Quit While You're Ahead

by magicasen

Summary

It began, as things tend to between them, as a bet.

Notes

Hi, nightwalker! Firstly, an explanation for how this fic turned out this way, because it obviously doesn't follow your prompt to the letter. My thought process went: "Steve is touchy-feely with Tony in front of the other Avengers? But what about Tony? He's not the same? Is he uncomfortable with it for some reason? Is there an explanation why?" and that's how my mind jumped to "OBVIOUSLY IT'S BECAUSE THEY'RE PLAYING GAY CHICKEN."

I hope you enjoy the fic!

Also, Bucky is in here even though he hasn't joined the team in AA canon yet because I know you're a fan, so think of this as some future fic after he's joined up with the Avengers :)

Thank you to thyrza for the beta!

“Is that Tony Stark reading? On actual paper?”

“Now, don't give yourself a heart attack so early in the morning, old man.” Tony winked at Steve,
just having entered the common room, and brought the magazine he was holding next to his face. He peeked up at Steve from under his lashes, mimicking the pose on the cover, and batted his eyes. Steve turned away, huffing and looking slightly perturbed.

“I hold the record for the number of times anyone's starred on the cover.” Tony side-stepped back into Steve's line of sight. Steve had to realize by now that seeming annoyed was the best way to egg Tony on.

“Because you need the exposure?”

Tony held up a hand. “Please, Cap. I give them exposure by being so kind as to grace their covers.”

Steve looked at him closely. “Well, good to know you're feeling well after the last mission.” He seemed to be fighting a frown, then the magazine was suddenly yanked out of Tony's hand.

“Hey!”

“Top ten tips to steal their heart: superhero showstopper talks flirting. Really?” Steve looked wholly unimpressed, which was no fun.

Tony shrugged anyway, trying for nonchalance. “Turns out the adoring masses aren't so into hearing about run-ins with the Cabal or our team-ups in space with the Ents and talking raccoons. Plus, have you seen me? Who wouldn't want to hear what I think of romance?”

Steve gave him an impassive stare, which was all the answer he needed to give.

“Okay, you got me. One person.” Tony pointed at Steve. “Not that I expected it out of you.”

That seemed to grab Steve's attention as he shifted his balance, looking at Tony suspiciously. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“No, I get it, Steve.” Tony spread his hand over his chest. “You don't have to explain it to me. I understand it's very difficult, coming from a different time. You thought seeing a lady's ankles was cause for uproar back then.” He sighed dramatically. “Our modern sensibilities are just too much for you.”

Steve crossed his arms. “I won't say our times are the same, but they're more similar than what anyone from such an open-minded era seems to believe.” He quirked a brow meaningfully.

“Oh, ouch.” Tony grinned. “Well, I'm not the history buff here, so I guess I'll just have to concede.”

“Really?” Did Steve sound a bit disappointed? Surely he couldn't be.

“If you admit that it's just a hang-up on your behalf.”

“What?”

“I'm serious! I haven't seen you making advances toward anyone ever since I've met you! Now, I wouldn't be surprised if Captain America was chaste, but this is sincerity speaking, here. We're friends. Is it a matter of not wanting to, or not being able to?”

“You're doing that thing where you no longer make sense.”

Tony rubbed his chin with his hand and paced, like he was down in the workshop and on the verge of a breakthrough. “Maybe you just haven't found anyone you're interested in this entire time? Do you need matchmaking services? Or maybe you need to take a peek at my flirting tips. I understand
that many people get tongue-tied, but you'll get nowhere like that.”

Steve's face grew blanker the more Tony spoke, signaling that aha, yes, Tony had touched a nerve.

“So what is it?” Tony stopped, crossing his arms, mirroring Steve's stance as he looked at Steve.

“I think I'm doing fine on the flirting front,” Steve had the gall to declare, staring right back at Tony.

So Steve did have someone he was interested in. That was information important enough to file away for later.

“Obviously not, if you're still single!”

Steve couldn't meet Tony's eyes. Yes, Tony was right, once again, surprise of the century.

“But really, Steve, I'll help you out. Teach you all the tricks.”

“My flirting is fine, Tony. I don't need your help.” Steve sounded a bit put out.

“Sure. Go, practice your moves on me then. I'll just proceed to keel over laughing.”

Steve huffed, but he didn't seem very amused. After a moment, he looked back up, seemingly battling the beginnings of a self-deprecating smile. “Want to settle this the usual way?”

“What, a bet?” Tony cracked a grin. “You're on, Cap.”

The corner of Steve's mouth twitched. “You haven't even heard the terms yet.”

“Oh, you know me, Steve, can't back down from a challenge. Loose cannon and all.” Tony circled around to the side, and Steve swiveled his head to meet him.

“In more ways in one?”

“Hey, you're catching on!” Captain America just made a sex joke. Tony couldn't keep pursuing this trail of thought. He spun around. “But really, your training sessions aren't all they're cracked up to be.” The last time Tony had lost a bet, he hadn't been able to raise his arms above shoulder-level or walk any faster than an agonizing shuffle for a week. Not that Steve needed to know that.

From the way Steve raised an eyebrow, looked like he'd known it already. Shoot. “So the stakes are the same. You lose, you spend a week joining me in basic training. I lose, I have to test-drive one of your new inventions.”

“Sounds good to me. So, what's your game? Go on,” Tony swept an arm out, “sell your pitch to the wildly successful businessman.”

Steve looked caught in the middle of too many expressions before his face smoothed out. “A flirting game.”

Tony's mind screeched to a stop, and it took far too long for him to pick it, and his jaw, back up. “Like, what, how many chicks each of us can pick up in a week?” That actually was some cause for concern. Tony was Tony Stark, genius billionaire playboy philanthropist, but Steve was, well, Steve. If you really hounded Tony, he could even be brought to admit that Steve didn't need the whole Captain America thing to get people to fall all over him. Even if he couldn't flirt to save his life.

Steve made a show at consideration. “No, I don't like the idea of getting other people caught up in this. Too many possible complications. What do you say we go at it with just the two of us?”
Tony swallowed, mouth suddenly dry. “So you’re — okay with that? — saying we flirt with each other. And how do I win?”

“Skill is subjective, so how about we keep the game up, and whoever outlasts the other wins?”

Tony was aware he was gaping at Steve. Tony also found he didn't care, not when his mind was at a dead stop between the dual thoughts of there's already a name for that, it's called gay chicken and Captain America wants to play gay chicken with me holy balls.

“Sure.” Did that shrill squeak come from him? “When do we start?”

“How about now? Or do you need some time to freshen up?” Steve leaned in until they were almost nose to nose. Wow. His eyes were really, really blue. Azure, even.

“Invasion of personal space doesn't constitute flirting,” Tony barely managed to choke out. Thankfully, his attempt at a counter made Steve back off.

“Duly noted. I'll see you when I'm back from my run, then, soldier.” Steve’s fingers ran down the length of Tony's arm as he walked by, each point of contact between them leaving Tony's skin tingling.

The door to the elevator slid shut behind Steve, and Tony could breathe again.

“Right, I'll expect to see you in my workshop tonight, then, after you've lost!” Tony called out. “If you liked the jet boots, you're going to love what I've cooked up for you next!”

No reply. Tony shuddered and rubbed his arm. He forced out a chuckle as he looked out the window, not really seeing anything.

What the hell had he gotten himself into?

By the time Tony had called people to fix the new hole in the wall, this time thanks to a game of rock paper scissors between Thor and Hulk; upgraded Sam's wings like he said he would for the past two weeks; tinkered with Natasha’s Widow Bites so they now deployed faster and left them in a corner of a workshop where they would disappear unbidden within the day; drafted up proposed improvements for Bucky's arm for perusal because Bucky's eyes had an odd glint in them when Tony rambled on about the new limits one could push with metallic compounds; and made a new pair of sunglasses for Clint, just in case he lost or broke his current pair, he had pulled himself together sufficiently.

Tony had just been caught off guard earlier, was all, he thought as he rubbed as his forehead, a headache setting in, probably from the three and a half hours of sleep last night. But really, touches on the arm were nothing. Tip of the iceberg level, the same arena as darting looks from under the lashes or licking one's lips.

Had Steve ever rested his hand on someone's thigh, sliding it up as the ambiance of the party dulled into a buzz, the loudest noise you could concentrate on the startled, quickened breath of the other person? If Tony pulled that one off, Steve would probably fall out of his chair and the bet would be done and out.

Tony tried to imagine Steve doing that to him, eyes lidded, sly smile on his face as his fingers crept up the inside of Tony's thigh.

Well, anyway, that was the stuff to pull out when Tony needed to stop this bet in its tracks. Tony
doubted the game would lose its luster so quickly, though. The thought of Steve stumbling over his own words as he found new ways to compliment Tony's shoes had too much appeal.

