Houston (We have a Problem)

by HepG2, justtopostmyfic

Summary

Tony Stark had officially reached a new high. Brawling with the Chitauri and still ending up on top? Check! Hosting a ragtag bunch of misfits he called "The Avengers" and "maybe-family" in his newly-minted Avengers Tower? Check! Romancing Bruce Banner and surviving a stable-ish relationship? Triple check, sealed with a kiss!

And then, he got sick.

[Tony and Bruce recount the story from their respective point of views.]

Notes

Hello, folks! We're so excited about this collaboration, it's something we've never attempted. And with our hearts pumping in our throats, we present you, this! We hope you enjoy reading this as much as we do working on it ^^ Cheerios!
Chapter 1

It was a beautiful, beautiful Monday morning. Tony Stark couldn’t have asked for more. There he stood on the granite steps of a ninety-three story skyscraper - a hot red, self-indulgently sized capital-A stuck on the eastern side of the rooftop. The Main Tower was flanked by a thirty-five story South Building and a fifty-five story North, because yes, he needed that much space for everybody’s stuff.

Oh, he thought it’d made the news already.

“You hear it from me first,” he addressed his audience. “The Avengers Tower, ladies and gentlemen. What happened with Loki’s pageantry was unprecedented. But hey, we got over it.” He pushed his shades up his nose. “That was really the groundbreaking ceremony. Now, I am pleased to announce the donation of this premise to the Avengers, to be used as their primary base of operation.”

“Mr Stark, is Captain Rogers available for comment –”

“Mr Stark, with respect, there’s a lot of office space in this building –”

“Mr Stark –”

Well, Mr Stark had also been up all night catching up on his paperwork because being CTO of Stark Industries did not excuse him from crossing his T’s, dotting his I’s, the whole nine yards. So, him kicking back on his couch, stacks of folder doubling as elbow rests was him sucking up and being responsible. Could somebody put this on a memo for Miss Potts, because this compliancy deserved a medal.

“Tony,” someone pinched his lovely three-piece Tom Ford by the elbow. “The scissors?”

Dr Robert Bruce Banner looked absolutely spiffy in fifty shades of grey – until Tony lowered his gaze and studied him from above the rim of his sunglasses. “What scissors?”

“There.”

As if on cue, Pepper pushed a pair of golden ceremonial scissors into his hands, and did something
impossible with her brows that implied the company’s CTO better stay sharp on his feet or else, while alluding absolute delight to everyone else. He must’ve tuned out a sizable chunk of the last five minutes, because last he remembered, there was a bunch of people asking if Steve was available for a Wefie – which was a no, that wasn’t up for debate – and suddenly, they were down to ribbon-cutting already?

The quicker they got this done and over with, the better.

“To world peace!”

After that, it was champagne and beet tartare at the foyer, complete with in-house entertainment in the form of ads for property leasing in the South Building. Not many takers, Tony considered as he nursed his club soda alone – which never happened at parties, especially the ones he threw.

It was nobody’s fault.

Since the Tower began reconstruction, he’d been asking around his circle of highly influential, deeply-pocketed and forward-thinking peers if they’d want to rent out some floors. It was going to be the pinnacle of modern architecture! Couldn’t pitch a better deal than that. Pepper even made sure the feng shui was agreeable to a diverse range of economic pursuits.

A year before the certificate of occupancy was issued, they had no choice but to halve prices per square feet.

Let’s face it. Nobody he knew in real life – outside of Avenging – was psycho enough to open shop in the same complex Iron Man and his merry men work from, because then all tenants’ documentation on risk assessments would have to include “alien attacks”. And here he thought, the hype around that Chitauri invasion would phase out as quickly as little Marion’s on Robert E. Kelly’s live on BBC.

Turned out, insurance companies didn’t like it when properties share zip codes with the Tower. Go figure.

“Hey there,” Bruce joined him at the stand-up cocktail table. “It’s rare to have this much elbow space around you.”
Tony smiled easily and shifted his glass a bit. “Short of handing out flyers, I don’t see how I could play landlord, ever.”

“It’s a strategic address. Between 58th and Broadway, near the Columbus Circle in Midtown, Manhattan. You’ll find your tenants.”

“Who’d think Loki would be bad for real estate?” he knocked back the rest of his soda in one go, and burped. “You, on the other hand, have just been given access to the top ten floors of the Main Tower. The system’s just up. The card’s in my back pocket though, so if you want it now, feel free to reach in and grab —”

“I can wait a couple more hours.”

Tony laughed, because he would never get tired of this. It’d been a couple of months now – a year in? – since they dropped the “B” in “Bromance”, and ol’ Bruce was still so stoic about having this.

And, Tony respected that.

“A couple more hours —” His shoulders shook, until suddenly he started coughing – those full-bodied hacking that made breathing impossible. He braced the table to ground himself. Some reporters nearby regarded him curiously, and he cupped his mouth and –

“Bathroom,” he rasped, and took off.

Thank God for the foresight of skipping breakfast. He didn’t bring up anything solid this time, just a disgusting concoction of club soda and stomach acid.

“It’s been going on for a while, Tony.” Bruce was suddenly beside him by the sink. Christ. No kidding, the sound of blood pounding in his head had become deafening. He looked up into the mirror and saw how immaculately done his necktie was – whatever, he snagged it free from his neck and took out the first two buttons of his shirt.

“Thanks,” he took the proffered paper towel and slapped it over his chin. “I’m not enjoying this either.”
“You want to see a doctor?”

“Oh, like another one?”

The first three he paid good money for hadn’t been helpful. Extrapolations of their medical verdicts convinced him that the fourth MD-PhD would either tell him to chillax and de-stress, or order a battery of tests on tuberculosis. Again. Expecting any difference would be insanity.

Tony pitched sodden paper towel into the bin from where he stood. A solid three-point!

Bruce was right. The coughing fit had been going on for a while. Some six months, on and off? In the day when it was warmer and he was busier, not meeting deadlines would kill him faster than whatever he was down with. But at night? He once had the misfortune of having Bruce find him on the floor, red-faced and completely out of breath, just inches away from a majestic puddle of barf.

Yeah, something was up.

“Deep breath, Tony,” Bruce now had two fingers on the underside of his wrist. “One eleven per minute. How long?”

“How long what?”

“Your pulse, has it been this high whole morning?”

“… I guess so.”

“Let’s get you some rest,” he began to steer Tony towards the door.

“What? No, no – the function isn’t over yet –”

“Pepper can take care of this. I’ll tell her you’re not feeling well –”
“Oh, God, no. You can make up any kind of excuses, just don’t tell her the truth.”

The ride up the elevator was serenaded by the echoes of Tony making mincemeat out of his lungs. Now out of public scrutiny, Bruce held on to Tony closer, their bodies pressing up against each other.

That was undeniably the best human crutch one could ever ask for.

“Maybe,” he sighed eventually, “I’m allergic to you, Bruce.”

“An astute observation. You got sick around the same time I moved in.”

Then, Tony frowned into Bruce’s shoulder. In all seriousness, he had been sick – sicker than usual, by his standard anyway – around the same time Bruce moved in. But that would also mean around the same time Loki happened, and that realization made him nervous. He’d been to space in a mangled Iron Man suit that was never made to last a minute there, and must he remind anyone of the nuke he carried through the wormhole?

How was he even alive?

So, what could this be? Radiation sickness? Altitude sickness? Alien infection – boy, that would be a doozy.

He leaned forward to press his forehead against the polished wall of the elevator. “Thank you.”

“… For what?”

“For being an asshat.”

“Well, this asshat wants you to lie down so he could take your BP and temperature. Just in case.” Tony glared at him something fierce. “Humor me.”

He kept his penthouse just the way it was before the demolition, but he did away with the bar. Now,
it was a charging station for Dum-E – until it decided to mix dishwasher into smoothies and earn detention time elsewhere.

“A penny for your thoughts?”

Tony tucked himself on his three-seater and held out his left arm. Bruce rolled up his sleeves and promptly slipped the cuff of his portable sphygmomanometer around his biceps.

“Nowadays, the ballpark is about thirty-three-thousand dollars per thought… and I was gonna say ‘nothing’, not because you can’t afford it. Having said that, me merely implying it is just plain mean… but in all sincerity, it’s really ‘nothing’. Nothing serious anyway.” He winced when the cuff tightened and he felt blood vessels struggling against the Velcro. “There’s a logical flaw in that argument.”

“Details, details.” The machine started beeping and the cuff visibly deflated. “You’re not well, Tony.”

“Broken recorder.”

A broken body, he could mend in a second.

