dog Cops! uwu

The next morning, Carol had breakfast waiting for them and their bags packed, sitting at the door. Steve smiled, grateful, his arm wound around Tony's waist as he got the plates together. Before he could turn to ask the two of them how much ketchup they wanted, Tony's shout of, "Steve, it's ten AM, the new Dog Cops is on!" startled him out of his warm, fuzzy, post-sex routine.

"Uh," he said, ever the intelligent one after an orgasmic all-nighter, "Carol, do we have the time to stick around and watch, or..."

"The plane leaves at one, so yeah," Carol said. "If you two are up for it, I'm game."

Steve nodded, making them their plates and settling in on the couch; Tony snuggled up underneath his right arm and kissed his neck, discreetly nipping at a love bite he'd left the night before as he did, and Carol sitting crosslegged beneath his left, giving Tony a look. Tony stuck his tongue out her and kissed Steve's neck again. Steve himself just sighed and turned the television on.

The theme song went on as normal; Steve was sure he'd be humming the opening riffs for the next six days, as would everyone else. The show started, and Steve raised an eyebrow, curious.

"Is that Captain Barkley's doghouse?" Tony said, baffled. "Why are we starting there?"

Steve shrugged, continuing to watch as it focused on the inside. Two dog beds were on the doghouse's floor; one was labeled "Captain," and another, "Sergeant."

Steve and Tony blinked, shocked.

"Aw, hell yeah," Carol muttered under her breath, fists clenched, eyes bright and eager. "C'mon, canon."
Steve had no idea what she was talking about, but the anthromorphic golden retriever that was nosing a similarly humanoid pit bull out the door, licking his cheek, was a bit of a clue.

"So, uh," Tony said, shaking his head, "we're seeing the same thing, right?"

"Sloppy adorable dog kisses, yeah," Carol said. "Get used to 'em. Steve looks like he's the type."

Steve choked; Tony puffed up indignantly in his defense.

"He is a good kisser, thank you very much, and not a dog!" Tony emphasized.

The argument was for later, however, when the newest episode wasn't on. The three of them continued to watch; if anything was obvious, it was that the Captain had somehow convinced Sergeant to return to the force despite his mistakes. Tony watched, his eyes grey and sharp. Steve squeezed his hand.

When the two of them returned, the rest of the force descended on them for a delighted dog pile; Detective DuPuppy, Inspector Jowlvert, and Officer Chowndler all piled onto Sergeant Gruffles, so relieved to see him back. Captain Barkley stood a short distance away, letting the others have their turn at jumping all over Gruffles.

Finally, however, the pit bull managed to disentangle himself from the pile and come over to nuzzle at his Captain.

"Thanks," he said. "For everything. All your help in bringing me back here, I mean...and bringing me back to myself."

"Don't mention it," the Captain replied, "it was worth it. For a good partner...and a good friend."

Sergeant Gruffles yipped and began licking his face, his tail wagging as Captain Barkley nuzzled him back, licking the top of his head.

When they turned back to the rest of the team, hesitant, they were all wagging their tails, delighted to see the two of them so happy. Captain Barkley's ears went up for a second, eager, before he just nodded.

"C'mon, gang," he said, "we've got some crimes to solve."

Everyone barked in delight, and the opening riffs played before the cut to commercial.

Steve, Carol, and Tony all watched the cheesy commercials play in dead silence, eyes wide and jaws agape.

"...Is...is it too much to hope for DuPuppy and Meowskowitz, or..." Carol trailed off.

"Interspecies lesbianism? Sure, why not," Tony said, shaking his head. "So, we all just...saw that..."

"Yeah, we did," Steve agreed. "It's...sweet. I'm glad they did that. Barkley needed someone to ground him in reality and pragmatism sometimes; someone he could trust to do the right thing alongside him."

"You think he can be trusted?" Tony asked, looking up at Steve. Steve smiled and cupped Tony's chin, rubbing his thumb along his jawline.

"Of course," he said, not entirely sure who they were talking about anymore and pressing on regardless, "he fell in love with him, didn't he? I'd say he trusted him an awful lot, even at his worst."
"And everyone lived happily ever after," Tony said after a moment, as if shock had numbed his tongue, "and everyone accepted them and things were all right? Even after his mistakes?"

"Sure, why not?" Steve said. "That's what teams are for. To take care of each other and be happy for one another when they do right, and forgive them when things go wrong."

Tony nodded, letting Steve stroke his hair for a little bit, deep in thought.

"No matter what might happen to us," Steve murmured, "I'll always love you, Tony. And everything will be all right. You've been forgiven, Tony, hundreds of times over. It's time to come home."

Tony believed him. Through all the self-doubt and all the pain, Tony believed him. How could he not? He'd trusted Steve too; let Extremis lie dormant for him, let him give him all that he'd ever wanted...

It was time, Tony agreed. He could do this. Because Steve trusted him...he could do this.

"I love you," Tony said, unsure of what else he could possibly say that would encapsulate ten years of friendship, desire, and true, abiding love, regardless of how life made him turn from it.

"I love you too," Steve said, replying in the only way he possibly could after ten years of the same.

They had a minute of silence together, holding each other tight on the couch, entwining their hearts and minds as Tony looked through his own and realized his thoughts were the only ones in his head and deciding when they were all focused on Steve...that wasn't such a bad thing.

As if Steve understood, he kissed Tony's forehead and held him tighter, stroking his hair.

"Commercial break's over," Carol said, jolting them out of their reverie. "You two gonna watch or eat face?"

"Oh very funny, Carol, like you don't eat face with the spider lady every time we have movie night," Tony muttered.

Carol just threw a spare throw pillow at him, which Steve caught with a heavy sigh as he chastised them both, "Behave, you two, and Tony, sit down and watch the episode."

Tony kissed his neck again as if to spite Carol, before giving Steve a warm, genuine, chaste kiss, full of love and happiness. Steve smiled and kissed him back before they finally did sit down and relax, interested to see what further curious parallels *Dog Cops* had to offer.

Steve and Tony, still entwined, with the sun shining in through the window and warming them up, continued to watch the episode and thought only of how the rest of their lives might unfold.

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