Sure, Tony had long learned there was much more to Steve than what met the eye. He had a sense of humor dry enough to give the Sahara an inferiority complex. He made horrendous puns, but that might have been Clint rubbing off on him. He sang old show tunes in the shower. Loudly. He could hold his own against the technology of the 21st century, and do it well, at that, but Tony wouldn't ever let Steve hear that one. He was all too human for his iconic status, but if there was a person who was worthy enough to actually be put on a pedestal, it was him.

But that was besides the point. Which was, for all that Steve surprised him, this was an area where Steve followed the old, familiar straight and narrow. Tony knew Steve's daily schedule well enough, and he knew the only place Steve frequented regularly outside of the Tower was the cafe around the corner. He'd even visited the place before when he joined Steve on his morning run once. Tony was sure that Steve wasn't making googly eyes with anyone there, considering the only workers there were a lovely old married couple, their married children, and the grandchildren who couldn't have been older than fifteen or so.

Then again, if you'd asked him yesterday, he would have been dead-set in his belief that Steve was as straight as one could get. Tony rapped his knuckles against his head. That didn't mean anything, he reminded himself. Straight guys played gay chicken all the time. It was the stuff of frat boys throughout the ages.

But there was someone Steve was interested in. He could have anyone he wanted, Tony thought irritatedly. This just proved that with so much lack of practice, either Steve would be painfully shy, embarrassingly awkward, or both when he actually tried flirting. Tony already had the game in the bag.

So when Steve made his way into the workshop toweling his hair, presumably having showered after a workout and still in the outfit to match, Tony had to hold back a snicker. No tight jeans or buttoned shirt that clung to his skin and showed off that perfect Adonis body. That was honestly the least Tony had expected out of Steve here. Half of the fun of making bets with Steve was how he refused to back down from the challenge. Where the others would throw up their hands up in frustration and call Tony a stubborn ass who took the fun out of things around the time they had nearly been run over by a barely-wrastled bilgesnipe with an unarmored Tony clinging on for dear life atop, Steve would be the one to take it in stride, executing a front flip on point to land behind Tony and grab ahold.

Tony pretended to examine the schematics for thruster upgrades for the armor. He promptly squinted. If they were angled in that direction there would be some heat loss, which was always unavoidable, of course, but he could minimize the diversion and maximize efficiency if he situated it like so – he flicked at the screen. Good. Like that, and then he wouldn't have to worry as much about the adjustments required for taking the armor underwater –

“Hey.” The voice came from right next to his ear.

Tony jumped while he recalled what was going on. Damn, just because Steve was hopeless didn't mean Tony could slack off. People, which usually meant Steve, never made bets with Tony only for him to do things half-assed.

“Hey there, soldier.” Tony leaned back, running a hand through his hair, making it stand on end, and grinning slyly before tugging at his tie. Steve tilted his head, but Tony didn't miss how his eyes ran appreciatively over Tony's body. Maybe that "Steve Rogers is straight" belief had to be amended.
Tony knew how people liked him. Powerful and confident, sexy but personal. Remind them of his status, but also remind them that his attention and prowess was all theirs for the evening. So Tony had went for the deep red dress shirt, first few buttons undone to show off the collarbone, with a tie hanging loosely around his neck. He had to fight to get into these jeans with a dark wash he had told JARVIS to put through the laundry for a few cycles to get some wear into them. Couldn't come off as too sleek in what amounted to a date outfit that promised at the very least some hot and heavy time on the dance floor and something even more in the nearest bedroom at best. Or nearest private spot, really, Tony never got too bothered about the specifics.

Steve licked his lips. “Hey.”

“You said that once already,” Tony chuckled, low, and leaned to his side, into Steve, who immediately backed up. Well, that put a damper on things. “Looks like you had quite the workout.”

Steve blinked at him. “Oh, right. Wish you could have joined.”

“Yeah, getting tossed around and pinned down by Captain America for a few hours sounds right up my alley.”

Steve didn't falter, to Tony's surprise, a small smile playing at his lips. “The showers were even nicer.”

And that brought to mind images of steam barely obscuring a sweaty, naked St – ahem. Damn it, Steve's looks gave him an unfair advantage in this. Why couldn't he look like Justin Hammer instead? “I believe you're supposed to take me out to someplace nice at least three times before you proposition me like that, Cap.” Honestly, if Steve didn't have a killer smile he should be rightfully smacked for the comment out in the real world.

“Not sure. I heard if you're Tony Stark you can get away with it just fine.”

“Hate to break it to you, Steve, but there's only one of me in the world.”

“Only the room for one too.” Steve shrugged with a small chuckle. “It doesn’t sound like such a bad deal. I have my hands full already with you.” His tone was strangely suggestive. Tony squinted at him. Steve looked back blandly. “Or should I say right hand?”

With that, the moment had passed. “Oh my god,” Tony threw back his head and laughed. “I'm glad we're doing this for fun Steve, because I have got to tell you, you never tell people you jack off to them unless you're already sleeping together. Not as a joke, and especially not if it's true.”

Steve coughed a bit, not meeting his gaze. “I'll keep that in mind, then,” he finally said. His eyes shot back to Tony. “But what's with the tangent? Don't tell me you've already reached your limit with our little game.”

“Are you kidding me?” Tony sat up straight. “I'm just getting started, babe.”

“I expected as much from you.” Suddenly, Steve's hand was on the back of his neck, rubbing at it slowly. Tony tensed up. “Relax. I actually did come down here for a reason and – you're really tense.” He pushed a bit and Tony hissed. “Sorry, sorry.” Tony felt Steve move to stand behind him and the kneading continued.

Tony remained stiff. So, Steve wanted to turn this into a physicality thing as well? That was a smart move, considering how much...presence he had. If he wanted to touch Tony while he flirted (pretended to flirt, Tony had to remind himself) then, well, who was Tony to deny himself a free massage? With that, Tony sighed and let his shoulders drop, finally allowed the wave of easy
pleasure to sink into him. Of course Steve was a fantastic masseuse, managing to find just the right spots to rub the knots out. Okay, maybe not the best word choice. He groaned as Steve worked a particularly tough one out. “You're really good at this,” he mumbled with some regret. It's too bad Steve wouldn't do this for him normally. Being an Avenger was hard work. They built up a lot of tension.

“I can't get quite at your neck,” Steve replied. “Shirt collar's in the way.”

“Oh, well.” Through the haze of contentment he found himself in, Tony grinned lazily. Time for some tricks of his own. “I'll take care of that.” He unbuttoned his shirt, fingers nimble from practice, and pushed his shirt until it was halfway down his shoulders. “That good?”

Steve took a quick breath. Checkmate. “That's fine,” Steve said, voice a bit hoarse. He leaned over Tony and resumed. Steve's fingers, gentle against Tony's bare skin, were a wholly new sensation. Tony's body reacted in turn, melting into the feeling. His eyes drifted closed as Steve's hands did their magic. Usually Steve only touched Tony when they were on Avengers business, or sparring, or –

When he came back to himself who knows how much longer later, Steve's hands had stilled on his shoulders. “Tony?” Steve whispered again.

“Mm.”

“I thought you might want to come out of here,” Steve said quietly. “See everyone else at least once today, but if you're this tired then –” There was a pause.

“Oomph!” An arm came under his knees and his shoulders were supported by another as Tony's center of gravity lurched, his body lifted into the air. “Wha – put me down!”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Tony was jostled, and then he was being laid on something soft. Cot in the workshop, right. Tony wiggled and grunted irritatedly at the sudden cold.

“I got you.” Steve covered him with a blanket and Tony rubbed his face against the pillow being wedged under his head. “Now,” a warm hand brushed the hair from Tony's face, “good night, Tony. God knows you need it, right? Stop making me think more about you more than I have to.”

Tony fell asleep to the sound of a soft, fond huff.

The ceiling was nice and blank and bare. Completely undemanding of his attention, so Tony looked blearily up at it for a long time after waking. No bird song could compare to the morning sound of the workshop machines humming merrily away. Not that you would hear any birds outside the Tower.

He shifted, his arms and legs still trapped by his clothing, although his shirt hung open, exposing his chest, the arc reactor glowing brightly in the middle.

Tony had to laugh. He'd given Steve quite a show then. And in return Steve had –

tucked him into bed like a little kid. Tony groaned and covered his face. His mind dredged up the fond lilt of Steve's voice, the only clear memory he had of last night. His face burned needlessly. It was what teammates did for each other. Tony was team leader, and if anyone else had seen that he'd fallen asleep in his chair they would have done the same as Steve.
Yeah, right. No, maybe Steve just felt responsible for putting Tony to sleep in the first place with the massage. *Not very sexy there, Rogers,* Tony wanted to stick out his tongue at something. Massages were supposed to lead to slow, sensuous sex, and Steve had overshot the mark.