“I see a suit of armor around the world, Bruce,” he whispered. He turned his head to the side, and studied Bruce’s features intently. He saw concern. More so than usual. “I told you what I saw up there. Loki and Chitauri are just wake-up calls. We can’t depend on… what, Thor, or a bunch of nukes to save our hide from what’s to come.”

“Maybe nothing will come.”

“There’s always something.” He raised his forearm to his eyes, and found the momentary darkness soothing. “I don’t know. What do you think of Code Ultron anyway? Think Cap and Nick would like a bunch of Veronicas in orbit and on standby?”

“Sounds like a cold world, Tony.”
“I’ve seen colder. We alone are not enough. Six mortals – OK, five of us and one God – on the Avengers roster aren’t going to count for much. An army remotely controlled from somewhere out of the range of fire. Somewhere safe. Peace in our time.” He squeezed his eyes. “Imagine that.”

“Book an hour or two at the gym. Beat up a few bags,” Bruce replied instead, and Tony peeked at him from under his elbow. “Invite Steve over for a round. I’m sure he’ll be happy to show you some moves.”

“Oh, you mean he’d be happy to drop me on my ass every other minute. Pass, thank you. Why not you come join me in the gym for a couple of rounds?”

“… You’d rather risk the Other Guy instead?”

“I mean, Cap’s probably just worked out cooking army stew over an induction cooker or something.” He shifted his weight to face Bruce fully. “Where’s he staying again?”

“He’s back in Brooklyn. SHIELD put him up someplace nice in the suburb, last I heard.”

“Huh? Must be lonely.”

“You do have plenty of room to spare.”

“Well, Rogers would love the painting aisle on his balcony. I’m kinda nervous about sharing floor with two world-class assassins to be honest, and Romanoff still gives me nightmare, Jesus Christ – and Thor…”

What could he say? Welcome to the Avengers Tower, home to Earth’s mightiest heroes.
For the most part, Bruce liked living with the other Avengers. It reminded him of his college days in the freshman dorm. That was a lifetime ago when he had a normal, if boring, existence.

Back then, he mostly kept his head down, aside from showing up for mandatory dorm meetings. This was an unexpected chance for a do-over at communal living and Bruce enjoyed it.

It was good for Tony and him to be around other people too. The two of them could too easily get lost in their lab work around each other, and that kind of isolation probably wasn't healthy.

Bruce didn't trust people quickly, but he was making his way there with the rest of the team. If things got too crowded for either of them, they could always retreat to the lab or penthouse. Bruce found himself hiding out infrequently.

The biggest hurdle was getting used to Tony's affections in the others' presence. Tony was understanding enough not to display much in public, and in the Tower, Bruce wanted to reciprocate Tony's touches and snuggles. He wanted to initiate contact with Tony whenever he felt like it at home too.

The more he realized the rest of the team paid no attention, the less self-conscious he felt.

Almost as he got over that issue, he noticed a bigger one had sprung up: how little Tony was eating these days. Tony had gotten into the habit of pushing his food around his plate, that is, when he did eat a proper meal from a plate.

Bruce couldn't hide his displeased expression as he eyed Tony's full and messy plate, yet again. Tony wouldn't see it, or pretended not to, because he had taken to evading Bruce's gaze during meal times.

Did Tony have a hangup about eating around the other Avengers or something? Bruce didn't think that was the problem.
It all came to a head when Bruce cornered Tony alone in the kitchen one night after dinner, right as Tony was shoving his full plate of food into the trash can.

_Caught in the act._

"Please Tony. What's so difficult about eating at least one regular meal a day?" Bruce rounded on him exasperatedly.

The man's lack of self-preservation was always apparent, but this was a whole different level to not even try to keep himself nourished.

"Bruce, I can't." Tony pleaded, and he knew that alone wouldn't appease his scientist boyfriend.

"Why the hell not? Can't you at least take a few solid mouthfuls to keep yourself alive?" Bruce shot back.

Tony knew this wasn't like the mother-hen routine Pepper often did. This time with Bruce was different, insistent, desperate.

"Because my heart is... pounding too much in my chest. It feels like... from my throat to the pit of my stomach it's all blocked up."

He had never described how he had been feeling since _this_ started, and it scared him.

Bruce almost wanted to call bullshit, but something about the openness and _actual fear_ in Tony's face made Bruce believe him.

Tony wavered slightly where he stood, maybe from the shock of actually being honest about his health, and Bruce moved to close the gap between them.

He hugged the discernable ribs on Tony's too-thin form, and felt Tony's entire body sag against him heavily. Tony felt rigid in his arms, like he didn't quite dare to relax. Beneath the stiffness, minute tremors thrummed against him, worrying Bruce more than usual.
Bruce broke the tense silence. "If I make you a milkshake, will you drink some of it?"

Bruce knew it was one of Tony's guilty pleasures to indulge in a milkshake from In-and-Out and the other burger places Tony liked, or at least it used to be before his appetite started giving him problems. Tony nodded against Bruce's shoulder, and Bruce gently deposited him on one of the counter stools.

Tony seemed so lethargic nowadays. Bruce, being the logical scientist, chalked it up to the calorie deficit.

"What flavor?"

"Vanilla." Tony replied hollowly.

Bruce wondered if Tony was just picking the flavor that would go down, and come back up if it had to, the easiest. He quieted that thought.

Tony gazed at him dispassionately as Bruce shuffled around the kitchen, blending up the milkshake. Bruce chose to use his stash of Haagen-Dazs. Tony had his preferred brand of frou-frou imported gelato but as far as Bruce was concerned, that was blasphemous to use in an ol'-fashioned milkshake.

He poured the shake into a steel tumbler and handed it to Tony. Bruce chose that tumbler deliberately: its opaqueness and innate weight meant Tony could drink as much or as little as he wanted and it wouldn't be obvious to Bruce.

"Thank you." Tony mumbled quietly. "Penthouse?"

Tony came to lean against Bruce as they made the walk to the elevator. Bruce couldn't tell if Tony was being affectionate or too tired from their confrontation or something else. Regardless, he slung an arm around Tony's shoulder.

In the penthouse, Tony pressed himself against Bruce on the couch and asked Jarvis to project Animal Planet. They both knew it was just to put on some mindless background noise.
Bruce had a mask of bland neutrality on, but his mind was still reeling from the last twenty minutes.

Whenever Tony and him were together, they were usually less than ten feet apart in the lab. Outside of the lab they were even closer. Heck, Tony liked to sit in contact with him whenever he could and they shared the same bed.

But Bruce could feel the psychological rift between them growing since The Battle, like a plug being pulled slowly from the wall socket until one day it would be disconnected.

*Maybe they were already disconnected but still hanging precariously in place.*

Bruce could, and did right then, squeeze Tony's knee, earning himself a soft smile.

He pressed a gentle kiss to Tony's temple, and Tony turned and lifted his head to meet Bruce's lips with his own. Bruce savored the creamy vanilla taste of Tony's mouth, the sweetness would dissolve too quickly and they would lose their connection again.

He wanted so badly to drag Tony to the best shrink in New York, or, given Tony's high profile, have the best shrink make a house call. But Bruce knew better than to force Tony to do anything against his will if he wanted to keep his trust.

*Don't push him, and don't push him away, Banner.*

After that night, they fell into an unspoken agreement. Tony would drink his damn green shake for all his meals, and munch on whatever minimal snacks he had the appetite for in the lab.

Bruce would make him a vanilla shake each night without prompting, without checking how much Tony actually drank and without nagging him about his diet. He started using the supply of fancy gelato in the milkshakes; it wasn't like Tony was voluntarily spooning that expensive stuff from the pint anyway. Hadn't been for a long time.

What Tony lacked in a proper diet, at least their relationship made up for. They nudged closer back to their easy companionable state of equilibrium, for which Bruce had been grateful.
Maybe grateful in a head-in-the-sand way, Bruce would think on hindsight.

Weekly team dinner rolled around again, and this time Clint was back from his SHIELD mission. Tony had his usual bottle of green shake between his knees, eschewing the pork chops and mashed potatoes Steve and Bruce whipped up.

"What Stark, watching your figure?" Clint sneered offhandedly. Tony just glowered at Clint, then returned his gaze towards the TV.

"My figure is much better than yours, and Brucie will be the first to tell you that." Beside him, Bruce choked on his mouthful of mashed potatoes, blushing to the tip of his ears. Tony just patted his back sweetly.

That night in their bed, Bruce muttered something about Barton being a bit assholish.

Tony snickered beside him, and retorted, "How about I show you a nice real asshole instead?"

