Crimson & Clover

by Dresupi

Summary

Alice Vorso takes a job as Pepper Potts' new intern at Stark Tower. Little does she know how upside down her life will become as a result.

Yes, this is a repost of the previous work you probably read on ffnet, I've made very few changes, only edited for clarity/grammar, and I'm updating DAILY. So you can stop messaging me about this on tumblr now, rofl. Alice is back. I'll do all three works. Enjoy and bookmark it this time, goobers. ;) ;) ;)

Notes

Um okay, this was my first fanfiction I ever posted publically. Written back in 2014. So, I like to think I've gotten better since then. I took it down for a while, but due to popular demand, I'm bringing it back. I'm editing it for clarity/grammar, not for content. So be forewarned, I'm not messing with plot stuff at all. This is the original plot I had back in 2014.
This is a definitive slow burn, so be prepared for that. But it will eventually become a Bruce/Alice fic. In due time.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

"I cannot believe this," Alice groaned, throwing aside the third and last pair of pantyhose she had tried on. "They can’t be all torn."

Maybe I should wear pants, she thought to herself.

She waded through the piles of clothing on her bedroom floor and pried open the closet door, only to be impeded from opening it further or even closing it completely. Upon closer inspection, she discovered one of her blouses had gotten stuck under the edge.

"Dammit," she whispered. She knelt to try and clear a path.

"TWENTY MINUTES TIL GO TIME, BABE!" she heard from the other room.

"ZEKE, I NEED HELP!" she called back.

Her fiancé peeked his head in the bedroom door, his short black hair still wet from his shower. White button-down and black slacks on, he was looping his tie around his neck. He entered the room and studied her, brow knitted.

"Well, I won't lie, Stark will definitely hire you if you walk in like that." He gestured to her 'outfit': a grey camisole and white panties.

She smirked and shook her head. "No, really, what am I gonna do? All my pantyhose ripped. Should I go with pants?" she asked desperately, her Southern accent getting thicker the more upset she became. Zeke crossed the room to the mirror and began tying his tie.

"Well, you could go sans pantyhose…” he trailed off, "or you could go back in time and trim your toenails so you don't shred your nylons with your wildcat claws," he teased, a smirk forming on his face.

Alice glared at him, hands on her hips.

He formed a claw with his free hand, and growled softly, imitating a wildcat.

She pursed her lips and squinted up at him. Standing at over 6 feet, he towered over her 5 foot nothing frame.

"Actual help or input would be nice. I haven't shaved my legs, so I can't go without pantyhose, lest someone mistake me for a Sasquatch."

He chuckled at that. "I reckon where you're going, they wouldn't find that unusual," he drawled, his own Southern upbringing bubbling brightly to the surface. He tightened the tie, measuring the ends; he still wasn't good at tying one, even after 4 years of working for SHIELD and wearing one on each of those working days. Alice stepped in to help him fix it. "You could fulfill every single fantasy I've ever had, and wear thigh highs," he wagged his eyebrows comically while looking directly over her head at his reflection. She crinkled her nose.

"I wanted the pantyhose because they were control top." She tightened the knot and stepped back so he could admire it. "They would help hide my belly." She turned to the side and stuck her stomach out, rubbing it for emphasis.
"What belly?" asked Zeke, meeting her eyes in the mirror. She turned to walk away, but he grabbed her hand and slid to his knees in front of her. He wrapped his long arms around her waist, resting his head on her stomach. "This belly? This one here?" He placed a kiss right above her navel. "Hon, your tummy's so flat, I could balance a bowling ball on it." He smiled up at her, his crooked smile never failed to melt her heart. It widened to a full toothy grin, his blue eyes sparkling. He abruptly blew a raspberry on her stomach and laughed when she pushed him back onto the floor.


He scoffed, "Gird yours, darlin', and promise me you won't take them off until I come home this evening." He flashed his most debonair smile and waggled his eyebrows again.

She walked over to the dresser, rolling her eyes at him in the mirror. "No promises, I hate these things."

She fished a pair out of the top drawer, checking them to be sure they were a match. She slowly rolled them up her legs, being careful so they didn't suffer the same fate as the discarded nylons in the corner. She took out her new skirt, pencil, charcoal grey and her green cap-sleeve button up. Her new "professional clothes".

They weren't really her style, she had a more neo-bohemian/hippie thing going on, but since she'd come to New York, she'd dulled it down to jeans and a bright flowing skirt here and there. Zeke had convinced her to drop it altogether for this interview since he was convinced that her 'juvenile' style decisions were what was holding her back. She was inclined to agree with him. If for no reason other than it was the only opinion she'd asked for.

"There," she said, looking at her reflection in the mirror. She grabbed the black heels she planned to wear, making her way out of the bedroom and into the bathroom.

"Hair up, or down?" she asked, gesturing to her wavy auburn tresses, which hung midway down her back.

"Up, definitely, looks more professional," Zeke conceded.

"Yeah," Alice agreed.

Personally, she liked it down, but this was a new beginning. She was 25 years old, dammit. She'd been out in the workforce for 4 years. She needed to start dressing for success or she'd never have it.

She closed the bathroom door to finish her preparations. She brushed out her hair and twisted it up into a French knot. It was the only up-do she could accomplish alone. Other than a bun, and that was more librarian than she was willing to go. She secured it with a comb and curled the few tendrils that escaped with her finger.

Alright, she thought, now make-up.

Powder on her pale, freckled skin, followed by eyeliner, mascara and a touch of eye shadow. Purple, to complement her green eyes. Finally, she applied a dab of clear lip gloss.

She inspected her reflection in the full-length bathroom mirror. She sighed. She looked like a little girl playing dress-up. The skirt was tailored, so it fit nicely, but the whole outfit was too confining, it made her stand differently. Wearing her hair up gave her face a pinched look. The heels were a mistake, she could tell that now, but she didn't have anything else to wear, nothing that would work with the skirt. She was altogether too clumsy to be allowed to wear heels this high.
"Done," she called. "Time?" She opened the bathroom door, walking into the living room. She placed her reading glasses in their case and tucked them away in her messenger bag.

"6 minutes," answered Zeke. "Want me to drive you?"

"No, I'd rather be alive for the interview." She paused. "What's the complete job title again? I need to know exactly what I'm applying for."

"Um…Public Liaison/Personal Assistant…" he muttered the last part.

"What?!" Alice exclaimed. "Why didn't I know about the assistant part of that title?"

"Al, I only left it out because I knew you wouldn't go for it if you knew," Zeke said apologetically.

"You're damn right I wouldn't!" she retorted. "What, so I'll be a glorified receptionist? I'm glad you told me before I got to the interview and made a fool of myself thinking I was applying for a PR position."

"C'mon, Al…I went through a LOT to get you this interview. It's more pay, better benefits, great connections, even you have to admit the perks are better," he pleaded.

She flattened her lips into a line and sighed, slipping on her shoes, "Yes, I'll admit that the perks are better, but it's STILL the same job I've had for the past 4 years."

"Well, at least we know you can do it," he chided. "4 years of experience, you're practically a pro!"

Alice ignored the last statement and spun around, wobbling slightly on the heels. "Okay, well, how do I look? Professional? Intelligent?"

Zeke looked her up and down. "You look like a sexy librarian."

She blinked twice. "Thanks for the objectification."

"What?" he pouted, "It's a compliment! You're hot! VERY Professional. Aren't you glad you listened to me about that skirt?"

"I guess so, it's definitely more…tight than any of my others…" she tugged up on the waist.

"Your others make you look like a hippie. A hairy-pits hippie."

"Okay, that's enough. The others made me feel like 'me'. This one just makes me feel…uptight. Like a wedgie waiting to happen…"

"Professional women are uptight."

"I'm not uptight."

"No, but you could act like it sometimes. You're awesome and wonderful and 'not like all the other girls' and all that…but…that's not going to make you successful. Changing yourself slightly…that's what everyone does. You're just lucky it's so slight."

Alice sighed and kissed him on the cheek. "Love you."

"Me too, babe." He placed a peck on her lips.

She walked to the door, grabbing her keys off the side table as she left.
She walked down the carpeted hallway to the elevator. She hurried as fast as her 4-inch heels would allow. She mashed the button on the elevator multiple times. She absently wondered why people did this kind of thing; it didn't seem to be hurrying the elevator along at all. She mentally shrugged and continued to mash the button as hard and fast as she could. When the doors finally opened, she hit the 'L' button for Lobby.

Once on the ground floor, she resumed her quick pace past the mailboxes, her heels clicking on the tiled floor. She exited her building, nodded to the doorman, and raised her hand for a taxi. She'd briefly entertained the thought of walking to Stark Tower but dismissed the idea just as quickly. As clumsy as she was prone to be, she didn't need to be tempting the fates any more than usual. Especially today.

A cab pulled up and she got in.

"Stark — Avengers Tower," she said, still not really used to calling it that.

The cab driver reset the counter and they were off.

"Job Interview?" asked the driver jovially.

"Yeah, how'd you know?" she asked, smiling.

"Oh, I dunno, you just look nervous. Hopeful. That's usually how people look when they're on their way to interview for their dream job," the cabbie replied.

"I don't know about 'dream job', but it's a different job."

The driver looked at her in the rearview mirror. "Hey, working at Avengers Tower would be a dream job for a lot of people."

"I suppose it would be and if I'd gotten this interview 4 years ago, I might be more excited. As it is, I thought I was moving on, moving up, but it turns out I'm moving sideways, know what I mean?"

"Yeah, I getcha."

She suddenly felt embarrassed, complaining about a cushy desk job to someone who drove cabs for a living.

There was an awkward silence for the rest of the 20 odd minute ride. A short trip for NYC. At least this job would be closer to home than her previous one was.

An apartment in the Upper West Side was not cheap, so truth be told, Alice was hoping for a successful interview. She and Zeke split everything down the middle and he made considerably more than her, being an agent of SHIELD.

That was as much as she knew about his job, though. He worked long days, longer nights and sometimes didn't come home for days at a time. There was never a warning, never a sign that he'd be away. She'd just taken to good faith that he'd always find his way back to her, even though it still made her nervous.

She checked her make-up in her compact mirror, made sure she had copies of her resume in her bag and cleaned a fresh scuff off her new shoes.

"Well, here you are," said the driver.
She took out her wallet and paid him. "Keep the change," she said, tipping him graciously as if that would make up for her faux pas earlier.

She turned and stepped up onto the sidewalk in front of Avengers Tower, looking up…and up…and up. *This building is MASSIVE.* She chuckled to herself. *Tony Stark. Overcompensating, much?*

She trained her gaze back down to the front entrance, focusing on the doors leading to the atrium and lobby.

*Great. Revolving doors, my old friends.*

She was suddenly sent back to her very first experience with revolving doors. Picture a Tiny Alice, only 4 years old. She got stuck in one for 5 minutes before her grandfather rescued her. She smiled fondly at the memory.

She thought about what Grandpa would say. He was so disappointed when she'd dropped out of the music program in college. But, Zeke was right, she'd been big shit back in Southmeade, TN, but once she stepped into the college environment, she was one of a million. PR and management was the best route for her. She'd excelled quickly.

Never mind that she'd had to give up a dream job in LA to come to New York with Zeke. Her current job at the publishing firm left much to be desired. She'd worked her ass off to see others promoted before her. Stark Industries would definitely be a step up if she got hired.

She started working her way towards the revolving doors and saw, much to her delight, a set of normal doors to the side. She smiled; her day was starting to look up already. She walked inside.

Remembering the instructions Zeke had given her, she crossed the lobby to the reception desk. She smiled warmly at the receptionist, a brown-haired man, impeccably groomed. "Alice Vorso, for Virginia Potts."

The receptionist was in the middle of stirring his coffee. "What time is your appointment, sweetie?"

"9:30," she replied.

"Okay, you're a little early, but I'll call up and see if she's ready for you."

"Thank you," she said cordially.

She walked over to one of the armchairs nearby and perched on the edge of it, messenger bag in her lap. She looked it over, wishing she'd cleaned it up a bit. It was the same brown leather bag she'd gotten for a going away gift when she moved to New York. Looking around the posh lobby, it seemed sparsely decorated for the lobby of such an important building.

"Ms. Vorso?" the receptionist called. Alice stood up and straightened her bag, walking over to the desk. "Ms. Potts will see you now. Just follow this gentleman here and he'll escort you up to the office suites," the receptionist gestured to the foreboding figure approaching the desk.

He had short dark hair and wore the stereotypical black suit, black tie, and dark sunglasses. "Really, Johnson? Where's your name tag?" He gestured to the receptionist's shirt.

"Sorry, Mr. Hogan, I forgot again."

'Mr. Hogan' puffed and shook his head. "This way, ma'am, follow me," he directed towards Alice.
He set a quick pace. "Hogan, Head of Security," he nodded curtly, clearly not expecting a reply. She supplied one anyway.

"Pleased to meet you."

This man demanded respect in his very stance. He stalked to the elevators, placed his thumb on the pad outside of one. The doors opened, they went inside and the doors shut again.

"Identify yourselves," a voice said, it sounded male. And British.

"JARVIS, it's Hogan," said Hogan. He looked expectantly at her.

"Oh! Um…Alice Vorso," she squeaked, looking around.

"Ms. Potts is expecting you, Ms. Vorso," said the voice.

Alice felt the elevator start to move. She took several deep breaths to calm herself. She snuck a quick peek at Hogan, who was standing stoically, unmoving. She cut her eyes back front and fiddled with the strap on her bag. The elevator dinged.

"Office Suites," the voice said. "Good luck, Ms. Vorso."

"Thank you…?" She faltered, unsure of how to address the disembodied British voice.

"JARVIS," supplied Hogan.

"Thank you, JARVIS," she replied.

The doors opened, Hogan exited first and turned to the left. Alice followed. Hogan walked to the end of the hall, where there was a set of double glass doors. He opened one for her and followed her inside.

There was a large waiting area with black leather couches and a desk off to the right side. There was a large glass office on the opposite wall. Seated at the desk was a slender redhead, who was talking on the phone. She chewed on the end of a pen before scribbling something down on the pad in front of her.

As Hogan led Alice towards the desk, the redhead looked up and smiled warmly. She held up one finger, asking them silently to wait. Hogan stopped just short of the desk, and in her zeal to inspect the waiting area of the office, she ran into his back. He turned his head to the side, stifling a chuckle. Embarrassed, she backed up and looked at her shoes. Her face grew hot.

The redhead ended her phone call and made one more note on the pad. She stood up, smiling, and extended her hand towards Alice.

"Julia Morgan. Current assistant and public liaison to the C.E.O."

She took her hand. "Alice Vorso, applicant for assistant and public liaison to the C.E.O."

Julia chuckled, "I'll go tell Ms. Potts that you're here. We'll both be interviewing you today if that's alright." It was a statement, not a question.

Like I have a choice in the matter, she thought.

"If you'll just have a seat here, "Julia said to Alice and then turned towards Hogan, "and that's all we needed, Happy. Thank you."
"Don't mention it, Ms. Morgan," Hogan replied, turning to leave.

Happy? She thought incredulously.

She went to sit on one of the chairs but she'd barely seated herself before Julia was back.

"We're ready for you, Ms. Vorso."

Alice got up again and straightened her skirt, smoothing out the creases. She followed Julia into the big glass office. Another slender redhead sat behind the desk inside, her hair was more strawberry blonde than bright red like Julia's, though. So many redheads.

*Wow. So, Tony Stark definitely has a type. I guess that's a good thing for me?*

The woman behind the desk stood, she was tall, almost a head taller than herself. She smiled and extended her hand.

"Virginia Potts, C.E.O of Stark Industries. You can call me Pepper, everyone does."

"Alice Vorso, Ms. Potts, I'm pleased to meet you."

"Please, Alice, call me Pepper." Pepper walked out from behind the desk and went over to a cluster of chairs on the right-hand side of the office. Julia followed. She walked over too, noting that Pepper was barefoot and still a head taller than herself, who was wearing heels.

*Good grief, the woman's an Amazon. If she fell down, she'd be halfway home.*

Alice sat in an unoccupied chair, crossing her feet at the ankles and turning her knees to the side, just like her Grams taught her. She pulled her messenger bag into her lap and took out a folder. It contained several copies of her résumé and a few memo samples, as well as cover letters if they asked for them.

Pepper began speaking, "I know you've probably heard that this job is for Mr. Stark's assistant, but the official job title is 'assistant and public liaison to the C.E.O of Stark Industries', which is me. I hope that's not too shocking," she smiled.

"Oh, that's completely fine," said Alice. "To tell you the truth, the thought of working for Mr. Stark is intimidating."

Pepper laughed and exchanged a look with Julia.

The rest of the interview was pretty routine. They were impressed with her resume and her memo samples. Julia seemed blunt and straight-forward. She contrasted well with Pepper's polite honesty. Julia was also loud, where Pepper was quiet.

"Did you find your way here easily, Alice?" asked Pepper.

"Oh, yes. I don't live far from here, it was only a twenty-minute cab ride."

Pepper smiled, "Well, you shouldn't have to take a cab every day when you start working here, we'll send a driver."

"Oh, that's not necessary — " Alice trailed off. "Excuse me, did you say WHEN I start working here?" she asked, trying (and failing) to keep her voice level. Pepper and Julia grinned simultaneously.

"I'm so excited to have you work with me!" Pepper exclaimed. "Of course, it's not a done deal yet,
even though you'll technically be my assistant, you'll be working closely with Mr. Stark as well. So, he has requested, nay, DEMANDED, that he be a part of the hiring process." She looked over to Julia who was biting her lip to keep from laughing.

"Don't look so worried," Julia chided. "Out of all the people who have met Tony Stark, MOST of them survived."

As if on cue, the doors to the office swung open.

"Jules, why aren't you at your desk? Your smiling face is what I live for," said Tony Stark, strutting into the office like he owned the place…well, he did own the place, so it was understandable.

Pepper stood up.

"We're interviewing my new assistant, we just need the go-ahead to hire her," she informed him. Alice stood, her folder fell open and papers flew everywhere. "Shit," she whispered through clenched teeth.

Tony chuckled. "You picked a real winner." He knelt to gather some of her papers. He shuffled through them to find her resume. "Thanks, sweetheart, saves me the trouble of telling you I don't like being handed things." He let the rest of the papers fall back to the ground as he stood up.

"Tony…" Pepper sighed, as she and Julia rushed to help her.

"Vorso…Vorso, Vorso…" said Tony. "Is this the chick whose boyfriend got her the interview?"

"SHEILD Agent Ezekiel Powell recommended her, but her resume stood out above all the other applicants," answered Pepper.

Alice took a deep breath. "My personal life is none of your business, the only thing you should be concerned with is my professional life, which is more than adequate for this job."

"Nice accent…Mississippi?" Tony asked, bemused.

"Tennessee…but that's not…"

"Tennessee? Well, Lord have mercy, we've got a real southern belle on our hands." He drawled in a poorly executed southern accent.

"Sir…" she intoned, trying to regain control of the situation.

"Pepper, I don't know, do we really need to hire Delta Burke?"

"Tony, Delta Burke was from Florida, and Designing Women was set in Atlanta," corrected Jules, winking at Alice.

"Well, there's no one famous from Tennessee."

"June Carter Cash…Minnie Pearl…Dixie Carter…" supplied Jules.

"Dixie Carter! I don't know if we need to hire Dixie Carter."

She ignored him, barreling forward, stubborn to a fault. "My personal life doesn't affect my professional life at all. It's true that my FIANCE got me the interview, but I hope to be hired purely based on my professional skill set, which to reiterate, is more than adequate. And since you've
broached the subject, where I am from should have no bearing on whether or not I am hired. It's just geography."

Her mouth was a thin line, her green eyes flashed and unshed tears gathered in the corners against her will. She raised her chin defiantly, just as her knees started wobbling, she sat down quickly in the chair. Damnit…I locked my knees…she thought miserably, flexing her feet.

"And…I've lost interest," Tony shrugged. He turned to leave. "Hire her. I like her. She's saucy. Just remind her to breathe. And remind me to 'never cross a Sugarbaker woman!" he laughed at his own joke. "JARVIS, is Bruce back yet?"

The voice returned, "No sir, Dr. Banner sent word that he won't be returning for at least another month."

"Well, I'm shooting back to L.A for a while. Break her in for me, Pepper." He turned and winked at Alice over his shoulder.

Pepper excused herself politely before proceeding to berate Tony on his "deplorable manners."

"What's a 'Sugarbaker woman'?" asked Alice exasperatedly, after they had left.

Julia laughed. "It's from 'Designing Women, didn't you ever watch that show?"

"Nope." She deadpanned, shaking her head. "We didn't have T.V."

The other woman giggled.

Alice frowned, trying to appear puzzled.

"Oh, you're serious? I'm so sorry," Julia started backtracking like crazy.

"No, we had T.V. I'm just yankin' ya." Alice winked at her. "I never watched Designing Women, though, I mostly watched NBC sitcoms. That was the only channel we could pick up besides PBS."

Julia peered at her, questioningly.

"That, I'm being serious about," She smiled with a deep chuckle. "Now, I have pretty much every channel under the sun, and I still don't watch any of them."

Julia laughed, "To be perfectly honest, I barely have time. I DVR everything and watch it all at once on my day off."

"So…what's Mr. Stark's deal? Was he making fun of me? I couldn't tell."

"That's Tony. You get used to him."

Alice snorted, "Maybe I don't want to get used to it. Is this job really worth it?"


"Tea would be great, thank you, Ms. Morgan."

"Jules, please. We're going to be around each other non-stop once you start training."

"If I start training," she corrected. "When would that be, hypothetically?"
"Pepper will tell you when she gets back," Jules started to leave. "Oh! Also, how do you take your tea?"

"Milk and sugar," replied Alice. "Thank you."

"It's a pleasure and of course, a one-time thing. Once we're colleagues, get your own damn tea," Jules winked and turned to glide out of the office.

Alice was too wound up to sit down, so she walked the perimeter of the office and looked at the artwork. Jules left her tea by the door. She walked over to get her mug and the door to the office opened, Pepper rejoined her.

"Congrats on getting the job!" exclaimed Pepper. "So, it's already almost 11; I was going to take Jules out to lunch at 12:30, and she and I would love for you to join us." She continued, "After lunch, you can start shadowing Jules. For now, you'll need to get a name tag, and…"

"Wait…" she interrupted. "I'm sorry, but I haven't accepted the job offer yet."

Pepper smiled, "I apologize; I got ahead of myself…did you need to look at the benefits package again?"

"Well, there's the issue of my current job. I haven't quit or even given notice yet."

"Oh, don't worry about that, we'll take care of it."

"What about my experience there? I was there for 4 years and I'd like to keep them as a reference."

"Again, no worries. If you ever leave us here at Stark Industries, you will have a glowing recommendation. So, without further adieu, I would like to formally offer you this job, Alice."

Alice thought about it. She knew the perks were better and there was the promise of moving up in the company; whereas, her current job held no such promise. Of course, she'd have to put up with Tony, but she'd mostly be working with Pepper. Yes, the benefits definitely outweighed the negatives.

"Okay. Yes, I accept."

"GREAT!" exclaimed Pepper. She motioned for Alice to follow her as she exited the office and walked over to Jules' desk. "Lunch at 12:30, but first things first, you need to go down to security to get a name tag/badge/thing, and to get your fingerprints scanned into the system. You will also need to sign some forms for legal and payroll. We'll start you off shadowing Jules after lunch. So exciting!" she reiterated. "Jules, can you call someone to escort her around and input her info for Jarvis, so she can use the elevators?" With that, Pepper walked back into her office.

Jules was on the phone, so Alice waited patiently. "Okay…" she said, hanging up the phone. "Happy says to just send you down to security."

"How do I get to security?" she asked.

"I'll take you down there myself; I need to get another copy made of my ID. New-ish policy. Total joke, the only one who makes a big deal out of it is Happy."

Jules stood and started to leave the waiting area. Alice followed.

"Um…can I ask? Why is he called Happy?"
"It's a nickname from his boxing days. He never smiled," grinned Jules, as they walked down the hall to the elevators.

"I thought it might be something like that," exclaimed Alice, "Like how sometimes the really tall guy is called Tiny?"

Jules snorted as she pressed her thumb to the pad on the elevator. "It's exactly like that."

"State your name," said JARVIS.

"Julia Morgan." She looked over at Alice expectantly.

"Alice Vorso."

"Wonderful. To the ground floor, ladies?" asked JARVIS.

"Yes, thank you," replied Jules.

"What is JARVIS?" asked Alice.

"Just a Rather Very Intelligent System," replied Jules.

"What?" asked Alice, confused.

"I'm Mr. Stark's A.I.," replied JARVIS.

"Oh, your name is an acronym! Like the TARDIS!" exclaimed Alice.

"Quite. Except I, unfortunately, am not bigger on the inside," lamented JARVIS.

"Well, I still think you're amazing, nonetheless," said Alice reassuringly.

"Thank you, Ms. Vorso," said JARVIS, "Ground floor, Lobby & Atrium, Security." The elevator doors opened.

"Thank you!" chimed both women as they exited the elevator. They turned to the left and started down the hall.

"After this, Happy will escort you to legal, and then to payroll. After that, just find any elevator with a fingerprint scanner and ask JARVIS to take you to the office suites. Only elevators with fingerprint scanners can take you to the upper floors," explained Jules.

"I would think there would be tighter security than just fingerprint scanners," said Alice.

"Fingerprint scanners get you into the elevator. JARVIS runs the elevator. If JARVIS don't know you, JARVIS don't move," explained Jules.

She opened a door to their right. There was a tall counter that ran the length on the room; there were lots of CCTV feeds along the back wall, and quite a few security employees watching them. Jules addressed the guy behind the desk. He looked to be around the same age as Jules and herself.

"Thomas, is Happy around?" asked Jules.

"Yeah."

Jules waited impatiently, "Could you tell him we're here?"
"A 'please' here and there never killed anyone," chided Thomas.

"Mine might," she replied dryly.

Thomas noisily pushed his chair back and walked down the hall behind the counter. Alice looked at Jules and raised her eyebrows.

"We went on a couple of dates, but it never clicked…well, it clicked for him, not for me, he bears a grudge, I guess," she shrugged, "But, it's all an adventure, am I right?"

Alice shrugged, "I wouldn't know, I met my fiancé during my freshman year of college, and there's never been anyone else."

"Oh, well, that's great too!" gushed Jules. "Never had your heart broken, you've got someone you can depend on AND, you're way ahead of the rest of us schmucks trying to grab around in the dark to find someone we have anything in common with."

Alice smiled. "Yeah, it's pretty nice."

"He's an agent of SHIELD, right? What did you say his name is?"

"Ezekiel Powell. Zeke."

"I don't know him, but that doesn't mean anything other than I've never worked with him before," Jules smiled brightly. Just then, Thomas came back with Happy.

"Alright, here's your replacement badge, Ms. Morgan."

"Happy, call me Jules, we've known each other for 4 years!"

Happy raised an eyebrow and pressed his lips into a line. "Please try not to lose it again, Ms. Morgan."

Thomas snickered.

"Something funny, Riley?" Happy asked.

"No, sir." The other man’s smirk disappeared.

"Just because Ms. Morgan turned you down for a third date doesn't give you the right to act like a jack-ass, now shape up. Empty the trashcans." Happy nodded towards Jules. "Ms. Morgan"

Jules nodded, arching her eyebrow, "Mr. HOGAN." She turned to leave, winking at Alice. Happy watched her leave the room.

"Mr…Hogan?" she ventured quietly.