And no, he hadn't. This was just a game, for fun. Between two teammates who didn't feel anything for each other. The flirting was supposed to make them laugh, not give them blue balls. No morning wood could argue with Tony otherwise, even as flashes of Steve covered in massage oil flashed through his mind. Well, now was as good a time as any for a shower.

Tony was still musing over the implications of last night as he wandered into the kitchen, leaning against the counter and watching Sam flip a pancake. Tony reached over and slid a stack onto a plate for himself.

“You would think one of the richest men in the world would have more refined tastes,” Clint commented as Tony's food disappeared under a pile of whipped cream and strawberry sauce.

“It's a genius thing,” Tony said, waving a fork in the direction of Hulk who was spurting the entire can of whipped cream down his throat and Sam who had begun dousing his own pancakes in chocolate syrup. “Can't deny that sweet tooth. Hey!”

“Far be it from me to be the person who denies Tony Stark what he wants,” Steve said, leaning in next to Tony as he pushed the whipped cream canister to the side.

“Oh, morning Cap.” Sam raised a hand. “I made pancakes as repentance for my screw up last weekend. Help yourself!”

Steve frowned. “I let you know you didn't have to worry about it. We've been on Skull's tail for weeks now, but we could actually count this operation as a success.” Bucky, silent in the corner up until now, snorted loudly. They had uncovered plans for a brainwashing protocol to produce new HYDRA drones. The issue, it had seemed, had been who to use said protocol on. The way Skull had said it, he wouldn't accept anyone less than perfect to administer the brainwashing procedure to, but apparently the other members of the Brotherhood disagreed. The moral of the story was that supervillain infighting could never be a bad thing for the Avengers.

“Yeah, but this was the closest we've been!” Sam stabbed his pancake with an undeserved viciousness.

“It wasn't your fault,” Steve reassured him. “I hope no one else has been telling you otherwise.”

Sam's eyes flicked to Tony. Steve turned to frown at him.

“Well, I let him know that he came the closest to actually capturing Skull in a while. I was frustrated too, okay? And hey, I upgraded his wings! Maybe if I'd done it earlier like I said I would we'd have him in our custody. The real Red Skull, not that blustering baby Skull that was around when the Infinity Stones were happening.” Tony wouldn't tell anyone that he was slightly relieved when that whole Infinity Gauntlet business was settled with the help of the Guardians and a newly recovered Bucky and the Red Skull had reverted back to his normal, deranged, egomaniac self.

“It wasn't on you either, Tony,” Steve said quietly. “You were hurt too, remember?” He leaned in but spoke to the entire room. “We have to look at what we gained from the operation. If we could only keep going on after a success we wouldn't have lasted very long as a team.” He rested a hand on Tony's shoulder and Tony grunted as he shoveled more food into his mouth. As Steve's fingers rubbed his neck invitingly, Tony made another muffled sound, but not from frustration. Ghost memories of Steve's clever fingers over his back were brought up again, and Tony shifted from foot
to foot.

“Let me try some.”

“Huh?” Tony looked back up.

“Of your food. If I let you eat all of it, you won't be able to sit still for the rest of the morning.” Steve smiled. “Or did I already take care of that part?”

Sam dropped his fork to the ground with a clatter. Clint snorted his milk and keeled over, coughing. Bucky turned some kind of undignified giggle-snort into a coughing fit. Hulk and Thor continued to go at their impromptu pancake eating contest, deaf to the happenings in the rest of the kitchen.

“Uh,” Tony said.

“Uh?” Steve opened his mouth, and his hand ran down Tony's back, the fingers trailing along slowly, leaving the skin tingling after its touch. Tony didn't know what about that did it, but he forked a piece of pancake, swirled it around until it was covered in whipped cream and strawberry syrup, and lifted it up. Steve leaned forward, closing his lips around the fork and making an obscene slurping sound as he pulled back.

“Uh,” Tony said again as he watched Steve lick his lips. He jumped nearly a foot in the air when he felt something slip under his waistband, and that was

Steve's hand teasing at the skin under there, holy shit. Tony might have whimpered.

Steve leaned into him until their foreheads were nearly touching. “You calling it quits, Shellhead?” he murmured.

Tony blinked, and then narrowed his eyes. “Oh hell no.” He took another piece of pancake and popped it into Steve's mouth. Steve grinned, and his hand slipped out from beneath Tony's boxers only to reach lower.

Tony had to resist squeaking as Steve's hand squeezed his ass, the protection of his pants barely obscuring the sensation. Hell. The other Avengers were right there, and sure, that might have been on the other side of the kitchen island and no one could actually see what Steve was doing but they could have guessed. Tony didn't look up as he took his first bite of his own breakfast. It was sweet and warm against his tongue but he could barely notice as Steve leaned in closer, his eyes trained on the fork as Tony removed it from his mouth.

“Well, that was good, thanks Sam.” Tony glared at Steve, who grinned brightly back at him like he was actually some entirely wholesome, squeaky-clean Prince Charming unable to be implicated on any accusations of sexual harassment. “I have to get going, now.” Steve's eyes widened as Tony wiggled his ass back into his touch, and a flush had already begun to creep up his cheeks. Right, that pale complexion didn't hide anything, and Tony smirked triumphantly at the small victory.

He couldn't bring himself to look at the rest of the silent room as he turned tail and left, chest pounding hard.

Tony paced down the hallway, chewing on his lip as he debated whether to retreat to the workshop or the gym. His subconscious must have made the choice for him, as he found himself in front of the door to the simulation training room. But he hadn't made the changes he'd considered to the thrusters yet. He frowned in concentration.

Well, he could always have JARVIS save the replay and do before and after comparisons. Having
made his decision, Tony reached up to key in his code before he heard someone clear their throat behind him.

“You!” Tony whirled around.

“I know you don't have any SI stuff today,” Steve said, arms crossed. “I asked Pepper to let me know about your schedule, at least until we get to the bottom of this Cabal business.”

“Really?” Tony put his hand on his hip and raised an eyebrow. “We're always in some type or another world-ending business, though. What makes this one so special?”

“Tony,” Steve warned. “You were incapacitated. We had to pry you out of the armor when you weren't responding to our calls! I thought you told us that EMP probes shouldn't work anymore.”

“With what we knew of what they're capable of? No, they shouldn't have worked. But I'm not a mind-reader, Cap. If I'd known that they'd had access, even limited, to my files thanks to Skull's little stint here, I would have patched up those holes ages ago.” He didn't meet Steve's eyes, the shame of failure making him stare resolutely at the floor.

“It's not your fault either, Tony,” Steve said. He stepped forward to rest a hand on Tony's shoulder, which Tony promptly shrugged off as he remembered his other source of irritation.

“Oh, and about that, what was up with breakfast?”

Steve's lips pursed, but he allowed the change of topic with a small sigh. “You mean when Sam went out of his way to make us breakfast and you barely ate anything?” He didn't look amused.

“Don't try to come off like you're innocent. I mean this!” Tony waved his hand between the two of them. “The thing between us! Us, so what were you trying to pull in there?”

“You're mistaken there, Tony. The flirting is between us,” Steve reminded him. “Or did you want me to do that to Hulk, too?”

Tony held up his hands. “I don't want this game to end up with one of us dead. No, it's just – ” he muttered. “You know, it's kind of – ”

“Embarrassing? I looked this up on the internet – ” Tony suddenly had half a mind to block Urban Dictionary everywhere on Avenger premises – “We're supposed to go as far as we're willing until it's too uncomfortable. You said it wasn't too much, so I took your word for it.” Steve tilted his head at him. “Shame is a social emotion, anyway. Taking it in front of others ups the stakes, in a sense. I don't see anything wrong with it.”

Tony huffed. No way he'd let Steve smirk triumphantly at him like that, not when they were playing in Tony's arena of expertise. “I'm fine with it. Think you might have scared everyone else for life, though.” Also me, because remembering what it felt like to get groped by Captain America was definitely a hindrance, somehow.

“They'll be fine, too,” Steve said, looking to the door to the training room. “You in the mood to beat something up?” he asked lightly.

“I'm an engineer,” Tony said. “Putting theory into practice is my calling.” Steve watched him with a thoughtful expression.

“Come spar with me,” he said then.
Tony paused. “I wanted to test the armor,” he finally lied through his teeth. “Are you going to let me use the armor on you?”

“I could take you, even with the armor,” Steve laughed. “But no, I meant one-on-one, nothing fancy.”