Chapter End Notes

From Bruce's POV, he pays more attention to Tony's actions and reactions. The words Tony cannot say, his big mouth in the way. (that's lyrics from "The Little Things That Give You Away" by U2! New song, reminds me a lot of Tony Stark, powerful ballad. youtube.com/watch?v=ETxQTKPwXxE)

Bruce is sensitive like that.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

There's always room for more whumping~

So here goes.

And then, life began to suck more.

“Stark, two o’clock!”

His body moved on its own – thank you, JARVIS – his suit twisted precisely towards two o’clock, right arm stretched, repulsor ablaze. Two shots of electric blue hit a bigass holographic boulder squarely in the middle, and it shattered into a million pieces. As virtual debris snow on him, he tasked JARVIS with one last round of perimeter sweep. Nothing looked amiss anyway, and he powered down the suit's weaponry. The time stamp on his HUD said he was just in time for lunch, so shawarma first -

"Give me a break..."

A square panel framed red popped up and started blinking on his display - a heatmap depicting three humanoid bodies huddled behind a smashed truck. Civilians in distress. And that was all that went through his mind of as he coaxed his suit to go faster, when one of them suddenly stood up and pointed at him something that looked like a spear –

“Shit, shit!”

A purple stream of energy shot past him. He curved sharply to his right, swear to God he missed that by a hair's breadth.

And then, everything blacked out completely. Cut off mid-flight, he dropped unceremoniously to the ground, bounced off the hood of another banged-up truck, and rolled a short distance into a virtual pothole. That pounding sensation between his ears could be his freaking brain pinballing inside his skull. Definitely not the kind of soft landing he was aiming for.
“Kill switch, Dr Banner.”

He knew at once that Iron Man's arc reactor was taken out. He flipped his faceplate up and sat his ass on the floor. Rows and rows of recessed lighting came up, and all holographic evidence of downtown Manhattan's destruction flickered, before they vanished completely. It was just him on the linoleum platform, Steve Rogers holding a tablet in one hand, and Bruce watching them curiously from the control room.

The day was Tuesday, three p.m. Location? Others called it the training room. He called it as it is – the Danger Room.

“Can you turn that off?” Steve waved at the ceiling in agitation. Correction. *Assumed* to be in agitation, if the prominence of a vein near Steve's hairline was of any indication. From the tail of his eye, he caught Bruce fiddling with something on the control panel - he would agree with Steve here, the siren was grating on his nerves - when everything went eerily still.

Just the harsh sounds of his breathing filling in the gaps.

Time to face the music.

Steve flipped his tablet around so Tony could read how devastatingly pathetic Iron Man’s performance was today. The worst of damages was concentrated around the arc reactor. The last hit that did him in had charred the casing through and through – so, someone had finally wised up to the suit’s Achilles’ heel.

His fault for making it *so easy*.

“How would you grade yourself?” Steve asked coolly, and put the tablet to sleep.

“… Not my best, I’ll admit.” He wiped sweat from his brow and exhaled generously. He could still hear his blood pumping in his ears, and he was stewing in his suit. “Bruce, can you lower the temperature? It’s freaking hot in here.”

“… OK.”
He slowly, painfully drew himself up to one knee, when black spots started cramming his vision. So, he kept still and decided to pay his respects to Steve’s boots. About time.

“I don’t need to remind you how important it is to stay sharp even on our off-days?”

Maybe Steve would want little wheels to go onto the sole of his shoes? So he could skate around when he needed the boost – man seemed to be running on foot everywhere. He refused to use the company’s car, refused to use the Avengers’ car, unless they were on active duty –

“– wonder if you’re holding back because you’re unwilling to share the suit’s full combat capacity. But, we’re a team, and I can’t lead a team effectively if I have no access to my men’s strengths and weaknesses –”

It was a legit sauna in here. He could feel moisture building up under his armpits and between his thighs. Highly unsexy.

“Tony, your temp is at a hundred and one,” the PA system came abuzz, and Bruce’s concern was thick enough to coat airwaves. “I’m releasing you from the suit.”

“Whoa – not so fast –”

The catches came loose, he stumbled forward, and the room’s frigidity took him completely by surprise. He barely managed to catch himself with both arms and knees. The suit might be a genius invention and all, but first-hand experience told him it was more form-fitting than the tightest corsets.

Breathe.

“You OK?”

Steve was suddenly crouching before Tony, eyes raking his form from the top of his helmet tussled hair to his socked feet.
“Yeah,” he clasped Steve’s shoulder and used it as a leverage to pull himself up. “I stink. Don’t come close.”

“… I can feel your body heat from here. You sure you’re OK?”

“Oh, yes.” He glanced up where Bruce was still manning the control panel. “This is a dummy suit, Cap. The real thing is a lot more comfortable than this one. Unhappily, I’ve only one prototype that can be remote controlled from that swanky room upstairs, so, here we are, lamenting the inadequacies of my technology.”

Steve still looked unconvinced.

“Right. I’m heading off to shower. We’ll do a re-test or something after I tweak this suit, how ‘bout that –”

The room was suddenly doused in red again, and the siren returned, blaring from all directions. Even the control room was not spared.

“Bruce, what’s going on?” Tony picked up the tablet Steve had left lying on the floor. “Something tripped?”

“S.H.I.E.L.D is requesting an assembly. Nick just sent us the latest seismic tomography of the subducted Farallon Plate, and… I’ve got more incoming.”

“… We don’t have such expertise in the Tower.”

“They’re not asking us to crunch data.”

“Surveillance?” Steve peered at the images on the tablet, which was proving to be quite the challenge because of how unsteadily Tony was holding it up. Steve shot Tony the same questioning look, and promptly took hold of the device himself.

“Most likely.”
“Send me out,” Tony offered. “I’ve got a suit for deep sea excavation. Specs are perfect for this purpose. The Avengers could clear a perimeter, in case something happens –”

“No.” Steve tucks the tablet under his arm, and clasps his free hand on Tony’s shoulder. “Sit this one out, Tony. Get some rest.” He looked like he had something more to say, but time was pressing, so he let Tony go and was quickly gone.

Tony found himself hating his me-time in the common lounge. What gave? Solitude was a way of living for a good part of the decade in Stark Tower, Stark Mansion-Perched-on-a-Cliff, Stark-Life...

Turned out, that benching episode wasn’t a one-off. Three days later, they did the re-test as promised, and his grades were still as abysmal. Steve was as ecstatic about it as he’d expect. The third attempt was worse, and Steve had to call it off halfway in because he was sagging against the far wall, buried under a pile of holographic concrete. His fault. He couldn’t hear Steve yelling at his eardrums about an incoming at twelve o’clock. The fact that he puked his guts out the moment he took the helmet off wasn’t helping his case, either.

“Non-combatant for the next two weeks? You got to be kidding me.”

Bruce was kind enough to placate him with more vanilla milkshake, that he gobbled down in less than three swallows. His stomach decided it didn’t want it there anyway, so it took all his willpower to keep all of that quarter pint down. Then, something creaked in the corner - materials expanding and shrinking as temperature changed, the usual - and that was all it took for his milkshake to come forth, splattering gloriously onto the floor.

There he sat uselessly in a chair, as Bruce swept the muck into a bag without the slightest hint of disgust.

“Something’s wrong with me, Bruce.”

Bruce did not comment. Anybody with or without eyes could see that Tony Stark hadn’t been sleeping, or eating. Or as of late, climbing up one lousy flight of stairs. JARVIS wouldn’t even let him fly the suit anymore. Something about not meeting minimum physical requirement.

He was ill. Thank you, genius here, so what was next?
“You had a nightmare again, yesterday. You remember that?” Bruce began to mop the spot with a soap-soaked cloth.

“… Nope.”

He dreamed of a hole in the sky, and an outpouring army of reptilian aliens. What else was new these days? He drew his arms around his stomach and settled deeper into his cushions.

“Did you tell anyone else about it?”

“I told you.”

Bruce sighed, and went back to polishing that one specific tile, probably wouldn’t stop until he could see his own reflection frowning at him.

“The team has the right to know, Tony.”

“Right. I haven’t told anyone anything and Rogers has already banned my ass from Avenging. If I even whispered to him my overactive imagination, he’d be first to recommend my exit from the Avengers –”

“Don’t make this personal –”

“I can’t fix this, Bruce!”

Good talk, Stark. Very mature. When he first rode a bike without training wheels he plunked onto the tarmac and busted up his knees real bad. When Howard found out, he got an earful not for the four stitches, but for the dried-up tear tracks on his cheeks. If he’d learned one thing that day - besides the fact that he should’ve rode on a grass field instead - it was that nobody would praise him for trying to ride an adult bicycle well before his time, or that he'd toughed up during the suturing.