"Ms. Vorso! Congratulations on your new job!" he said loudly, overcompensating for the fact that he was watching Jules walk away. "If you'll follow me, I'll get you set up." He lifted the counter at the hinge and gestured to Alice.

"Thank you," she said as she followed him down the hall.

Outfitted with her shiny new security badge, fresh from signing piles of forms and non-disclosure agreements and with her direct deposit all set up, she pressed her thumb to a fingerprint scanner outside an elevator. She boarded and stated her name for JARVIS, excited to be using it alone for the
first time. Once up in the office suites, she met up with Pepper and Jules, ready for lunch and to start her training.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

In which Alice meets some of the other inhabitants of Avengers Tower, all except for... you know who! :) And Natasha and Clint, but also... you know who!

Chapter Notes

I feel like this needs a heavy trope warning. So here it is. A heavy trope warning.

This has everything, everyone living in Avengers Tower on their own floor, Jane asking for Poptarts, Darcy the Science!Intern, Thor hugging too tightly, Steve being awkward, Tony being Tony.

Ah, the good old days...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"And that's how Tony forced the chef at Jean Georges to make us cheeseburgers! And to tell you the truth, they weren't even all that good!" Pepper laughed as she, Alice and Jules re-entered the office after lunch.

They'd had salads at a little bistro that wasn't far from Stark Tower, and Alice was considering the possibility of eating there regularly.

After lunch, Alice was left in Jules' care to learn the ways of the job. It was basically just like her previous one: Lots of transcription, copy work, phone answering, and coffee fetching. Of course, it was made a lot more enjoyable due to Jules’ company. Her brusque and blunt demeanor was a refreshing change from the two-faced corporate world Alice was familiar with.

About twenty minutes before Pepper's three o'clock meeting, people started to filter into the waiting room. Jules greeted each one by name and ushered them into the boardroom.

After all the expected people had arrived, she grabbed Alice's arm and dragged her out of the waiting area. "We've got two hours to kill; Pepper doesn't need us at the meeting, boring stuff, apparently. Would you like to meet the Avengers?"

Alice’s eyes widened. "You mean, they're here? NOW?"

"Oh yeah, they live here," Jules replied flippantly.

"WHAT?! Isn't that dangerous? What about the big green one? The Hulk? Wouldn't he like… destroy the building?"

"Dr. Banner? No. He can control it most of the time. He's a normal, if slightly insensitive, kind of a
jerk." Jules shrugged. "I mean, Tony likes him alright, but he's not my cup of tea, ya know?"

"Oh…" Alice nodded as if she knew exactly what the other woman was talking about. "What about Captain America?"

"Steve? Oh, he's a sweetheart. He lives here too."

"Wow," said Alice, in awe. "I wouldn't mind meeting him…"

"The other half of our (soon to be your) duties, are to check in with them and just keep tabs on where they are. Part of S.H.I.E.L.D.'s 'commandments.' If they want to live here with the freedom to come and go as they please, they have to know where they are. Like, right now, Dr. Banner's in Indonesia somewhere. He goes off on trips trying to find a cure for his 'condition'," Jules explained as they boarded the elevator.

"Why does he want to cure himself? He's a superhero."

"Well, from what I understand of it — which isn't much — it's really violent and painful."

"Oh," she mouthed. Apparently, the media did NOT give an accurate account of his life. No big surprise there.

The elevator opened and they exited into what looked like a large, posh penthouse apartment. Of course, this wasn't the top floor, so it wasn't technically a penthouse. In front of them was a HUGE eat-in kitchen, to the left a living area with a large home theater system and to the right a hallway. There looked to be a balcony out past the living area and another hallway branching out from there.

Seated at the counter, eating a bowl of Grape Nuts and reading something on his Kindle, was none other than Captain America. He looked up from his book and smiled.

"Hello, Ms. Morgan," he said.

"Captain Rogers, it's nice to see you again. I came up to introduce my replacement, Alice Vorso, She'll be taking over in a month when I move on, and she'll be shadowing me until then."

Steve turned to Alice and held out his hand. Trembling, she took it. "Ms. Vorso, I'm pleased to meet you, I'm sorry Ms. Morgan is leaving," he nodded towards Jules, "but happy to see she's leaving us in capable hands."

He beamed that thousand-watt smile and Alice couldn't speak, she could probably melt right then and there.

It was at this precise moment that her knee buckled. She had to grab his forearm for support.

Mortified, she tried to right herself, only to feel her ankle start to give with she put weight on it.

"Whoa!" exclaimed Steve, as he slipped his arms under hers and lifted her easily up onto the stool where he'd been sitting.

She blushed crimson and started to babble. "I'm so sorry, I just…I don't know what I was thinking…this shoes. I'm so clumsy when I'm nervous, and…I'm just so sorry!" She looked down at her lap, thoroughly embarrassed.

Jules laughed, "Oh it's fine, Captain Rogers is aware of the effect he has on women, I'm sure."

Steve's eyes widened, it was his turn to blush.
"Oh, no, no, no, no, NO! It's not that!" stammered Alice. "I mean, you ARE...you are attractive, sir. But, I've just, I've just heard about you for my entire life! My Pops...my GRANDFATHER, he...he got to meet you when he was young, and... he had a picture of you up in his bar. But...I'm so sorry; I'm doing it again, aren't I?"

Steve smiled awkwardly and looked over at the other woman as if hoping she'd get him out of this awkward situation.

She took a deep breath to keep from apologizing again and bent over to slip off her shoes.

Steve cleared his throat. "Beg your pardon, ladies, I need to get going, have a great day." He nodded curtly, "Ms. Morgan, always a pleasure. Ms. Vorso, I'm pleased to meet you." He grabbed his book and bowl and dumped the latter into the sink, swiftly leaving the common area.

Julia sat down on the stool beside Alice. "That went well," she said with false brightness.

Embarrassed beyond comprehension, Alice dropped her shoes on the floor. "Could've been worse...I could've puked on him." She turned on the stool to face the counter and put her head down on it.

"Just...wow," said Jules. "I mean, that was just amazing. Steve is the most easy-going one, I have no idea how you did that!"

"Just talented, I guess," Alice groaned.

Jules chuckled and patted her on the back. "It'll be okay, hon. he bounces back. We'll just have to make sure you put in face time every day, just like socializing a puppy. C'mon, you can meet Natasha and Clint another day. Dr. Banner won't even be back for another week or so, but we can go down to the lab and meet Dr. Foster. Her lab assistant is even more awkward than you, not much chance of you causing any damage there. Just..." she stopped and turned to face Alice, "Don't touch anything."

They got up to leave; she thought to grab her shoes, dangling them from one hand. They entered the elevator, Jules informed JARVIS that they wished to go to the Lab, Level 1. (There were 10 levels of the tower that were strictly for lab research).

Alice sighed, "It's really only a problem if I'm nervous or flustered, or excited."

The other woman snorted in response. "It's a good thing Dr. Banner isn't here then, that guy makes ME nervous."

"Why?"

"Oh, you mean besides the fact that he turns into the Angry Green Giant?"

"Of course."

"Well, he's actually got pretty good control of that. It's just...he's really intimidatingly smart. CRAZY smart. Stephan Hawking smart," emphasized Jules. "He makes you feel like an ant." She squeezed her thumb and forefinger together, "This big." She shrugged, "Nuclear Physicists."

Alice smirked, "I know the type, my Pops would say he holds his nose so high, he'd drown in a rainstorm."

"I wouldn't go so far as to say THAT...he's just a tough nut to crack," she chuckled. "Your Pops sounds like an interesting individual, though."
They exited the elevator, walking down the hall.

"If he's anything, he's interesting," laughed Alice. "He owns a piano bar outside of Memphis, lives off the grid in a house he built himself, and smokes more pot than any of my friends in college ever dreamed of."

Julia guffawed, a noise that sounded like a cross between a goose honking and a witch cackling. It made her smile nervously. "Oh my God, I have got to meet him sometime!"

"He won't set foot in New York."

"That's a pity." She wiped her eyes as she tried the door to the lab, finding it locked, she pressed the buzzer beside the door. It buzzed loudly. They waited, and waited. Jules pushed the buzzer again, and the door promptly opened.

"Owwwwwwww!" whined the girl on the other side. She was a brunette, with large eyes. She was short, around Alice's height, a little taller. She was holding her ears, looking more than slightly annoyed.

"Sorry, Darcy."

"Juuuulllleess, you're killing me"

"This is Alice Vorso, my replacement. Alice, this is Darcy Lewis, Dr. Foster's lab assistant."


She widened her eyes, cutting her gaze towards Jules before extending her hand.

"Hello, Ms. Lewis…" she began.

"What kind of squirrel farm did they find you on?"

Alice frowned, "I don't think that's a thing…"

"Well, I guess you'd know, Texas…can I call ya 'Tex'?"

"I'm from Tennessee."

"Even better! Oh my gosh! Love it, Tennessee."

She tried to move past the awkwardness, "Hello, Ms. Lewis, I'm pleased to—"

Darcy interrupted "Call me Darcy. All that Ms. Lewis crap is for the nerds."

"Don't you mean for the birds?" she asked, slightly confused.

"Probably so, but the nerds are the ones who can talk," answered Darcy solemnly.

"Well in that case, hello Darcy. I'm pleased to meet you…" She felt a little uncomfortable, she wasn't the BEST with introductions. She always felt awkward and weird. She never knew what to say, and anything she DID say sounded scripted and rehearsed.

"How about you guys come into the lab instead of standing in the hall? Standing in the hall is for losers. It's loserly," said Darcy, and turned on her heel.
"Walk this way..." she groaned and began to drag one foot behind her, hitching a shoulder up and limping further into the large room.

Alice looked at Jules, who was wearing a look on her face that said 'I told you so.'

She chuckled. Darcy glanced over at her.

"Young Frankenstein?" she said, eyes still wide. "I love Mel Brooks."

Darcy's face broke into a grin, "I think I'm gonna like you Al."

She scrunched up her face, "Um, please just call me Alice, if you don't mind... I don't like 'Al'... Sorry."

Darcy clapped her on the back, "No need to apologize. Alice it is."

She snorted, "Thanks."

"They have Mel Brooks in Tennessee, Tennessee?"

"Yes..."

Why wouldn't they?

"Good to know."

They had walked around a stainless steel countertop and were making their way back in the direction they had come, on the opposite side of the counter. The lab was enormous and mostly dark except where they were headed. She craned her neck to see the other side of the room. Tables were littered with pieces of Iron Man suits, tools and other implements lay on every flat surface. It was obviously Tony's area.

The far corner of the lab was the darkest; she could barely make out the shapes of large pieces of equipment. That was most likely Dr. Banner's station. Everything reminded Alice of the labs from high school and college. Except bigger and with more blinking lights. There were also safety showers, eyewash stations and what looked to be observation cells. Those were different.

The other two were discussing the incident with Thomas down in security. Darcy snorted when she laughed.

There were many large machines, none of which were active, but her attention was fixed on the hunky blond GOD of a man seated on a stool beside a slight brunette woman who was glued to the computer screen. Hunky Blond God had his fist under his chin and a large ornate hammer on his knee, his other hand on the handle. He was wearing what looked like battle armor and totally rocking it. He noticed the three women walking towards them.

"Well met!" He practically bellowed a wide grin on his face, arms out to the side. He set his hammer down on the floor and strode over to them. He grabbed Jules up in a bear hug, lifting her off the ground in the process. "Lady Julia! It has been too long."

"Thor!" she squeaked, "I didn't know you would be here."

Darcy tapped Thor on the arm. "Remember what we talked about before, Thor-zy-Wor-zy?" Remember your strength."

Thor put her down, who gulped air into her starved lungs.
"I apologize, Lady Julia. I forget how weak Midgardian women are."

"Not weak," coached Darcy. "Weak in insulting."

"Of course. They're just…dainty!"

"Much better."

Thor beamed over at Julia. "Lady Julia, you must introduce me to your companion."

"This is Alice Vorso, she's training to be my replacement."

Thor looked confused, "Replacement? Are you going somewhere?"

"She's going to have my job. And I will be working somewhere else."

"Ah, she will assist the man of Iron and his Lady Pepper," Thor nodded animatedly. "LADY ALICE, the replacement!" he bellowed cordially, throwing his arms around her and lifting her up in a crushing hug.

"Thor! You're crushing her, remember she's DAINTY!" chided Darcy.

"My apologies, Lady Alice."

The brunette still hadn't looked up from the computer screen.

"Dr. Foster?" called Jules.

They all waited. She didn't slow her furious typing or even flinch when Jules said her name.

"My lady is hard at work," explained Thor. "She is Midgard's best astrophysicist," he said proudly.

"I'm not the best, Thor..." she said, suppressing a grin.

"Jane?" said Darcy. "We really need you to turn around so you can meet Jules' replacement."

"Just a second..." Dr. Foster trailed off. She then stopped typing and turned towards them in her chair.

"Jane this is Alice, she'll be replacing the other one in a month."

Jane shook her hand, "Alice what?"

"Vorso, and I'm pleased to meet you Dr. Foster."

Jane smiled, sort of. "Pop-tarts?"

Her brow furrowed, "Come again?"

Darcy interjected, "She's making sure you know to keep the pop tarts stocked when she's deeply embedded in SCIENCE!" Darcy exclaimed, one hand raised in the air triumphantly. "She's a Poptartitarian who also drinks coffee," she continued.

"Your duties here in the lab consist of bringing up meals for Jane, Tony, and Bruce when he's here," said Jules, gesturing around the lab.

"Just asking, but why does the CEO's assistant have to bring food up to scientists? Isn't there another
lackey to do that?" asked Alice.

"Top secret stuff goes on up here, and besides the executives, the CEO's assistant is the only one with the security clearance to get here," Jules replied.

"But I never went through any security checks."

"Oh, honey…” said Darcy, touching her arm.

She continued, "You've been in the system since your fiancé took the job as an agent of SHIELD."

"What?!" Alice exclaimed.

"Sorry, but it's what they do," said Jules.

"But that's an invasion of privacy. That's unconstitutional," she argued.

"You signed the forms when he started working there," said the other woman.

Alice's eyes widened, "Oh my God. Do they know everything?"

"And then some."

"That's so creepy," she said, shivering.

"Hey," said Darcy, "think of it this way. It's not like they're all huddled in your room with a flashlight reading your diary. They just… know it all already." She grimaced, "Not as helpful as I thought it would be, sorry."

"Well, I don't like it, but it's not like they can un-know it now, no way to un-ring that bell," Alice sighed, deciding not to linger on something that she couldn't even control.

Darcy slapped her on the back, "That's the spirit."

She smiled weakly, "I guess…"

Jules checked her watch, "Whoa! It's almost 5! We need to get back down to the office; Pepper's meeting is almost over!" She grabbed her arm. "We'll see you all in an hour when we bring up your evening meal."

"That won't be necessary, Lady Julia, Tiny Alice," said Thor. "Lady Jane is taking me to Chili’s."

"Well, have fun with that," she directed to Jane. ‘That go for you too, Darce?’

"Nope headed home for the blue box special."

"Mac and cheese doesn't sound like a healthy dinner…” she chided. "Come down to the office and eat take out with me and Alice tonight."

"Take out?" she asked. "Do you always stay that late?"

"Well, I usually stay until about 7, but tonight it'll be later, since I'm training you."

"I'm sorry…”

"Oh no, don't worry about it. It always takes longer to teach someone than to do it yourself. We really do need to head back down now," said Jules, looking at her watch. "We're ordering dinner at
7, see you then, Darce."

"Bye," Alice waved as she was dragged out the door.

On their way down to the office, Jules asked Jarvis about Pepper’s whereabouts.

"Miss Potts is still in her meeting, it appears to have run long."

"Thanks, JARVIS."

She breathed a sigh of relief, "Pepper's not too much of a hard ass when it comes to punctuality, but I hate to disappoint her. It's like disappointing a...beautiful swan or something."

Alice pondered as to what EXACTLY one might do to disappoint a swan as they rode the rest of the way to the office.

They hurried in through the door and over to the desk, she sat and immediately pulled out her Stark phone to check the voicemail. She started writing down messages and handing them to Alice to input.

By the time they'd finished, people had started to leave Pepper's office. It was 5:30 when they all left. Pepper came out a few minutes later.

"I'm leaving for the day, ladies, are there any messages?"

"Dr. Libscombe from Meadowbrook Hospital called for you, she wants to speak to both you and Tony," said Jules, handing the notecard to Pepper.

Pepper pursed her lips and frowned, looking at the message. "I've never heard of Meadowbrook before...this must be for our non-profit division, I'm sure." She pursed her lips thoughtfully, "anything else?" she asked.

"Your two o'clock has been moved to four tomorrow," said Alice.

Pepper smiled, "Thank you so much. Have a good night, don't stay too late."

And she was gone.

"Okay, so after hours, you'll just kind of make sure everything is in order for the next day, schedule new meetings and/or appointments, then clean up the schedule and transcribe any notes from meetings. I'll tell you who is talking so you have a name to record."

"I need to call Zeke and let him know I'll be late."

"Sure! I'll get everything together and we'll get started when you get back."

Alice walked a short distance away and dialed Zeke's number. She got the voicemail. She sighed and left a message, walking back to where Jules had set up camp.

They set to work, transcribing the two-hour meeting. At about 6:45, Darcy strolled in, plopping down in one of the over-sized armchairs. Jules decided they would start their break early.

"I ordered pizza, hope that's fine," she said. "We'll do something different tomorrow, but I figured everyone liked pizza."

A little after 7, Thomas Riley sauntered in through the door, carrying the pizzas.
"Evening ladies," he practically hissed.

Looking at him, Alice decided he was not unlike a snake. He had sandy blond hair and almond-shaped hazel eyes, combined with angular features and a saunter that was not unlike a slink, none of which helped his case. He was on the shorter side for a male. He was barely taller than Julia. He wore his hair slicked back and he reeked of cologne.

"Thanks, Thomas," said Jules, forcing a smile.

"I tipped the delivery guy for you," said Thomas.

"Thanks," she said pointedly.

"10 bucks," he continued.

"I'll have to owe you; you know I don't carry cash."

"I have it," Alice said, grabbing her bag and fishing out her pocketbook. She pulled out a 10 and handed it to Thomas, a fake smile plastered on her face.

He glared at her before snatching the bill form her hand. "Later," he said flippantly as he slunk out the door.

"Ugh, what a creep, he makes me wish I had my taser," said Darcy, shivering.

"Thanks for that, Alice," Jules said with a smile.

"Don't mention it; I didn't want you to owe that snake any favors."

She laughed, "He is a snake, isn't he?"

"Thomassss the ssssssnake," hissed Alice.

They all had a giggle at that one before digging into their pizza.

After dinner, they said goodbye to Darcy and finished up their transcription. On their way downstairs, she explained that a driver would take them both home in the evenings and pick them up in the morning.

"The driver is also here in case we need to run any errands during the day," she added.

When they got outside, there were two cars waiting by the curb. They said goodnight to one another and climbed into their respective cars.

On the way home, she contemplated the turn her day had taken. Earlier that morning, she'd been less than excited about her interview and now, she was a full-fledged employee of Stark Industries.

Her driver let her off in front of the building and stayed until she was safely inside.

Once she entered her apartment, she was only a little surprised to find it dark. She sighed. Zeke must be working late again.

She went back to her bedroom and undressed, wrapping her ratty flannel bathrobe around herself and picking up all the clothing off the floor and bed, putting it away. She then hopped in the shower.

Afterward, she dressed in her pajamas: grey cotton pants and a tank top. She went out to the kitchen
to fix Zeke a sandwich for when he got home. She checked the time: 9:20. She sighed again and turned on the T.V, flopping down on the couch. She must have fallen asleep because the next thing she knew, Zeke was shaking her awake and regaling her with an abridged version of his day. The clock read 11:50, and she yawned, listening to him talk animatedly between bites of his sandwich.

"Oh my gosh, babe, how did your interview go?"

"You didn't listen to my voicemails?" she asked.

He winced, "Sorry, babe."

"It's fine," she smiled and gave him the details of her day again.

He hugged her excitedly. "I'm so glad it worked out, Al."

She yawned again, "Time for bed, I think."

Chapter End Notes

I'd like to think I've become better at Thor writing. ;) But I stand by my 2014 self. I won't throw her under the bus. She was new, and this was a major endeavor.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

And finally, here's Bruce.

Alice

Over the next few weeks, Alice shadowed Jules. Each morning a black car arrived in front of her apartment building promptly at 6:30 am. The first morning Alice brought her breakfast along to eat in the car during the drive. On the second morning, Preston, her driver, brought her bagels from her favorite café. He did that every morning after the first.

He was nice enough. Quiet in the mornings and more talkative in the evenings. Alice sensed that, like herself, Preston wasn't really a morning person.

Work began at 7 am when Jules and Alice would tackle the voicemail, switching up between taking the messages and inputting the information for JARVIS. Alice knew she was going to miss Jules' help when she moved on.

As it turned out Jules would still be in the building, she was just going to move down the hall to the PR department. Well, across the hall and down a few floors. She was going to head up the official Avengers PR team. The battle for New York had left a sour taste in the public's collective mouth, and if anyone could fix it Jules could.

After the voicemails, they took breakfast up to Jane and Darcy in the lab. Tony was still in L.A and Dr. Banner was still in Indonesia, so they were the only two in the lab at present. Then, Alice and Jules went back down to the office where they arrived just in time to greet Pepper with coffee.

The Starkphone was constantly ringing. "Virginia Potts' office, this is Alice." Alice was sure she said it hundreds of times throughout the day. More often than not the caller sounded affronted and asked to speak with Jules. That was going to get old very quickly.

They stayed in the office through lunch, eating bites of salad and sandwiches between calls and organizing Pepper's agenda. They took lunch up to the lab around one and retrieved the dishes from breakfast, which were usually stacked neatly on the counter in front.

The afternoons were usually spent in meetings and checking in with various members of the Avengers. Steve still seemed wary of Alice, but he was starting to warm up to her, even if only a little. Thor always greeted her loudly and jovially, hugging her until she thought her lungs would burst.

Natasha Romanov, the Black Widow, had never spoken so much as a word to her. Jules assured her it was a good sign. Apparently, Romanov spoke many words to Jules, none of them particularly kind.

Clint Barton, or Hawkeye as he was known, was marginally friendlier. She received a nod in
greeting and another in farewell. He even went so far as to wave hello to her in the lobby when he passed her there.

Pepper went home no later than six in the evening. Alice was surprised to discover that Pepper actually lived in Stark Tower, in the penthouse. After Pepper left, Alice and Jules finalized Pepper's agenda for the next day and transcribed any meetings that took place.

Darcy hadn't joined them for dinner since Alice's first night there, but she and Jules got along well so it wasn't a huge deal. They usually left for the night around 8:30 or 9 pm, and Alice went to bed soon after arriving home.

During Alice's final week of on-the-job training, there was to be a series of meetings throughout the day. Jules thought Alice could handle the phone and meal duty by herself. Pepper agreed.

"You'll do fine," assured Jules the night before, "just like we've been doing. Easy-peasy."

Alice was understandably nervous about going it alone for the first time since accepting the job.

She handled the voicemails that morning alone. It took her a tiny bit longer than usual, and she was half an hour late bringing breakfast to the lab. She was barraged by a series of texts from Darcy.

" Seriously, dude. Jane's getting HAN-GRY. "

As she was picking up the trays from the kitchen, she received another text from Darcy.

" Oh, and Banner's back, so get his food too."

Alice's stomach clenched. Jules had not been kind when she had described Dr. Banner. Alice was nervous about meeting someone about whom Jules couldn't even find something amiable. She texted Darcy back:

" No, he's not coming back till Monday."

" Really? Well, tell him that, compadre, cuz he's stalking around here like someone pissed in his Cheerios."

Alice felt like she couldn't breathe. This was NOT supposed to happen. She contemplated calling Jules, but she didn't want to bother her over this. When they dropped off the food, they did just that. Darcy and Jane were always busy, so they didn't talk to each other. She could just order an extra meal and leave it for him and then tomorrow she could officially meet him with Jules there as a buffer.

She took a deep breath. I can do this.

She got the sous chef's attention and asked for another meal. He raised his eyebrows.

"Is he back?" he asked.

"Yes," affirmed Alice.

"I thought he wasn't coming back until next week."

"Me too."

"Well, I can't say I'm surprised, he's such a flake," said the sous chef, handing Alice another tray.
Alice thought it was an odd thing to say, she'd never heard from anyone that Dr. Banner was a flake. It must be a trait that's overshadowed by the fact that he's also a 'royal ass-hat,' according to Darcy. She smirked at the memory.

Thor had taken Darcy's sarcasm literally and had wondered aloud, 'how the Doctor Banner was so flexible that he could rest his hindquarters on his own head.'

Darcy couldn't even reply.

Alice rearranged the trays so Darcy and Jane's meals were on a tray together, and Dr. Banner's was by itself. She wasn't sure what she was going to do when Tony got back. Perhaps balance one tray on her head Cinderella-style. She chuckled inwardly at the idea.

She carried both of them to the elevator. Once in the lab, she left them on the front counter. She looked back towards the furthest and usually darkest corner of the lab. It was lit up and she could see someone moving around back there. It made her stomach clench again, so she made sure the trays were in order and made a hasty retreat.

Lunch went pretty much the same except Dr. Banner hadn't left his breakfast dishes up in the front for her. Alice decided to give him until dinner, and then she'd ask Darcy to go get them or something. A childish way of handling it? Probably. She just really didn't want to meet him alone.

When she brought the evening meal up there were still no dishes from Dr. Banner.

Frowning, she leaned against the counter, elbows propped and texted Darcy.

"* Up front, soup's on."

"* Be right there."

Alice waited and Darcy jogged up to meet her.

"Hey," said Darcy. "What's new, pussycat?"

"Dr. Banner hasn't returned any of the dishes from breakfast or lunch."

Darcy flattened her mouth and nodded. "That's too bad."

"I need to take them down to be washed."

"Great story. Let me know how it ends." Darcy turned to walk away.

Alice leaned over the counter and grabbed Darcy's arm, her own feet leaving the ground.

"Please, Darcy, can you go get them?"

"Nope."

"C'mon, please?"

"Just leave it 'til tomorrow, and let Jules deal with it."

"No!" exclaimed Alice, "I need to be able to handle this myself! I'm taking over for Jules completely next Monday!"

"Well, then, you shouldn't be asking me to do your dirty work for you," said Darcy.
"But…you're the lab assistant…" pleaded Alice.

"I'm JANE'S lab assistant. That doesn't include having to deal with Señor Verde in there. I don't think Pepper OR Jules will think less of you if you just wait until tomorrow and let Jules take care of it."

Alice sighed. "I'll just come back for your dinner dishes later on, and maybe he'll have left them for me," she said hopefully.

She left with Darcy and Jane's dishes and took them down to be washed. She went back to the office, hoping to ask Jules what do to. Alice discovered that she had already left for the evening, having handled her end of the work already. She'd left a post-it on the computer monitor that read: "Great job today, see you tomorrow, lovey!"

Alice sighed and got to work on the schedule and agenda for the following day. Her dinner came at 7, chicken alfredo from the Stark kitchens. She ate, leaving half of it in the foil take-out pan to give to Zeke when she got home.