“Nothing fancy except the super soldier serum running through your veins?” Tony teased, and Steve smiled back good-naturedly. “But really, if you're allowed to use your scientifically engineered physical superiority over this Joe schmoe, I want to at least call a few repulsors at hand.”

“That would give you an advantage at long range, and this is sparring,” Steve pointed out. “Besides, you're never average, in or out of your armor.” He tried smiling again.

Tony snorted as he looked away. He would rather admit it to himself, instead of facing that thousand-watt smile again. Maybe he didn't want to have to touch Steve after what just happened. There was no way the physical contact would be just grabs, or throws, or holds right now for him. Not when he would feel the slip and slide of skin no matter what.

“Clever how you didn't specify whether I was above or below average,” Tony shot off.

He expected Steve to get fed up, but Steve ducked his head instead. “Above average is selling it short, too,” he blurted.

It wasn't exactly a compliment right out of left field, but the combination of the posture and the decidedly more...charged nature of their interactions lately gave Tony pause before he could respond. Stupidly.

“Fine. I get your game, Steve,” Tony sidled up and bumped Steve's hip with his own. “You going to pin me to the mat and have your way with me?”

For some reason that comment flustered Steve as well, though he had no issue with feeling Tony up ten minutes ago. Tony and Steve never did mesh very well or understand each other on many levels, although they made up for it in other respects.

“C'mon,” Steve said, reaching out and grabbing Tony's wrist to tug him along. Tony saw his opening and took it.

“No need to force me. I'm always a willing participant, when it comes to you.” He aimed a salacious grin at the back of Steve's head.

Steve snorted, but his grip tightened. “I wish,” he said, as he pulled them in front of the gym a few doors down.

“You're not really dressed for the occasion,” Steve said off-hand, glancing over at Tony, who was actually wearing business casual for once. Regardless, dress shirts weren't what you wanted to be wearing while being tossed all over the room (unless the goal is taking them off, something in Tony's mind helpfully offered.)

“I'll go grab a change of clothes from my locker,” Tony waved a hand, making his way over to the shower-bathroom-locker area.

As he pulled on his sweatpants, Tony considered his situation. Clearly he could catch Steve off-guard with risque comments, but when it came to a matter of touch, (and physical attraction, a traitorous part of Tony's mind said) Tony lost his edge. Steve had an advantage on the mat in a game of love as much as he did for its intended purpose. Tony pulled a loose fitting shirt over his head,
thoughts racing through his head.

Of course Steve was attractive. Tony wasn't blind. But, to be honest, everyone on their team could have also taken on side jobs in modeling. Hell, Thor actually had before, although he'd seemed confused about posing in “flimsy undergarments instead of handsome regal wear.” Even Hulk could get some gigs for more specialized interests.

But Steve was – no one else could take up as much of Tony's attention as he could. But as privileged as Tony was to be friends with him, close enough to trade playful teases and verbal jabs with each other, Steve was still...there was some kind of invisible barrier there, one that Tony hadn't bothered trying to climb over or smash through. There was personal, and there was personal, and with this game the wall between Steve, friend and teammate and the person who would always have Tony's back, to Steve, potential love interest, was quickly crumbling. Every time Steve called attention to his fairer physical assets, a new crack was added to the glass between them.

Tony was sure this wasn't how gay chicken was supposed to be played. It should be about pushing boundaries and seeing how far you got before someone snapped back, safe and secure back in their own personal bubble. It wasn't like this, seeing how close to the edge you could scoot before you ended up tumbling into the crevice. That was a consequence Tony wouldn't be able to recover from, not when the longer he spent time with Steve the more he wanted to stay.

Damn it, he should probably call this off. It wasn't like Steve was actually a better flirt than Tony, he tried to rationalize. Steve just happened to be unfairly kind, and hot, and unfailingly good, and just...a great person overall. No wonder he drew people who could never hope to be anything close to him, people like Tony, like flies.

What would happen again? He'd just have to spend a week training for hours on end with Steve. Tony groaned. Here he was, palms already sweaty from the thought of having to have one spar with the man.

*I am so boned,* Tony thought, staring up at the ceiling. Who knew all it'd take was a few flirty remarks and some groping over the course of not even 48 hours to make him like this?

“I am never doing a shoot for GQ again,” Tony muttered as he walked out of the lockers, only to see Steve sitting on the mat, legs spread as he brought his arms to either side to touch his toes.

“Hey there,” Steve said. “That took a while. You needed to work off some tension?”

“Only because you're here,” Tony said back easily, wanting to kick himself the moment the words left his mouth. Damn, Steve had always been so easy to playfully tease, and now that they'd acknowledged it was all a joke was exactly when Tony actually meant it. Not that Tony had ever beaten off to the thought of Steve before, and if he crossed that barrier he was officially too far gone to save.

“So you have something in mind for this, or did you just want an excuse to touch me?” Tony asked as he joined Steve in stretching.

Steve rolled his shoulders. “I was thinking we try to stick to taking each other down today. Holds, grabs, stuff like that. More useful at all times, since I don't expect you to throw many punches while in the armor. If it gets to the point where you're forced into direct hand-to-hand, then I must have done something wrong.” He suddenly looked so serious, brows furrowed as he contemplated the scenario, that Tony felt something stutter in his chest.

“Part of working as a team is taking care of yourself first, but only because you can trust everyone
else to be able to handle their end,” Tony said. “You're not responsible for my well-being in any fight.”

“That's well said,” Steve pointed out. “But it'd help if you listened to your own advice, first.”

“I have the armor,” Tony said as he jumped up and stretched his arms out from side to side. “No one else has the kind of protection I do on the battlefield. It's not that dangerous if I get hit, not compared to you or Falcon or Black Widow or....really, anyone but Thor and Hulk.”

“We proved that armor isn't enough to keep you safe in our last mission,” Steve said petulantly. “Okay, instead of bringing that up again, let's just take out our pent-up frustrations on each other.” Tony hopped back. “Sound good?”

“You're a stubborn ass sometimes,” Steve said as he got to his knees.

“You like me like that,” Tony winked. “And I like you like that.”

Steve stared up before him blankly before taking in what he looked like. He scrambled to his feet, face red. “Maybe this wasn't such a good idea.” Steve voiced. “If all you're going to do when we argue is distract me by reminding me of our game.”

“Are the distractions too much?” Tony teased. “You know you can always call things off.” What was he thinking? Five minutes ago he was seriously considering ending it himself, yet the moment he ran into Steve it ran back up into full gear.

“No,” Steve said as he began circling around Tony. “Goal is to take down the other and get them in a submission hold.”

“There are easier ways to get me down,” Tony said as he skirted around Steve.

“You can always charge me,” Steve replied, taking a few quick steps back, swaying side to side. “I'm sure you'll get me on my back in two seconds flat.”

Tony snorted. “As if. I know your game, Steve. Gotta watch out for your slick moves when you turn things back around on me. You'd rather be on top, right?”

Steve's expression turned confused. “What makes you think that?”

“You're a natural leader type. Not just that you're good at getting others to follow you, but you genuinely care for others. Others always come before you do. How unselfish of you, Steve.” Steve frowned at him, and Tony redoubled his efforts, light on his toes as he pulled out fancier footwork. Keep him guessing. “Oh, did I get it wrong?” Tony said. “I could buy it, actually. Maybe you've gotten tired of always being in charge. Maybe you want someone to take care of you, instead. Don't have to worry about a single thing, just do as you're told. Maybe you want to sit back, close your eyes, and get swept — away!” Tony slipped forward and to the side, grabbing the sleeve of Steve's shirt with his right arm. He pushed, bringing his foot forward to sweep Steve, but when he swung back he caught nothing but air.

Steve grabbed Tony's arm, bringing him down as he controlled their fall. The moment Tony hit the floor he rolled, bringing a knee up to break Steve's grip. He rolled once, twice, building up the momentum to bounce to his feet, but the moment he put his heel down on the floor he felt something pounce on him.

Steve's hands pinned a forearm, then another when Tony swung up with his other hand to break the
hold. Tony kicked with a leg, and Steve wedged a knee between his thighs, putting his weight on Tony's left leg. Tony tried to throw him off, but he didn't have enough momentum with his right leg and part of his torso to achieve it.

“Is that what you want?” Steve breathed. Tony's heartbeat picked up. Steve's face was mere inches away. Tony could see how his eyes were wide and dilated, could hear how his breath came in harsh pants despite not much happening.

Tony tried to throw Steve off again to little avail as Steve trapped his other leg in place with his knee. “Because you hate losing control,” Steve said, “but if you could do it and no one would judge you. If someone would actually love you for it. Is that what you want?” His voice shook a bit and his eyes dropped down to Tony's lips.