No more crying. Save the tears not for himself.
“I thought Avenging would keep us safe, even if for a bit longer. That’s how I deal with it. You like to talk about me not dealing with my issues? This is me, dealing.”

Bruce loaded his washing tools into a pail and went to the sink, still pensive.

“... Steve told me what happened this morning.”

Wow, Captain America had no problem breaking promises after all. To give it some context, Tony couldn’t sleep, as it were, and felt flabby because he’d done more sitting and mopping around than flexing muscles. He could almost hear Steve going drill sergeant on him about *not doing more*. Ego nicely stoked, he got up at five in the morning and decided to go for a jog after all. He took the stairs down, buckled his shoes, and sprinted out of the foyer, only to end up horizontal by the hydrangea bed.

Steve found him there, flushed and limp, and carried him up to his room.

He made the good Captain swear not to tell anybody.

“Next time, I’m gonna put it in a God damn contract and have him swear it over the Bible.” Then, Bruce knelt beside him, wrinkled fingers coming to brush stray hair from his forehead. “Did he tell anyone else?”

“No. But at this rate, he might just drag you to the medic bay himself.”

“Is that a threat?”

“He’s worried about you.”

“You worry enough for the whole team. Send him my thanks when you see someday, but this is really none of his business.”

“You can’t shut yourself out from Steve, or from the team. You learned how to let me in.” Bruce
leaned in, and rested his forehead against Tony’s sweaty temple. “Just got to expand your horizon a little bit.”

“… I haven’t rinsed my mouth out. It’s disgusting in here.”

He felt Bruce’s lips curve upward against his neck. Their fingers interlaced atop his stomach, and he calmed his palpitating heart. Truth was, and let it not be known - it’d started to hurt. Nothing serious, a transient prickle here and there. If Bruce ever caught a wince, he passed it off as sneeze.

“What are you afraid of? Really?” Bruce asked quietly.

So, he closed his eyes, and found himself yet again, staring at the vast nothing. A bed of stars, and beyond. The sheer possibilities that even his mind could not wrap around. And what he didn’t know, he feared. He fell, and they told him that Bruce caught him. Plucked him from the sky outright and brought him back to life.

He was ready to die.

He gasped, air not filling up his lungs enough. He blinked rapidly, moisture collecting in the well of his eyes. Bruce was still watching him closely, brows drawn together. And Tony looked at him, just looked at him, and thought about the rest of the team freeloading off him several floors below.

He was ready to die.

Not anymore.

Steve benching him from Avengers duties only meant more time for him to spare on Ultron. It was a passion project concocted in the deep recesses of his mind when it went nowhere good in the middle of night. He needed hundreds of suits responding to commands and terminating hostile targets with extreme prejudice as a team. Programming hive-mind was not easy - admitting so left a bad aftertaste on his tongue - so he hustled on his codes, ran tests on prototypic Veronica 2.0. He was busting ass in his workshop and he was happy.

“What do you think, J?” he motioned to a row of gleaming Mark 42 he’d mounted on a deck. “Five out of five.”
“Sir, your vitals are unstable. Prolonged tachycardia since you put on Mark 30 gauntlet, BP has risen to –”

“Mute!” If JARVIS wouldn’t be part of the solution…

He had one more batch of motherboards to attend to. He took the soldering gun from its stand, directed it to a capacitor –

“Oh, come on…”

Silver droplets landed everywhere with each minute tremor of his hands. He just short-circuited the whole thing. Thank God for deep pockets and bottomless supply of motherboards. He binned this one and reached out for another –

He gripped the edge of his bench and held his breath. His hearing was shot, and there was a burst of hotness in his chest. He grappled at it, winced as his palm smoothed over the cool surface of his arc reactor. Christ, he just got this new ticker after the whole fiasco with palladium poisoning -

Too soon.

At the first throb in his core, he slid sideways off his chair. He was falling again, and he was so sure Bruce wouldn't be here to catch him this time.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Bruce and Tony drift apart. Tony gets sick in bed and, in a medical emergency, trusts Bruce to unseat the arc reactor while trying not to have flashbacks about Obadiah.

What a goddamn day. What another goddamn day in a row. Another day of Tony avoiding the rest of the team, not eating anything solid, and mysteriously stumbling out of Bruce's presence every time the beginning gurgles of a coughing fit started.

The day before, Tony gave Bruce a funny look when Bruce told him it wouldn't do any good to be lone ranger, then stalked out of the lab.

Sometimes dealing with Tony could be exhausting. Not because of the scars of his past and not-so-distant past. Bruce sympathized with that part, understood the mental and physical toll it took. But because of the way Tony chose to shut everyone out, including Bruce now, until the fallout would manifest itself in an uncontrollably messy way.

In the lab, Tony either ignored him and waved off his concern, or was irritable and snappish at Bruce. So Bruce temporarily relocated to another R&D floor to put some space between them. He wasn't afraid of Hulking Out on Tony; he was afraid of saying something he would regret.

Bruce was running some simulations that seemed to take infuriatingly long, and his mind couldn't focus enough to comprehend the rows of data being spat out. So he put his fist through the keyboard without turning a shade, then felt too guilty to break out another of Tony's expensive keyboards.

To calm himself and assuage his guilt, Bruce went to make a large pan of lasagna which Tony, predictably of late, never showed up for. Didn't even grace anyone with his presence at dinner.

Bruce finally made his way to bed, if a little apprehensively. He was exhausted and had to go to sleep eventually, although he didn't know what to expect. Tony didn't come to bed at all last night after that "lone ranger" comment, and the night before he had such a violent nightmare he woke himself -and Bruce- screaming.
Surprisingly, the engineer was curled up in bed, staring unseeingly at the door Bruce just walked through. Bruce crawled into bed in silence, then decided to put his arm around Tony hesitantly, spooning him in a loose embrace.

Tony grabbed his arm and squeezed, unexpectedly welcoming of the touch. The other man felt feverishly hot, but Bruce was too pleasantly surprised to say anything that might ruin the moment.

It was freezing in the room, felt like it was only twenty-something degrees, yet the covers were dashed down on Tony's side. Bruce was shivering, even tucked under the blankets and wrapped against Tony's radiating body.

They were lying in silence when Bruce felt Tony buck against him. He lifted his head and looked over Tony's shoulder, where the dim light of the arc reactor illuminated Tony's hand clawing at the mattress. "What's wrong?"

Tony just shook his head against the pillow, reticent as always. "Go to sleep, Tony. Tomorrow will be better." *Tomorrow they would start afresh.* Today had been a long and trying day for Bruce, for Tony, and for their relationship.

Bruce had no inkling of the discomfort Tony was suffering, no idea it was crushingly worse than the anxiety-driven fidgeting Tony felt - and hid poorly - most of these nights. In fact, this was like nothing Tony ever felt before. He laid awake and terrified, his pulse ringing rapidly in his ears, heart pounding like it was going to explode out of his chest.

Tony couldn't for the life of him articulate what the fuck was wrong with him. And he was afraid if he said anything, his heart would leap right out of his mouth. He just tried to calm himself and follow Bruce's advice. He was making such a valiant effort to hold himself still so he wouldn't piss Bruce off even more that day, or worse, make him worry.

Bruce was about to drop off into blissful unconsciousness when the sickening sound of retching and water suddenly gushing hit his ears.

"Shit." Tony croaked feebly.

*Shit, Bruce echoed in his head.*
Bruce was instantly awake, and instinct kicked in. He laid a steadying hand on Tony's back until the heaving spasms eased up.

"Jarvis, lights 50%." Bruce said as he rolled off his side of the bed.

The moderate light revealed Tony's ashen face panting heavily into the bed. Bruce rested a hand on Tony's arm and felt tremors beneath his finger pads. Tony couldn't usually move under his own steam after his frequent puking episodes since this mess started. This time was no different.

Bruce scooped Tony up in a bridal-carry. Belatedly he surveyed the damage; aside from the wet spot on the pillow, there wasn't much. Tony's unsupported head rolled back bonelessly as Bruce carried him out to the living room, and the sight creeped Bruce out.

He propped Tony sitting up on the couch as listless, unfocused brown eyes stared ahead. Bruce aligned himself at Tony's eye level, and waited for a bit more awareness to return to Tony's features before he dared to leave him alone. "I'll be right back."

He returned to Tony's side with what he needed to help. Seeing as Tony's arms were lying limply at his sides and he made no sign of moving, Bruce brushed a damp, cool towel against Tony's wet face. The ailing man flinched and shied away from the touch slightly, then slowly relaxed.