She sighed again. Just one more day of work and then she could enjoy a day off. She was looking forward to Saturday. Pepper had been kind enough to give her Saturdays off. She was still coming in on Sunday, but having a weekend day off was infinitely better than having one in the middle of the week. It was a miracle that Zeke's day off coincided with hers this week. She hadn't seen him in a while. They were like two ships passing in the night. On the rare occasions that they were both home at the same time he was so distant it was almost like he wasn't there. She was starting to miss him. She gathered all her things and sat them in the desk chair. She then made her way back up to the labs.

It was after nine when she got there. Darcy and Jane were gone already; their part of the lab dark. She looked at the counter. Only Darcy and Jane's dishes were there. She huffed.

"This is ridiculous," she thought.

She stood there for a second, weighing her options before deciding to let Jules handle it. She started to leave and stopped. She looked towards the back corner. It was still. She couldn't hear anything. Maybe he wasn't here. Maybe he'd just left the lights on.

"Asshat, flakey AND wasteful," she thought spitefully.

She set the other dishes on the counter and made her way back to Dr. Banner's corner.

She spotted all the covered dishes on a table, propping up notebooks, sketches, and various other things. She started to walk over when she saw him. He looked like he was asleep. He was leaning back in a computer chair, hands folded on his stomach. He had lots of floppy brown hair and a scruffy beard that looked more like a couple of days of forgotten shaving rather than purposeful. His skin was tanned, at least what she could see of it. Jules said he had been in Indonesia for a few weeks, so that made sense.

He was wearing grey slacks and a red button up with a white t-shirt underneath. The sleeves were pushed up past his elbows, and everything he wore appeared wrinkled and too big. He looked like he might be tall, Alice couldn't really tell, but most people were tall compared to her.

He looked peaceful and normal. She might even venture far enough to say he was handsome, although obviously very bookish. He just had that look about him. It didn't help that he'd left his glasses unfolded on his desk on top of an open book. He didn't look at all like he could suddenly
change into a scary green rage monster at the slightest provocation.

Alice crept silently towards the table, deciding to stack his notebooks and take all the dishes down to the kitchen. She picked up a manila file folder full of loose papers.

"Leave them."

Alice jumped and gasped, her heart leapt into her throat. "I'm sorry?" she stammered, clutching the folder in front of her.

"Leave them, I'll take them myself," he repeated, eyes still closed.

"I'm sorry I woke you…" she started.

"Wasn't asleep," he said, opening his eyes and peering at her. "Meditating."

"Oh," said Alice, stupidly.

He leaned forward and stared at her intently, aggressively.

"I…I'm Alice Vorso. I'm…Pep..." As she stammered her accent was becoming more and more apparent. She fought to keep her voice level and neutral. She was still holding the stupid folder in front of her like a shield or something.

"Pepper's assistant," he finished, frowning. "I thought your name was Julie or Jenny or something."

"No, it's Alice, and Julia is who I'm replacing."

"You're new," he stated bluntly.

"Yes."

He was silent for a moment. It was as if he were trying to process this new information. He looked up at her abruptly. "I'm Dr. Banner," he said uncertainly as if he weren't really sure how to introduce himself.

Alice's mouth was hanging open for some reason. She closed it before answering. "I-I know…" she stammered, "I—" she relaxed her hold on the folder a little too much and the contents fluttered out onto the floor. She stared at the papers, aghast for a moment before apologizing profusely and kneeling down to pick them up.

Smooth, Vorso. Really smooth. There is still a way to salvage this interchange, just do not, DO NOT open your mouth and unleash a torrent of verbal diarrhea on this poor man.

"I am SO sorry…I'm such a klutz…I mean, seriously…" she started gathering the papers again. He knelt down to help, and she kept her mouth in check.

He took the folder from her and stood. She followed suit carefully so she didn't take another tumble. That's all she'd need to do.

He just stared at her, probably wondering how she was hired at all. Alice's eyes darted around. The silence was stretching on for too long.

Say 'goodnight', and leave. 'Goodnight', and leave.

"I… um… know who you are. I've seen you before… last year, during that whole… battle-thing in
New York…"

He raised his eyebrows.

*Shut up, shut up, shut UP!*

"I mean…you were BIGGER. And green. And…smashing things. But, I've seen you before… that was… thank you. I mean, thanks for what you… Thanks," she said, looking down at her hands sheepishly.

*Am I STILL talking? What the hell is wrong with me?!

He frowned, "I'm a vegetarian."

Alice stopped talking and blinked a few times, confused. She stared at him, frowning for a minute before the realization hit her.

*All the uneaten food. Of course!*

"I'm so sorry, I had no idea…"

He held his hand up, "It's an honest mistake; I'm surprised no one in the kitchens told you."

Alice thought back to that morning. "Oh, I reckon they thought I was referring to Tony, and not you."

*RECKON? Way to go. Now he thinks you're a dumb country bumpkin.* She felt her cheeks get red.

Dr. Banner eyed her warily. "Well, now you know." He was staring at her again. Alice shifted uncomfortably.

"Well, I'm fixin' to go…Will you at least let me take your dinner tray? You aren't using it to prop somethin' up are you?" *Damn. That accent was out to get her today, it appeared.*

Dr. Banner was silent for a long moment before blurting, "What? Oh, no. Take it if you want". He turned to his computer screen.

She went over, picked up the tray, hoisting it up on her shoulder.

Then, it happened.

Seemingly in slow motion, but in truth, it happened faster than a knife fight in a phone booth.

Just as she was turning, her heel stuck to the floor. Her ankle rolled, the tray and its contents went tumbling down onto the table. The soup du jour, which just so happened to be Chef Jeffrey's Vegetable Beef, spilled all over the notebooks. It soaked everything in tomato beef broth. Alice's hands flew up to her face; her eyes darted over to where Dr. Banner had leapt out of his chair in a vain attempt to catch the tray.

The blood drained from her face, and her stomach lurched. She felt a cold feeling envelope her whole body. Her head hurt.

He gaped at the mess before him. He slowly looked up at her.

She flushed, feeling cold and hot at the same time, "I… I'm… I'm so sorry," she began; continuing on a blithering babbling ramble that would have put a frightened two-year-old to shame.
Dr. Banner just looked at her, his brown eyes dark, glowing. His watch started beeping frantically.

"Get. Out." He rasped.

"But let me help you…”

"You've done enough," he ground out through clenched teeth.

Alice froze. She wasn't sure what to do. Her instinct was to help him clean up the mess, but she felt a very strong desire to flee the room.

She knew he had anger problems but wasn't entirely convinced that this situation warranted the reaction he was having.

"JUST GO!" he bellowed. He held his head in his hands and breathed heavily through clenched teeth.

Alice ran, scared for her life.

She ran to the elevator, mashing buttons frantically. She ran down the hall to the office, hiding under the desk and sobbing for a few minutes before calling Pepper.

Bruce

He was meditating. Dr. Foster and her lab assistant had been gone nearly an hour, with the latter pushing the former out forcefully. That was normal.

Bruce was glad that the lab assistant didn't really bother with him anymore. Her voice was too whiny and it was tedious trying to decipher her strange way of speaking. In addition, she took offense when he couldn't remember her name. She had been blabbering something about Jane Austen and Pride & Prejudice the last time it had happened. What was that supposed to trigger? He hadn’t ever read Jane Austen when it was assigned to him in school. Spark notes usually gave him what he needed. He’d tuned out most of the literature he’d been forced to read. It wasn't important. He pushed all thoughts about the irritating girl out of his head.

He tried focusing on meditating again. Of course, the whole notion of focusing on nothing did seem a little counter-intuitive.

However, it was relaxing, and if it was relaxing, it was something Bruce Banner needed to take part in. He'd done everything he could think of to push down the angry beast that lurked beneath the surface. Meditation, herbal remedies, vegetarianism: all ways to keep healthy, keep relaxed and keep the Other Guy from rearing his ugly green head.

He heard the door to the lab buzz as it opened. He heard footsteps clicking and the rattle of dishes. It must be Tony's assistant here to get the dishes. Technically, she was Pepper's assistant, but Tony still ordered her around. He decided to give up on the meditation and cracked his eyes open to look at his work table, where he had utilized all the covered dishes as book and notebook props. He closed his eyes again. He'd take the dishes to the kitchen himself when he left for the night.
He hoped it wouldn't be too late to talk to someone who worked down there. They hadn't sent up his usual meals. In fact, they weren't even vegetarian. He'd had to make do with Dr. Foster's pop tarts, which, to be perfectly honest, weren't much better than nothing at all. All the chemicals and sugar were messing with his head. After five months of clean eating, the sugar rush was insane. They must have someone new working in the kitchen.

He was surprised that Tony's assistant hadn't caught and corrected the mistake. But he was back earlier than he'd expected. Even so, he'd have to remember to let Tony know eventually.

The lead to a medicine man in Indonesia had turned up nothing new. Over a month to find the shaman, a week and a half to gather the various flora, and about five minutes to realize he'd discovered a new twist on Darjeeling.

He'd returned to the States with no new ideas on how to better control the Other Guy. It wasn't a complete waste of time; however, he did manage to catalog two new types of plant-life with calming attributes, obtain samples of their seeds, and detailed instructions on how to produce potent cuttings.

The footsteps were moving closer. He started to breathe deeply to simulate sleep. Maybe she'd just leave him alone. That's when he heard her moving towards the work table. Nope, not going to happen.

"Leave them," he said.

He heard her stumble.

"I'm sorry," she stammered, her voice quieter and smaller than he remembered.

"Leave them, I'll take them down myself," He reiterated.

"I'm sorry I woke you…"

"Wasn't asleep," Bruce said simply.

He opened his eyes and looked at her curiously. She was clutching one of his files in her hands.

"Meditating," he finished.

Okay, that was a lie, he'd let his mind wander. But she didn't know that.

"Oh," she said, eyes wide and doe-like. Well, more like deer-in-the-headlights. She held the file in front of her as if she were trying to protect herself or something.

He leaned forward, studying her…something wasn't right. The girl in front of him didn't hold herself the same way she used to. She seemed to be cowering. Actually, she was just shorter than he'd remembered. Her top half was barely visible over the books and dishes on the table. Her face also appeared to be rounder with smaller, more endearing aspects. Well, except for her eyes, they were still very large and darting around rapidly.

That's not Tony's assistant. She can't be. Did he hire a new one while I was gone? What was wrong with the other one?

He glanced over her very quickly hoping she didn't notice. Not that her opinion of him should matter.

She had red hair, which wasn't surprising. Almost all the women in Tony's direct employ had red
hair, so that did nothing to clue him in as to who she was.

The table was blocking most of her still, which irritated him for some reason. He did notice that she was wearing stockings, or tights, or something.

*She must be wearing a skirt*, he thought to himself. It didn't seem likely she'd be wearing shorts with leggings to work, although that might not have been a bad…

"I. I'm…I'm Alice Vorso, I'm…Pep…" her voice startled him out of his thoughts.

"Pepper's assistant," he interrupted, trying to regain some sort of mental composure.

He realized he was still staring at her legs. He quickly looked back up to her face. She was nodding now.

Bruce frowned. "I thought your name was Julie or Jenny or something?" he asked, confused.

"No, it's Alice and *Julia* is who I'm replacing."

Realization dawned on Bruce.

"You're new."

"Yes." She affirmed.

*Tony really needs to start hiring people who look different from one another. This is like Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory except all the Oompa Loompas are shapely redheads.*

He let his eyes wander up and down her frame once more. *At least, I think she's shapely.*

Bruce realized that the poor girl was probably lost, or at least uninformed as to his identity. Once he told her she'd probably run screaming from the room.

"I'm Dr. Banner," he said, his tone cautious.

"I—I know," she said, stammering as the papers in the folder slid out all over the floor. She muttered something to herself and dropped down to the floor to gather them again.

Bruce felt the Other Guy start growling. He took several deep breaths. She was rambling, apologizing or something. He couldn't really concentrate on what she was saying. The blood in his head was rushing loudly. The Other Guy beat at the confines of the metaphorical prison where Bruce kept him locked away.

It was discouraging. He'd been doing so well with this. Something this trivial shouldn't be sending him over the edge so quickly.

Bruce repeated his calming mantra in his head and felt the Other Guy quiet down, apparently pacified for the time being.

*Good, that's good*, he congratulated himself on not Hulking out and ripping this poor girl to shreds.

He knelt down to help her pick up the rest of the papers. Bruce took the folder from her to keep her from dropping it again.

They stood again, and she looked down abruptly.
She had come out from behind the counter and looked up at him suddenly. Like she knew something.

"I…um…know who you are. I've seen you before…last year, during that whole…battle thing in New York…"

He raised his eyebrows.

"I mean…you were BIGGER. And green. And…smashing things. But, I've seen you before…that was…thank you. I mean, thanks for what you…Thanks." She looked down again.

_Did she just…THANK ME? For…smashing things?_

His brow furrowed. "I'm a vegetarian," he blurted.

_What?!_

She frowned as if she was trying to understand his meaning. She bit her bottom lip. That was kind of appealing. She was actually rather attractive.

_In a completely empirical sense, of course,_ Bruce thought to himself reassuringly.

Her eyebrows shot up and her mouth formed an "o." "I'm so sorry, I had no idea…"

"It's an honest mistake," he stated. "I'm surprised no one in the kitchens told you."

She appeared to be thinking again.

_There's nothing more attractive than a woman who gives the appearance of thought,_ he thought facetiously.

"Oh, I reckon they thought I was referring to Tony, and not you."

Her face reddened slightly.

"Well, now you know." He detected a tiny bit of an accent, southeastern U.S. She was trying to hide it though. Interesting. It suited her. Quaint. Cute. Whatever the hell word he chose, it would sound stupid if he said it.

He looked at her again, trying to read her expression, the silence reaching awkward levels. She shifted to her other foot, looking anywhere but at him.

"Well, I'm fixin' to go…will you at least let me take your dinner tray?" She stepped around the table and motioned to the untouched tray nearest him. "You aren't using it to prop somethin' up are you?" she asked.

There was that accent again. 'Fixin' to', that was definitely from the southeast.

Her eyes really were quite large. He felt like they were drawing him in. He was a bit embarrassed with himself. He usually didn't ogle the employees. Never to this degree, at least. There was something about this one…

Suddenly, he realized he hadn't responded.

"What? Oh, no. Take it if you want." He waved his hand dismissively at the tray, swiveling in his chair to face the computer screen. He didn't want to look at her anymore.
He heard it before he saw it, and he leaped over to try to stop it from happening.

The contents of the tray toppled down on to his notes, soaking everything in cold, greasy, orange liquid.

He slowly turned to look at her. She wore a horrified expression, her hands covering her mouth.

The sound of blood rushing through his head was deafening. The Other Guy clawed at his psyche, scrambling for release. He fought to keep him in.

Shit...keep cool, keep cool...

She started talking. He couldn't understand her; she was blabbering like some unstoppable moron. His pulse crept up, the monitor was beeping. Why the hell did Tony hire someone who was so inept at basic motor skills?

Not her fault, not her fault...she's probably nervous...just calm down, Big Guy.

Of course, none of this was helping, The Other Guy was already riled up from before. There was no way in hell he was going to calm him down if she didn't leave. The Other Guy did not like her.

"Get. OUT." He punctuated, voice rasping.

"But...let me help you..." she squeaked.

"You've done enough."

She froze, just staring at him. Why wouldn't she leave?

"JUST GO!" he shouted, his voice starting to deepen and change. He had to get to the containment chamber.

She blinked, tears forming in her eyes, and she was gone. She tripped on her way out, but she was gone.

Bruce staggered back to the containment chamber, knocking over tables on the way.

He finally reached it after what felt like forever, arguing with himself the whole time. He locked the door and collapsed on the floor of the room.

He repeated the calming mantra from earlier. The one that had worked. He had no idea how loud he was because the blood rushing through his head sounded like a freight train. His pulse monitor was beeping frantically, he glanced down at it. 180 bpm.

Shit.

He took deep breaths, trying to coax the Other Guy back down. He roared and struggled, but finally he felt him recede. He looked at his pulse monitor, which had stopped beeping. 160 bpm.

Better, much better.

He groaned, the pain in his head was intense. Each time he talked the Other Guy down, it was worse.

After a while he lifted his head, looking around. He sighed. He'd have to spend the night here tonight. He was able to lock himself in but was unable to let himself out. Dr. Foster would be here
early. Tony might even be back soon.

He dropped his head back down to the padded floor of the containment chamber, closing his eyes. He dozed.

He heard his name, softly spoken. He jerked his head up, eyes wild to see Pepper and Thor, Mjölnir at the ready, looking at him warily through the window of the chamber.

"Sorry," he said. He was. Just because that PA was clumsy didn't mean she deserved the Other Guy's wrath. She'd probably quit now.

"No…it's fine." Pepper said soothingly. "Can we…let you out?"

He nodded, slowly standing.

Pepper unlocked the door. Bruce walked out of the chamber, stumbling over to his desk. He sat down, dropping his head into his hands. He was so damn tired.

"What happened?" asked Pepper.

He sighed and gestured to the table, where soup was dripping on the floor.

"Yes, I know all about that, Alice told me. What I mean is, why did it upset you so much?" She pulled a chair beside him and put her hand over his clenched one. Her skin felt cool. "Are you okay now?"

"Yes, it's under control."

Thor visibly relaxed.

"And to answer your previous question, I have no idea why I got angry. I used to fly off the handle for stuff like this at the beginning, but I've gotten myself in check lately." He looked over to Thor. "I see you brought back-up."

"Were these important?" Pepper waved off the comment and gestured to the ruined notebooks on the table.

"It was all the work I've done for the past few weeks, all my research and notes from Indonesia." He admitted. "Now, I'll have to recopy all the notes. It's going to set me back at least a week."

He sighed again, cradling his head in his hands, suddenly exhausted.

"Well, don't worry about that," said Pepper. "Alice is going to come in tomorrow and recopy them for you. She'll come back every day until it's done."

So, she didn't quit immediately. That was almost impressive. Or incredibly stupid.

"That's really not necessary," said Bruce. It wasn't. She'd probably take forever. It wasn't like he could do anything else until the notes were finished anyway.

"It is, and she's doing it," said Pepper firmly. "She's competent. She has lots of experience in copying and transcription. She'll be here tomorrow morning, put her to work."

Bruce nodded. There really was no arguing with Pepper when she made up her mind. He rose, and shut down his computer and stood up, turning to walk to the table to clean up the mess.
"Banner, go rest," said Thor. "Keeping the green one at bay appears exhausting."

"He's right. Go, Bruce. I'll tidy this up," offered Pepper.

Bruce turned to leave, too tired to argue. He didn't remember walking to the elevator or riding it up to his apartment, all he remembered was collapsing on the couch. He was asleep as soon as he laid down.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

In which... interesting things develop. :)

Chapter Notes

This is one of the most trope-filled chapters of anything I've ever written, and I could not be more proud.

Enjoy! :D

Alice

Alice stretched her arms over her head, her stiff back aching. The stool she was sitting on was less than conducive to comfort. Why she couldn't just do this at the office was beyond her. She pushed her reading glasses up on her nose and glanced around the lab.

Darcy sat bent over her notebook, squinting, then frowning, then sighing exasperately when she couldn't decipher another section of notes because of Dr. Banner's terrible penmanship. It was Alice's fault she was here. She was VERY vocal about that.

Alice thought back to the previous evening, after her frightening encounter with Dr. Banner. She had called Pepper, and while Pepper wasn't mad, she was disappointed. Jules was right, it was worse. Pepper told her in no uncertain terms, that she was to recopy ALL the work she had destroyed. It wasn't that copy work was a HUGE deal, it was the fact that she was at the beck and call of Dr. Banner. Dr. Banner, who certainly thought she was a complete idiot. Who didn't bother to learn her name or even look at her? When she arrived that morning he hadn't even said a word, just motioned and grunted.

Of course, Alice was being less than mature about the whole thing. Not that she'd admit it.

She'd purposely moved her stool around the counter so she was facing the opposite direction and wouldn't have to look at him. When she'd done that, she'd opened herself up to numerous conversations with Tony, whom she was now facing.

He'd guffawed loudly when he heard about Alice and Dr. Banner's meeting. "Ha HA! Give that girl a raise!" he'd laughed, clapping Alice on the back. "Bruce has been here almost a year, and I've NEVER been able to get him that riled up! How'd you do that?"

Alice had reddened and looked down at the notebook in front of her, shrugging. "Just lucky, I guess," she'd replied dryly, fiddling with the cap on her pen. Dr. Banner had ended the exchange.
abruptly by reminding Tony that she and 'the other one' was here to work, not to converse. As much as Alice didn't like him, she was glad he'd ended the conversation before it had gotten more uncomfortable. And with Tony, every conversation was uncomfortable.

Alice decided to take her first break. Her back wasn't feeling better after stretching. In fact, it felt worse. It was almost as if one wasn't meant to hunch over a low counter on a high stool and copy notes that were almost illegible, to begin with.

She was certain she'd be more comfortable on the floor, and if it weren't for the fact that she'd dressed for a normal day in the office (pencil skirt, blouse, and heels), she would sit on the floor to finish these notes. She made a mental note to dress more casually the next day.

Alice got up, stretched again, and walked back to the kitchen area. She started the electric kettle and looked around for tea bags.

"In the top right cabinet, top shelf," said Tony, who had followed her into the kitchen area.

Alice opened the cabinet and sighed. "There aren't any tea bags on the top shelf, Tony."

"Oh, I didn't know what you were looking for. I just wanted to watch you climb up there." He beamed at her. "I figured you were short enough to have to climb up on the counter."

It really was hard to stay mad at him. But, Alice liked a challenge.

"Tea?" she asked shortly, raising her eyebrows and crossing her arms.

"Drawer on the left," said Dr. Banner quietly from the doorway.

"What?" exclaimed Tony in mock confusion. "I thought I threw all that out. We don't drink tea in America, Banner."

Alice opened the drawer and took out a tea bag, abruptly slamming it before Dr. Banner could reach in. She grabbed her mug from the shelf, it had thoughtfully been brought down from the break area in the office suites. She filled it with boiling water and dropped her teabag in. She then proceeded to lean on the counter to wait for it to steep.

Dr. Banner, who had apparently retrieved his tea from the drawer, was waiting for Alice to finish with the kettle. He was staring at her. He leaned on the counter on the opposite side of the sink, turned towards her and folded his arms. He was being awfully fidgety. She looked over at him.

"If you're wondering why I'm just standing here, my back hurts. The stupid stool I'm sitting on is hurting my back. I'll be back to work as soon as my tea is done," she snapped, pressing her lips into a thin line, with a look in her eyes that challenged him to have a problem with it.

Dr. Banner shook his head, his face blank. "I don't care." He turned towards Tony, who had been watching the scene unfold before him, with a look on his face that was nothing short of giddy.

Alice pulled her mug closer and proceeded to dunk her tea bag several times to speed the process of steeping. She knew it would make it bitter, but she really just wanted to get out of the kitchen as quickly as possible. She discarded the used tea bag and opened the small fridge on the counter in search of milk. There was none. She slammed the door and grabbed the sugar, furiously scooping in more than she normally would have since the tea was going to be bitter anyway. While stirring, she sloshed hot tea onto her hand. She jumped in surprise and wiped her hand on her skirt, inspecting it for burns.
"If you wanted milk you should have mentioned it to someone," said Dr. Banner, bluntly.

"I prefer half and half," she replied shortly. She took a sip of her tea and grimaced.

"Later, Alice," Tony called after her.

She walked back out to her work station.

She seated herself at the counter, this time dragging her stool closer to Darcy. She might as well clear the air if they were going to be table-mates for the foreseeable future.

"Darcy," Alice began. She turned an indifferent look towards her, her glasses magnifying her eyes. "I'm sorry you got dragged into this. It's completely my fault and it was a stupid mistake I made. I should have listened to you and waited for Jules to help me. I'm an idiot. Please forgive me."

Darcy blinked, then removed her glasses. She grimaced and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Alice, it's fine. I should have just gotten the damn plates for you and neither of us would be here. To tell you the truth, I was sick of being mad at you. I just want to be mad at the Green One now, and you've been absolutely bitch-tastic, so I want in on that."


"It's refreshing, really. Most people tiptoe around him and let him do what he wants. I think that's why he prefers to work alone, it makes him seem more mysterious," said Darcy.

"I guess..." Alice began. "Well, he deserves someone like me. Dr. Banner is a jerk."

Darcy swatted her arm, looking over towards his work station where the doctor himself was settling into his desk chair. Alice couldn't tell if he had heard her or not, but deciding that she didn't care one way or the other, she settled herself onto her stool as best she could and got back to copying.

After a while, Darcy turned towards Alice.

"Alice, could you take a look at this gibberish and please tell me you know what he's trying to say..." Darcy slid a stained notebook over to Alice. She squinted at the writing, picking up the notebook and looking at it from different angles.

"I have no idea, sorry, Darce."

"Damn. I was hoping I wouldn't have to talk to him," Darcy whispered.

Alice smirked, "Great story, let me know how it ends."

"Shut up, you," replied Darcy, as she hopped down from the stool and walked over to Dr. Banner's desk.

He was across the room at that time, staring intently at the large touch screens in the back of the lab. Darcy waited.

He walked back over to the desk and jumped when he saw her there.

"What?" he asked, annoyed.

"I'm sorry to bother you, I'm sure you're busy with SCIENCE! right now, but I can't read this chicken scratch right here," Darcy pointed to the place on the page.
Dr. Banner snatched the notebook from her, held the page back from his face and slowly brought it closer.

Darcy swung a look at Alice. Alice was silently snickering. Darcy smiled and bit her bottom lip to keep from laughing. Unfortunately, she let out a snort. Dr. Banner stared at her.

"Something funny?" he asked, clearly not amused.

"Can you not read it either?" asked Alice, biting back laughter with every word, "Seems like those notes are about as useful as a screen door on a submarine."

Dr. Banner frowned, and handed the notebook back to Darcy, still looking directly at Alice. "Ink's smeared. Looks like some moron spilled soup all over it." He walked away. Darcy froze, looking over at Alice.

Alice coughed. She stared down at the table, blinking rapidly. She wasn't sure why she got so upset so quickly, but she was NOT going to cry in front of these people. She took several deep breaths and felt a hand on her shoulder. Darcy.

Darcy helped her stand. "I'm starved, I think it's time for lunch," she said kindly, smiling at Alice.

Alice nodded, sniffing loudly.

Darcy linked arms with her and walked her out of the lab. "LUNCH!" she yelled over her shoulder as they left.

She cried over her sandwich down in the office break area. Both Darcy and Julia took turns comforting her, but deep down she knew she deserved the insult. Both she and Darcy were making fun of him, and she'd been nothing but horrible for the whole day. The whole reason she was there in the first place was her fault and hers only. But it didn't make it sting any less. Nobody likes being told they're stupid. It certainly didn't improve her opinion of Dr. Banner.

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**Bruce**

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The morning started the same as most mornings. Bruce was in the lab long before anyone else. Dr. Foster came in first, dragging her groggy assistant by the arm. She came over to Bruce's station and waited beside his desk for him to look up.

"Darcy is going to help Ms. Vorso recopy all your notes," stated Dr. Foster.

"Why?" asked Bruce. He really didn't want Ms. Vorso there, let alone Dr. Foster's assistant (Darcy?).

"I think she needs to help, is all," said Dr. Foster, with a tone of finality.

Bruce sighed, "Alright." He gestured to the counter closest to the wall. "Have a seat."

Darcy shuffled over and plopped herself down on the stool.

"The notebooks that need to be copied are here," he pointed to a stack of notebooks in the center of
the counter, "and here are the new ones to copy into. There are pens too, I'm sure you can figure out what those are for..." he paused, she was staring blankly, "write with the pointy end." He walked back over to his desk, sitting down at the computer.