Tony wiggled and found, to his horror, that he was already half-hard. Shit, he couldn't let Steve figure that out. But how couldn't Steve find out? He was everywhere, on top of him and around him and overwhelming every one of Tony's senses.

Except one, Tony realized, and before he could think further than that he leaned up and pressed his lips against Steve's. Steve gasped. Tony pushed further, trying to chase Steve's taste with a bit of tongue.

Then he was flat against the mat again, Steve's hands cupping his face as he kissed back like his life depended on it. Steve was kissing back, and a surge of desperation shot through Tony as he used his free hands to grip fistfuls of Steve's hair, bringing him as close as he could, yet still not close enough. Steve groaned and it dawned on Tony that if Steve got any closer to him, felt Tony's whole body, then he would realize exactly how much he was affecting Tony.

Tony shoved at Steve's shoulders with enough force that they rolled ever, Tony's thighs bracketing Steve's chest and his legs trapping Steve's thighs.

“Gotcha,” he said, breath so short it came out as a gasp.

Steve blinked, eyes hazy, up at him. Fuck, his lips were all red and swollen. It took a moment for Steve's eyes to clear and something in his expression to crumble. He closed his eyes.

“You got me,” Steve mumbled hoarsely. “Good one. Using distractions to your advantage.”

Which meant Steve accepted that kiss as a part of their game, and had just been responding in turn. Tony scrambled off, eyes roaming the room for anything not-Steve and not-himself. His feet were moving of his own accord, turning away and striding towards the door.

“That was fun!” His voice was distant to his own ears. He hoped Steve didn't notice his awkward shuffle. Walking with a boner was annoying as hell.

“Call me when you want to get tossed around again!” he called out as he turned tail and ran out for the second time that morning.

“Cut it out,” Tony whispered out of the side of his mouth. “You look like you're about to bolt the moment I let go of your hand.”

“I'm checking the exits,” Steve countered, resituating his grip in Tony's hand.

“Yeah, well, try doing it a bit more inconspicuously. You're usually better than this.”
Steve squeezed Tony's hand in response, but didn't refute the statement. Which meant he knew Tony was right, and when did Steve ever know that? Tony looked over at him. A cap, drawn low over his face, along with thick-rimmed glasses obscured Steve's eyes, but Tony could still make out that his mouth was drawn in a thin line and his shoulders were tense. All in all, Steve looked utterly miserable.

That was a blow against the ego, that Steve would resent being sent with Tony on an undercover mission. But context was everything, and masquerading as a couple to enter a gay club and hopefully strike a blow against the Cabal was entirely grounds to be unhappy. Tony couldn't say he was thrilled with the idea, either. Flirting together was one thing, but actually pretending to be infatuated with the other for at least part of the evening was too close for comfort, especially after yesterday.

Tony's complete avoidance of Steve after what happened in the gym could have been enough of a reason for Steve to declare himself the winner of the bet. But Steve wouldn't have had the chance to track him down and tell him that, because Tony had been too busy turning corridors, sitting as far away as possible from Steve, and not sparing him any unnecessary glance during dinner, movie night, or this morning's debriefing.

“I think we might have found the reason for the Cabal's infighting,” Natasha had told them, sporting her brand-new pair of Widow Bites that she adjusted idly. “It involves one of their new prospective members, who I'm sure we're all familiar with.” She placed a photograph on the table.

“I don't know him,” Bucky said, raising a hand.

“Batroc?” Sam looked up. “In the Cabal? The same Cabal the Red Skull's a part of?”

“They don't strike me as conducting the same kind of villainy either.” Tony frowned.

“The Cabal was initially a response to the Avengers,” Natasha said. “Team of superheroes needs a team of supervillains to face off with.”

“Fair enough,” Steve said, “but what has Batroc done to warrant this sort of divide?”

Natasha cleared her throat as she placed more photographs on the table and spread them out. “His personal life involves some dealings that I'd wager Red Skull has something against.”

The photographs were of Batroc entering and leaving some sort of club. They were marked with different dates but it was actually not too hard to tell, because every image that showed Batroc leaving with a different man in tow.

"Le Secret de," Clint read aloud the club sign. “Okay, now that's not even proper French.”

“Thank you, Hawkeye,” Natasha said as she keyed in the coordinates, displaying the layout of the place in hologram form above the middle of the table. “The type of entertainment Batroc engages in doesn’t seem to meet Red Skull's approval. However, it seems that other members of the Cabal don't have the same opinion as he does. They think as long as he can be useful in their fight against us, that should be all that matters. And there we have it.”

“I always knew he leapt for everyone!” Clint snapped his fingers. Steve sighed.

“I don't think Batroc would be the sort of person who'd seek admission into the Cabal, knowing that their leader doesn't want to let him in on such a basis,” Steve said, brows furrowed. “He's not really the type to...obscure himself.” He stared down at the table, pointedly not looking at Tony. Well, not looking at anyone, really, but Tony couldn't bring himself to care about that bit at this point.
“So we just talk to him!” Sam straightened up. “Lay things out and we'll see if he still wants to join up.”

“And if he does, we knock a bit of sense into him,” Hulk made a fist and punched his palm, grinning.

“But how will we find the Leaper?” Thor asked. “Shall we challenge him to a duel?”

Natasha ran her hand over her face. “Let's try talking sense into him before we have a street-leveling fight with him.”

“We do have one reliable way of finding him.” Bucky was biting his lip, trying to hold back a grin.

“Right!” Sam pointed to the hologram still floating in the air in front of them. “We just need to get someone into...” his voice trailed off.

All eyes in the room turned to Steve and Tony.

“What?” Tony felt his throat close up as he looked between the others and Steve, who was sporting a high flush on his cheeks. “You're not saying – what!?"

“But you did such a great job masquerading as Crossbones and Grim Reaper last time you tried to infiltrate the Cabal,” Clint said brightly, fluttering his eyelashes. “Besides, you're already –”

“I haven't heard about that one.” Bucky raised an eyebrow.

“Oh, I gotcha covered, Broski,” Clint said, throwing an arm over Bucky's shoulders. “Steve let me borrow his Cap costume and everything.”

And that turn of events was what had led Tony to here, about to enter a gay club hand-in-hand with Steve. The same Steve he'd made out with on the gym mat yesterday. Somewhere, someone was laughing at him and his rightfully deserved karma.

But he wasn't the one who mattered right now. Tony glanced at Steve, who was staring resolutely ahead of him as they were checked over by the bouncer. Tony pushed the sunglasses, part of the disguise, down a bit to wink at the man, who nodded and then looked to Steve. He didn't say anything, but Tony could take a gander from his blank face and Steve's obvious discomfort.

“It's his first time,” Tony told him in French. “He's still a bit new to these sorts of things. Don't worry, I'll have him loosened up by the time we're out.”

The man nodded again to Tony, a small smile quirking his lips. “It'd be a waste if he didn't take a liking to our type of business,” he said back, in French as well, looking Steve up and down before opening the door for them.

Steve cleared his throat and mumbled a thanks as they walked in. The music could be heard from outside as they waited in line, but now that they were inside the bass made the floor beneath them shake. That, combined with the wave of heavy heat from the mass of dozens of dancers, made something in Tony's throat go dry.

Things hadn't even gotten started and Tony was already craving a drink.

“I speak French, you know,” Steve said quietly, before turning his head a bit to the side. “We're in,” he spoke into the comms.
“There's been no sign of him yet,” Natasha said. “We'll let you know when we spot him. Go on and blend in for now, and if there's anything suspicious from your end let us tune in.”

“Have fun, boys,” Bucky wasn't succeeding in holding his snicker back. Nor was Clint.

Tony surveyed the room, taking his sunglasses off and tucking them into the collar of his shirt. On the stage, some scantily clad men were putting on quite a show. Apparently, the proper way to blend in was to head over to the bar or to the floor. Tony couldn't stop his laugh – how was this his life, undercover in a gay club with Captain America – and, making his split-second decision, tugged at Steve's hand toward the latter.

“Tony,” Steve said warningly, matching the voice in Tony's head that told him this was a horribly idiotic idea. On the other hand, hey, that was the first thing Steve's said to Tony that wasn't operation objectives for the past day.

“We go to the bar, let anyone see us up close or strike up a conversation and we're more likely to blow our cover,” Tony said. “But there's no chance of anyone bothering any couple wrapped up in each other. Not here, at least. Or would that make you feel too uncomfortable?”

Steve was almost glaring at him, biting his lip. Tony felt a surge of satisfaction, and fine, maybe he did feel a bit petty as Steve let himself be tugged along to the floor.