Bruce held a bottle of water to Tony's lips and Tony reached to support the bottle, some of his strength evidently returning. Bruce lifted an empty lined trash can to Tony's lap and let him rinse and spit into it. He would be more comfortable on the couch than in the bathroom, and they both didn't have the energy to wrangle their way to the bathroom then.

Tony struggled to pull his sweaty shirt over his head, exposing his bright red torso. If there was any levity to the circumstance, Bruce might have remarked that Tony looked like a traffic cone. Instead he eyed Tony's pale face and red body with clinical concern, then wiped his chest with a fresh cold towel. This touch Tony welcomed immediately.

Bruce was crouched over, almost forehead to forehead, looking into Tony's face.

"I'm sorry, Bruce." Tony whispered, breaking the quietness of the ministrations. He really did look apologetic. Bruce knew him well enough to know he wasn't just apologizing for depriving them of sleep that night.
"It's okay, Tony." Bruce murmured, trying to keep the tiredness out of his voice.

Because even though Bruce was running on empty, what else could he say to the man he loved when Tony was looking at him like that, using that earnest tone of voice? Bruce hoped Tony would know he wasn't just talking about the mess in bed either.

Bruce moved to sit beside Tony, waiting for him to catch his breath and get his stomach back under control.

After some moments of stillness, Tony started to squirm and claw at his chest, and Bruce reached reflexively for the trash can. Tony shook his head, but with this wave he volunteered some vital information.

"No... palpitations really bad." He choked out.

Bruce was on his feet, on high alert again. He examined Tony's form and caught sight of his jugular vein throbbing furiously in time with his racing pulse.

Jesus Christ. Was this all from the anxiety? How could a psychosomatic response be so... palpable?

"Jarvis, is cardiac arrest imminent?" Bruce didn't want to freak Tony out, but he had to know if he should be running Tony to the ER pronto.

"No, Dr. Banner, but sir's pulse is at 122 beats per minute."

Tony was losing his breath he just worked so hard to catch. He started fumbling with the arc reactor casing.

"Tony, what the hell-?" Bruce questioned as he tried to still Tony's hands.

"Need to... remove from housing... so can breathe..." Tony gasped breathlessly, although his hands were shaking too badly to get a good grip as they clawed at his chest.
"You... do it."

What?! For the near-nine months that Bruce had free reign to touch Tony, he never fiddled with the arc reactor. He understood how it worked when Tony explained, but the closest he had come was grazing across the arc reactor's surface whenever he caressed Tony's chest.

But Bruce had always adapted well to crisis, and he kept his outward calm as his hand replaced Tony's over the arc reactor.

He sat back down beside Tony, and rested the other arm behind Tony's neck. He was going to have to mentally prepare and steady himself just as much as Tony. Click, turn, click.

Bruce was about to extract the arc reactor from its metal housing when Tony pleaded between erratic breaths, "Bruce wait.. please tell... story about... yourself." His eyes were frantic and terrified, like a trapped wild animal.

Bruce was momentarily bewildered, but his mind quickly made the connection. Obadiah. This situation, this tableau of letting someone else handle the arc reactor, was horribly similar to when Obadiah Stane ripped the arc reactor from Tony's chest. Tony had told him about this before in scant detail.

He put more pieces of the puzzle together, with the way Tony's hands were now grabbing and kneading at Bruce's shirt. To remind himself he's not paralyzed this time.

Bruce heard what Tony wasn't asking from his odd story-telling request. Please make this -make yourself- as different from Obadiah as possible.

"Okay, sweetheart." Bruce pressed a faint kiss to Tony's cheek.

Bruce's mind scrambled for lighthearted stories while his steady hand extracted the arc reactor, keeping all the wires in place. He held the glowing technological marvel like it was the most important thing in the world, because Tony's life really was to Bruce.

He used his usual calm murmur, even though he felt anything but. "Junior year in college and it's the first party I'd been invited to all year. The hosts wanted to set up shots in test tubes, so I volunteered to steal a few test tube holders from the freshman chemistry lab. I was gonna return it the day after
the party, I swear! Thought I scoped the place really well, but just as I was walking out of the lab with a backpack full of rack holders, the crotchety old lab technician Mr. Sanders burst in and started interrogating me on what I was doing. Thought I was gonna shit my pants, Tony. So I made up some lab ass excuse about looking for my water bottle or something and hightailed it outta there. Then there was this other time...

Bruce didn't have Tony's gift, but he could ramble on with his frivolous anecdotes for as long as Tony needed him to.

Bruce smiled at the familiarity and warmth that returned to Tony's eyes, which were glued to his face. Tony responded with a weak smile of his own. His jugular vein was no longer pulsing so visibly or rapidly.

Bruce couldn't remember how many stories he told, or what stories he told, or how long they sat together in this odd position with Bruce supporting the arc reactor. But it gave room for Tony's lungs to expand and slowly he got his breathing back under control again.

Tony nodded at Bruce, who carefully reinserted the arc reactor into its home. *Click, turn, click.*

Bruce suddenly felt drained when the arc reactor had its final click into place. What a goddamn night, but at least Tony and him were unified again. They held onto each other for a while, Bruce's hand on Tony's chest, Tony's on Bruce's lap.

It was Bruce's turn to catch the breath he didn't realize he had been holding.

"We'll sleep on my old floor tonight." Bruce decided, finally disentangling himself from Tony and getting to his feet.

The responsible, middle-class side of him nagged to strip the bed sheet and pillowcase, to seal off the liner in the trash can. Unfortunately, that part was quickly silenced when Tony stood up from the couch and his knees immediately buckled under him.

Tony wound up on all fours on the floor. He slowly maneuvered himself to sit on the floor leaning heavily against the couch. They both didn't have any more energy to vocalize their fears or concerns. Bruce just scooped Tony up in his arms wordlessly, making sure to support his head this time.
What was wrong with Tony? The weakness that came after vomiting and after the palpitation attacks should have passed by this time, Bruce's mind reeled.

At some point during that night, Bruce already decided that the next day he would get Tony the long overdue medical attention and a correct diagnosis for this mysterious illness.

He suppressed his patented guilt at waiting this long to help, at not intervening sooner, and concentrated instead on getting Tony settled into the spare bed that night.
Chapter 5
Chapter by HepG2

Chapter Summary

Finally. The reveal of Tony's diagnosis.

It was kind of dark, and kind of bright when he first came to. He blinked away thick mucus from his vision and tried to sit up. Like a wheelbarrow rusted through and through, his back creaked as he looked around, and quickly found himself gloriously, alone.

Why was he alone?

“Bruce?”

He wasn’t even in his room. God forbid, he was in a single bed. No, no – he made a promise to himself, it was always either gonna be a double bed, or a Jacuzzi, or a freaking meadow under a starry, starry sky. He yanked the blanket off his lap and got up.

Then, Bruce reared his sleep-deprived, baggy-eyed, still-handsome face through the door. He took one look at Tony, and pushed the door apart. “What are you doing?”

“… I was thinking of brushing my teeth –”

Bruce was all over him in the next heartbeat, fussing over his pulse, his temperature, his smell –

“I need a shower.” His tongue tasted like something recently died on it. Bruce was about to manhandle him into bed, so he twirled about him – then only, recollection of yesterday’s events hit him like a truck. His hand came up to grope at the arc reactor – a reflex – and he stopped dead in his tracks, wondering if he’d really let Bruce take it off.

“Tony, hey.” Bruce sidled up behind him, one hand came up to rest on the small of his back. “What is it?”
He quickly released his chest and pushed back his hair from his forehead. That couldn’t be right… he remembered feeling like he was on his deathbed or something. Not anymore. Was it a dream? He thought he felt this *thing* come off, that he was done for. This felt surreal.

“Screw shower,” he promptly marched down the stairs. “I need coffee.”

“What? Tony, wait up!”

“Nuh-uh. Busy, busy.” He walked faster, and plain ignored the growing *boom, boom, boom* in his ears. “Why wasn’t I up earlier? Did you off my alarm?”

“Tony, stop.” Bruce about seized him completely by the shoulder and spun him around. That was *annoying* because even Steve didn’t manhandle people that way, not unless they stunk of Hydra and deserved a good kick in the nuts. Bruce, of all people knew better.

“You’re… clearly pissed off,” Tony pointed out. “Please don’t be.”

“We’re calling in Helen Cho, all right?” Bruce pronounced every word in measured calmness, syllable by syllable that if Tony didn’t know him, he would’ve bitten back for being patronizing. It didn’t matter how Bruce deliver the verdict.