Ms. Vorso came in at 7 am on the dot. She stalked over to his desk, arms crossed, glaring. He gestured to the counter by the wall where the other one was sitting. He sat back at his computer and began entering data from the previous day's experiments.

Suddenly, there was a loud scraping sound that lasted for nearly 10 seconds. He peered around his monitor and saw Miss Vorso dragging her stool around the counter so she was on the opposite side facing the other one, but with her back to him. She climbed up onto the stool and bent over the notebook, looking at the first page of notes.

He settled back down again, and the rest of the morning was uneventful except for Miss Vorso's annoying habit of constantly cracking her knuckles. It seemed she did it every five minutes, followed by a frantic shaking of her left hand. She wrote furiously and fast. Bruce hoped the notes would be legible.

Bruce spent most of the morning at the large touch screens at the back of the lab. His own DNA strands were displayed on them, and he was simply spinning them around and back again. But, to the untrained eye, he looked hard at work. Until his notes were readable again there wasn't much he could do. He thought about asking Tony if he needed his input on any of his projects but didn't really want to deal with Tony all day. He then briefly entertained the idea of recopying some of the notes himself, but decided against it, since it wouldn't be received well by "the help". He smirked. That wouldn't be received well either.

He'd really been hoping for a breakthrough on the last trip. That was a redundancy, really, because he was always hoping for a breakthrough on every trip. It just seemed like the list of places he could look for a cure was getting shorter and shorter. With every failure, with every disappointment, he could feel himself slipping further and further away. He often wondered how long he'd be able to control the transformation. What if, someday, he didn't change back? He shook his head. Thoughts like that weren't going to help anything. He closed down the program he was using and walked back to his desk. He grabbed his mug and went to the kitchen to make some tea. As he approached, he heard Tony and Ms. Vorso (Alison? What was her first name?) talking.

"Tea?" she snapped at Tony, crossing her arms.

"Drawer on the left," answered Bruce.

"What? I thought I threw all that out. We don't drink tea in America, Banner," chided Tony. Bruce ignored him and started to cross the room.

She looked over at Bruce, narrowed her eyes. She leaned over and opened the drawer, taking out a black tea bag and slammed the drawer shut right before he reached in. She abruptly turned. Bruce, slightly amused, slightly affronted, calmly reopened the drawer. He took out a tea bag and turned towards her, placing his mug on the table. He never quite knew what to do with his hands, so he picked it back up again. He turned and leaned against the counter, hoping for nonchalant. He was probably failing miserably judging by the look on her face.

*Pull it together,* he thought to himself. *No reason to be acting like this.*

Suddenly, she exploded, "IF you're wondering why I'm just standing here, my BACK hurts. The STUPID stool I'm sitting on is hurting my back. I'll be back to work as SOON as my tea is done."
What the hell? He thought. I didn't make the stupid chairs. Didn't force you to sit in them, either.

"I don't care," he said simply, hoping to convey that he wasn't her boss and didn't care how long she took a break as long as his notes were back by the end of the week.

She then proceeded to bang around the kitchen, looking in the fridge, slamming the door, angrily stirring a LOT of sugar into her tea. Seriously, a LOT of sugar. Spilling hot tea on her hand, cursing under her breath. Bruce just watched it all unfold.

"If you wanted milk you should have mentioned it to someone," Bruce offered, not entirely sure why he was trying to placate someone who obviously didn't like him.

She snapped her head towards him, eyes flashing. "I. prefer. Half and half." She enunciated slowly like she was talking to someone of much lower intelligence than herself. She took a sip of her tea and started walking out of the kitchen.

"Later, Alice," said Tony.

ALICE! Alice Alice Alice. Thought Bruce. Perhaps if he could remember her name, that might garner some positive report.

"That girl is aces," laughed Tony. "Haha, love her."

Bruce chuckled, "Somehow, I don't think she thinks the same of you."

"Or you," retorted Tony.

"Yeah, well, I'm used to that," said Bruce. "Although, I'm not sure I've been subjected to this amount of sheer hatred since I was in grade school. I'm legitimately scared that she's going to somehow stuff me in my locker."

Tony laughed. "It's not hatred. Just pull her hair and give her what she wants." He looked at Bruce knowingly and winked.

Bruce shook his head. "I'm leaving. This conversation is over."

He finished steeping his tea, threw out the bag, and left the kitchen. Tony was still laughing. How that guy got any work done was an amazing feat.

Bruce crossed the lab and was almost back to his desk when he overheard a conversation between Alice and the other one.

"...it makes him seem more MYSTERIOUS," the other one said.

Bruce knew he shouldn't be listening, but it was hard not to overhear them.

"I guess...well, he deserves someone like me, Dr. Banner is a JERK," stated Alice, definitively.

Ouch.

Bruce seated himself at his computer, but couldn't keep still. He wracked his brain, trying to pinpoint a time where he had behaved in a jerk-like fashion. He couldn't think of one. He also couldn't figure out why he cared what Pepper's new assistant thought of him. He never even bothered to remember the other one's name. Now, not only had he learned Alice's name, he CARED about what she thought about him?
Nope. Nope, nope nope nope nope. I need to Shut. This. Down, thought Bruce.

He got up and walked back to the large touch screens. He felt flustered again. He shook his head, swiping the graphics around on the screen. He'd gotten absolutely no work done today. That did not need to happen again. He turned and walked back to his desk to retrieve his rapidly cooling tea.

The other one was standing there, he jumped.

"What?" he asked sharply.

"I'm sorry to bother you, I'm sure you're busy with SCIENCE! right now, but I can't read this chicken scratch right here," she said, pointing to the center of the page on a particularly stained portion.

Bruce took the notebook from her and realized he'd left his glasses on the counter in the back; he held the notebook far away from his face, and slowly brought it closer, squinting to see what he'd written. He was dragged out of his concentration by a loud snort coming from the other one. He looked up, annoyed to see her laughing at him.

"Something funny?" he asked, moving past annoyed and onward to irritated.

"Can YOU not read it either?" asked Alice, incredulously. "Those notes are about as useful as a screen door on a submarine," she laughed spitefully.

Okay, maybe not spitefully, but she is being awfully rude, considering it's her fault it looks like this. Hell if I'm going to be one-upped by a country bumpkin.

Bruce frowned and handed the notebook back to the other one, making sure not to break his gaze at Alice. "Ink's smeared. Looks like some moron spilled soup all over it," he said pointedly. He knew as it was coming out that it was not the right thing to say, but damn if it didn't feel good.

He turned and walked to the back of the lab, not wanting to have to see the repercussions of his statement. He was mentally berating himself the whole way back.

A moron? Really? You had to call her a moron? There aren't a MILLION other, nicer ways to say this? You had to call her a moron.

He resumed his previous activity: trying to look busy at the touch screens. He vaguely heard the other one yell "LUNCH" before the door to the lab opened and slammed.

He was in the process of wondering for the hundredth time in five minutes what possessed him to behave that way when he realized something else. For the entire day, he'd been caught up trying to impress Alice, or not really impress her, but be nice to her and positively impact her opinion of him. And all the while he hadn't felt the Other Guy at all. No scratching, no clawing, nothing. The Other Guy was quiet. All morning.

"Huh…" he said aloud, "That's interesting."

Alice
After lunch, Alice went into the restroom and washed her face, because she had mascara and eyeliner dripping down her cheeks. She was so mad at herself for letting him get to her. She looked at herself in the mirror and took a deep breath. She inspected her face. Her eyes were red, and she was inexplicably without makeup now, but she figured no one would really notice. Alice took a deep breath, gathered up her bag, and left the bathroom.

Darcy was waiting outside. "Ready?" she asked, a big fake grin plastered on her face.

"No, but let's go before I lose my nerve," said Alice.

They boarded the elevator.

"JARVIS? Where is Dr. Banner?" asked Alice.

"He's in the laboratory," answered JARVIS.

"No, sorry, whereabouts in the lab is he?" she asked.

"Dr. Banner looks to be taking his lunch break."

"Okay, thanks, Jarvis."

Darcy looked questioningly at Alice.

"I didn't want to have to face him right away," explained Alice. Darcy nodded.

Once they got back up to the lab and had seated themselves at the counter, Darcy turned towards Alice.

"What are you doing tomorrow?" she asked.

"Oh wow, um…sleeping in, definitely," answered Alice, "running some errands, doing some laundry, and Zeke and I are going out to get drinks in the evening."

"Nice. Sounds similar to what I'll be doing, minus the drinks with a male," said Darcy.

"Oh, why don't you come with us? We usually just go out with Zeke's friends, maybe you could meet somebody."

"Maybe…yeah, sounds fun," agreed Darcy.

They then turned back to their respective notebooks. Both were trying to finish as quickly as possible because neither wanted to be here for an entire week. Since there were two of them working, they should be finished in four days. In fact, Alice was already almost done with the first notebook. She was sure she would be finished with it by the end of the day.

When 5 o'clock rolled around Alice had finished with the first notebook, and was trying to wait for Dr. Banner to get up from his desk so she wouldn't have to give it directly to him. She realized he wasn't going to get up from his desk anytime soon, and she wanted to go down to the office suites and see if Jules needed any help finishing up for the day. So, she grudgingly got up from her uncomfortable stool and walked over to his desk. She set the notebook down beside him, turning to leave.

"I'll look this over tonight, and I'll let you know tomorrow if there is anything that needs to be rewritten," he said, eyes not leaving the screen.
"Hmm? Tomorrow? You mean SUNDAY, right?" she asked.

"No, I mean tomorrow. I'm coming in tomorrow," he said with finality like it explained why they should be there tomorrow.

"But, it's SATURDAY," stated Alice, stressing the last word.

"Yes. IT is."

"But Saturday's my day off, just because you..." she trailed off, taking a deep breath. "Fine. Sure. See you tomorrow," she said quickly, rushing out the door.

Pepper. She'd take this up with Pepper. Pepper was her boss, not Dr. Banner. If Pepper said her day off was Saturday, then Dr. Banner would just have to understand that.

"Alice, wait!"

Alice turned to see Darcy rushing to keep up, she held the elevator.

"Did he say we're working tomorrow? I'm NOT working tomorrow," panted Darcy, out of breath from trying to keep up with Alice.

"Me either. I'm going to ask Pepper," said Alice.

"Good idea," agreed Darcy.

They rushed up to the office suites, hoping that Pepper hadn't left yet.

Jules had gone home, but Pepper remained in her office.

"Alice. Darcy." She rose from her seat. "How are things down in the lab?"

"We're getting the copy work done. I actually finished the first notebook today," said Alice, proudly.

"Great. I sense that you didn't come down to talk about your day, however," said Pepper.

"You're right! You're so empathic!" gushed Darcy, "and so beautiful! Have you lost weight? Is that a new dress?"

Pepper smiled. "Darcy, I don't know what you've heard about me, but flattery will get you everywhere," she laughed.

Darcy laughed too, if a little too loudly.

Alice shook her head slightly before continuing. "Dr. Banner seems to think we need to come in tomorrow, but tomorrow is Saturday, and you said I could have Saturdays off, right? And you're my boss, not Dr. Banner. I had made plans..."

Pepper nodded. "I am your boss, and I did say you could have Saturdays off..." Alice's hopes rose. "However, until the copy work is done, Dr. Banner is your boss, and if he wants you to come in tomorrow, you come in tomorrow." Alice's face fell. "I'm sorry you have plans, but it's probably just going to be for this one weekend. I'm sure you two will be finished in no time and will be able to have your Saturdays free again by next week."

Alice nodded in defeat. "I understand."
Pepper patted her shoulder. "I'll see you both later, I'm sure." She smiled warmly at Darcy, before sitting down at her desk again, dismissing them.

Alice and Darcy left the office crestfallen.

"Well, I guess I'll see you tomorrow," said Alice.

"Yep."

Alice let out a strangled scream, clenching her fists. "UGH, I HATE HIM!"

Darcy nodded. "I know you do, but let's just get this done without any more episodes then we can move on."

Alice took a deep breath. "Yeah, okay…I'm going home. See you, Darce."

"Later, Alice."

Alice left the building and saw Preston leaning against the black car.

"Hey, Preston."

"Ms. Vorso," He nodded and opened the door for her.

"Alice, please." She got in, he closed the door and crossed around to the driver's side, getting in the car.

"Alice. How was your day?"

"Terrible. But, I wasn't expecting anything but terrible. How was yours?"

"I'm sorry to hear that. Mine was typical."

She nodded. The rest of the ride home was in silence. They were almost back to her apartment building when she realized that she'd left her bag in the lab.

"Dammit," She swore. "I left my bag in the lab, and my house keys are in it."

"Want me to drive you back?" asked Preston.

"I suppose so if I want to get into the apartment tonight," sighed Alice.

The car ride back was spent in silent frustration on Alice's part. She prayed to whatever God there was that Dr. Banner wouldn't be in the lab still, but she knew that was wishful thinking. It wasn't even 7 pm yet, of course, he'd still be there. Darcy said he was the first there and the last to leave, which made Alice wonder if he didn't just live there.

Geez, he doesn't have a life, does he? She thought. Just because he has a miserable life, doesn't mean he has to spread it around.

She really hoped he wasn't there. She really couldn't trust herself not to insult him again.

In the elevator on her way down to the lab, she asked Jarvis where he was.

"Dr. Banner is still in the lab. Would you like a more detailed description?"

Alice chuckled darkly. "No, JARVIS, thank you."
If anyone could program an A.I with sarcasm, it was Tony.

She entered the lab slowly, quietly, cautiously. She looked around. It was still mostly lit up, which meant all three scientists were here somewhere. She craned her neck and spotted her bag on the table in the back. She could just rush back, grab it, and leave. Hopefully, all the egg heads would be too busy to notice.

She walked quickly back to the table, grabbed her bag, and was turning to go when her shoe slipped. She went crashing down towards the floor, she tensed, waiting for the impact, but it never came. Instead, she felt a pair of strong arms on her waist.

_Tony?_ She thought and looked up. _Nope._

Dr. Banner. He looked embarrassed for a split second before he helped her stand again. "Are you alright?" he asked, seemingly concerned.

"I…I forgot my bag," Alice stammered, stupidly. She cringed inwardly. _No wonder he thinks I'm a moron._

"Okay, well, you have it now. Can you make it out of the lab without hurting yourself?" he asked, smirking slightly.

Alice chanced a small smile. "Thanks. I'm a danger to myself…and notebooks, apparently."

Dr. Banner chuckled. "Well, just take it easy. One of the Avengers won't always be around to catch you if you fall."

Alice blushed. He knew about what happened with Steve, apparently.

"I'm going to go. Thanks for catching me." She smiled.

"Don't mention it," Dr. Banner turned back to his desk and righted his chair, which he'd apparently jumped out of to catch her. "Have a good night," he said.

"You too."

She left the lab and the building. On the second drive home, she wasn't nearly as bitter as the first. Embarrassed, yes. But she wasn't nearly as angry. And she couldn't forget the feel of his hands on her waist.

_Unexpected_, she thought, blushing and hiding a smile behind her hand.
The next morning Alice was almost late because she truly did not want to get out of bed.

"Babe, just call in sick if you don't want to go in," said Zeke, rolling away from her and burying his head under the pillow.

Alice groaned as she hit the snooze button for the fourth time. "I can't do that. Pepper already knows I didn't want to come in, it'd be too…transparent." She changed her mind and turned off the alarm altogether. "I don't need to do something like that. I just… UGH ! I don't want to go in and spend the whole wonderful day in that dungeon of a lab. I also don't really want to be around someone who thinks I'm an idiot."

"Well…" said Zeke.

"Thanks for the advice," Alice teased, playfully punching him in the shoulder.

He scooted further away from her, out of reach, "Geez…"

"Love you, Zeke."

"Me too, babe," he mumbled half asleep.

Alice groaned again and rolled out of bed. "At least I can look forward to us going out this evening, right?" she asked, stretching.

Zeke mumbled something incoherent.

"Darcy's still invited right?" she asked.

"You invited her."

"It's okay, isn't it?"

"Whatever babe, I'm not really awake right now."

"Sorry…"

Zeke sighed exasperatedly. He sat up, blinking repeatedly, turning to look at Alice. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, don't worry about it."

He sighed again, "What's wrong?"

"Well, you seem kind of distant."

"I'm asleep."
"Well, you're not now."

"No. I'm not. I'm awake now."

"I was just trying to nail down our plans for this evening," she reminded him.

"Let's just…figure that out later."

"Okay…"

"Just worry about not killing your boss."

"He is not my boss."

"…Okay."

"He isn’t."

"I'm agreeing with you."

"Well, at least I only have to work with him for a week or so. I'll go back to my real job soon enough and you'll get your loving fiancée back."

"Yep," he said shortly as he laid back down, rolling away from her towards the wall again.

Alice rolled her eyes. He always got weird when she mentioned the wedding or the engagement. She'd long since stopped bringing up a wedding date. Whenever she brought it up Zeke always said the same thing.

"What do we need to get married for? We already live together, we don't need a piece of paper to prove that we love each other!"

It had been four years since Zeke proposed to her at the little restaurant where they were eating with their families after their college graduation. Zeke meant well; she knew he did. If he'd given the proposal any thought at all, he'd have known that she didn't want a grand spectacle.

He didn't even have a ring for her when he proposed. She picked it out later, alone, and he paid for it. She had a sneaking suspicion that he proposed on a whim, or just to get her to come to New York with him. Zeke did things the way he thought they were supposed to be done and gave very little thought to how his actions affected others. She wanted to get married, but if Zeke didn't want to, she was through pushing him. They got along a lot better if she didn't try to force things.

She was happy, though. Of course, she was happy. She was in a long term relationship, with a very devoted, wonderful guy.

Alice got up, grabbed her bathrobe and quickly scurried to the shower. She didn't have time to dry her hair. So she combed out the tangles and decided to let it dry on its own. She ran back into the bedroom and got dressed: just jeans and a t-shirt today. Hell if she was going to dress up to go to work on her day off. She dug her Chuck Taylors out of the closet and sat on the bed to put on her shoes and socks. When she had finished, she turned to look at Zeke. He had gone back to sleep. She smiled and reached over to ruffle his hair.

"You leavin'?" he asked, not opening his eyes.

"Yeah, pretty soon, just need to put my face on."
He nodded and rolled over into his pillow.

Alice got up and went back to the bathroom. She hastily applied minimal makeup.

"Don't overdo it." Zeke was leaning against the bathroom door frame.

"Thanks," she smirked, "Love you."

"Me too, babe," he answered.

Alice frowned at her reflection. "Why don't you ever say it back?"

"Do you have to start this right now? You're gonna be late for work," he groaned.

"I'm not starting anything, I'm just curious."

He stood fully in the doorway, pushing off the door frame, "You're not curious, you know why I don't say it back. I don't need to, you know how I feel about you."

She turned to face him, "How would I know when you never say it?"

"Look, I'm not doing this right now. I'm sorry you have to work on a Saturday, but it's no excuse for you to ruin my day off."

"Well, damn, I wouldn't want to do that, now would I?" she snapped.

"Look, I work really hard, a lot harder than you do, and I don’t deserve this!"

"Right, right, I forgot for a minute that everything revolves around you," she said sarcastically.

"That's not what I meant, and you know it," he said levelly. "Look, you have to go to work; we'll talk about this later."

"We won't. We never do," she said shortly, throwing things into her bag and slinging it over her shoulder.

"Look, I don't want to do this right now. This conversation IS OVER," Zeke ground out. "Everything was fine until you had to go and drag all this old shit up."

"Well, I want to talk about this. Maybe now's not the best time, but we NEED to talk about it," said Alice.

"Whatever, you need to get goin' or you're gonna be late," he said, pointing at the clock.

"Right," she said, blinking rapidly. "Talk to you later." She opened the door, looked back at him once and continued out.

She walked towards the elevator. He wouldn't come after her. Not his style.

By the time she was downstairs and sitting in the car, she was mentally kicking herself.

Why did I do that? Why can't I just keep my thoughts to myself? Now I've probably ruined the first day off he's had in a while, and all because I want to argue about something that isn't even that big of a deal. Is it? Nope. Not a big deal.

She got out her phone to text him.
"I'm sorry. Forget about it, okay? I was just upset about having to go to work today and I lashed out at you. You don't deserve that. I'm so sorry."

She hit send and put her phone away.

She took the blueberry muffin out of the paper bag Preston had handed her when she had gotten into the car. She picked a piece off and sipped her enormous chai latte. He had to be some kind of food psychic. He always knew what she wanted to eat. She checked the bag again, Greek yogurt. Seriously, the guy was magic.

She ate in silence, thinking about the sudden turn her morning had taken. Before she knew it, they had arrived at Stark Tower.

"Thanks, Preston." She said as she got out of the car. Preston nodded in response.

Alice checked her watch and realized she was almost late, so she sped up her pace. She breezed into the lab at seven a.m on the dot. She rounded the corner and walked towards the counter where she and Darcy had been sitting the day before. She looked up and stopped suddenly. The counter was empty, the notebooks gone, Darcy wasn't there.

"Over here, Big Red," Darcy waved from further back in the lab. Alice walked towards her. She was sitting at a work table in one of the two cushy desk chairs that were placed around it. The notebooks were stacked on the table. Alice smiled.

"You got us better seats?" she asked Darcy.

"Not me. This was here when I came in. The good doctor pointed it out."

Alice raised her eyebrows and nodded, impressed. "Tony must have arranged it. I was kind of complaining about it in the kitchen yesterday."

"Well, I'm glad you did, and so is my aching back," replied Darcy.

Alice set her bag on the floor and plopped herself down in the chair, the motion propelling it backwards a bit.

"Oh, yeah, before I forget: Big Red? Seriously?" laughed Alice. She scooted herself closer to the table.


"What's Tony's?" asked Alice.

"Ummm…Tony," she replied, giggling.

Alice laughed, "The man who needs no pet name." She took a sip of her chai. She decided to try and be positive. It was too tiring to be a super-bitch all the time. She had to hand it to the ladies who pulled that off every day.

"That's because I'm nobody's pet," said Tony, placing both hands on the table and leaning towards them.

"Not even Pepper's?" asked Darcy, smiling mischievously.

"Hey. What we do in the privacy of our own sex dungeon is between me and Pepper," said Tony, pointing his finger first at Darcy and then at Alice.
Alice blushed. She really didn't want the mental pictures now swimming around in her head.

"Haha, mission accomplished," laughed Tony. "I got the prude to blush."

Alice scoffed, "I'm no prude!"

"If that made you blush, you're a prude," assured Tony.

"I have to agree with him. That was pretty tame, for Tony," said Darcy.

"Well, if not wanting to talk about your boss's sex life makes me a prude, then I proudly accept the title," said Alice, throwing up her hands.

Tony pulled up a stool and sat down. He leaned his elbow on the table and his head in his hand, with a mock dreamy expression on his face. "So, ladies, what's the scuttlebutt? What are your plans this lovely Saturday night?" he asked.

"We're getting drinks with Zeke and his friends," replied Alice.

"Zeke. Is this the boyfriend?" he asked.

"Fiancé. And yes," said Alice.

"Oh, I didn't know you were engaged!" exclaimed Darcy. "Do you have a date set? Do I get to be a bridesmaid?"

"Don't worry, Darcy. She's not really engaged," said Tony.

"I am too, and we don't have a date set yet. But, when we do, you can totally be a bridesmaid," replied Alice.

"She's not, so you can't be a bridesmaid," said Tony, obstinately.

"What are you? Six-years-old today?" asked Alice.


"I see Tony is explaining what his new suit does," said Dr. Banner, who was walking out from the kitchen with a mug of tea and seating himself at his desk.

"Hey. I resent that," whined Tony. "My new suit does not do that," he paused. "It doesn't need to… I do enough of it on my own," he added indignantly.

Dr. Banner shook his head and switched his attention to the computer.

Alice snuck a look at him out of the corner of her eye, all the while chastising herself. She was engaged, for Pete's sake, and this guy had done little more than be a thorn in her side since she met him.

Well, he had gallantly saved her from falling down the previous evening. Alice wasn't sure if it was actual gallantry or if he was trying to keep her from destroying something else.

His hands though … she let her gaze drift down to the objects in question. He had strong hands; and even if he was dorky-looking, he was still handsome. He was dork-chic. In a foxy professor kind of way. He'd probably be really embarrassed if he knew she was looking at him right now.
She really needed some alone time with Zeke. She used to wonder how long was too long to wait between "sessions" of alone time. Apparently, four weeks was the time to beat. Four weeks before she started ogling scientists. She quickly snapped her full attention back to what Darcy was saying.

"Let me guess…" began Darcy, "There are these awesome rockets that shoot out these pellets that embed in the concrete and blow stuff up."

"No, smarty-pants," said Tony. He turned his head sheepishly, "they aren't pellets, really more like tiny grains."

"Oh, I have an idea for you, why don't you make a suit that shoots something and blows it up?" said Darcy. "Or, you could make a suit that PROJECTS something into something else, and blows it up?"

"Well…" he looked around at the two amused faces, "I'd like to see you guys come up with something useful."

"I've got another idea," said Darcy. "Why don't you pool your resources and invent a pair of pants for Banner that doesn't rip to shreds when he Hulks out? I'm pretty sure everyone here has had their fill of naked Banner."

"Their fill of naked Banner, HA! I don't think anyone's had that in a WHILE," laughed Tony.

Alice blushed and quickly looked down at the notebook in front of her.

"I'm still here," Dr. Banner said quietly.

"It's funny because it's true!" laughed Darcy, ignoring him.

"I don't see why that needs to become public knowledge," stated Dr. Banner, his voice still quiet.

Alice looked at him. He was staring hard at the computer screen in front of him. Then he closed his eyes, breathing deeply. Darcy and Tony were still laughing and joking about something or other, but Dr. Banner looked…angry? Frustrated? Embarrassed? Probably all three.


Tony and Darcy looked first at Alice, then at Dr. Banner. Dr. Banner took a deep breath, and stood, quietly excusing himself. He was making sure not to make eye contact with anyone. Alice frowned and stood to follow him. Tony grabbed her arm, shaking his head.

"He probably needs to go cool down," Tony said, raising his eyebrows. The double meaning was apparent.

Darcy rolled her eyes. Alice shook Tony's hand off her arm, glaring at him.

"We need to get cracking on these notebooks, PROBABLY," said Darcy deliberately, trying to diffuse the situation.

"Yeah," agreed Alice. She sat and pulled her legs into the chair with her, tucking them under herself. She reached for a pen and a blank notebook.

"Aw, but you guys were helping me procrastinate," whined Tony, standing up and moving the stool back where it came from.

"Get out of here and go blow something up," quipped Darcy.
"I'll blow you up," threatened Tony.

"Try it, Iron Man. I dare ya."

"Darcy. Alice. I like you guys," stated Tony, before he swaggered back over to his area.

Everything was pleasant, actually moving along, until around 11 when Alice heard her phone chime. She looked at it. A text from Zeke. She decided to take her break. She went to the kitchen and started the kettle while she checked her messages.

One sentence, "Going out with the guys tonight. Don't wait up."

Wait. WHAT? she thought. She reread it. Did he just CANCEL our plans?

She texted back, "What do you mean? I thought Darcy and I were coming with you!"

She waited. He texted back, "Don't think that's a good idea right now. Another time."

"Call me," she pressed send. A few seconds later, her phone chimed.

"No. You're at work. Just forget about it and we'll talk tomorrow."