Tony turned to Steve once they'd worked their way safely into the crowd and grinned wide-toothed at him. Steve's temporary flare of anger had subsided, as he stood there listlessly, Tony's hands on his arms. Tony swayed a little, trying to get Steve into the moment too, to little avail. Man was like a rock.

Steve seemed intent not to look at Tony, which meant he was looking around. The other clubbers ranged from groups of friends laughing as they danced in circles, sectioned off their own little worlds, and couples dancing close and with little pretense. Steve was biting his lip again as both of them turned their eyes back to each other.

“Fine,” Tony huffed, letting go but not stepping back as he began to move his body to the music, not taking his eyes off of Steve's. Thanks to his mom, Tony had received lessons in dancing as a child. This, however, was not the dances he'd had drilled into him. The memories he had of this sort of thing were from MIT and were also on the hazier side. But, if you thought about it like that, even people drunk off their asses could dance properly in this sort of setting.

And if he moved his hips and ass more than he really needed to blend in, no one had to know. No one but Steve, whose expression became blanker and blanker as he watched Tony dance. Annoyance flashed through Tony, and he grabbed Steve's arms again, pulling him up until their chests met.

“If you didn't want to blow our cover, you're not doing such a great job of it,” Tony whispered harshly. Steve's face was surprisingly open for a moment as he shuddered and licked his lips, despite looking even more miserable at the same time.

“Okay,” Steve said, expression smoothed out as he gently pushed Tony back, only to wrap his arms around Tony's waist. “Okay.”

Then Steve began to move with Tony, and shit, Tony really hadn't thought this through. Story of his life. They were about a foot apart, which was cautious territory but not enough cause for actual alarm. Tony was wrong.
Dancing was a physical act, and Tony had long accepted he couldn't outclass Steve here. Steve was like a magnet, and when Tony broke eye contact to take a look, it was only a matter of seconds before he snapped his eyes back up to Steve's, heat roiling through his body. Steve didn't help either. He'd somehow worked up a sheen of sweat within the past few minutes, something that usually didn't happen until after a good half-hour of sparring. His eyes bore into Tony's, intent, earlier awkwardness and stolen glances vanished. There was something in his expression, a promise that made Tony's blood rush straight to his groin, the lust ramping up in waves in sync with the beats of the music.

As Steve swayed his hips in time to the music, Tony felt himself melting into his body. Fuck, he wanted to plaster himself onto Steve, all over Steve, and he locked his fingers together around Steve's neck in an attempt to get closer. Steve's breath stuttered as he tightened his grip on Tony's hips.

Nothing could get between them now, and Tony's breath came in short gasps. Steve's mouth was hanging open now, almost panting, and his lips were red and wet just like they had been back in the gym – a moan escaped Tony.

Steve's grip on him tightened and loosened all at once, and then he moved his hands to Tony's ass and pulled until their hips met. They both groaned at once, and Tony had been half-aware of how hard he was but now that he was pulled up into Steve's blazingly hot body it was unmistakable. Steve was biting down on his lip hard as he stopped moving all at once. They were still staring at each other. Tony felt a stiff bulge against his gut that wasn't his and fuck, fuck, they were surrounded by nothing but people but invisible at the same time. No one would give a shit if Tony rubbed himself off here, now, against Steve and made noise that would be lost into the heavy, throbbing beats of the music that blurred more rational thoughts away. The desire was so blinding that it didn't seem there was anything Tony wanted more in this instant than to come.

And he tried, he'd always been a hedonist, as he ground his hips up into Steve's, once, twice. Steve remained still but he was shuddering all over, eyes wide. Tony tried again, hitting some sweet spot that made desperate pleasure rush through him and he pressed up, holding the position, and watched as Steve's eyes fluttered shut.

"Batroc's in," Sam's voice cut through the haze, and that was all they needed. Tony and Steve jumped apart, and it might have been funny if it wasn't utterly humiliating.

“Well, he won't be too hard to find,” Tony said wryly, lips barely moving. His voice came out throaty, and he thumped himself in the chest to clear it.

“It's not just that.” Bucky's voice was low and serious. “We think he's been followed. We couldn't get a clear visual on them, though.”

“Cabal?” Steve asked, and he sounded just fine. Damn it.

“That's where I'm putting my bets,” Natasha said. “Skull's men, I'm thinking, which means we could already have HYDRA inside the club.”

“They wouldn't do anything if they're just tailing him,” Tony said. “Right?”

No one replied, and Tony's heartbeat was still pounding his ears.

Steve met his eyes and nodded at him, expression gone serious and mission-ready. There was no room for Tony's personal failings, here. “If those are Skull's people, then he might have found the easiest way to solve his dilemma.”
“They don't need to argue about letting him in if there's no one to let in anymore.” Tony fell into place behind Steve, who took care of the task of shouldering past the clusters of dancers.

There were so many people in the room that even Batroc wasn't an easy man to find. Until a loud bellow with an atrocious French accent boomed over the crowd.

“You are challenging me to a match of who can hold the alcohol down best?” A roar of laughter that sounded oddly like honking followed. “Brave, foolish man! I accept!”

Steve veered to the left and Tony followed, making their way to the bar as fast as possible. Tony fished the sunglasses out of his shirt and put them back on.

“Wait!” Tony called out when he and Steve extricated themselves from the crowd. “Don't drink yet!”

Batroc was sitting at the bar beside a gruff-looking man, both of their shot glasses already filled to the brim. If Steve looked out of his element earlier, it still didn't hold a candle to this man. He was dressed in a black zip-up jacket and cargo pants, for one, compared to the tight shirts and skinny jeans that at least ninety percent of the club were wearing, with the rest wearing even less. He also looked like he would rather be anywhere rather than here, but in a fuck off vibe instead of a get me out of here one. That could explain the drinking, actually.

“What?” The man glared at them suspiciously. Steve adjusted his glasses and ran his hand through his hair, stealing a shared glance with Tony before turning and speaking.

“I was wondering if I could join in,” Steve offered. The man immediately scowled, but Batroc's face lit up.

“Of course, take a seat!” Batroc ushered Steve over while Tony shuffled behind him. “And your partner, too?”

“No!” Tony nearly squeaked, to a raised eyebrow. “I mean, it's – I've had plenty of drinking games with this guy here.” He rapped on Steve's chest with his knuckles. “Can never outlast him.”

Batroc nodded, quirking his lips. “I pray you will not mind if your little friend's bravery results in no fun for you tonight,” he glanced between them with a knowing smile which made Tony fidget, “once you must haul him home in one piece.”

“Oh, I don't think that's going to happen,” Tony said offhandedly. The only people who could compete with Steve here, as far as Tony knew, were gods and gamma radiation-produced monsters. Batroc did his deep honking laugh again before slamming a hand on the table. “Bartender! Another drink for this man here!”

“I – ” the bartender hesitated, looking between Steve and Tony, then at the other man. The man looked furious, for all Batroc could read the atmosphere, for he clapped him on his shoulder.

“The wording is 'the more, the merrier', is it?”

The other man aimed a glare at the bartender, who jumped. “I'm actually really sorry, but it looks like we're out of that drink, guys. Maybe you can join in during the next round?”

“Nonsense!” Batroc waved his hand. “A new round of drinks, then! On my tab! Give us the strongest, but do not make Batroc's insides burn even after the night is over.”

The bartender met the man's eyes again before he nodded slowly, clearing the bar. “I'll get those right
up for y'all, then. Just a moment, gentlemen.”

Batroc hummed merrily while Steve looked at Tony. Tony edged closer. “You'll be okay, right? I don't think he'll go down easy.”

“I'll be fine. The only stuff that's ever impaired me came from a different realm. The best place for us to be is right here, especially if he's a target. The armor – ”

“I have the repulsor gauntlets ready to get in a few seconds flat. That's all I brought – if it gets bad enough to need the whole suit, everyone else will have charged in by then. Sam's got my armor.” Tony shifted from one foot to the other. “Well, I'll be cheering for you, then,” he said. Steve aimed a surprisingly soft smile at him, and it was like the last fifteen minutes – scratch that, the last three days – had never happened. How dearly Tony wished things really had ended up that way.

“Here you go, fellas,” the bartender said, pushing three light red drinks toward them. Batroc picked his up, grinning widely at them all as Steve and the man picked up theirs.

“Cheers!” Batroc roared and held out his glass.

“Are we sure he's not already rip roaring drunk?” Tony said quietly, and Steve chuckled as he clinked Batroc's glass with his own. The other man didn't join in the toasts, sliding the drink from side to side on the table. The bartender was putting away the bottles he'd used to mix the drinks, which –

Wait. “Steve – ” Tony said suddenly, turning to Steve, who simply nodded at him before downing the drink in one quick gulp, which, with Steve's reflexes, meant it was gone before Batroc had even raised his glass to his lips. Batroc blinked, probably disappointed that he'd been beaten to the punch. He had begun to tilt the drink down his throat when Steve's hand shot out, knocking the glass out of his hand. The bartender jumped back as the glass shattered against the wall behind him, splashing the liquid over all of them.