“Nope. Not going.”

“She can run a more comprehensive test on you. She’s an expert in regenerative medicine. If this is a – I don’t know, some kind of response to your new arc reactor –”

“I’d like to call it Starkium. Or Howardium? It was Dad’s discovery, I just stood on his gigantic shoulder –”

“We could analyse your blood, urine. Run some untargeted tests, screen for abnormalities in metabolite levels, peptides –”
They brisk walked all the way to the common lounge, when Tony did a sharp turn into the kitchen, onto to jolt to a stop by the fridge. He wasn’t sure what hour this was, but he’d expected the area to be empty.

Steve was perched on a stool by the island, and he looked up at once from the newspapers he was perusing. “Morning,” he frowned. He sized Tony up in one second and inevitably, frowned some more. “Are you alright? You look terrible.”

“I feel like a million dollars, thank you.” Tony wrenched the freezer open and pulled out Bruce’s tub of Häagen-Dazs.

“Ice-cream for breakfast? Really?”

“Watch me.”

He ignored the way Bruce and Steve trade a look, and fetched a spoon from the drying rack. And what are the odds? A generous pint of creamy coffee bean-laced concoction of heavy cream, condensed milk and vanilla extract ought to count as a fix. He sensed more than saw the burn in Bruce’s eyes on his forehead, so he slithered away to join Steve at the island.

For all the geeky PhDs in Bruce’s collection, Tony wondered if mastery in body language analyses had been one of them.

“Tony, how long are you going to avoid discussing this?”

He settled his ice-cream tub right over an article Steve was reading. “Cap, I demand you reinstate my status to combat-active.”

And two shouts of incredulous “What?” rang in the kitchen.

Again, they exchanged a look behind his back, and he couldn’t ignore it any longer. He was about to launch into his signature hyperverbal vomit thing, lecturing them about his worth in the team, that if he were going to be benched indefinitely, they might as well take him off the roster for good. He’d already failed all his Avengers assessments anyway, so Fury would’ve fire him regardless. Let’s just get this done and over with, so he could fly back to Malibu and continue tinkering and making obscene amount of money –
“Here’s a coordinate.”

Steve slid a fountain pen across the table, said coordinates engraved along the polished ebony length. How clandestine…

“To what?”

“It’s a dead drop. This is how we communicate with SHIELD informants. I was meaning to ask Nat to check it out –”

“Then have her check it out.” Bruce plucked the pen from Tony’s grip. “Steve, it’s long due. Tony is not –”

“Not *complaining* about this assignment.” This was a cakewalk, sweetcheeks. He wouldn’t even need a suit. Just pop by some neighbourhood, take a looksie at the mailbox, see what’s the four-one-one. “With your permission, I’ll take the Audi out for a quick spin, Bruce.”

It inevitably became a three-man trip downtown – JARVIS the navigator, Bruce the co-pilot.

“I’m the boss,” Tony burped contently as he sat the emptied tumbler of another quarter pint of vanilla milkshake under his seat. “Hit me, J. Where’s Cap sending us?”

JARVIS did not reply, but the GPS bleeped anew with a red arrow, wordlessly instructing him to take the second turning on the right. Bruce didn’t say a thing either since he strapped himself down, arms curled around an unassuming silver briefcase. That was a six-billion-dollar investment he was cradling. Tony sure hoped they didn’t have to deploy that.

Two minutes later, Tony decided to eff it and tap Bruce on his knee. “Ten bucks for your thoughts.”

“We should go back.”

“… Pretend I never asked you that.”
Six-billion-dollar worth of metalwork clanked against the seatbelt as Bruce turned towards Tony. “You don’t have to worry about Helen spilling your secrets. I personally vouch for her professionalism –”

“What secrets are we talking about here, ‘cause you got to be specific –”

“That reactor in your chest!”

“Hey, easy on the suit, Bruce. You break it, you buy it.”

Bruce took the deepest breath Tony ever seen him take, and held his tongue. He was good at pushing buttons, but one too many, and he would have to deploy that freaking suit.

“Just humor me, huh?” Bruce spoke with feigned serenity. “She’s coming down for the Gordon conference in three days. See if I can arrange a half-an-hour slot with her –”

“Bruce, it’s fine.”

“It’s not!” As if on cue, the engine purred demurely as JARVIS took charge of the wheel. Their Audi swerved to the next lane, and Bruce undid his seat belt. “Stop the car.”

“I don’t like dealing with traffic tickets –”

“JARVIS, stop it.”

“Shit – Bruce, calm down –”

The suitcase almost broke Tony’s nose as Bruce shoved it into his face, and he promptly tumbled out of the car before JARVIS could properly park it by the curb. Tony clambered out of his seat, a thumb hovering over the deployment button. He tuned out all the angry honks and middle finger salutations, and rounded the hood to get to where Bruce was.
He stopped a clear three-yard away.

“Bruce?”

Imagine the ensuing PR disaster if Bruce go Code Green on him right now. If the seams around Bruce’s collar and sleeves start to rip, that’s it – Iron Man would have to drop this brand-new Audi on his head, warn incoming traffic to stop coming in, get smacked around in his metal coffin because he absolutely deserved it –

“… I’m fine.” Bruce sucked in another breath, and straightened up. His eyes were still decidedly hazel. “I don’t know what to do with you sometimes.”

Broken recorder.

Still not letting go of the briefcase, Tony leaned his hip against the back of the car, and took his shades off. “I’m scared, Bruce.”

Bruce slowly looked up at him, and Tony shook his head. “Yeah. Well. Guess even Tony Stark isn’t invincible after all, huh?”

“It’s about New York, isn’t it? And Loki.”

“… I don’t know.”

The vast nothingness that envelope him every night he closed his eyes was one thing. The weight of the nuke over his shoulder still was crushing. He roused to the lingering impression of being piled on by aliens. The sight of Loki and his majestic spear on the roof of his Tower. But, he took their names and kicked their collective asses, and he was brave.

Not always.

“I don’t want to lose you.”
Bruce frowned, and his feet did a weird, stuttering jig that told Tony how much he wanted to come over, but couldn’t. Code Green had always been a difficult wedge between them, but they’d manage.

“I, uh,” Tony twirled his shades restlessly between nimble fingers. “Believe it or not, I do think about this a lot. About,” he waved his hand aimlessly, “what’s wrong with, you know, me, in general. I’d cheated Death enough times that I’m losing count, Bruce. Afghanistan. Obie. This,” he tapped on his chest, on the light kept hidden under layers of clothes, “New York. I don’t know. I was fine before, I’m not now. What gives?” He tucked his shades in his breast pocket. “I care about you, Bruce. I do. I care about Pepper, Rhodey. The team.” He looked pointedly away. “I can’t do… dying anymore. I really can’t.”

“Nobody’s dying, Tony – we can help you get better –”

“What if I can’t get better?” he cut off smoothly, his expression stony. “What if,” tongue felt like lead, “what if, this is it? I don’t want any more diagnosis, tests, that whole… mess. If my days are numbered, I wanna spend ‘em at home. That too much to ask?”

“Yes!”

Bruce did turn a shade green, and his shoulders shook with barely-there restraint. Tony backed up a step, his thumb going back to the button.

“Good God, Tony! What makes you think we’re OK with that? You’re not dying, we can fix this! Why won’t you let us?”

“Sir,” a cool, mechanical voice erupted from the car’s radio. After making sure Bruce wasn’t running the risk of growing taller by two more feet, Tony pulled the backseat door open.

“What is it, J?”

“I suggest you take the conversation elsewhere, Sir. A police car is heading this way, and stopping on the side of this road is traffic violation –”

“Yeah, I hear you.” He closed the door and cocked his head at an angle. “We got to move, Bruce.”
And that was it. Bruce did not push the matter any longer. And maybe, this was it. This… illness, it was just gone. Today, he walked the full length of his penthouse without quite losing his breath, he kept his breakfast down – half the usual portion, but still. He felt OK.

They’d be OK.

Then, JARVIS turned a corner, and the Audi rolled to a gentle stop beside an alley.

“Sir, I believe the dead drop is close by.”

“OK. Hey, check out my new toy!”

Bruce still looked like he wanted to wring Tony by the neck. Fine by him, but Cap gave him a job, and he would bend over backwards doing it. Hashtag sarcasm. “This,” he slipped a weirdass looking watch around his wrist, and activated a function, “is a miniaturised UT probe.” Bet even Bruce couldn’t say no to that.

“… You made ultrasonic testing wearable?”

Score one for Stark.