"I don't want to talk tomorrow, I want to talk now. Where are you going tonight?"

"Out. Talk to you later."

She locked her phone and jammed it into her pocket. He could be such a baby sometimes. She pulled her phone out again and texted back one more time.

"Fine," she pressed send.

It wasn't fine. Even Zeke could probably guess that.

She sighed angrily and pulled out a tea bag from the drawer. She poured her hot water and started steeping her tea. She stared at the countertop, drumming her fingers.

She had forgotten to pick up some half-and-half this morning. She decided to chance the fridge; maybe someone got milk or something. She opened the door roughly, rattling the things inside. She scanned the contents of the fridge and saw a small carton of half-and-half in the door. Her face softened. Tony must have told someone to buy it for her. For such a douchebag, he could be really thoughtful sometimes.

Maybe that's what Pepper sees in him, she thought as she took the carton out of the fridge.

She dunked her tea bag three times and threw it out. She added her sugar and half-and-half and stirred. She took a sip. Perfect. At least something was going right today.

She walked back to the table where Darcy was sitting. She sat down and got back to work.

Darcy nudged her, "What's wrong?"

Alice's face never left the notes she was reading. She shook her head, "Later."

"Lunch?" Darcy asked. Alice nodded.

They continued working for another hour before stopping for lunch. They had decided to order from
the in-house restaurant that morning; so, they made the run down to the third floor to get everyone's lunch. Darcy and Alice decided to eat in the break area in the lab that day, it was just off the kitchen. There were chairs and a table. Darcy pulled out her cheeseburger, and Alice pulled out her grilled chicken Caesar.

"Okay, so you haven't said a word in over an hour. What's wrong?" asked Darcy, worried.

"Zeke and I had a fight this morning, he canceled our date. He's just going to go out with the guys. He told me not to wait up," Alice sighed, picking at her salad.

"Okay? So? You and I can still go out. We'll rock this town, baby!" Darcy took a huge bite of her cheeseburger, chewing loudly.

Alice raised her eyebrows, "I don't know. I don't feel right about it."

"Why? He's going out. Why should he get to have fun, and you have to stay home and mope?" asked Darcy.

"Fight was my fault," answered Alice thickly, sounding on the verge of tears.

"Don't care. We'll talk about it tonight when we're out. Getting drinks. Getting hit on by hot guys."

"Darcy. I can't do that, I'm engaged," chastised Alice.

"Okay, I'm not so sure that you are, for one thing. And for another, there's no rule against getting hit on, you just can't be the one doing the hitting," corrected Darcy.

Alice rolled her eyes and sighed, "I guess it's not a real engagement. It's just like Zeke wants us to perpetually be where we were in college, but it's been seven years and we need to move ahead. Staying still is not working."

"Okay," said Darcy, "We can go out tonight, drink some margaritas and you can tell all about good ole Zeke. For right now, let's just figure out where we're going. Save the depressing stuff for drinking time. No drinky, no thinky, got it?"

Alice laughed, "Got it."

"Awesome," Darcy exclaimed. "Let's figure out where we're going."

"Where are you going? What are you doing? What's happening?" asked Tony, plopping himself down in a seat beside Alice.

"Alice and I are going to a bar tonight. We're gonna get wasted and dish on guys and stuff," answered Darcy, batting her eyelashes.

"I wanna go. I can bitch about guys and stuff. We can bitch about Bruce. Alice will like that," said Tony.

"She said dish, not bitch. And I don't bitch about him that much, do I?" asked Alice.

"You kinda do, hon, with the sole exception of this morning. When you kind of stuck up for him," said Darcy sympathetically, patting her on the shoulder.

"Well…he usually deserves it, but it looked like you guys were really bothering him this morning," said Alice. "Besides, I'd rather bitch about Zeke, if given the choice."
"Hey!" exclaimed Tony, loud enough that it caused both women to jump. "Why don't I just have everyone over to my place tonight? I have a bar. I have booze. I have music. You can get schnockered and not have to worry about getting a ride!"

"Tony…that's gross," said Darcy, wrinkling her nose.

"What?" he asked, then paused as the realization hit, "A ride home. I have drivers, geez. I didn't mean I was going to ride you. Pervert."

"Well, good grief, what would you expect us to think?" asked Alice.

"Oh come on, like YOU haven't thought about it," he teased, poking her with his elbow.

"I can honestly say I have never thought about you that way," she stated.

"You're right, I bet you haven't thought that about ME," he said, looking at her meaningfully.

"What are you suggesting? asked Alice.

"I think you know. I think you know exactly what I'm suggesting," he waggled his eyebrows.

"No, I really, really don't," said Alice. She looked down at her hands.

Darcy snickered, "Tony…leave her alone, she's had a bad day."

"Oh okay…" he said, taking a swig of the water he brought with him, "Just this once."

"Hey, so I was actually wondering, why are you bothering us so much lately?" asked Darcy.

"Oh, is this not normal?" asked Alice.

"No, it's really not," replied Darcy.

"Hey, if I'm bothering you…" Tony got up to leave.

Darcy and Alice looked at each other and said nothing.

"Wow, I was hoping for some resistance at least," said Tony.

"Oh, Tony. Don't leave. We love talking to you," said Darcy dryly.

"That's better," he said, "Anywho, I've been 'bothering' you guys because I don't have anything better to do."

"Awww, I know what it is," said Darcy.

"No, you don't," said Tony, quickly.

"Yes, I do. It's because Banner is being more angst-ridden and moody than usual. He's not wanting to be Science Bros anymore, is he?" prodded Darcy.

Tony scoffed, "That's not it at all. I'm just bored and I'm secretly in love with Alice."

Alice laughed, "I know that's not it. Is your buddy being mean to you?"

Tony stood up, "I don't have to sit here and put up with this."
"Well you know, you could just give him a hug, I'm sure that's all that's wrong," said Darcy.

"Maybe send him some flowers?" suggested Alice.

"Or chocolate. That helps too," said Darcy.

"Just…shut up," said Tony, leaving the break room in a huff.

Alice and Darcy giggled. Alice ate more of her salad, and Darcy finished her cheeseburger. She offered some of her fries, Alice took two.

"So…what was up with you defending Senor Verde this morning?" asked Darcy nonchalantly.

"Hmm? Oh, I don't know. I felt bad for him. That seemed like it was a touchy subject. I have a few of those of my own, so I know how it feels to be teased about something that you're really self-conscious about," answered Alice.

"What are you self-conscious about?" asked Darcy.

"Why?"

"So I can stay away from that topic."

"Oh, okay. Well, umm…I'm sensitive about my engagement," said Alice.

"Oh, god, and I've been teasing you about that! I'm so sorry!" apologized Darcy.

"It's fine. I mean, it's a joke. I know it is. I think I know deep down, that we're never getting married, but it hurts when other people bring it up." Alice sighed, "I feel like an idiot wearing this ring." She pointed to the diamond solitaire she wore on her left hand. "I just wear it because I guess if I took it off and acknowledged defeat, I'd lose part of myself, you know? It's like this is what's keeping me grounded right now. I just…I don't know what's wrong with me," she choked on the last part, lowering her head to the table.

"Well, my opinion, for what it's worth, is if the guy makes you cry more than he makes you laugh, he's not worth it," said Darcy.

Darcy slipped an arm around her for a hug. Alice sniffed and rubbed her eyes.

"Okay, so are we going to Tony's tonight or what?" asked Alice.

"I think it sounds fun. Guy's loaded, so free booze. The good stuff," said Darcy.

Alice nodded, "Probably need to go see if the offer still stands. Hope we didn't piss him off too much."

Darcy laughed, "Guy's got a thick skin. He'll be fine. What are you going to wear?"

Alice glanced down at her t-shirt, "This?"

Darcy laughed, "No, no, no. Not that this isn't hot in a weird, dorky way, but you need to look hotter. Skinny jeans can stay. Converse can stay, but you need a different top. Something low-cut. Let those girls breathe a little," she said, gesturing towards Alice's chest.

Alice laughed, "I don't think I need to dress up for Tony."
"It's not just Tony. Rogers will be there, Barton, and Banner will be there too."

"And none of those is my fiancé, so this occasion doesn't warrant dressing up," said Alice.

"You need to dress up. It'll make you feel better," coaxed Darcy.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd think you were trying to get me in trouble," laughed Alice.

"You could stand to get in some trouble here and there. I don't condone cheating, but it's nice to know you're turning heads, amiright?" said Darcy. "I'll come home with you this evening and help you pick something out. You can do the same for me."

After lunch, it was business as usual. Alice copied her way through another notebook. Darcy finished the one she had started the day before and started another. Dr. Banner stayed in the back of the lab for most of the day. He came up to the front once, close to five p.m. Alice brought him the freshly recopied notebook.

"Wow. You're really fast at this," observed Dr. Banner.

"Well, I guess even a broken clock is right twice a day," Alice smiled.

He frowned for a moment as if trying to decipher what she said. "Still...one a day? I guess you're in a big hurry to get out of here."

"What? Oh, well, I figure you're probably anxious to get Darcy and me out of your hair," said Alice. "We can't be very conducive to research."

Dr. Banner flipped through the notebook she'd handed him. "Well, you're right about that. There's not much I can do until you are finished."

Alice started, looking down at her hands and swallowing. She wasn't used to someone who was this blunt. "Well, if that looks good, I'm going to head out," she said quickly.

"Hmm? Oh, sure. You can come in a bit later tomorrow. Around 9 if that's okay."

"Really? Thanks! That's thoughtful of you," she smiled.

"Well, I might have heard about your plans for the evening. You won't be much use to me hungover," he explained.

Again, Alice was surprised by his abruptness. No time wasted on niceties. She was developing a thicker skin, though.

"Right, well, I'm going," she said. Darcy scurried up and dropped her notebook on Dr. Banner's desk.

"Thank you, Darcy," Dr. Banner said absently. He was still flipping through Alice's notebook.

"Aw, snap. You remembered my name!" exclaimed Darcy. Dr. Banner looked up from the notebook, with a bewildered look on his face.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing," said Darcy, waving her hand dismissively. "Later, Dr. B"

"Have a nice evening, Darcy. Alice," said Dr. Banner, nodding to each. He leaned against his desk,
turning his attention back to the notebook.

Alice dropped by Tony's station to confirm plans and thank him for the new table, chairs and half & half.

"Oh, that wasn't me," he said, not looking up from his work. "That was all Banner."

"What? Why would he do that?"

"I don't know, probably to get in your pants. That's why I would have done it."

"Right, thanks. You've been a great help," she said sarcastically, turning to go. She looked over at Dr. Banner. He was still pouring over the notebook she'd given him. He always looked so rumpled, like he'd just rolled out of bed and that's how he came in to work. It made her want to smooth him out. Iron his shirts; fold his clothes. Weird sort of impulse, but whatever. He looked like he needed someone to take care of him.

Darcy and Alice left in a hurry, talking excitedly about this and that. They couldn't wait to get changed and start their evening. Alice couldn't remember the last time she had gone out without Zeke. It must have been before she started dating him.

"And how many times has he gone out without you?" asked Darcy, when Alice shared this piece of trivia with her in the elevator.

"I don't know," replied Alice truthfully.

"Hmm. Sounds like Zeke wants to do what Zeke wants to do, and doesn't really care what Alice wants to do," she said.

Alice was silent for a moment. "He's not evil," she said simply.

She still loved him. He had his faults, sure. Just like she did.

"He's not doing it on purpose."

"Well, of course not. He's doing it because you let him do it," charged Darcy.

Alice opened her mouth to retort, but realized that Darcy was right. She closed it again and looked down.

"We'll talk more about this later," said Darcy. "Let's just concentrate on making you look hot!"

They exited the elevator in the lobby and walked out front to where Preston was waiting. He raised an eyebrow at Darcy, but after Alice explained their plans, he nodded and waited for them to get settled in the back seat before he drove off.

"Want me to wait out front for you, Miss Vorso? Or would you rather I come back at a set time?" asked Preston at the front of her apartment building.

"Give me an hour. Come back in one hour," said Alice.

Preston nodded, they climbed out of the car and ran into Alice's apartment building. Preston pulled away from the curb, wondering how he was going to productively kill an hour on a Saturday night in NYC.
Chapter End Notes

xoxo!
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

More things. Also, Zeke is awful.

Chapter Notes

Feel the need to remind you all that this takes place almost directly after the events of the Avengers. So before you rail me for my Steve Rogers, please remember, it's directly after the Avengers. Not much time has passed between him being unfrozen and this. The Winter Soldier hadn't even come out when I wrote this. <3

Also, going to be updating daily from now on out, because I didn't realize how long it was going to take me to post it if I only did weekly updates.

Alice

They had headed to Alice's apartment first to pick out something different for her to wear that evening. Alice still didn't think it was necessary, and she was starting to suspect that Darcy just wanted a reason to get out of Stark Tower. She did live and work there, so Alice couldn't begrudge her wanting to leave for a while.

Darcy whistled when they got out of the car, "Not too shabby, Big Red."

"Nope. And it has inflated rent to match!" Alice said with false enthusiasm.

"You should just get an apartment in Stark Tower. Zero expenses. I have SO MUCH disposable income."

"You know, I'm fairly certain that Zeke would not want to do that."

Darcy laughed.

They made their way up to the third floor, and Alice unlocked her door.

Zeke poked his head out of the fridge when they came in.

"You're home early," he stated simply, popping open the beer he'd gotten out of the fridge.

"You're starting early," Alice said, gesturing to the can.

"Price of beer in bars is ridiculous," he explained, mostly to Darcy.
"I'm just here to change. Then, we're going back to hang out at Tony's," Alice said nonchalantly, leading Darcy back to the bedroom.

"Where?"

"At Tony's apartment. My boss. Tony Stark."

"I know who Tony is," Zeke snapped.

Darcy's eyes widened.

"Sorry…I thought you might be confused about who I was talkin' about…"

"I don't think it's appropriate for you to 'hang out' at your boss' place on a Saturday night."

"It's not just me, it's everyone."

Zeke nodded, still looking from Darcy back to Alice.

"Maybe you should just stay home," he said slowly, pointedly.

"You're going out!" Alice protested.

"Not with my boss."

"Who cares?"

"I do. He's obviously trying to get into your pants."

Darcy and Alice scoffed. "He's seeing someone," said Alice.

"He's a player," said Zeke.

"Look, if you wanted to hang out with me, you shouldn't have canceled our plans!"

"I DON'T want to hang out with you. I'm still pissed at you for that little stunt you pulled this morning."

Alice visibly wilted, "Zeke, I apologized for that…"

"Too little, too late, Al. I made other plans."

Alice sniffed the air, scrunching her nose in disgust. "Went a little overboard on the cologne, didn't you? What are you planning on doing?"

He stepped closer to her, "None of your business. I do what I want."

Alice set her jaw.

Why does he have to do this? This is why I don't have any friends…

"You are more fun when you don't have your own friends," he sneered in Darcy's direction. "If you're going out tonight, don't bother coming back." He chugged the last of the beer, grabbed his keys and went out the door.

Alice blinked back tears. Whether Darcy wanted to say something or not it wasn't apparent because she simply bustled Alice back to the bedroom and picked a flowy grey top out from her closet, which
Alice put on along with the lime green flats Darcy placed by her feet.

She ran a brush through her hair in the bathroom, watching as tears slid down her cheeks. Any plans she had for eyeliner were distant memories.

She didn't really understand what had changed between them. It felt sudden. She sometimes felt like he was disgusted with her. Like he didn't want to share a bed with her. Or look at her. It had been four weeks since he'd tried to initiate "alone time", and whenever she'd tried he'd blown her off. You could only get rejected so many times before it started messing with you. And it was messing with her.

She looked at her reflection in the full-length mirror. She pulled the flowy top tight around her torso. She'd lost weight. About 10 pounds. She didn't have it to lose, really, but just couldn't eat. She could see her ribs sticking out when she pulled the top like this. Sighing, Alice decided to just let it go.

She shook her head, trying to shake the thought away.

She sprayed on some sweet pea body spray. The smell was comforting. Her Grams always smelled like this. Zeke didn't like floral sprays, so she rarely used the thoughtful gift she'd gotten from her grandparents for Christmas last year.

She looked at her reflection again. She was really short. She guessed the weight loss was a little off-putting. She didn't know what had changed about her, though. She peered intently at her reflection, almost getting hit in the face with the door when Darcy opened it to check on her.

"Are you ready?" Darcy asked, searching Alice's face for something, probably a sign of her mental wellbeing. Or lack thereof.

"Yeah," Alice said, opening the door the rest of the way and following Darcy out to the living room. She grabbed her bag and locked the door on her way out.

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Bruce

Bruce opened the door to his apartment and felt around on the wall for the light switch. Once the lights were on he glanced around the room and shut the door. He didn't bother locking it because truthfully, he'd like to meet the cat burglar who breaks into the Hulk's apartment, in the Avengers' Suites, in Stark Tower.

His duffel bags from his trip were still on the floor. He'd been living out of them since he'd moved in, not really bothering to unpack them fully. He realized he hadn't turned the light on in a while either. He usually came in late and collapsed on the couch.

He always slept restlessly, his head filled with flashbacks from the Other Guy. He felt him growl in response at the thought.

He deposited his laptop bag on the counter and opened the fridge.

He closed it again, walking from the kitchen over to the living room.

He was back unusually early from the lab. He couldn't concentrate on anything. The Other Guy was really obnoxious today. He guessed the previous day must have been a fluke or something.

Of course, Tony and Darcy hadn't made anything better. What the hell had he ever done to them that he deserved having his dirty laundry aired for God and Alice to see?

Alice.

She'd defended him. Or tried to. It had only made him more furious for some reason. He'd heard nothing but the blood rushing through his head and the Other Guy roaring. He'd had to leave. His emotions were all over the place lately. Everything made him angry. Or sometimes, nothing made him angry. It was strange. He'd tried keeping a journal of his mood swings, but even that had annoyed him.

This must be what it's like to be a woman, he thought bitterly.

He opened the fridge again and took out a bottle of water. He left the kitchen area and sat down on the couch, looking around his barren apartment. It didn't even look like someone lived here. There was a TV, but he couldn't recall a time that he'd turned it on. Bookshelves, all full of notebooks and textbooks. Work stuff. The desk in the corner where he plugged in his laptop. The two bedrooms. One was completely empty. The other had a double bed that he never slept in, an empty dresser and an empty closet. The bathroom had towels, white towels. Like a hotel. No art on the walls, though. So it was more depressing than a hotel. He sighed. The silence was making his ears ring.

It was clean, anyway. He assumed Tony had someone who cleaned everything. Whoever it was doing an excellent job of not touching things he'd left out. Of course, if the apartment was dirty it would at least look lived in.

There was a knock at the door. He glanced over, hesitating before getting up to answer it. He looked out the peephole expecting to see Tony. He frowned and opened the door.

"Pepper?" he asked. "How can I help you?"

"I was just wondering if you were going to come by tonight. Tony invited you, didn't he?" she asked, smiling.

"I…Yes, yes, he did. I don't know yet… if I'm coming."

"Well, I hope you do. Everyone deserves to relax once in a while…can I come in?"

"What? Umm…sure." He backed away from the door, embarrassed that his apartment was so bare.

She came in and sat on a stool at the counter near where he'd left his laptop bag. He crossed the room and sat on the couch.

"Bruce…" she began, "We're worried about you."

"Who's we?"

"Everyone. Since you came back from your trip, you've been different. Is something wrong? Are you okay?"

"I'm aware of the difference. I'm not sure what's going on," he confessed. "I'm more on edge with
everyone and I apologize for that. As far as I know, I'm okay. Nothing's inherently wrong."

"I think you should come up and be around people tonight, Bruce," repeated Pepper.

"Pepper, I appreciate the thought, I really do, but I'm just…not good in social situations," he said.

"This is just going to be teammates, plus me, Darcy, Jane, and Alice. I think it will be fun and I think you could use some fun, truthfully. You could forget about your problems for a few hours? Laugh?" she suggested.

"I can't forget my problems, Pepper. If I forget my problems, if I let my guard down, people get hurt, people die," he said.

"Please. Look at it as a favor for me," she pleaded.

Bruce put his head in his hands. He'd been defeated and he knew it. "Sure," he said, head still down. "What should I wear?" he added, jokingly.

"Wear that purple shirt you have," she said. "That color looks nice on you."

He smiled. If he didn't know Pepper so well, he might think she was attracted to him. But he did know her well and knew that the only love she felt towards him was motherly. She looked at him like a baby duck lost on its own.

"If I can find it," he promised.

She got up and walked to the door, "We'll see you in a few? Just come up when you get dressed," she directed.

He shut the door behind her.

Bruce rummaged around in the duffel bags until he found the shirt she was referring to. It wasn't even that wrinkled. He'd forgotten that he even owned it as he put it on with the slacks he was already wearing. He finished getting ready and shut off the lights on his way out.

He was walking out to the elevator in the common area when he passed Steve Rogers sitting in the kitchen.

"Captain Rogers," he nodded towards the first Avenger.

"Dr. Banner, nice to see you out and about," said Steve. "Will you be joining us for Tony's shindig?"

"I am actually on my way up now," he replied.

"Maybe you could help me make some sense of this book I'm reading," said Steve, holding the book out towards Bruce.

Bruce took it and read the title out loud, " Electronic Lifestyle: How electronics are changing our lives."

He opened it to the title page and scanned it to find the copyright date: 1995. "Hmmm, my advice is to throw this book away. Throw it far away. Have someone show you how to do a google search." He turned the book over to look at the back cover. "Where did you even get this?"

"Tony gave it to me."
Bruce nodded, "Sounds about right. Don't ever take anything from Tony. Never take advice from Tony. Never take anything he says seriously. I cannot stress this enough." Bruce started to go to the elevator and turned around to see Steve opening the book again. "No. Throw it away."

Steve frowned, "Dr. Banner, with all due respect, that would be wasteful."

"No, that book is a waste of paper. Put it in the recycle bin. Maybe they can make something more useful out of it. Like toilet paper."

Steve put the book on the counter and put his hands in his pockets. "I'll come up with you if that's okay."

Bruce nodded. They waited awkwardly for the elevator and then even more awkwardly as they rode up to the penthouse.

The elevator opened up into Tony's living room.

"Bruce! Steve!" Tony walked up to them, arms open wide. "Welcome!" He put an arm around each man, walking them over to the bar area. "What's your poison?"

"Doesn't matter," said Steve. "Something that tastes good, I'm not getting drunk regardless."

"I'll just have seltzer with lemon," said Bruce.

"Bunch of wild and crazy guys up in here tonight!" said Tony.

Bruce chuckled at the picture they made. Steve couldn't get drunk. Bruce shouldn't get drunk. A lot of fun this evening was going to be.

Pepper walked out from the back room and greeted Bruce and Steve. She took a glass of wine that Tony had poured for her.

"Sir? Miss Lewis and Miss Vorso are here," said JARVIS.

"Awesome," said Tony.

Bruce's stomach wrenched at the mention of Alice's name. He stared at the lemon floating in his glass. The Other Guy was strangely silent.

He turned in the barstool at the last second, just in time to see Pepper envelop both girls in a hug and then escort them over to the couch.

Alice looked strange. She was smiling, but her smile didn't reach her eyes, which were rimmed with red. Had she been crying? Darcy had linked arms with her and was patting her forearm. She patted her again and got up from the couch. She sauntered over to the bar on Bruce's left. She leaned on the bar.

"Tony. We need a drink, something fruity and preferably made with tequila. We need it quick."

"Are you sure you don't just want tequila shots?" asked Tony. "I'm not good at mixed drinks, pretty much just pour stuff into glasses."

"I'll do shots," said Alice from Bruce's right. When she'd gotten there, he didn't know. But now that he saw her up close, she did indeed look like she'd been crying.

"Yeah, hon…I was kidding. Let's work up to shots, you don't want to pass out before anyone even
gets here, do you? Why don't you just have a seat beside old Brucey here and tell us what's going on. Do I need to beat someone up?” Tony coaxed, his hand on her shoulder.

Alice sat down hard on the stool. Sniffing, she looked at her hands.

"It's not really something I want to share with everyone," she said simply. Looking up at Tony, and then over at Bruce. Her eyes looked watery. Darcy plopped down in the stool on the other side of Alice.

"So, I met Zeke. Can't say he made a great first impression," she shrugged.

"Darcy…” warned Alice.

"I'm not sharing your stuff, I'm sharing my own experience. That's allowed," Darcy said defensively.

Zeke… Bruce wracked his brain for where he'd heard that name before. He couldn't recall. He snapped his attention back to Darcy.

"No offense, Big Red, but your guy's kind of rude," started Darcy.

He felt his stomach drop. *Of course. Of course, she's with someone. Why wouldn't she be?*

"He can come off that way," agreed Alice.

"He didn't hurt you, did he?" asked Bruce, surprising himself. Tony and Darcy stared at him.

"What? No! No. He'd never…no!" said Alice, shaking her head. "Just a disagreement, nothing I want to bother anyone with, just need to have a good time tonight and forget about it for now. I appreciate the concern, though. Thanks, Dr. Banner."

"Bruce," he corrected.

"Bruce," She smiled.

He looked down at his drink again, trying to hide a grin that threatened to show itself.

*For crying out loud,* he thought. *Get a grip. She's involved with someone else. Didn't realize that until now, but still. Plus, there's nothing you can do about this. Nothing. Leave this alone, let her be happy with the jerk she's dating. Not that he's a jerk. That was mean. You know nothing about him.*

Steve now spoke up, breaking the silence that had spread to everyone at the bar. "Maybe we should play some music?" he asked.

"Anything to make this less awkward," answered Tony. "Any requests, Cap?"

Steve shrugged, "I doubt you have any Andrews Sisters, so I'll defer to your judgment."

Tony wiped his hands on the towel on the counter. He pulled out his phone and scrolled through pages of music selections. Tony had everything rigged to his Stark Phone. Bruce remembered when he was programming all of it. Three hours of AC/DC blasting at top volume while he tried to figure out where the faulty code was. He seemed to have worked all the kinks out now. He tapped the screen a few times, and Queen came on, low volume, very much in the background, but it helped.

"Tony, can you make me a Tom Collins?" asked Alice.

"What's in a Collins? Gin?" he asked, looking at all the bottles he had out on the counter, selecting
Bruce was surprised at Tony's manners this evening. He must be worried about her. For someone who had only been here a month and someone he'd only known for about a week, it was already hard to imagine doing without her. That was frightening to Bruce. He really shouldn't be forming attachments to complete strangers so easily.

"I practically grew up in a bar, you know?" said Alice, taking the drink from Tony.

"Really?" asked Tony. "That's kind of depressing."

"No, not at all. My grandpa owns and runs a piano bar near Memphis. He played piano in the in-house band and tended bar on weeknights. Lots of happy memories in that bar," said Alice, smiling. "Grandpa gave me piano lessons on the baby grand there on Mondays and Wednesdays after school."

"You play the piano?" asked Bruce.

Alice looked over at him, surprised she wasn't alone, lost in the memory. "Not so much anymore, but I used to. Got into college on a music scholarship. I wanted to work in the marketing aspect of the music industry. Just because..." she sniffed, "there's not much work to be had as a musician. I turned down a job at a recording company in L.A to move here with Zeke." She looked down at her hands. "To become a glorified secretary," she sighed.

Bruce fought the urge to hug her. She looked like a kicked puppy. Luckily, Darcy slipped her arm around her shoulders.

"Sorry," Alice choked out, putting her head on the bar, and hiding her face in her arms.