“What in the world!?” Batroc jumped up, staring open-mouthed at the spot the glass had smashed against, before turning to Steve.

“I do not know your game, friend, but you should not refuse my generosity in such a – ”

“It's spiked!” Steve shouted as he leapt over the counter, easily overpowering the bartender until he was face-flat against the counter. Tony stepped forward.

“If you drank that, you wouldn't be around long enough to yell at us. Shame about that, really,” Tony drawled as he watched Steve. Something felt off, and Steve looked back up at him with a troubled expression. The bartender had went down far too easily to be HYDRA, and Tony's eyes wandered until he realized the other man hadn't even touched his drink. The other man, who looked like he was reaching for –

“Get down!” Tony yelled as he tackled Batroc to the floor. Above them, a gunshot rang out. Screams erupted almost immediately, and Tony heard someone crash to the ground nearby amidst the sudden stampede of footsteps. Tony went up on his hands and knees, then Steve was hauling him up roughly. The other man was sprawled on the ground. When Tony's gauntlets finished assembling he shot the gun still on the floor, promptly turning it into a melted, useless lump.

“What is the meaning of this!?” Batroc shouted as he got back to his feet.

“We're trying to save your life. I know how that sounds.” Tony took his sunglasses off and scooted next to Steve, who swept the shot glasses off of a serving platter so he could hold it by the edge.
“You two are –” Batroc's eyes went comically wide. “The Avengers!?"

“Please don't let this get out,” Tony said.

“We've got company,” Steve said, both to them and to the Avengers, over the comm. The people who were HYDRA-affiliated were easy enough to pick out; they were the half-dozen men running toward Steve and Tony rather than away. They were also, interestingly enough, the only people wearing clothing decidedly not suited for clubbing purposes. Steve's eyes flicked to Tony. “They're armed. Watch yourself!”

“I always do, Cap!” Tony shouted as he shot off a blast, catching one of the guys in the chest. Another gunshot rang out and Tony ducked, taking off into a dash as glass and liquid from broken bottles rained down on them. He barreled into the next guy, taking him to the ground and ducking to the side when the gun went off as the agent fell. Tony adjusted the power on the gauntlet to the lowest setting and blasted the agent once in the head. Guy would have a hell of a headache when he eventually woke, but that was the least of Tony's worries as he rolled to his feet.

Steve and Batroc were fighting back-to-back, which was quite a sight to behold. Tony could tell Steve didn't want to risk throwing the once-platter-now-makeshift-shield, so he used it for a shield's actual purpose, catching a bullet with it before dropping it and executing an impressive spinning kick to down his opponent. Batroc, on the other hand, used nothing but legs, leaping over, under and atop his opponents and the bar counter. Tony scanned behind him, but it didn't seem there were any more coming – they'd expected to off Batroc with poison, after all, and had definitely not expected the Avengers to make an appearance.

Wait – Tony wheeled back around and began to run. “Steve!”

Steve caught another bullet with the same platter, but this time the force sent it flying out of his grip. That didn't deter Steve, who stepped to the side to dodge another shot. Bewildered shock crossed Steve's face as his leg gave out and he crashed to the floor, instead.

“Steve!” Tony raised his arm and shot off a few repulsors in quick succession, downing the agent. Batroc clotheslined the last of the HYDRA agents to the floor with a triumphant shout.

“And that is why one makes no attempt to eliminate Batroc!” he roared.

“Steve!” Tony shoved Batroc aside as he got to his knees besides Steve. “Talk to me!”

Steve coughed harshly, already trying to sit up. Tony put his arm around his shoulder for support. “Burns like hell,” he whispered roughly. “Damn it. I didn't get shot, did I?”

“The poison,” Tony said. “It was meant to kill Batroc, and I told you he doesn't go down easy.” Tony's chest was so tight, it felt like he was the one shot after all. Steve slumped sideways into Tony.

“Oh. But feels like the first time I got shot.” Then, “He okay?”

“Yeah, he's fine,” Tony said. “Just like you to worry about the villain when you're the one injured.”

“I'm not worried about any of those guys I took down,” Steve tried to smile, but it came out as a grimace. Something in Tony's gut twisted.

“Avengers, come in!” Tony raised his fingers as he spoke into the comm. “Steve just downed enough poison to kill an elephant! Where the hell are you all!?”

“We're here, Tony!” The sound came from behind him rather than in his ear, and Tony looked back
at Steve as the Avengers surrounded him.

“Steve!” Bucky touched Steve's shoulder. Steve grumbled and pushed up closer to Tony. He'd started shivering.

“It hurts, I know, but it can't kill you, Steve,” Natasha said, her tone soft. “Stay with us, okay?”

“If you don't, I automatically win the bet. Don’t you hate losing to me?” Tony asked, voice trembling a bit.

“Already lost...most important game,” Steve mumbled, and Tony felt Steve smile against his shoulder.

Steve went silent after that, only nodding and grunting in response to the others. Tony remained in the same spot, hand still around Steve's shoulder, until SHIELD medics came and forcibly extracted Steve from his grasp. Tony watched them go gloomily. Even knowing that Steve would be fine, that he was Captain America for more than his personality, Tony still felt like the biggest idiot in the world.

---

Steve would be fine. Tony holed himself away in his workshop for the next twenty-four hours with only that keeping him going, which meant it didn't even register in the top twenty times he'd shut himself off from the world.

“I believe the term is brooding, sir.”

“I am not an angst-ridden teenager, JARVIS,” Tony said as he turned the hard rock music up. A few moments later, the music was interrupted again.

“You have a visitor in your workshop.”

“If they want to visit, tell them no. If it's not that, then I don't know why they're bothering to knock.”

“They didn’t.” Steve's voice came from behind. Tony whirled around in his chair. “I used my passcode, but I asked JARVIS to let you know since I wanted to announce myself.” But leave no opening for you to refuse to let me in, it was left unsaid.

“Well, nice to hear you're finally taking advantage of the wealth of technology at your fingertips,” Tony mumbled disingenuously. An awkward moment passed before Tony spoke up again. “So, how are you?”

“As you can see,” Steve stood up straight, smiling and motioning at himself with a hand, “I'm doing great. Practically brand-new. You could never tell I drank the equivalent of motor oil last night.”

“Yes, how lucky for us,” Tony drawled. The grin on Steve's face slid off like water.

“I would have guessed you'd be happier seeing it with your own eyes, since you didn't bother to go to the trouble earlier,” and oh, Steve was pissed. An odd, gratifying rush went through Tony, knowing that he'd gotten to Steve, right under his skin.

“Sorry, I don't believe in positive reinforcement for people who intentionally poison themselves.”

Steve's eyes narrowed. “Excuse me?”

“You knew what was going on the moment we saw that bartender didn't intend to pour any more drinks in a goddamned drinking contest, yet you drank it anyway.” Tony was suddenly standing,
voice rising, accusing.

Steve stepped forward. “What would have been the better choice? Batroc was confused, yes, but at least he knew we were on the same side back there. If I hadn't proved it by taking the drink, then we would have ended up fighting both him and HYDRA.”

“You're sidestepping the bit where you poisoned yourself! What kind of strategy is that?”

Steve sighed, exasperated. “I have a healing factor, you know.”

“Still doesn't mean you try to burn yourself from the inside-out.”

Steve took a deep breath, fingers kneading at his eyes. After a long moment, he finally spoke. “Okay. You have a point. I knew I would most likely get hurt, but I took those chances anyway after considering the alternatives.” He looked back up at Tony meaningfully. “Not that you're the one to be judging me here.”

Tony groaned, burying his face in his hand. “Steve, don't tell me you're still not over the EMP thing?”

“I don't get over 'things' where you get hurt!” Steve threw up his hands. “Forgive me for caring about my teammate.”

Tony waved his hands around, but couldn't stop a laugh from escaping him. “So, you're saying we're in the same boat, here?”

Steve didn't look ready to back down from the argument, but when Tony laughed again his expression softened, his shoulders slumped, and he sighed. “You tell me. You've never sulked like this. Don't give me that look, it's not like I haven't been grievously injured before.”

Tony snorted as he looked down at his hands, his fingers fumbling together. That was it, wasn't it? It was Steve's stupid, reckless actions, yes, but it was also everything that had happened yesterday, and the day before that had caused Tony to regress to a sulky kid. You're supposed to feel more attached after experiencing sexual gratification with someone, Tony tried to rationalize. Serotonin or something.