“While it’s fun creating new stuff, innovating existing technology is just as smart. I don’t fancy myself tapping brick after brick looking for a hole in the wall, you know?” He got out of the car, and Bruce followed, silver briefcase in tow. “It has to be somewhere here, right?” Tony stood before the alley’s entrance, and nope, not spending a second longer in there. It smelt vaguely of dried urine. “Let’s see what this baby can do for us.”

A red beam shot out of his watch to land on a somewhat off-coloured brick not too far away from them. He nodded at Bruce, and held his hand out for the briefcase. He called it better safe than sorry, but as if Steve would feed them a bogus coordinate to a trap in some back alley. Come on…

The brick came off easily enough.

“… What the?”
And it was empty.

“Tony?” Bruce was megaphoning with his palms cupping his mouth. “Found anything?”

“… No. There’s nothing here.” He stuck his hand into the hole and felt around, just to make sure. It really was empty. “Think we been had?”

“… I’ll call Steve.”

As it turned out, it wasn’t with a hundred-percent certainty that dead drops would contain anything. That meant someone would have to routinely check those spots so they wouldn’t miss anything – Jesus, what a waste of time. As he idled around some lamp post while Bruce spoke on the phone, he had like three designs down for a miniaturised motion or mass sensor to fit inside dead drops. The instant a load was placed in their belly, SHIELD would know. See? A little bit of smart engineering could go a long way.

And boy, it had been a long day. His body was succumbing to the exertion, his heart racing in his ribcages again. He’d settle the briefcase on the grimy ground, but found himself – inexplicably – sagging against the pole. Bruce’s profile was wavering in and out of his focus, so he pulled in several deep, reassuring breaths, which obviously did nothing for him.

“Hey, hey, you’re all right.”

So much for pretending to stand tall and strong. He was done. Bruce would have to drive them home. Large hands wrapped around his waist and shoulder, and he felt like it wasn’t that much of an uphill battle anymore.

“… Give me a minute.”

He wanted to crawl into bed and fall headfirst into Bruce’s pillows. There was this unsettling, bone-deep weariness that just wouldn’t let him go, and he couldn’t hold himself together long enough. He was this close to losing it all –

“Is everything OK, Sir?”
Who was speaking? Didn’t recognise that voice.

“Yeah, my friend is just a little winded, we’ll be fine –”

“Dr Banner? Dr Bruce Banner, oh my God, it’s really you!” Bruce’s arm on his waist left him, and he felt half of Bruce’s body jiggle with each enthusiastic handshake. “I’m a fan – I mean, I want to thank you, and the Avengers for what you did for New York. My aunt was nearby, and the aliens would’ve gotten to her but some arrows took ‘em down, so yeah. I can’t… no words, Sir. Thank you.”

Exactly what they needed. Folks should appreciate their superheroes more, dammit. Tony wished he could melt into a puddle and slink down the drainage. There should be a string of witty comebacks paraded on his lips by now, so he could vomit them the soonest Mr Fan Guy wish to shake his hands. Maybe a fist bump, a high five.

“Mr Stark?”

His knees buckled and he slid to the ground, knocking away his briefcase as he went. He lunged for the case, couldn’t lose Iron Man –

“I’ll take that, thanks.” A flash of silver fluttered before his face. The briefcase was once more tucked under Bruce’s arm. Ha, try steal that from the Hulk. And then, there were hands – felt extremely foreign – clinical and probing and not the right size, not Bruce’s. They were palming his neck, pressing into his wrist and pulling his cheeks –

When they went to his collar, Tony gripped that hand in mild panic. He couldn’t see much by now, thick fog clouding his vision, but he thought he caught a grimace on the man’s face.

“Don’t even try,” he gritted out.

“Sir, calm down. I’m a doctor. I can help.”

Who was asking? Tony pushed himself up on an elbow and scooted away from Mr Doctor, and promptly fell into Bruce’s lap.
“Dr Banner,” he said instead, “How long has this been going on? Any appetite loss? Weight loss?”

That, ladies and gentlemen, was how Tony Stark got clerked by a GP on the curb, with Bruce’s thighs pillowing his head. Not great for the press.

But, at least he got some answers. Some maybe-answers – they could only be sure after the tests came back. Not complaining! The mystery of him coughing out lungs for so many moons? That was his heart pumping so hard it tickled. Who would’ve thought? His weight loss, vomiting spells, bouts of insomnia and general irritability?

“I thought that was just me being me,” Tony grumbled as they made him sit on the trunk of his Audi. He had buttons sewn onto the butt pocket – yep, he just scratched something. “What are you – hey!”

The doc tapped a spot below his knee and he kicked. It tickled, so he giggled, and Bruce’s brows disappeared into his hairline.

Tony cleared his throat.

“Interesting,” the doctor commented. “If you’d let me run a blood test, just to confirm your TSH and –”

“No more tests!” and “Thyroid hormones?” were half-shouted in unison, one in annoyance, the other in bewilderment.

“First off, you’re not getting anything from my body,” Tony pointed a finger at the doctor. “And you,” he pointed it to Bruce next, “What are you thinking? You know why I don’t swing into your friendly neighbourhood clinic for consultations!”

Grubby paw off the arc reactor, please. He really didn’t need more people gawking over the light in his chest.

“Uh, Avengers Sirs, if I may?” Tony would give it to him. Among all four physicians-with-an-opinion he’d “consulted”, this one sure was the politest giving it. “I understand the necessity for all these uh, seccrecies. You can run the TFTs yourself. I’m sure Stark Industries is more than able to run
Back in the Tower, Bruce worked his CSI magic and tested Tony’s blood against a typical thyroid function test panel he smooched off a colleague from New York-Presbyterian Hospital. Tony wasn’t quite sure what to think. He kind of wanted the doc’s suspicion to be right. He was so done with people asking if he still had nightmares, or if he needed to cuddle a shrink after that Loki incident. He didn’t want this to be a physical manifestation of repressed psychological issues.

He was made of tougher stuff. Wasn’t he?

“It’s out, Tony,” Bruce declared from his bench. He poked his reading glasses up his nose, and studied the numbers. “Your T3 and T4 is off the charts. TSH is near zero.”

“… Sounds like bad news.”

“Well,” Bruce set his glasses on the table. “Looks like hyperthyroidism.”

“… I’m hormonal?”

Anything was possible these days.

“It is rare among male. Primary cause is usually hereditary. We have to refer you to an endocrinologist, they’ll tell you more.” Then, Bruce came sidling beside him on the couch. “Relieved?”


“Nah.”

It also felt kind of silly in retrospect, to almost lose his mind about something so trivial. There was a lesson in here somewhere. Like that astronomer dude who was so obsessed with counting stars that
he walked into a hole in the ground.

“I wonder if the doctor would want to relocate to the South Block?”

Bruce smirked, but said nothing and pecked Tony lightly on his forehead. All was well, except damn, he didn’t even get the doctor’s name. So much for wanting to send him a thank you note and Christmas cards every year thereafter.

“Sometimes,” Tony thought he could sleep better this time. “We need people to look at things just the way they are.”
Chapter 6

Chapter by justtopostmyfic

Chapter Summary

Bruce is still adapting to being uninhibited in chauffeured car rides. That won't stop him from caring about Tony.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In the weeks since the diagnosis and prescribed treatment plan, Tony developed a mild addiction to blackberry-infused water, so cases of bottles started appearing in every fridge in the Tower. All Jarvis' doing, didn't matter that this artisanal water was only sold mostly on the West Coast.

In some ways, looking after Tony was easy, with help from his quick-learning A.I. and the infinite wealth that afforded support staff. In other ways, it was not, because Tony was Tony.

But what Bruce could do, right then, was join in his boyfriend's company. His boyfriend who was standing alone out on the terrace overlooking the night skyline of Manhattan.

"Is this why you've been snarking less at Steve and Clint these days?" Bruce joked by way of announcing his presence, even as he handed Tony a chilled fresh bottle from the fridge.

Dry mouth was pretty benign, and Bruce knew from the list of side effects it could be a lot worse with the meds Tony was on.

Tony elbowed Bruce in the ribs as soon as he got close enough, just hard enough to make Bruce yelp. "Keep that up, and I'll restrain myself from sucking you off for the foreseeable future."

"So the sass applies to me as well." Bruce quipped in a mock-wounded tone. "Good to know your sex drive isn't affected."

"Yet." Tony finished almost silently, and Bruce heard the notes of shame and frustration as the mood in the open air suddenly turned somber.
Tony was prone to slipping into fits of being subdued and morose, especially since the treatment plan started. Bruce already made a note to himself to talk to Tony about it, after the physical side-effects settled. But he suspected Tony disliked the dependency on pills, because it was so human.