Tony gingerly removed the drink from her hands. "Gin is not what you need right now, let me try my hand at margaritas. Happy drinks." He smiled, a bit too wide to be genuine. Darcy nodded enthusiastically.

Pepper slid in behind the bar with Tony. "I'll make them. The thought of you making girly drinks, while comical, is cringe-worthy." She gathered up ingredients, sending Tony into the kitchen to get the blender.

While Pepper made margaritas, the other teammates started filtering in. Thor, Jane, Clint and Natasha came in soon after. Jane had joined Darcy and Alice, while Clint busied himself by mixing drinks. Natasha stood awkwardly by herself, looking as uncomfortable as Bruce undoubtedly did.

Bruce got up at some point, walking to the windows, where he stood and looked at the view. He saw Alice's reflection appear behind him. She kept back, arms crossed in front of her, as if she wasn't sure why she came over.

"Alice?" he asked, turning slightly towards her.

"Hey." She waved, awkwardly, since her arms were still crossed.

"Do you need something?" he asked, back to looking outside. He didn't trust himself to make eye contact right now.

"I have a question. It's probably stupid, but I feel like I should ask, just so I know."

Bruce felt alarm rising in his gut, boiling hot and worrisome. He felt nauseated. Maybe he should
throw up, that would send the right impression.

"Ask away," he said tightly.

"Have I done something to make you not like me? I'm really confused, I'm getting mixed signals from you. Like, you can be really nice at one moment, getting me new chairs and half & half for my tea, and then you can't stand me the next. I feel like we're probably going to have to see each other often once I take over completely for Jules, so if I have done something to make you dislike me, we should clear the air." She shut her mouth abruptly. She frowned, "It's stuff like that, isn't it? I ramble and it's annoying?"

Bruce shook his head. "No." He turned toward her, looking into her eyes. Dark green. He'd never noticed that before. "I apologize for my behavior, something's wrong with me. I'm not sure what it is, but it's causing the Other Guy to freak out, for lack of a better term." He chanced a smile, hoping it wasn't weird. "It's nothing to do with you, it's me. It's the Other Guy. I enjoy talking to you. I learn more about you when you ramble."

*What the hell was that? If that doesn't scare her away, nothing will. Shut your damn mouth, Banner.*

He waited for what seemed like an eternity. She just looked at him while squinting her eyes slightly. *

*Probably trying to think of a polite way to excuse herself from my company.*

She smiled, this time it reached her eyes. "Thank you for saying that. It's not my best trait, to be honest." She took a tentative step forward, as if she were trying to coax a feral animal, and put her hand on his forearm. It was warm. "I hope you figure out what's going on, Bruce." She squeezed his arm, smiling reassuringly. She pulled her hand back, making his arm feel cold at the lack of contact. She crossed her arms again and stepped up closer to the window. Looking down on the city, she swayed slightly on her feet, making him wonder how much she'd had to drink.

He released the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

*Her hair is long. Really long. Why haven't I noticed that before? Does she wear it up all the time?*

He hadn't noticed what she was wearing in the lab today. She must have changed because the top she was wearing definitely wouldn't have been deemed work appropriate. Not that it was revealing, it wasn't. It just not something someone would wear to work. Or maybe they would. Bruce didn't follow women's fashion at all.

It was grey and flowing, longer, like a tunic, it fell off one shoulder. She wore it with jeans and flats. She really was a lot shorter than he had previously realized. Standing next to him, she came just up to his shoulder. He could probably rest his chin on the top of her head easily. He might even have to bend slightly to do it. Maybe slip his arms around her.

*I definitely shouldn't think about doing that.*

She smelled nice.

*What was that? Something floral.*

"Sweet Pea," she said, laughing.

He jumped, looked at her, eyes wide. "I beg your pardon?"

"You asked what the scent was. I told you: Sweet Pea. And thanks, I was worried I wore too much."
She smiled and then brought her hand up to hide her mouth.

"I said that out loud?" he asked, confused and embarrassed.

"Yeah, did you not mean to?"

"Definitely not."

She bit her lip, turning towards him. "Well, still, thanks." She kept her eyes cast down, not looking at his face.

"And no you didn't."

She looked up at his face. "I didn't what?"

"Wear too much."

"Oh," she smiled again, hiding her mouth and turning back towards the window. She kept her other arm wrapped tightly around her ribs.

"Your shirt looks nice," she said quietly.

"What?" He looked down at the purple shirt Pepper had suggested, "Thank you."

"It's a nice color on you," she reiterated what Pepper had told him earlier.

They were quiet for a while, just looking outside. Bruce was scared to say anything or move. He was worried she would leave and go back to her friends.

He had lots of things he wanted to say though, to ask. He wanted to know all about her. She had told him a little bit about herself earlier. Or she had told him, Tony and Darcy, whoever'd been sitting there with them. He craved information. If he had information, he could…what? Make her fall in love with him? He couldn't do that to her. No, she was a nice girl, she deserved to be with a normal guy. He was sure her boyfriend wasn't all that bad. He probably made her happy. Tonight was just a minor setback, a bump in the road. She needed a friend. That's what he was, a friend. He could be a friend to her. He couldn't stand the silence though. It was usually something he craved, but not with her.

"I'm sorry about yesterday," he said.

"Hmm? Oh, don't worry about it. I totally deserved it. I was being a bitch."

"No, it was uncalled for, and you are absolutely not a bitch…or a moron," he added carefully.

"Well, thank you for your apology. Although, I can be a moron sometimes. And a bitch most others," she laughed bitterly.

"Everyone can be." He said, really wanting to reach out and touch her.

He was working up the courage when Darcy sauntered over with two drinks, the aforementioned margaritas. She draped her arm around Alice's shoulders and handing her one of the drinks.

"Pepper makes the best margaritas!" she exclaimed.

Alice took the drink, and sipped at it. Her eyes went wide, "Wow! This is amazing! Pepper!" she turned to walk away. She stopped, turned and reached out to squeeze Bruce's forearm again.
"Thanks, Bruce," she smiled, before walking over towards Pepper and Tony at the bar.

"Did you ask her on a date?" chided Darcy, who was standing in Alice's vacated spot.

"No." he said, looking back out the window, "She is with someone."

"She's unhappy," pushed Darcy.

"Doesn't change the fact that she's WITH someone," he repeated.

"Doesn't change the fact that she's unhappy."

"That's none of my business, or yours, for that matter."

"Zeke's an asshole. He's demeaning and manipulative, I hate him. It was like when you watch the time-lapse video of a flower dying. I could visibly see her wilting when he talked to her."

Bruce gulped, feeling the Other Guy twitch in the back of his mind. He shook off the feeling. She wasn't his to protect.

"Alice is a grown woman. She can take care of herself, I'm sure. If she needs help, she'll ask for it. So, unless you think she's in an abusive relationship, this conversation is over."

"Wow, Banner, that's the most I've ever heard you say at once," said Darcy.

"Plus, I'm not the guy for her," he added.

"Who says?"

"I do. The Other Guy does, too."

"How do you know? Did you ask him?" she asked.

"No, I just know that both of us are dangerous."

"And I just know that you have the hots for her," said Darcy.

"I do not."

"Wow, original comeback, Dr. B. Anyone with eyes can see that you do. The way you look her up and down when she isn't looking. Like the way a parched man looks at a tall, cold glass of water."

"It doesn't matter," he said shortly. "Besides, if the parched man had any sort of intelligence, he'd know that the worst thing he could do is drink cold water, room temperature or lukewarm is best."

Darcy responded with an exaggerated eye roll. "Stop it with that. I know you just hide behind logic and reason so you don't have to deal with real life. And really? It doesn't matter? It doesn't matter that you want her, but won't be with her because she's with someone who makes her unhappy?"

"I'd make her unhappy too," he said quietly.

"How?" prodded Darcy.

"I'm done. This is over. Do not EVER bring this up again," he growled. He turned to leave.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

All Bruce POV this chapter.

Chapter Notes

ooops, sorry I'm so late on this update! I had a migraine earlier and took my pill for it and then slept for six hours. The migraine's gone, but I lost half my day in the process... ugh.

Anyway, enjoy chapter 7! Drunk Alice, y'all! Also, I made Tony more of a jerk than I normally do nowadays. I really wanted to like... edit him, but it would have altered the rest of the chapter, so I didn't. *shrug*

"I'd make her unhappy too," he said quietly.

"How?" prodded Darcy.

"I'm done. This is over. Do not EVER bring this up again," he growled. He turned to leave.

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Bruce

He stalked back over to the bar to say goodbye to Tony but was intercepted by Thor who clapped him on the back and nearly knocked the wind out of him.

"Banner! The Man of Iron has procured some Midgardian Spirits, would you like to partake with me?"

Bruce looked over to Tony, who was behind the bar again, shaking his head vigorously and miming "NO!"

Bruce looked back to the blond god, "Not today, Thor. You go ahead."

Bruce walked over to the bar, sat on a stool.

_I wasn't going to stay, but I just have to know_...

He looked at Tony, shaking his head. "Midgardian Spirits?" he asked.
"I made moonshine in the lab," stated Tony as if it were the most normal thing in the world.

Well, that certainly explains some things.

"I thought I smelled something."

Tony waved his hand, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, anyway, it's pretty much pure alcohol...mostly. I want to see if he'll get drunk on it."

"Tony, you're going to kill him," warned Bruce.

"Not likely."

Thor sat down at the bar with his hands on the counter.

Tony pulled Bruce aside, "Okay, don't touch it."

"What?"

"Don't let it touch you, it will absorb directly into your skin and make you rip-roaring drunk."

"What, the alcohol?"

"Yes," replied Tony, as he pulled on a pair of neoprene gloves. He reached into the mini-fridge under the counter and pulled out a beaker of clear liquid with a pair of rubber tongs.

"Is that one of my high-density beakers?" asked Bruce, slightly annoyed.

"Yes?" answered Tony, "I really hope you're okay with this because I was totally going to ask you tomorrow."

"I suppose I'm going to have to be fine with it...plus, I'm interested now," said Bruce, standing back from the bar and getting ready to observe. Tony joined him.

Thor took the beaker in hand and took a large swig from it. He swallowed and smacked his lips a few times.

Tony was waiting with bated breath.

"I believe the fire has gone out in your Spirits, Stark. It's rather bland and weak. This is similar to what we give Asgardian children when they are ill."

"Congratulations, Tony, you've invented alien cough syrup," said Bruce, slapping Tony on the back.

"Shuddup," said Tony, shaking his head.

Alice and Darcy wandered up to the bar, asking for more margaritas. Darcy was really giggly, but Alice barely looked any different. She was still swaying a bit. She could probably hold her drink better than Darcy, what with growing up in a bar and all.

"Sorry, sweetheart, no more margaritas. I'll go get Pepper to make some more," said Tony, turning to leave. Alice sat down at the bar. Darcy leaned on a stool beside her.

"Tiny Alice," boomed Thor, "please have some of my Midgardian Spirits while you wait for The Man of Iron to return."
Bruce was so alarmed that he lost the ability to speak. Sputtering incoherently, he leaped to knock the beaker away from Alice, but Darcy was in the way. Before he could get to her, Alice had picked up the beaker and swirled the liquid around before she knocked back the rest. She coughed.

Bruce pushed Darcy out of the way and knocked the beaker out of Alice's hand. It was too late, she was coughing and sputtering and gasping.

"TONY!" Bruce yelled towards the kitchen. Tony bolted into the room, looking around. Bruce was supporting Alice, who was having trouble standing.

"What the hell happened?" asked Tony.

"She drank some of that stuff you gave Thor!"

The color drained from Tony's face. "How much? How long ago?"

"I don't know! Whatever Thor didn't drink, I knocked the beaker out of her hand! It was less than a minute ago."

Tony grabbed Alice's chin and searched her face. "Alice, are you still with us?"

"What?" she asked, opening her eyes slowly.

"Holy shit," exclaimed Tony, dropping her chin in surprise.

"What proof was that alcohol?" asked Bruce, trying to do the math in his head.

*All the drinks she'd already had, plus this…did she have alcohol poisoning?*

"190 proof, but that's not all…it's genetically engineered and modified…there's nothing like this on the market that's drinkable…the closest thing would be rocket fuel."

"She just threw back 200 mills of rocket fuel? Tony, she's going to die! This is going to kill her!" bellowed Bruce, grasping for control.

"Okay, so first, I think you need to calm the hell down. Then, I think we should take her to the lab, and just observe her for a while," said Tony, calmly.

"WHAT? NO! We have to get her to a hospital!"

"Excellent job calming down," he placed his hand on Bruce's shoulder. "A hospital's not going to do any good, that stuff was absorbed before she swallowed it. If she was going to die, she'd have done it already. She's still here. She's still kind-of-awake, which is amazing!" He frowned, thinking, "Or I did something wrong when I made this?"

"Can you please sshctop yellin'?" Alice slurred, her Southern accent rising up again. She opened her eyes wide and looking from Tony to Bruce before closing her eyes again. "I'm so tired…" her head lolled to the side.

"No, Alice, you need to stay awake. Just for a little bit, can you do that?" asked Bruce, scooping her up in his arms to carry her to the elevator. She barely weighed anything.

"Where are you taking her?" asked Pepper, who had cleared everyone else into the living room area when the commotion had started. Thor and Steve had their eyes locked on Bruce, probably waiting to see if he'd Hulk out or not.
"To the lab, I guess," answered Bruce. "Tony, come on, you're in this too." Tony jogged after them.

Once in the lab, Bruce laid Alice out on the hospital bed in the Med Bay where he tried out various serum antidotes on himself. He hooked her up to a pulse monitor. He decided to delay hooking her up to anything else as long as she was still responsive.

"Alice? Are you still here?" he asked, shaking her shoulder to wake her.

She opened her eyes a sliver and widened them, looking around. She looked at Bruce and at Tony. "I'm a dream a baby's havin'," she said to Tony before closing her eyes again.

Tony snorted, "Wow, she's hammered."

"Yeah, it's really funny," said Bruce, angrily. He shook her shoulder. "Alice! Wake up." She murmured something incoherent before turning on her side and snuggling into the pillow. "I'm testing her blood alcohol content," he said, pulling out a rubber tourniquet and a sterile needle and vials from the drawer beside the bed. "Help me lay her flat again."

Tony pushed her over and Bruce grabbed her arm. He wrapped the tourniquet around her upper arm. He found a suitable vein, and slid the needle in, drawing three vials of blood before withdrawing the needle again. He held a cotton ball over the needle mark, before taping it down. Alice sat up abruptly, looking at her arm, then at Bruce and Tony.

"Uh…she doesn't look so good," said Tony, worried. He scooted back from her.

Alice started to fan herself. "It's hotter than a billy goat's ass in a pepper patch!" she exclaimed loudly, her accent thicker than ever. It would have been humorous if the circumstances weren't so dire. She gagged, holding her stomach and grimacing. "Y'all, I'm about to get sick…"

"Get her something to puke into, Tony!" warned Bruce.

Tony got up from the chair, looking around. He grabbed the trash can, which was empty thanks to the night cleaning crew. He handed it to Bruce.

Bruce looked at him in disbelief. "I'm not vomiting, she is, hand it to her!"

Alice groped for the trash can, her eyes closed. She put it on the bed and sat up on her knees, trying to hold it with one hand and her hair in the other. She retched into it. Bruce, unsure of what else to do, held her hair back for her. Tony took a step back.

It seemed like she was vomiting forever. "How much did she drink?" Bruce asked Tony.

Tony shrugged. "I honestly don't remember."

When she was finally finished, she sat back, and tugged her hair out of Bruce's hands, she crossed her arms over her stomach, and curled up in a ball on her side, turned away from both of them. Bruce handed the trashcan to Tony.

"Take care of that."

"Why me?"

"This is your fault."

"It's Thor's fault. He's the one who gave it to her."
"Thor didn't know it would hurt her, or he wouldn't have given it to her. Take care of that," Bruce said, a note of finality in his voice.

Tony gingerly took the trashcan and walked out of the room. Bruce sat back down in the chair beside the bed. He peered at Alice. She hadn't moved in a while so he reached out to touch her shoulder.

"Please don't," she pleaded. He jumped.

"Sorry, I didn't know you were awake," he paused. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm dying."

"You're not, at least not right now. You drank some of Tony's lab experiment."

"Dying."

"Do you want me to turn the lights down?" asked Bruce.

"Could you please?" she asked quietly. He obliged. Tony came back empty-handed. Bruce frowned at him.

"Where's the trashcan?" he asked.

"It was ruined. I incinerated it," said Tony.

"It was not. You could have rinsed it out," said Bruce.

Tony shivered.

"Not unless you want me to puke," he said.

"Sorry," said Alice, her voice muffled from under her arm.

"Don't apologize, it's not your fault," said Bruce.

"Well, you should know better than to drink something when you didn't know what it was," chided Tony.

Alice moved her arm so he could see her glaring at him. Tony quickly moved behind Bruce.

"Her blood alcohol levels are reading 0.10," Bruce read off the computer screen. "That can't be right. What proof was that stuff? 190? There's no way these readings can be right."

Tony pushed Bruce to the side so he could read the screen. "No, this can't be right. I have some of that batch left in the freezer over on my side. I'll go get it. Test it to make sure." He ran over to his part of the lab. He came back with the beaker of alcohol. Bruce took it from him and prepared a sample to test the alcohol content.

"95% alcohol, plus some other things my mass spectrometer didn't identify, I assume those are the property of Stark Industries?" asked Bruce.

"That assumption would be correct," replied Tony, he looked over at Alice, who appeared to be asleep. "That should have killed her."

Bruce nodded, "She looks fine, though. She'll have a hell of a hangover in the morning. I think we
should keep her here, just to keep an eye on her."

"Yeah, I bet," said Tony, winking.

"Hey, I'm very mad at you, I'm in no mood for joking around."

Tony smirked but dropped the subject.

"Someone should call her boyfriend, do you want to, Brucey?" he asked.

"Not really. See if Darcy or Pepper wants to do that," Bruce couldn't think of something he wanted to do less than calling Alice's boyfriend to tell him she was passed out in the lab and was staying the night.

"Do you have blankets in here or something? It's kind of chilly. We should probably cover her up," Tony said.

"No, not in here, I can run up and grab some from my apartment."

"Don't bother, I'll just ask Pepper to bring some down. " He got out his phone and walked into the other room to call Pepper.

Bruce walked over to Alice on the bed. She was sleeping peacefully. Her pulse rate was steady. He brushed her hair out of her face.

"Are you staying here?" asked Tony, the phone still up to his ear. Bruce pulled his hand back like he'd been burned. "Pepper wants to know how many blankets to bring down."

"Yes, I'll stay with her," said Bruce.

"Alright, well, do you want me to stay too?" asked Tony.

"If you want."

"I really don't. Are you going to hold it against me if I want to sleep in my own bed tonight?"

"It doesn't matter what you do, I'm still holding you responsible for this. Might as well get a good night's sleep if you're able."

"Oh, I'm able," Tony replied pompously.

Tony left, and Pepper came down with a few throw blankets and a pillow for Bruce. He thanked her and she walked over to Alice, brushing her hand over her forehead the way a mother would. She looked up at Bruce, "Take good care of her, I've grown rather attached already."

Bruce busied himself spreading the blanket out over her, tucking it around her sleeping form.

Pepper touched his arm, "Before I go, I have something I need to talk to you about." She motioned for the door. Bruce's heart leaped into his throat.

Does she know? Don't be stupid, Banner. She can't possibly know because there's nothing TO know. Right? Right.

Bruce sighed. He was now holding internal conversations with himself.

"Bruce, I called Alice's boyfriend, and a woman answered his phone."
Bruce frowned.

"Darcy said he was going out with his friends tonight, I'm assuming that meant work friends…now I know what female SHIELD agents sound like…" she continued.

Bruce nodded. He thought of Natasha, of Maria Hill. They barked more than they spoke and shot people with the same nonchalance that most women did their nails.

"This woman didn't sound like a SHIELD agent. She sounded like…well…you know. Like she was…" Pepper's brow furrowed.

Bruce decided to help her out. "Like a lover?"

"Yes."

Bruce nodded, sighing.

"And there was no background sound… like there would be if they were at a bar."

"Pepper, what are you trying to say?" Bruce asked, knowing exactly what she was trying to say.

"I think he's cheating on her."

Bruce took a deep breath. "Pepper…"

"She refers to him as her fiancé…and if my fiancé were cheating on me, I'd want to know…"

"Pepper…"

"Tony says they aren't really engaged, because he doesn't want to marry her…"

_Idiot_, thought Bruce, surprising himself.

"And she's been with him for seven years…" she continued.

"Pepper… I think this sounds like something that's none of our business…"

"That's just what Tony said!" she complained.

"And if even Tony said it, you know it's true."

"I just can't stand the thought of her getting hurt by this."

"Well, if he is cheating on her, she'll be hurt no matter what happens. It's not our place to interfere. She's an adult."

He didn't really believe what he was saying, but he knew it was the right thing to say.

"You're right, of course, you're right." She shook her head.

"What did he say?" Bruce asked.

"What?"

"What did Zeke say about Alice? Is he coming up to get her?"

"Oh, no. He said he had to be at work early in the morning. So if she was going to live, he'll see her
when he gets home tomorrow."

"Sounds like a nice guy," said Bruce dryly.

Pepper sighed nervously, bouncing on her toes.

"Just...leave it alone for now."

"Okay, I will...good night, Bruce."

"Goodnight, Pepper. Don't worry too much about this."

She laughed absently, walking out of the room.

Bruce looked back at Alice. She had tugged the blanket up to her chin. She sighed heavily before turning her face into the pillow.

Bruce walked across the room to the futon against the wall. He sometimes crashed here when he didn't feel like going back to his apartment. He lay down on the pillow, leaving the blanket folded at his feet. He fell into a light sleep with his arms crossed, facing the ceiling.

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**A few hours later**

"Bruce...BRUCE!" He awoke to Pepper whispering his name loudly. "I had Happy run a trace on Zeke's phone..."

"PEPPER!" Bruce exclaimed, running his hands over his face and sitting up on the futon.

"He wasn't at a bar at all. He's at some apartment building in Brooklyn. Zeke and Alice's apartment is in the Upper West Side."

"He could be staying over with a friend. Darcy said that he and Alice were fighting."

"The apartment's registered to a woman. Celeste H. Morton. She's not a SHIELD agent."

"Maybe one of his friends is living with his girlfriend."

"She's in their system, but not as a spouse OR significant other OR family member."

Bruce sighed, "It doesn't matter, Pepper. It's not our business...and now you've gone and disrespected this woman's privacy..."

"I know, I know. I just...I had to know if I was right, and I am!"

"Pepper..."

"I think we should tell Alice."

"WE?! I'm not telling her anything! And neither are you!"

"But, she's going to be so upset..."
"If her relationship is as bad as everyone says it is, she probably already knows, to some degree."

Bruce thought back numbly to a few of his past relationships. Most of them had overlapped. Sometimes a few at a time…he didn't really want to think about it.

"Just…sit on it for a while. If it looks like she's really hurting, approach Zeke with the information. Or have Tony do it. Zeke should tell her. Not you."

Pepper nodded, seemingly placated for the time being.

"Now, if you would, I'd like to try and salvage a few hours of sleep before I have to get up and work again."

"Sorry, Bruce."

"Don't worry about it, Pepper."

He rolled over and closed his eyes, listening to her retreating footsteps.

He couldn't sleep, though. He sat back up and looked around the darkened med bay. He found himself watching Alice sleep.

*Creepy. You're being creepy.*

Her face looked so peaceful, her eyelashes were really long. Her lips…well, they were thin, but still visually appealing. He liked the way they looked when she smiled. She usually covered her mouth, but he caught a glimpse of her smile every now and again.

*Stop it. If she woke up right now and saw you staring, she'd freak the hell out.*

As if on cue with his worst nightmare, her eyes flew open and she sat up suddenly.

Bruce leaped back, leaning back against the couch, keeping still. Like that would keep her from seeing him.

She looked around and then gagged.

Bruce jumped up, looking around for something to give her. Damn Tony for incinerating the trash can.

She gagged again and then puked all down the front of her shirt.

She frowned, looking down at her front. She looked over at Bruce. She pulled up at the neck of the shirt, pulling it off and over her head before he could look away.

Bruce was vaguely aware that he should probably turn around, but the pink lacy bra was just too mesmerizing. Her soft, smooth flesh perfectly cupped by…

*I REALLY shouldn't be watching a heavily intoxicated girl undressing.*

The thought became more of a distant memory as the shirt cleared Alice's head and landed…Bruce cared not the hell where. Alice took a deep breath, making her breasts heave ever so gently.

*Oh, come on!* Bruce thought inwardly, chastising himself for staring.

Bruce was suddenly aware that Alice was looking at him. His gaze had been just a couple of towns
south of eye contact. He quickly looked up, meeting her eyes. He just sat there for what had to be no less than ten minutes not saying a word.

*Come on Banner, say something, make up an excuse or...* Bruce tried to think of something to say, but all he could muster was a long moaning "uhhhhn..." *Yes, quite smooth. That wasn't creepy or rapey sounding at all.*

"Did I get any on my bra?" Alice more stated than asked as she reached behind her and unhooked the clasp.

Bruce's eyes followed the bra as it fell forward as if in slow motion. Eye contact and the location of shirts were the farthest things from his mind. He was pretty sure he was having a brain hemorrhage right now actually.

He was aware that he slowly leaning forward, feet firmly rooted to the floor, but his torso straining closer as if willing his legs to move.

Bruce hadn't given much thought to the ethical dilemma that had been thrust upon him with such glorious, majestic, awe-inspiring, bouncing, perky wonder... *what the hell? Where am I going with this?*

His gawking was cut short by his heart monitor, beeping frantically. He leaped back from her, looking up towards the ceiling.

"Uhhhh...I have a shirt you can borrow." *Borrow? You can have it. Just please, please, think of me when you wear it...* He backed out of the room, trying to lower his heart rate, which was up around one-seventy right now.

He located the shirt in one of his desk drawers. An old Culver University t-shirt he used to wear jogging. He threw it to her.

*Dead Puppies, dead puppies, dead puppies,* he thought, trying to clear his mind, but all he could imagine were Alice's perfect, nude breasts.

He heard a small crash in the med bay. "Are you okay?" he called over his shoulder, scared to look.

"Huh?" she called back.

"Did you fall out of bed?"

"Yeah."

*Oh, good god, help me.*

"Did you find the shirt?"

"What?"

"The shirt, did you find the shirt?"

"No...wait, here it is. I fell on it." She giggled, the sound was melodic.

*This is the best and worst day of my life.*

"Okay, can you put it on?"
"Huh?"

"Can you put the shirt on?"

"What shirt?"

Bruce groaned, his heart rate was up to 180 now. She needed to pull it together soon. He usually started having to deal with the Other Guy around 190.

"The shirt I threw to you." He growled.

"Oh, yeah, I'll put it on."

He heard another small crash. "Are you okay?"

"Fell over."

He groaned.

"Is the shirt on?"

"Yep."

He cleared his mind the best he could, taking deep breaths until the monitor stopped beeping.

"Can you get back into bed?"

Another small crash.

"Nope," she giggled again.

"Just a second," Bruce sighed, clearing his mind again. He walked over to her, kneeling down. "Put your arms around my neck," he instructed, slipping his arms under her. She wound her arms around his neck and snuggled into him when he lifted her to the bed. He deposited her gently back on the pillow, and she ran her fingers lazily through his hair. His breath caught in his throat.

"My hero," she said breathlessly.