He was probably blushing bright red by now, his face felt so hot. That was it. Tony didn't know how to deal with Steve's injury on top of dealing with this metaphorical hammer he'd been hit with, where out had spilled an intense longing for Steve Rogers that left him unable to think straight.

Steve's arms were crossed, tapping his foot, although probably in irritation and not to the music. Until Steve looked up and said one of the last things Tony expected.

“Dance with me.”

“What?”

“We didn't get to finish yesterday.” Steve stared at him, unflinching even at Tony's obvious apprehension. “So I want to, now.”

'Didn't get to finish.' Tony didn't know whether to laugh or cry. There was only one way their dance yesterday could have ended, and he couldn't tell you if that would have alleviated the situation or made everything a hundred times worse.

Probably the latter, really. “Not in the mood.” Tony made his way over to the couch in the corner,
spinning around and falling into it with a bounce as he stared Steve down. Steve's jaw worked before he seemed to have made a decision.

Steve came over, looking Tony up and down. Tony pointedly put his hands behind his back, just so he couldn't get pulled up. Steve hesitated, and then he put one knee on the couch next to Tony, promptly swinging his other knee over Tony's other thigh.

“What are you – ” Tony squeaked.

“Chicken?” Steve demanded, his entire face red as he straddled Tony. “You admitting defeat?”

Tony stared at him before groaning and slamming his head back on the top of the couch, looking up at the ceiling. The stupid bet. Of course. Of course. Steve's hands landed on the couch on either side of his head. Tony raised his head back up, only to nearly choke at the sight.

“If you're still in, then I suppose you won't mind if I start on my own.” Steve couldn't even look at him, already swaying his hips, not quite to the rhythm of the music, which was fair enough because Tony didn't really want to imagine him matching his body to the beats of AC/DC. His libido would explode at the thought.

Steve shuffled closer until they were flush chest to chest. His breath ghosted across the top of Tony's head, and if Tony looked up, their faces would only be inches apart. No other parts of their body met, though, and Tony was torn between thankfulness and regret.

Steve obviously had never given a lap dance before. That, or Steve was giving him one of a goddamned tease, not accomplishing anything other than making Tony painfully hard. All thoughts of bets and how far they could be taken before someone had to call them off were driven far from Tony's head.

Steve arched his back, pushing him closer to Tony. Tony bit back a moan as Steve began to circle his hips, just little ones and horrendously off-beat to boot and none of that mattered, the fuck, this was real. Steve buried his face into Tony's shoulder, body trembling a bit, like he couldn't believe this was happening either.

Steve rolled his body against Tony then, and Tony could feel the line of heat from his upper thighs up to his chest. He also felt the pressure of Steve's cock against his stomach. Steve panted hard – he must have felt how bad it'd gotten for Tony too.

“Oh fuck – ” Tony gasped before he reached around and grabbed Steve's thighs, tugging him in. Tony's head went dizzy when their crotches met.

“Tony,” Steve growled and bit Tony's collarbone. Tony hissed and Steve let go, licking the aching spot in apology.

“No, no, no, keep doing that. God, you are so hot, this is so hot, Steve.” Tony leaned his head back against the top of the couch, grinding his hips back into Steve's as his hands squeezed around Steve's legs.

“Want to touch you,” Steve growled, but his hands didn't get much further than up Tony's shirt, his undulations becoming more frenzied by the second.

“Yes, yeah, do that, don't stop.” Tony's head was spinning. It felt like the couch was vibrating in beat with the music and Tony had to move with it, lust washing in and out like a tide as he moved against Steve. He tugged on Steve's thighs again, leaning his face up.
Steve surged forward, and there was a moment of struggle as he tried to get his hands out from under Tony's shirt and caught on the fabric, but soon enough Steve's hands tangled in Tony's hair as they kissed, hips still grinding into each other. Oh god, it had been too much with just a kiss in the gym and too much with the dry humping on the dance floor but now that Tony had both together it wasn't enough, screw pants and boxers and clothing and the time it'd mean not touching Steve to stop and take them off. Tony groaned as he worked his hips faster instead, and Steve sped up in response. All Tony could think and do was harder and faster, it was too hot and too good to slow down. But Steve was the goddamned super soldier overwhelmed by passion, so of course his strength won over until Tony was getting fucked dry into the couch.

The way they were going at it, it was impossible that this wouldn't end within the next minute, tops. Of course now was the time that Tony could think about how he didn't want it to end, ever, he regretted taking things so fast, what was he, a teenager? Then Steve whimpered, thrust his hips against Tony's and pushed through with the motion, holding it as he broke the kiss and came with a loud moan. Tony could feel Steve's dampness spread through the layers of clothing, and that was just – Tony's back arched, the climax overpowering him in a rush.

It took a few minutes, both of them struggling to catch their breath against each other, before someone spoke. “Oh my god,” Tony mumbled. His gut felt stretched tight, like he had tried doing sit-ups on an empty stomach. This might actually be better for his abs. Tony giggled, disbelieving.

“That was the hottest thing I've ever done and I still have all my clothes on.”

“Tony,” Steve looked down at him. Did the high of orgasm wear off fast for him or something, because his expression echoed that miserable one he had worn at the club, yesterday, when he had held onto Tony's hand too tight. Steve shook his head, grit his teeth. “I'm being an idiot. It's not like I can hide it any longer.” He cleared his throat loudly.

“It was – ” Steve let go of Tony's hair, sat back on his haunches. “It was never just a game to me.”

They stared blankly at each other as Tony processed first, that yes, Steve's preferred pillow talk involved discussing their feelings and second, that Steve felt the same way Tony did. “You asshole,” Tony laughed, helpless, and no amount of hard rock could have overwhelmed the way his chest felt like it was singing. Steve frowned at him, and Tony wanted to kiss him again. “Did you really challenge me to a flirting game so you could touch me?”

“It wasn't supposed to happen like that.” Steve was pouting at him, and for all that they were humping like animals a minute earlier he still managed to look downright adorable.

Tony leaned up and kissed him, light and chaste. “You don't have to worry. I feel the same way.” He wanted to laugh again, for as long as he could. Steve looked oddly hopeful, like he didn't want to believe it. Tony kissed him again.

When he pulled back, Steve was smiling hard, utterly delighted. Tony matched the smile. God, how long had he been living in such a state of denial, like this wasn't what he had always wanted? He wanted to kick his past self. But first –

“I win.”

Steve's smile faltered just a bit, but he still tilted his head toward Tony, expression warm and fond.

“You what?”

“Whoever outlasts the other wins.” Tony pointed to the dark spots on both of their groins. “I win.”

“You – ” Steve dropped his forehead on Tony's shoulder, body trembling. It took a moment for
Tony to realize he was trying not to giggle like a loon.

“Give me some time to take you up on my prize though. I’m going to have to think up some very fun tech for you to test drive,” Tony said, hand rubbing the back of Steve's neck.

“Tony...”

“Hey, so you really jacked off to the thought of me before? Because that is insanely hot.”

“Tony,” Steve muttered, exasperated now, but when Tony tugged at his head he reached up and kissed Tony back anyway.

Steve's hand snuck up Tony's shirt, fingers rubbing against Tony's abs. It must be habit, Tony thought, leftover from their ill-advised bet. Which had a fantastic resolution, and there would be no take-backs here.

Steve didn't even seem to realize that he was doing it, eyes half-lidded from exhaustion. It had been a long day, and they were curled up together on the couch, about to watch (or in his and Steve's case, pretend to watch) a movie. Tonight was Sam's choice. Too bad it seemed like Steve, at least, wouldn't make it through the whole thing. He'd been a bit banged up, although his insistence at being fine proved to be true if the worst that had come out of it was exhaustion.

“Okay, Cap! Enough with the PDA,” Clint called out, a hand clapped over his eyes. “I honestly thought it'd be Tony who would permanently scar me, but you? You know, vision is an archer's most important asset.”

Steve suddenly stilled. His eyes cleared as he lifted his head off the couch and stared at Tony, almost in horror. “Clint, I – ”

“Okay, someone explain this to me.” Clint waved his hand around. “He's okay with sticking his hand down his boyfriend's pants one day and the next he can't even look at anyone when I point out he's getting a bit touchy-feely! Anyone got an explanation?”

“It's Steve,” Bucky said companionably. “I told you all, he'll keep on doing whatever he wants without any care for our mental safety. It's not my fault you keep on looking when they're together.”

“Okay, but that doesn't explain why his face has become the same color as his all-American get-up.”

Steve buried his face, which was indeed bright red, into Tony's shoulder. Tony noted though, that despite Steve's embarrassment, he brought his hand up anyway, placing it on Tony's chest, palm lain flat over the arc reactor.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!