Iron Man and Tony Stark of Stark Industries were not embodiments of human frailty, quite the opposite.

In their private space now, Bruce's first instinct was to envelope Tony in a hug. But he didn't. Bruce knew if he initiated the hug, the gesture would only be like a band-aid, a temporary numbing that would cease once they broke contact.

Instead, he angled his body away from the skyline and towards Tony. "You'll beat this, Tony. Sometimes the hardest battles have no clear enemies to fight."

Bruce didn't try to hide the raw openness in his voice. "And... and this time I'm here for you."

Let him come to you to accept your help, if he wants to.

It took a couple of seconds, but then Bruce felt the warmth of Tony in his chest, the chill of the half-drunk water bottle clasped against his back.

It didn't take Bruce nearly as long to return the embrace.

If Thor walked through the door at that moment after months away, and took in the sight of two lovers in each others' arms framed high against the city's backdrop, it looked like they had the world-Midgard at least- at their feet.

Every September marked the annual shareholders' meeting for Stark Industries, and Tony had to show up. Even without Pepper's stern reminders, Tony knew he couldn't get out of it.

He did have some business acumen after all, as much as he tried to downplay it to get a rise of of Pepper and, back then, Obie. More importantly, he couldn't show any signs of weakness in front of the board members and shareholders.
On the way to the meeting, however, was a different story.

Bruce agreed to come along for moral support, even put on a nice suit to match Tony's bespoke one, and this time Happy was driving them, as he usually did for official SI business.

Tony glanced at Bruce with a familiar look of longing, coupled with uncharacteristic vulnerability, and Bruce slid right up against Tony as he entered the car.

From the middle seat, he could see his own eyes reflected in the rearview mirror, and Bruce looked away quickly.

Happy was easygoing and a stand-up guy, but it was taking Bruce a long time to get used to any sort of intimacy in a chauffeured car. Definitely taking longer than it did to adapt to communal living with the rest of the team, and showing affection with Tony in the Tower.

There were fifty-five stories in the North Tower alone, but a car cabin was supposed to be a cocoon. And in such a small space, there wasn't any corner that a conversation couldn't reach. Same reason why Bruce never spoke on his cellphone in the subway.

But Tony clearly trusted Happy implicitly, treated him like his shadow, his wing man. So Bruce would adapt.

"How do you feel?" Bruce murmured against the shell of Tony's ear.

"Bored as hell."

"And aside from your disdain for the meeting?"

"I feel okay, I guess."

Bruce could feel the pregnant pause in the air as Tony drew a deep breath and hesitated. *Give me a little more than that, Tony.*
"A little dizzy." Tony admitted.

"And my stomach still hurts, but not in a pukey way."

"Love this A8 too much, huh?" Bruce gently teased, keeping the mood light to avoid bringing Tony down before the AGM spectacle.

"Yeah, this new Audi has got to stay spotless. We can't even fuck in it till it's at least six months old." Tony smirked.

Bruce blushed, they were not completely alone, then chuckled at the brazenly shameless declaration.

Happy didn't react at all; it was probably not the craziest thing he heard come out of Tony's mouth that week.

The A8 was a fun car to drive. They both enjoyed going on joyrides and taking turns behind the wheel, mostly before this illness put the brakes on a lot of their normal routines.

Soon they would take this bad boy out again more often, unchauffeured and unaided by Jarvis. Just the two of them, Bruce hoped optimistically.

"Tell me if you feel worse." Bruce punctuated that statement with a quick kiss that conveyed so many unspoken emotions.

"And definitely tell me if you feel better too." He smiled against Tony's cheek.

He knew Happy could see them in the rearview mirror if he looked up at that moment, but Bruce learned -was still learning- not to mind.

As soon as they climbed out of the car, Tony's demeanor did a one-eighty degree turn. He buttoned his suit jacket crisply, all clean lines and sharp edges.

Many of the other suits at these bloated meetings were older, more cynical, more polished. But Tony
puffed his chest out and postured like he was the biggest guy in the room, like he was the attraction they had all come to see. And he was probably right.

Bruce always liked to observe the change, and loved to be present for the change back. Most people never got to see the real unmasked Tony Stark, and Bruce would always treasure his luck of being in the intimate few.

*It was fascinating, perhaps just a little like watching the Hulk transform and then de-Hulk in privacy.*

*Except Tony could control precisely when to turn it on and off, and didn't have a destructiveness to the power he exuded (unless an overstepping reporter or rude board member provoked him, of course).*

*And people actually scrambled in the direction of Tony Stark, Bruce thought wryly.*

Bruce kept his hand on the small of Tony's back for the first few steps out of the car, for balance. Then he dropped his hand but kept close for the rest of the very public way to the auditorium.

Happy was the consummate professional as a bodyguard: hovering, but inconspicuously. In close proximity, but not in contact unless needed. They both knew Tony and his prideful nature in public too well.

Bruce lingered at the back of the large room, invisible. *Oh yeah, the public Tony Stark was a lot more eloquent and charismatic than the Hulk too.* Bruce beamed proudly at Tony, joining in the thunderous applause that few people could commandeer, especially following speeches on dry topics.

The ride home was pretty uneventful, giving the relaxed space for Bruce to think.

Five minutes into the drive, Tony tucked his head against Bruce's chest and muttered, "Stomach doesn't hurt as much now," just before falling into a light doze.

Bruce eased the near-empty bottle of blackberry water out of Tony's loose grip, then rubbed Tony's upper back gently to soothe him into a restful slumber; bonus that it comforted Bruce to do so as well.

Being with Tony sometimes felt like being inside the eyewall of a hurricane, and all Bruce could do was hold on.
At least once a week, Bruce didn't know what he was going to do with Tony. But what he did know was he would do just about anything he could for Tony.

He was still wracking his mind for how he would play this to actually get Tony to take his medication routinely, every day, like clockwork. Imploring? Teasing? Mother-hen? Clinical? Firm? All of the above manners?

The prescribed treatment plan was quite a rigorous one. Two pills, twice a day. Carbimazole to treat the hyperthyroidism itself, and the beta-blocker Propranolol to tame the unpleasant symptoms of hyperthyroidism.

Bruce suspected the latter drug of causing most of the side-effects, but at least the high blood pressure and crazy heart palpitations were thankfully a thing of the past.

Lesser of two evils and all that jazz.

The entire course of pills would take 18 months to complete. And doctor-ordered rest, as much as possible.

What he said to Tony before about there being no enemies to fight in this illness? Well, maybe Tony would be his own enemy, his own impediment.

Before the diagnosis while he was clearly sick, he certainly spared no thoughts about overworking himself or pulling all-nighters or insisting to go out to combat. Bruce expected the next 18 months to be an uphill battle to help Tony regain his health.

Luckily the Hulk had no enemies he had not defeated yet. And Bruce very rarely used the Other Guy as a comforting philosophy.

Then again, Tony had a track record of surprising Bruce in many good ways. Like a famous billionaire with everything to live for, of all people, being unafraid of the Other Guy.

Like whatever Tony saw in him, and how the most charismatic guy and the most invisible guy in any room could get along so well and end up together.
Like letting Bruce intimately unmask the real Tony, who is so honest and generous and privately vulnerable.

Like making a decent effort to be more forthcoming with Bruce about how he was feeling on the drugs.

Like Jarvis doggedly tracking down and Tony convincing the psychic-diagnosis GP Dr. Stuart Glassman to move his practice into the adjoining Tower. Even though Dr. Glassman wasn't his primary endocrinologist, it still meant a trusted MD was right next door.

As Bruce rested his head against seat, he inadvertently made eye contact with Happy in the rearview mirror. This time, he fought his natural reaction to look away. Bruce offered a soft smile that reached his eyes, and Happy nodded back.

They were both here to watch out for Tony, although in their own different ways.

When they clambered out of the car in the private underground garage of the Tower, Tony was leaning heavily against Bruce, too tired to care when no outsiders were watching.

A quick exchange happened without Tony's awareness when Happy lowered the tinted window from the driver's seat, and gave Bruce a look to check-in. Bruce just shook his head slightly.

*I got him.*

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Chapter End Notes

Justtopostmyfic: It's our first Science Bros Week fic! Can't wait for Infinity War for more Science Bro-yness. We both love reading and writing Tony!whump (HepG2 has published loads more).

HepG2: This has been a *fun* collaboration, I'll tell you that. I hope you've had much fun reading this, and thank you for sticking with us to theuffy end. Catch you beautiful people in the next one! Cheers!
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!