Bruce frowned. He was no hero. He turned to leave, but she grabbed his hand, lacing her fingers with his.

"Don't leave me here alone, Bruce," she pleaded, her eyelids fluttering as she struggled to stay awake.

He melted a little, pulling a chair up beside the bed. He left his hand in hers. It was selfish of him, but it felt good.

"I love your hands..." she drawled, tracing along his with her other hand. It made the hair stand up on his arm.

"Why?" he asked, in spite of himself.

"They're sooooo strong...." She closed her eyes, her head lolling to the side. "Just like you."

"And you are sooooo drunk," he said, slipping his hand out of hers. He pulled the blanket up over her, tucking her in again. He sat back in the chair beside her bed, though. There was no way he was
getting any sleep tonight. Not when he had images of…

The heart monitor started beeping again. He groaned, settling in to clear his mind for the second time and probably not the last time that night.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

More things...

Chapter Notes

I really forgot how jerky I wrote Tony in this. And with zero boundaries, sheesh.
Darcy's a little bit much in this chapter too. I would never write this now.
BUT, squint and read past that. It's cute, I swear!

Bruce

Bruce sighed, brought out of his daydream by the sound of his pulse monitor. He closed his eyes and cleared his head.

This is getting really old.

Once it had stopped beeping, Tony approached his desk, "Do you need to replace the batteries in that thing or what?"

"No, it's not the batteries," Bruce sighed.

"Well, what's going on, Big Guy? It's going off twice an hour! I can't work like this. Do you need to go get a massage or something?"

That definitely wouldn't help.

"No, Tony, I don't need a massage, I just need to calm down. I'm on edge."

"You're telling me. Take a break or something. Go take a nap."

It's worse when I try to sleep.

Bruce nodded, "Maybe."

"Figure it out, dude. It's been doing this for three weeks."

Bruce rolled his eyes, "Days. Three days," he corrected.

"Really? Only Three days? It feels like longer."
Tony sauntered back to his area of the lab and Bruce went over to his desk to begin rereading his notes again. Alice had finished them yesterday, much to his relief. Not that he didn't like having her around, but he couldn't get a thing done. His mind kept wandering.

Wandering back to the previous Saturday night. Back to the med bay. Back to Alice stripping off her shirt, and then her bra, back to those beautiful, glorious…

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

Bruce groaned, shifting in his chair.

"BRUCE, GO HOME!" Tony yelled from across the room.

Bruce did get up to get some tea. Of course, that made him think of Alice and that set off the monitor again. He really needed to get this under control. It wasn't like he'd never seen… breasts before. He had. Lots of times. Just not in the past few years. And never in his life had he seen any that looked so… heavenly.

Or maybe it was just because it was Alice. Alice, with her soft skin, and her scent… he swore he could smell sweet peas everywhere now.

Get a grip, Banner. She's only a woman. Not even that attractive, truth be told.

That's a lie, she's the most beautiful creature in existence and you know it.

But, even if that's true, there's nothing you can do about it. You can't touch her, can't even think about looking at her without freaking out.

He took a deep breath. Get it under control.

He successfully made it through the rest of the day without an episode. He poured everything into his research. Theorized a way to make a serum that could lower the heart rate to one beat per minute. It might be a way to keep the Other Guy at bay… probably not, but it was something, anyway.

Alice came in, but he made himself appear busy so she'd leave him alone. She was very good at reading a room. That was something else he liked about her. She left his lunch on his desk. He felt bad that he had to miss eating lunch with her, but he couldn't handle it. It was hard being in the same room with her, let alone sitting across from her… talking with her… being close enough to smell her perfume…

He ate alone, reciting the periodic table of elements in his head and counting the number of times he had to chew his food. Being a genius had its perks.

He made it through the next few hours and was doing well until Alice came in with their evening meal. She made a point to wait by his desk. He couldn't stay in the back forever. Well, he could, but it was killing him, knowing she obviously wanted to talk to him.

He sighed and walked up to his desk.

"Bruce?"

"Oh, hi, Alice", he said, smiling, hopefully playing it off like he didn't see her there.

You're acting like a child, he mentally berated himself.
"Are you okay?" she reached out to touch his arm. He flinched. She frowned, pulling her arm back. "What's wrong?"

He shook his head, "Just… on edge lately, sorry I haven't been available… I don't want to hurt anyone…" Partial truth there.

"Oh…I thought maybe I did something to upset you…I mean…Sunday morning in the med bay…"

"Nope, I'm not upset with you."

"Oh," she paused, looking around nervously, "I haven't been bothering you too much, have I?"

Bother. That's another word for it.

"Nope. Not bothering me--" he gulped for air, "at all."

"Oh… well, I was looking forward to eating lunch with you today…"

"Me too, I'm sorry I missed it."

"Tomorrow, maybe?" she asked.

"Yes, definitely."

She smiled, "Great. Gotta get my Bruce-fix. I got used to hanging out with you this week!"

He had to smile back. Bruce-fix. She's adorable.

"Well, far be it for me to deprive you."

She laughed, "I need to go. I'm running late as it is. I just wanted to check on you."

He felt warm suddenly. She was worried about him. That felt nice.

"Don't get behind on things on my account."

"It's worth it," she smiled again and waved goodbye, leaving with the lunch dishes Darcy had stacked on the front counter.

He let out the breath he'd been holding, sinking down into his desk chair.

"You guys are so damn cute, it makes me want to vomit," Tony's voice sounded from behind Bruce, causing him to jump in surprise.

"Tony, seriously. Don't scare me like that."

Tony snickered, "So… Jolly Green, wanna come help me with something?"

"Sure, give me a minute…" Bruce got up and followed him back to his station.

Tony sat down at his computer. Bruce sat down in an extra chair.

"So, Bruce, I saw something interesting this morning."

"Really?" Bruce asked, uninterestedly.

"Yep. I was reviewing the lab security footage from Saturday. Saw something REALLY
interesting."

Bruce's stomach dropped.

"Well, truthfully," Tony continued, "I'm not entirely sure of what I saw. BUT, if it's what I THINK I saw, I'm disappointed that you didn't share."

*Security footage? Of course, he'd have security footage. Dammit. Damn, damn, damn.*

"Now, this isn't the BEST quality. KICKING myself now for not going with the high definition security cameras for the lab. First thing tomorrow, I'm going to upgrade them."

"Tony… whatever it is that you THINK you saw…"

"Think? I misspoke, I KNOW what I saw."

Bruce took a deep breath.

He hit the play button. "Alright, there's the puke…ignoring that…there goes the shirt, the bra, and I'm sure at this point, your nose was probably bleeding." He cocked his head to the side, "Not sure what's happening here…are you passing out? Very slowly?"

Bruce frowned, crossing his arms across his front, "Shut up."

"And this next part, I guess you didn't get to see because you left the room. SO I will play it in slow motion," he clicked the mouse a few times. "There…she falls out of the bed and they…bounce all the way down. Awesome."

Bruce's heart monitor started beeping frantically.

"Seriously, Bruce, could you turn that thing off?"

He glared at Tony.

"Oh…because of…" Tony motioned to the screen. The realization hit as he undoubtedly realized the reason the heart monitor had been beeping like crazy for the past few days. "Oh…so that's why…"

He looked at him with pity. "Oh, Bruce, dude, that SUCKS! Do you want a hug?"

Bruce scooted away from Tony, "NO."

"Right, that'd be weird. I don't really want to touch you right now."

Bruce rolled his eyes. "Could you close that, please?" he asked, gesturing to the laptop. Tony did, and Bruce closed his eyes, calming himself until the heart monitor stopped beeping.

"I'm leaving," he announced, standing up.

"Oh right to go take care of business… gotcha."

Bruce sighed.

"What? You mean… no business? Nothing? For eight years? How are you still alive? I take care of business at least 5 times a day!"

Bruce frowned, "Tony, that is NOT healthy."
"What are you, a doctor?"

"Yes. You know I am."

"Well, you're not that kind of doctor."

"I don't have to be to know that's not healthy… Mentally. I don't know if there is any physical drawback to doing that so often, but…"

"It has to be healthier than NOT doing it for eight years."

"Tony, it's not like I have much of a choice," Bruce said, exasperatedly.

"Have you tried…"

"NO. This is not a topic that is up for discussion. I'd rather if you didn't think about the logistics or mechanics of it."

He got up to leave, but Tony trailed after him.

"Okay, have you tried doing it REALLY fast, before the rest of you has a chance to realize it?"

Bruce stopped walking, turning to look at Tony, a bewildered expression on his face. "NO! I'm not the Flash, Tony."

"Well, of course not. The Flash is a dumb comic book hero… Okay… I MAY have heard about some guys who say they can do it just by THINKING. Personally, I think it's a load of crap, but maybe that might work."

Bruce stopped walking again, turning to face Tony. "Let's suffice it to say, I've tried everything, and have accepted that this is something I'm not able to do."

"Dude, that really sucks, I'm sorry."

"Thanks for your sympathy. For once, I think it's actually genuine."

Tony switched gears. "So, you're NOT going to try to be with Alice?"

Bruce blinked. "Are you dense? NO. Besides the fact that we probably could never have a physical relationship, which makes any kind of romance completely masochistic, she is WITH someone else."

"Someone who is cheating on her. She doesn't deserve that."

Bruce sighed, "Pepper got to you."

"It's all she talks about! I don't know how to make her shut up!"

"I know she doesn't deserve to be treated this way, but it's not our place to say anything, Tony. If you care that much about it, approach Zeke with the information."

"No way! That little shit is accusing me of trying to get in her pants when he's the one who's running around on her! I think we should just tell her."

"Tony, it would break her heart, do you want to be the one who breaks her heart?"

"Psshhh, he's the one cheating on her."
"Ever heard of killing the messenger? Happened a LOT in medieval times."

"Fine, fine, fine. I won't say anything. But when she finds out and THEN finds out we all knew, I'm throwing you under the bus."

"Fine. I'll take the blame for it when she finds out."

"When who finds what out?" Darcy walked up to them, sipping some sort of an iced coffee beverage.

"Nobody. And nothing," Tony said quickly. Bruce rolled his eyes.

Darcy looked between them, sipping on her beverage that appeared to be mostly whipped cream.

"I know you're not talking about me. That one…" she motioned towards Bruce, "still doesn't remember my name half the time." She peered at Bruce's face. "Alice. 'She' is Alice."

"No, she's not."

"She is Alice. I can tell by Dr. B's face right now."

"What are you doing with your face, Bruce?" Tony peered at him.

"Nothing, nothing!"

"It's actually not his face. He gets an erection."

Bruce frowned, jamming his hands in his pockets. "Stop looking at my crotch."

"It's very prominent. You should be proud."

Tony busied himself looking anywhere but at Bruce or Darcy.

"Darcy…" Bruce warned.

"Ah-ha! You DO remember my name."

"You should have heard them earlier, Darce. 'I need my Bruce-fix'" Tony mimicked Alice's voice badly. " 'Well, far be it for me to deprive you'," he deepened his voice when he mimicked Bruce.

Bruce rolled his eyes.

"It IS Alice then. What don't you want Alice to find out? Hmmm…something Dr. B thinks she doesn't need to know. Something that will hurt her, then. Something BOTH of you know…it's about Zeke, isn't it? He's cheating on her!" she exclaimed, thrusting her drink forward in triumph.

"How do you do that?" Tony asked, amazed.

"It's MY superpower," Darcy took another big sip of her ridiculous drink.

"Darcy, you CAN'T say anything," Bruce pleaded.

"I thought YOU of all people would want her to break up with Zeke."

"Of course I do, but something like this…it's none of our business."

Darcy deflated slightly, "You're right. Of course, you are. I hate not being right."
She took another sip of her drink, "You've got a semi right now, don't you?" she gestured downward.

Bruce turned angrily away from them both, retreating to his work station.

*Since when did everyone insert themselves into my business?*

*Since you gave them something to be interested in.*

*Damn, Banner, you really need to stop carrying internal dialogue with yourself.*

He shook his head and went back to working on the serum. He had everything here to make it. He could possibly have it ready for testing by the next week. Work. That is what he needed to focus on. Work on the Other Guy, then worry about getting with the girl.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

More Thomas at the end. ;)

Chapter Notes

You guys brought up a good point yesterday. I shouldn't bash my old content.
You all know I've grown as a person/author. I don't need to constantly reiterate.
So like, I'm not going to anymore. <3

Alice

Alice had come in that morning and almost went down to the lab out of habit before JARVIS reminded her that she was going to the office suites.

While in the elevator, she received a text from Pepper stating that she was going to be sitting in on her first meeting that afternoon. She mentally inspected her appearance: she had pulled her hair up in a French knot again. She was wearing a charcoal grey cardigan over a black top and a bright yellow knee-length flowy skirt. One she'd salvaged from the recent culling of her 'hippie wardrobe'. She opted for flats since heels didn't seem to suit her for this job: lots of walking. She was sure she looked presentable enough for a meeting.

She was looking forward to lunch today because of Dr. Banner… Bruce … had invited her to eat with him in the lab. He actually wasn't all that bad. He had a witty, sarcastic sense of humor that rivaled her own. AND she figured, once someone holds your hair back when you puke, you kind of owe them a nice gesture.

Alice started out her morning with Jules in the office, checking the voicemail and updating Pepper's schedule. After this week, she'd be truly on her own. Jules would move down the hall to the PR offices and Alice would officially be the Assistant to the CEO.

They finished the voicemail in record time, giving Alice a moment to collect herself before they went to take breakfast to the lab. On the way down to the lab with the trays, Alice thought back to the previous Sunday morning, when she'd woken up with her first-ever hangover in the lab.

She woke up and put off opening her eyes completely. Her body felt really heavy. She cracked her eyes open and looked around. No one was in the room with her. Bruce spent the night there, but he probably started working already. Maybe she could get up and go home for a bit. Shower, nap, and then come back after lunch for a half-day. She flexed her legs, wiggled her toes and sat straight up.
A blinding hot pain seared behind her eyes and her head felt like it was imploding. She cried out and lay back down immediately, her hands over her eyes.

Bruce rushed to her side. He must not have been far, or she was louder than she realized.

"Your head?" he asked, brushing her hair out of her face.

"Yes," she answered weakly. It hurt too much to nod.

"I'll get some aspirin."

He left for a moment, but he came back with a large glass of water and two small white pills.

"Drink all of that, it'll make you feel better," he sat down in the chair beside her bed.

She sat up slowly. She took the aspirin and gulped down the water, not realizing how thirsty she really was.

"Do you want more?" he asked, leaning forward in the chair in order to stand if she needed something.

"In a minute, not right now," she said, holding her head. "Could you speak more quietly please?"

"Sorry," He said, noticeably softer. He took the glass from her, setting it on the table beside the bed. He sat back in the chair.

"Hey, earth to Alice! C'mon!" Jules nudged her arm before exiting the elevator. Alice blinked and followed.

"Sorry, daydreaming, I guess," she said.

They went into the lab to drop off the trays. Darcy was leaning against the front counter.

"It's about time you guys got here," she said.

Jules looked at her watch, "We're actually early."

"Well… I wanted to see Alice."

"Here I am," said Alice, smiling widely.

"How did it go with Zeke?" asked Darcy.

"Oh, she won't say. She's being all weird and quiet," answered Jules.

Darcy tilted her head and stared hard at Alice, she bounced slightly on the balls of her feet, "Spill it, Red."

"Not now. Later," said Alice.

"Lunch?" asked Darcy.

"No, I have plans."

"What plans?"

"Dr. Banner asked me to…"
"Oh, that. I can eat with you too. You can tell us both."

"No... I don't think that's something that's going to interest him," Alice said hesitantly. "I don't know why he wants to eat with me in the first place. I don't actually know what we're going to talk about."

"Who cares? We'll talk about what happened with Zeke," said Darcy. She picked up Jane's tray and turned to take it back to her part of the lab.

Alice sighed. She double-checked the trays again before turning to leave with Jules.

They left to go up to check in with the four members of the Avengers still in the suites.

Clint Barton was perched on one of the kitchen stools, reading the newspaper and drinking coffee. "Alice! How are you feeling?" he asked. She hadn't seen him since she'd gotten ill on Saturday.

"Much better than the last time you saw me, definitely," she answered with a half-hearted laugh.

"Glad to hear it," he answered genuinely. Clint was a man of fewer words than Bruce, but he was infinitely more tactful. If he had noticed the fake laugh, he didn't say anything about it.

"Ms. Vorso," a cool voice acknowledged her from the hallway. Natasha strolled into the kitchen and sat down beside Clint, picking up the part of the paper he'd already read.

Natasha wasn't the most open person in the world, but she was capable of being friendly when the mood struck her. Alice wasn't sure if it was genuine friendliness or an act, but it was infinitely more pleasant than the silent treatment she'd started to expect from her. Natasha fixed her gaze on Jules.

"What do you want?" she practically barked. It was well known that Natasha and Jules simply did not get along. Jules joked that it was because she was also a redhead and Natasha was just jealous of how much prettier she was. Alice thought it was probably just a clash of personalities. The fact that Natasha now addressed Alice by her name and not by a rude command or question boded well, she thought anyway.

"We're just here to check-in and make sure you have everything you need," said Jules, in a calm and patronizing tone. She smiled brightly.

"We do. We always do," answered Natasha harshly.

"Nat," warned Clint unenthusiastically, looking at her sideways from his paper.

"Alright, are Steve and Thor around?" cut in Alice.

"Thor's asleep still and Cap is at the gym," replied Clint.

"Awesome. Let's go, Jules," Alice grabbed her arm and tugged. Jules was staring daggers at Natasha, who sat coolly back in her seat, smirking. Jules turned and they got back in the elevator. Alice waved goodbye.

"I can't stand that woman. She's the only thing I'm not looking forward to when I move up to PR," confessed Jules once the doors closed.

"I'm sorry. Maybe just try not to piss her off so much."

"How do I do that? She's got it out for me."

"I don't know. I'm really just trying to make conversation and say the right thing," Alice grinned
"I know. You're awesome, thanks," sighed Jules, squeezing her shoulder once. She recovered quickly, clapping her hands together, "I have to go down to security to pick up my new badge."

"What?" asked Alice incredulously. "Did you lose it again?" She raised her eyebrows.

Jules grinned, "Yeah… kind of on purpose."

Alice nodded knowingly. Jules had confided in her about a crush she had on Happy. It was rather cute, truth be told. Alice hoped it worked out for them.

"How long do you think it's going to take before he realizes you're losing these things on purpose?"

"I don't know. Guys can be dense."

"I'll say," agreed Alice.

"Before I go, and while we're on the topic…" started Jules.

"No. Nice segue. But no."

"C'mon, tell me what happened!"

Alice sighed, "Fine… what all do you know already?"

"I know from Darcy that Zeke was pissed because you were going out with work friends on Saturday, even though he was doing the same thing. And I know that he was objecting loudly and badmouthing Tony in front of Darcy."

"Yeah, Tony doesn't need to know about that," Alice raised her eyebrow and eyed Jules knowingly.

"I think he already does. If Darcy knows, everyone knows."

Alice sighed, "Well, he's been polite and hasn't brought it up with me if he does know."

"Anyway, I ALSO know that Zeke said that you were a lot more fun before you got your own friends separate from his."

"It's true, he said that. BUT in his defense, everyone says things they don't mean when they're fightin'."

"What did you say?"

"Well, nothin' this particular time. I had said PLENTY that mornin', though."

Alice took a deep breath to calm her nerves.

"Right," nodded Jules. She knew the content of the first fight well.

"Anyway, we left and he told me if I was going out to not bother coming back, which is a blind threat coming from him. He always says that when we argue. Darcy and I went up to Tony's, had some drinks, then I drank that horrible science experiment, got sick, spent the night in the lab."

Jules nodded.

"Anyway, I didn't see Zeke again until last night. He had the afternoon off and it was the first we've
spoken since we fought on Saturday night. He worked nights for the past few days. He's been sleepin' on the couch." Alice paused, to take a few breaths before continuing. "He was apologetic, he said he was sorry to hear about me getting sick, and said he wanted to thank Dr. Banner for taking care of me. He apologized for badmouthing Tony and asked if we could just forget about all of it."

"What did you say?" asked Jules expectantly.

"What could I say? I just said 'okay' and hugged him. Now we're cool!" said Alice, ending the sentence happily. She omitted the part where Zeke was still sleeping on the couch. AND the part where he'd made no move to touch her purposefully.

"How about, 'why don't you trust me? How could you think that my boss was making the moves on me and I was okay with it? Why is it not okay for me to have my own friends separate from yours? Why did you refuse to come up to see me when I was sick?'"

"He couldn't have, he had to work early in the morning," said Alice, choosing to only answer the last question because she didn't have answers for the others.

"I don't know about you, but if my fiancé was sick and had almost died. Hell nor high water could keep me from being with them," said Jules.

"He's an agent of SHIELD, that's his first priority," Alice said thickly.

"Whatever, if you're happy, I'm happy… are you happy?"

"YES!" exclaimed Alice, laughing a bit too loudly to be sincere.

"Okay, I'm happy," stated Jules, unconvincingly. "I should get down to security. You wanna come or are you going to go back to the office?"

"I'll go back to the office. I have some stuff to do before lunch."

"Okay, I'll drop you off," said Jules. The elevator stopped at the office suites. "Wish me luck!" she said, crossing her fingers and grinning.

"Good luck!" said Alice, exiting the elevator. She walked down to the office and went directly to the desk. Jules had the Starkphone, so she was only responsible if the desk phone rang. She sat and looked around at the empty waiting room.

She texted Darcy and asked her if they could meet by the kitchen. She needed help carrying lunch up to the lab. Then, leaning on her hand, she allowed her mind to wander.

"Sorry," he said quietly. He took the glass from her, setting it on the table beside the bed. He sat back in the chair. He was wearing a different shirt than he had been the night before. He must have gone home to change. She looked down at her own shirt.

It wasn't her shirt. She was wearing a Culver University t-shirt. It was way too big on her. Her bra was gone, too.

Her head shot up. Mistake. She put it back down again, closing her eyes and groaning.

"What's wrong?" Bruce asked, worried.

"Where's my shirt I came in with?" she asked, looking up at him slowly. "And where did I get this one?"
"Umm..." his face reddened slightly. "You kind of...vomited all over yours, and the one you're wearing is mine. There wasn't another...option." He looked uncomfortable.

"Who put it on me?" she demanded, pulling it down against her body. "And where is my bra?!"

"You put it on," he said quickly. "I didn't... I didn't see... you did," he stammered, fidgeting and looking around. His pulse monitor started beeping. "Sorry," he blurted. He got up and left quickly.

Alice stared at the door he'd run through, bewildered.

After a few minutes, he returned.

"I apologize when my pulse monitor starts beeping..."

"Your heart rate is rising to dangerous levels," she finished.

"Yes."

"I'm sorry for upsetting you," she said calmly, looking down at her hands.

"No, it's fine. I wasn't upset. That really makes me sound like a wimp... I'm sorry, I don't know what's going on with me lately."

She smiled slightly, "You're not a wimp."

He rolled his eyes, "Thanks."

"Did anyone get ahold of Zeke?" she asked, changing the subject.

He sat down again, looking down at his hands. "Yeah... Pepper did, last night... he said he couldn't come up because he had to work this morning."

"Oh," Alice said, looking down again to hide her disappointment. "Yeah, his job is important," She nodded, looking up again and smiling thinly.

Bruce regarded her for a moment and picked up her glass. "I'll just go... get you more water," he said, leaving the room again.

Alice was thankful for the privacy. She let a few tears escape her bloodshot eyes. When Bruce came back with her water, she had composed herself. She drank the glass of water he handed her. Then, she pulled back the blanket and swung her legs over the side of the bed. Bruce leaped forward to help.

"Thank you," she said. She stood on wobbly legs and took several deep breaths, willing her body to behave. Once her legs stopped wobbling, she opened her eyes slowly. There was no dizziness. "I'm good," she said, looking at Bruce. He took a step back. "Where's my stuff I brought with me last night?"

"Umm... I think Pepper brought it down... Yeah, it's on the counter over here," he crossed the room and retrieved her purse and her vomity shirt, which had been folded up and placed in a tied-off plastic bag.

"Thanks again... can I bring this back to you tomorrow?" she gestured to the shirt.

"Sure, that's fine. Just take your time, no hurry or anything," he said quickly, looking around anywhere but at her.
"Alice?" said Pepper, snapping her fingers in front of her face. "Are you okay?"

"Hmmm? Oh, yeah, just letting my mind get away from me, I guess."

"I just wanted to know where Jules went."

"She had to go down to security to get a new ID badge."

"Another one? She certainly seems to like going down to security."

"Yeah, it seems that way," laughed Alice.

"Well, you can go take your lunch. I'm going to. Jules will figure it out."

"Alright, thanks, Pepper," she smiled.

"Did you want to grab something with me? Or do you have plans?" asked Pepper.

"Oh, thanks for offerin', but I do have plans. Dr. Banner asked me to eat lunch with him."

"He did?" Pepper sounded surprised. "Well, have fun," she said, sounding amused.

"I'll try… I don't really know what we're going to talk about," she reiterated her fear from earlier.

"You'll think of something, I'm sure," Pepper smiled.

Alice grabbed her purse and went down to the kitchen to meet Darcy.

"Hey, Red. Ready to talk about Zeke?"

"Geez, you just don't stop, do you?"

"Nope."

"Fine. I'll tell you about it while we're going up, I don't really want to talk about it around Bruce."

"Oh, BRUCE," teased Darcy. "He's Bruce now? What happened to Dr. Banner?"

"He asked me to call him Bruce, so I'm obliging him."

"I'll bet you're obliging him."

"Darcy, seriously it's not like that. I'm with Zeke." Darcy rolled her eyes dramatically. "He's… I'm just not his type," Alice continued.

"What's his type?"

"I don't know. Not me. Someone smart like him. Someone who knows what the hell he does all day. Someone who's… not me."

"Oddly specific," said Darcy. "You don't give yourself enough credit."

Alice bit her lip. "So, did you want to hear about Zeke or not?"

"Talk, woman."

Alice proceeded to fill Darcy in on what had happened the previous night with Zeke. As Alice
expected, Darcy was not thrilled.

"Damn, Alice! Quit being such a doormat! You let that douche walk all over you, and then get mad when he doesn't respect you like you think he should!"

Alice sighed. She listened to Darcy being absolutely right all the way into the break room in the lab, where they sat down with their lunches. Alice had dropped Bruce’s off at his desk, in case he couldn't tear himself away from his research that day.

"Darce, look, I know you don't agree with what I did, but could you at least be a friend and not insult me?"

"Hey, you are the one who complains that her boyfriend…"

"Fiancé".

"BOYFRIEND doesn't respect her and you just let him do whatever the hell he wants with no repercussions! He gets mad at you for hanging out with coworkers, accuses you of sleeping with your boss…"

"He didn't accuse me of sleeping with him. He accused him of wanting to sleep with me, and me of not doing anything about it," Alice corrected.

"Whatever, he doesn't trust you. And then you just… forgive him? Forget about what happened and the hell he put you through for the past three days? Alice, I just don't get you."

Alice shrugged. "Most people don't."

"Help me try."

"Okay, how about this? I've been with this guy for seven years. I'm engaged to him, for all intents and purposes. He has his flaws and I have mine. I can't just throw all of that away based on one weekend. When you've been in a relationship for that long, please feel free to give me advice. But until you are, please just support my decisions. Support me. 'Cause God knows I need it."

Darcy pursed her lips and shook her head, mumbling something under her breath.

"What was that?" asked Alice, frowning.

"Nothing, nothing. I'm dropping it, hon."

Alice eyed her suspiciously, "Thank you, Darcy."

Darcy nodded curtly, sighing exasperatedly.

Bruce

When Bruce walked into the break room, he quickly realized he had walked in on a private conversation. He quietly backed out of the room. He knew he shouldn't be listening. But here he was, standing outside the door to the break room, between it and the door to the kitchen, straining to
hear what Alice and Darcy were talking about.

He'd heard Darcy say something about Zeke when he'd first walked in and now she was berating Alice for something. Context clues led him to believe she was mad at Alice for not breaking things off with him.

He knew from the one-sided conversations Darcy had with him that Alice hadn't talked to or even seen Zeke since Sunday evening before she came up to Tony's. He knew it was none of his business, but he couldn't help agreeing with Darcy on this topic. Especially in light of recent information he'd been privy to.

It was hard to hear, but he thought the conversation was over. They were quiet. So, he turned back towards the door and walked into the break room. He sat down in front of Alice. He was slightly disappointed that Darcy didn't appear to be leaving, but maybe she'd make it easier for him to not think about Alice in a tawdry manner. Or maybe she'd just make it worse.

"What's wrong?" asked Alice, before he had a chance to greet her.

His disappointment must have traveled to his face. He'd never been good at hiding his emotions. That's why he tried his best not to have any.

"Oh, nothing," he smiled. Don't be creepy.

The worried expression left her face.

"Oh okay, you looked kind of… pensive. I thought something was wrong," she explained, with a half-smile. It didn't reach her eyes.

She looks tired. Did she look tired yesterday? Or is this a new development?

She looked back down at her lunch if you could call it that. She was eating, or more accurately picking at, a bowl of cut fruit.

He hoped she wasn't still feeling ill from the weekend. Maybe he should do a follow-up, make sure that all of Tony's experiment was all out of her system.

"Are you still feeling sick from…Saturday?" he asked, not wanting to specify what he meant.

"What?" she asked, looking up sharply. "Oh, no. I'm just not very hungry today." There was the fake smile again. When did he become so damn perceptive? She speared a piece of melon and popped it into her mouth.

Darcy rapped the table with her hands, "So, Bruce…did you hear Thor and Jane last night?"

He looked over at her, raising an eyebrow, "No, I didn't hear them, I did hear what sounded like Steve and Clint having another war movie marathon in the media room."

Darcy widened her eyes and flattened her mouth, looking at him expectantly.

The realization hit him. "What? Nooooo…" He shook his head. "That wasn't…oh my God!" He put his head in his hands.

Darcy nodded.

Alice looked between the two of them, "It couldn't have been that loud."
"It was," said Bruce, his head still down. "At one point, I swear to God I heard machine guns."

"I'm not even sure that sounds enjoyable," said Alice, taking a sip of her water.

"My room is beside theirs," said Darcy, "It sounded like she was having fun."

Alice choked on her water, turning her head to the side and shaking with laughter.

"Good for Jane," she giggled.

Darcy laughed, "More than any of us are getting, amiright?"

Alice's head snapped towards Darcy. Bruce froze, a French fry in his hand. The look on Alice's face was murderous.

Reminder to self: never do anything that might cause you to be on the receiving end of That Look.

"Darcy. That is not somethin' that needs to be common knowledge. That is somethin' I told you in CONFIDENCE." Alice's voice was up an octave from its normal timbre.

Darcy bit her lip. She looked over at Alice, "It slipped. Sorry."

Alice stabbed a grape furiously.

The silence was deafening.

Bruce couldn't help but feel elated.

Seriously, Banner? This makes you happy? You have a serious problem.

He knew it was wrong, but the thought of her with another man made him angry. And nobody wants Bruce to be angry, right?

Darcy, who had finished her lunch, rose and excused herself. Alice glared at her retreating form. She took a deep breath, trying to calm herself.

"You know, I could teach you some anger management techniques," Bruce offered, trying to appear deadpan. Alice looked at him searchingly. Her face broke out into a smile.

"That's enough outta you," she laughed. This time it looked real. "I should text her, she's probably sittin' in the kitchen alone like a dork. Hope you don't think I'm bein' rude."

"Not at all."

She pulled out her phone and sent a text to Darcy, who promptly returned to the break room.

"I am NOT a dork," said Darcy, in mock offense.

"Are too," answered Alice, grinning.

She looked down at her bowl of fruit and then looked up at Bruce. "Bruce, do you mind if I steal one of your fries? They smell really good and I'm feelin' a bit hungrier than I thought."

"Sure," he said, maybe a bit too quickly. He pushed the fries over to her. "Help yourself," he smiled again. Don't be creepy.

She smiled, another real one, "Thank you!"
Alice's phone then rang. She excused herself for a moment while she answered it. When she was gone, Darcy's hand snaked over to steal a fry. Bruce smacked her hand away.

"Hey… what gives? You are practically feeding them to Alice."

"I most certainly am not feeding them to her. You had your own lunch."

Darcy smirked, "Mmhmm. I bet you'd like to feed them to her."

Bruce blushed and shook his head. He looked directly at Darcy. "I'm not having this conversation right now," he whispered, motioning to Alice across the room. Darcy grinned, about to speak again. "Or ever," he added.

Alice sat back down, "Sorry about that." She grabbed two more fries and looked back and forth between Bruce and Darcy. "What'd I miss?"

"Nothing," said Darcy. "I actually just remembered that I have to go refile some of Jane's research. I probably should go and get started on it. See you tonight, Alice?"

"Yeah, we'll get dinner, if you want."

Alice checked the time on her phone, "I need to get going soon as well, I get to sit in on my first meeting with Pepper this afternoon, it starts in a half-hour." She grabbed another fry. "It was nice talking with you, though."

"Yeah, I enjoyed talking with you too." Awkward. "I'd like to do this again, I mean, if you want to…" More awkward.

"Sure! I'd love that."

She'd love that. He smiled.

"I promise I won't steal half your lunch next time either. When did you want to do this again? Tomorrow?"

"Uh…Yes. Tomorrow. Tomorrow would be great," he smiled again.

"Awesome. Will I see you tonight or will you be busy?"

"I don't know, I'm working on something with Tony. I'll try to wave, at least."

She got up to leave. She started to gather up all the plates on the table, he stopped her, "I'll get those. You need to get ready for your super exciting meeting with Pepper."

"Thanks," she smiled again. She had a dimple on her left cheek that showed when she laughed and sometimes when she smiled. It was cute.

Did I just think something was cute? What's wrong with me? I have multiple doctorates. I don't think things are CUTE.

"I'll see you later, then," she said, picking up her bag. "Bye for now."

"Bye," he said, standing up and gathering up the dishes. He watched her leave the room.

He carried all the dishes out to the kitchen.
"Did she kiss you goodbye?"

Bruce turned to face Darcy, who was leaning on a counter.

"Didn't anyone tell you not to scare me? It makes me angry."

Darcy smirked, "If you're trying to hide that you have feelings for her, you're not doing a very good job. You might want to pull it together."

Bruce straightened up a bit, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Look, I'm Team Bruce on this whole thing. I think you two would be good for each other, but if you don't want to pursue this, you need to get your act together. Because while she's really dense about this stuff, if you keep pulling crap like you did today, she's going to notice and she's going to fall for you. If you're not prepared to catch her, then just knock it off. She doesn't need another flakey guy in her life."

Bruce nodded, "Point taken." He laid the dishes on the counter. "Take those down, will you?"

He walked back to his desk to the sound of Darcy's protestations.

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Alice

Alice, Jules, and Darcy were eating a quick dinner in the on-site restaurant that evening. Alice and Jules were taking a break from transcribing that afternoon's meeting.

Thomas strolled into the dining room, swinging his keys. He plopped down on the chair nearest Jules. She visibly tensed.

"Jules, why won't you return my calls?" he asked.

"I told you to stop calling."

"I don't recall hearing that."

"I recall saying it," she said shortly, not looking up from her work.

Thomas turned towards Alice and Darcy. "Could you give us a minute?"

"Nope," said Alice.

"Please?"

"Nope, we were here first," said Darcy.

Thomas clenched his jaw, he pointed his finger at Darcy. "Look b—"

Alice held up her hand, "Stop right there. If you say the next word that I think you're gonna say, I'm goin' to Tony and having you fired. Jules doesn't like you and she tried to let you down nicely. You're too thick-headed to see that, so you've been after her every day since then. You're weird and
kind of a creep. I'm not sure that you don't spy on us throughout the day on the security cameras. If Tony knew that, he'd fire ya on the spot and you'd never find a job as nice as this one EVER again. So, I suggest you pick yourself up off that chair and never talk to any of us again. You had your chance with Jules and it's her prerogative if she chose to end things."

Darcy's expression was one of barely concealed mirth. Jules' eyes were wide and darting between Thomas and Alice.

Everyone around them was silent. While there weren't many people in the restaurant, there were enough to embarrass Thomas. Alice briefly felt sorry for him but she held firm. She knew from Jules that if you gave an inch with Thomas, he'd take ten miles.

Thomas glared at Alice, glancing around at all the people in the room. Witnesses. He looked from Jules to Darcy to Alice, and back to Jules again. He opened his mouth as if to say something, but closed it again, shaking his head. He stood and stalked from the room, muttering under his breath.

Jules let out a breath. She looked at Alice. "If we could get you to be that assertive with Zeke, we'd be in business!"

"Sorry, he was just… getting on my nerves," said Alice, sheepishly.

"Don't apologize, you're braver than I am!"

"Yeah, that little jerk had it coming. I was about to say something, but I think you covered all the bases!" laughed Darcy.

They finished eating and went back to the office to finish their transcriptions, Jules feeling a bit better and more hopeful that Thomas wouldn't be bothering her in the future. No one was worried about the awkward security guard. Neither gave much thought to what he had been muttering under his breath as he stalked out of the restaurant that evening.

"You'll be sorry, you stupid little hick. You don't know anything yet."
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Alice and Darcy go shopping, Zeke literally does nothing, and Bruce. Well. Bruce has a moment.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay, Idek what to say. I just... I couldn't get myself to update this fic for some reason.

Anyway, here's chapter 10!

Alice

Alice wouldn't have ever guessed it, but she truly enjoyed Bruce's company. She ate lunch with him a few times a week. She liked eating with him because she didn't feel the need to fill silences with mindless chatter. She could review notes if she needed to.

The silence was nice, but the conversation was nicer. He was attempting to fill her in on what he was trying to accomplish with his research. She wasn't really scientifically minded, so it was a slow process. He was patient with her. He probably made a great professor before all the mess happened. She wasn't entirely sure of what he was getting out of this interchange, but she didn't really want to stir the pot at all. She just went with it.

Sometimes Tony joined them. That was awkward, but necessary since she was technically managing his schedule as well. He was probably the most belligerent of anyone she'd ever had to deal with in a professional sense. He wouldn't look at anything she handed him. She had to hand it to Bruce or Pepper first. Whenever she made appointments for him, he changed them at the last minute. It caused her no small amount of stress when she had to deal with angry and jilted clients.

She excelled at the part of her job where she assisted the other members of the Avengers. Bruce never asked anything of her, likewise for Natasha and Clint. Most of her time was spent helping Thor and Steve acclimate to 21st-century American culture.

Job number one was to get both Steve and Thor into some culturally acceptable clothing, according to Jules who was now heading the Avengers' PR Department. Alice took a Saturday to do it. Saturday was her day off, but it didn't really matter anymore. Zeke was never at the apartment. She'd probably have just hung out with Darcy all day anyway.

Steve had been wearing his clothes from before the crash, so they were a bit dated. Not a HUGE issue, but Jules wanted to start setting up photo ops. She didn't want Steve 'dressing like he was
Thor was a bigger problem. His understanding of casualwear was literally not even on the same planet of thought as what he deemed 'Midgardian casual'. He usually tried to traipse around New York City in leather and chainmail. And while New York was a forgiving city, he needed to blend so as not to attract too much attention as per SHIELD orders.

"I do not understand why Lady Julia wishes to procure new garments for me. She has never had any complaints about them before!" he protested.

"I know. If it were up to me, you'd stay in leather and chainmail. Everyone would. It's a good look," Alice winked, "but just look at this as a favor to me. You owe me one after you tried to kill me."

Thor sobered immediately. Alice hated playing the 'Midgardian Whiskey' card, but she didn’t see any way around it. Thor was heartbroken that he’d been the cause of her discomfort that evening.

"I owe you unlimited favors. I will come with you and let you dress me like the men of Midgard."

She patted his arm, his extremely muscled arm, "Thank you, Thor."

Steve agreed to come along with less convincing. All she had to do was promise to take them to lunch at IHOP, which in turn, pleased Thor as well. Darcy tagged along because in her words: "How often do you get to play dress-up with Thor and Captain America?"

Alice decided to opt for Macy's because she also needed to pick up a new electric kettle for the office break room. The one there had burnt out and she'd been without tea for three days, which was unacceptable.

She didn't trust Darcy alone with the two heroes, so she dragged them all to the housewares department while she picked out a new kettle.

*Might as well get that out of the way first.*

As it turned out, Thor was very much amused by all the 'Midgardian cookware', and wanted to pick everything up. Darcy was no help at all. She kept showing him new things to touch. Steve tried to keep them in line, but it was really like having two small children with them. One of which looked like he'd wandered out of a cosplay convention and could crush all the stoneware casserole dishes to dust with his hands.

Alice grabbed the first kettle she saw, while Steve desperately tried to herd Thor and Darcy away from the breakables. After purchasing the kettle and two broken casserole dishes, they fled the housewares department amidst all the dirty looks from the staff.

She took them down to the men's clothing department, leaving Steve with Darcy for the moment to get fitted for a suit.

She took Thor over to the casual clothing and helped him pick out several t-shirts. She stuck to black, white and grey. She got several pairs of jeans for him as well. She had to enlist the help of a saleswoman to measure his waist. He hadn't worn jeans since he crashed in New Mexico, and then Jane had provided them. Why she hadn't asked Jane along baffled Alice. Maybe she also knew how to keep Darcy in line.

The saleswoman didn't seem to mind helping. After his waist and inseam were measured, she let him pick out a few pairs.
After his clothing was picked out, she took him back to where Steve was getting fitted for a suit. Steve was upset it seemed, he turned to shoot a worried glance at Alice. She looked to Darcy, who was shaking with laughter.

"The saleswoman is coming onto him," she whispered. "She mistakenly thought we were a couple and when I corrected her, she started flirting with Steve like it's the end of the world: He's the last man on earth and her eggs are dropping."

Alice snorted. She walked over to Steve. "I'll get you out of this, just play along," she whispered quietly. He nodded.

She threw her arms around his waist, pressing her head to his shoulder. "Babe, you look great! You're just so handsome!"

Steve looked around awkwardly for a moment before spinning around and placing his arms on her waist, smiling down at her. "Do you really think so? Do you like this color?" he gestured to the grey suit jacket he was wearing.

"I really do! You know, it will go well with the dress I picked out!" she bounced on her toes excitedly. She really should have gone into drama. She crooked her finger under his chin and tugged him down. She kissed him on the side of his mouth. Steve's eyes grew wide and he blushed. Alice hoped it would be enough for the saleswoman to back off.

It was. When she walked over with the sales ticket, she had a sour expression on her face. She pointed out the date that the suits would be ready.

Alice laced her fingers with Steve's and took the ticket, smiling widely at the saleswoman. Steve's face remained red for the entirety of the exchange. When the saleswoman walked away, he exhaled loudly.

Someone else was sent out to measure Thor. Apparently the saleswoman couldn't stand to look at the happy couple any longer.

Darcy was beside herself.

"Oh my god, that woman's face! Priceless! You two make a CUTE couple."

Steve blushed deeper, running his hand over his face.

"I just didn't want him getting felt up by that horrible woman," said Alice defensively. "I didn't do anything I wouldn't do for a friend."

"You kissed him!" squealed Darcy.

"It was mostly cheek, very chaste," Alice insisted.

Steve was trying to remain stoic, but failing miserably. His face had taken on the hue of severe sunburn.

Darcy held up her phone, it seemed she had captured the moment with her camera. "This is going up on twitter," she said.

"NO!" blurted Alice, grabbing Darcy's phone. She put it safely in her bag. "No tweeting, no face-booking. Steve has a reputation to keep up, and I'm WITH someone."
"Barely," said Darcy.

"That's neither here nor there," said Alice haughtily.

"Are you going to tell Zeke about it?"

"Yes," said Alice, uncertainly.

Darcy smirked, "I'm sure you will."

Steve sighed audibly, covering his face with his hand again.

Alice picked out two suits for Thor, a plain black and a charcoal grey pinstripe. He truly had no opinion. He did, however, enjoy the view of himself in the tri-mirror.

She then took all three back over to the casual clothing, where they spent the better part of an hour picking out clothes for Steve. He as it turned out, was a pickier customer. He ended up with several plain t-shirts in assorted colors, a few sweaters, and several pairs of jeans. He also picked out a brown leather bomber jacket.

Alice saw a shirt that made her think of Bruce, it was a purple and green striped button-down, mostly purple. He looked good in purple. She poked Darcy, gesturing to the shirt.

"Think Bruce would like this?"

Darcy smirked amusedly and looked at the shirt. "Looks like all the others he wears. Make sure it doesn't need ironing… Do you know his size?"

"I bet I could guess."

"Nah, give me my phone," she reached into Alice's purse and rummaged around.

"What are you doing? He doesn't answer his phone," said Alice trying to pull away.

"I'm texting Tony."

"Oh, good idea!"

In the meantime, Alice convinced Steve to get a black wool pea coat. "It gets really cold in the winter here, you know that." She chided. Steve gave in, even though it wasn't 'his style'.

Darcy nudged Alice's arm, "Tony says he'll check the tag on the shirt he's wearing."

"Okay, thanks Darce."

Thor chose a plain brown coat. It was longer, and not extremely warm, but Thor insisted he was only wearing it for appearances. He didn't get cold here.

Darcy tapped Alice on the shoulder, chuckling, "Tony sent the size." She showed Alice the screen, which was a picture of the tag on the back of Bruce's shirt. It looked like the picture had been taken while the shirt was still on Bruce.

"How did he get this picture?" asked Alice.

"He said he's pretty sure Bruce thinks he has a man-crush on him now. So, take from that what you will."
Alice laughed and grabbed a shirt of the corresponding size from the rack.

Afterward, they paid for their purchases with the Stark company credit card. All except for Bruce's shirt, which Alice paid for herself. She got a gift receipt in case he didn't like it. Even though she'd probably be the one who would end up returning it, as she couldn't picture Bruce going to Macy's to return a shirt. That sounded like a recipe for a Hulk-sized disaster.

They headed to IHOP on 14th. Where to Thor's delight, they were informed by their waitress that IHOP was in the middle of their all-you-can-eat pancake promotion.

"I really don't think you know what you're getting yourself into," warned Darcy.

Alice sipped at her soda and picked at her fries. She hadn't really gotten her appetite back and hadn't gained back any of the weight she'd lost. She never felt hungry. It was due to stress, but not from her job. She loved her job. Even dealing with Tony wasn’t a huge deal when she had Bruce or Pepper as a buffer. She'd learned early on that she had to be stern with him.

No, it was her strained relationship with Zeke that was causing the problem, whether she wanted to admit it or not. They barely saw each other, and when they did it was weird. Not unpleasant, just awkward and uncomfortable. She wasn't sure how long she could keep up like this. She slept alone most nights and Zeke never tried to correspond their days off anymore. She'd come to work and unload on Bruce or Darcy. She just wasn't sure that relationships were supposed to be this hard. The thought of ending things with Zeke was unbearable, though. Not because she was hopelessly in love with him or anything. She just didn't know who she was without him. She'd been with him since her freshman year of college. She'd always been Zeke's girl. What would she do if she was just… girl?

And what if what he said was true? What if no one else would put up with her the way he did? What if she never found anyone else. Feeling awkward was better than being alone forever… right?

A wave of nausea washed over her. She threw down the fry in disgust and rested her head in her hand. She played with the straw in her soda, letting it drip onto the napkin beside her plate.

"How is your stomach not bursting?" asked Steve, incredulously. His left eyebrow was cocked, and both eyes were wide, staring at Thor.

"Can I please tweet this?" asked Darcy, laughing.

"I don't see why not..." said Alice. "Thor, we really should leave soon, so wrap it up."

Thor shoveled the last of his pancakes into his mouth, chewing and swallowing quickly. He took a sip of his coffee and went to throw the mug, but Darcy deftly caught it and set it back on the table. She shook her head, not looking up from her phone once. It made Alice think this was a common occurrence.

Alice paid the bill, leaving a generous tip for their server plus a little extra since Thor ate so many pancakes. They piled into the black Escalade they were using for the day.

On the way back, Alice sent a text to Zeke, "Hey babe, what are you up to?"

She put her phone back into her bag, not expecting an immediate reply.

Once they arrived, they unloaded all the bags. Steve and Thor carried them inside. Alice grabbed the one that held Bruce's shirt and the one that held the new tea kettle.

"Want to go grab some coffee, Alice?" Darcy asked.
"Nah, I need to go drop this stuff off and head home."

She really just wanted some peace and quiet to continue thinking about Zeke. She was having some major doubts. Once she sorted them out, she'd feel better. She was sure of it.

"Suit yourself, see you tomorrow, then?"

"Yep, tomorrow."

She waved goodbye to Thor and Steve and turned to board the elevator.

"JARVIS, where is Dr. Banner?"

*Don't know why I asked that, he's probably in the lab.*

"Dr. Banner is in the lab, Miss Vorso. Would you like me to take you there?"

*Yup. Do I know him or do I know him?*

"Can you take me to the office first?"

"My pleasure, Miss Vorso."

She rode up the few floors, deep in thought. She was there before she knew it. She dropped the tea kettle off in the office break room and waved a passing greeting to Pepper in her office.

She got back on the elevator and asked JARVIS to take her to the lab.

When she entered the lab, she stood on her tiptoes, scanning the large room. Tony looked to be soldering something. Bruce was nowhere to be seen.

She sighed, disappointed. She'd wanted to give him the shirt in person, and perhaps hear the story of how Tony got the picture of the tag on the back of his shirt.

She walked back to Bruce's area, contemplating what to do. She set the bag down on the floor because his desk was too cluttered. She sat down in his chair, sitting back and crossing her legs and arms. She bounced her leg impatiently.

*JARVIS said he was here, he must be here.*

"Alice?" she turned and looked in the direction of his voice. She smiled brightly.

"Hi, Bruce," she stood to relinquish the chair.

"You don't have to get up," he said, gesturing to the chair. He leaned against the counter, folding his arms. "What can I do for you?"

"Nothing, I just…I bought you something," she said, suddenly embarrassed. She picked up the bag and held it out towards him.

His eyes widened in surprise. "Really? Thank you, I…I don't think anyone's bought me anything before… except for maybe Betty, but that was before…" he trailed off, looking down for a short moment. He snapped his head back up and took the bag from her. He looked inside and pulled out the shirt, holding it out in front of him like he didn't know what to do with it.

*Betty? Who's Betty? An ex-girlfriend, probably. I'll bet she was a doctor too. He looks like the type*
who would date other doctors.

The thought made her sad for some reason. She mentally shook it off.

"I didn't know your size, so Darcy asked Tony. He took a picture of the tag in the back of your shirt and sent it to us," she explained.

"Oh, is that why he hugged me earlier? He hugged me and grabbed the back of my neck, I had no idea what was going on," laughed Bruce. "I thought he was trying to kiss me."

Alice laughed hollowly. He was still holding the shirt out in front of him like it was contaminated or something.

_He doesn't like it. He doesn't like it...that's okay, he's allowed to dislike things. It's not because I got it for him. Unless it is. Maybe I overstepped a boundary..._

She bit her lip worriedly. She reached towards the shirt, grabbing the sleeve. "If you don't like it, I- I have the receipt. I can return it."

"What?" He looked confused and tugged the shirt back. "No, I love it. Thank you," he said, smiling.

_Oh good. Phew._

Relieved, Alice grinned and then quickly covered her mouth. A nervous tick, she didn't like the way her teeth looked. "I'm glad you like it." She lowered her hand. "I just saw it today and thought of you."

"Well, thank you for thinking of me," he said.

They were both silent for a moment.

_Awkward..._

"Did you have fun dressing up Thor and Steve?" he asked finally, breaking the silence.

"I'll say she did," answered Tony, strolling over and placing an arm around Bruce.

"I have to say, I'm not at all comfortable with the recent increase in PDA," said Bruce, dislodging himself from Tony's arm.

"Noted. Anyway, check this out. Darcy sent it to me," said Tony, bringing up a picture on his phone.

Bruce furrowed his brow, "Are you kissing STEVE?" he asked Alice, surprised.

Alice felt her stomach drop.

"Yeah, uh...there's an explanation for that...and it was more cheek than anything else," started Alice, embarrassed.

_Why are you feeling guilty? He's not the one who should make you feel guilty. You're friends. Just friends. This doesn't bother him._

"The saleswoman was molesting Steve, so Alice pretended to be his girlfriend to get her to lay off," explained Tony, speaking quickly. "It was hilarious, according to Darcy."

Bruce laughed hollowly, "Yeah, sounds like it..." He pushed off the counter, his movements erratic.
"I need to get back to work, it was nice seeing you Alice, thanks for the shirt," he said quickly, throwing the shirt on his desk. He clenched and released his fists, walking hurriedly towards the back of the lab.

What the—

Alice felt like someone had poured a bucket of ice water over her. She shivered.

"What's wrong with him?" she asked, accidentally voicing her inner thoughts.

"I dunno, I think he left the oven on or something," Tony answered, looking in the direction Bruce left.

Alice frowned and wrapped her arms around herself. She felt shaken.

"Tell him I said bye," She grabbed her purse and left the lab, intending to go straight home.

Her phone buzzed on the elevator, a text from Zeke. She read it absently.

"Nothing."

Wow, he literally sent me a text that said 'nothing'. So glad I spent the energy to move my thumb and read that...

Bruce

Bruce's blood boiled when he saw the picture. Tony must have felt him tense because he tried to remedy the situation by quickly explaining what had happened. It didn't matter. He couldn't hear him anymore. All he could hear was the blood rushing through his head.

She's not with me. Stop this.

He could feel the Other Guy pummeling the walls of his prison. His head was killing him. He had to get to the containment chamber in the back of the lab.

He said goodbye to Alice quickly, before hurrying off to the back. He really hoped she left and didn't see what was about to happen. He couldn't stand to look at her and see the fear in her eyes. The look she'd given him before had been enough.

Door, make sure someone locks the door.

He looked over his shoulder at Tony, hoping to catch his eye before he couldn't control himself anymore. He stumbled towards the containment chamber, he was almost there. He threw himself inside, slamming the door, and Tony ran up after him, sealing it from the outside. At least he wouldn't hurt anyone this time.

He fell on the floor, repeating his calming mantra over and over again.

Calm down, nothing's wrong, nothing's wrong.
NOT WORKING.

 Fucking chill out, Banner, she's not yours. Not yours.

 NOT MINE, NOT MINE.

He had to control this, keep the Other Guy locked up. The strain was making his head pound. Making the veins in his forehead and forearms stand out.

After a few minutes, it was apparent that it wasn't working, he was going to change.

He roared, the rage pulsing through his veins felt like hot lead. His thoughts no longer made sense. He felt his joints start to pop and crack as his skin took on a greenish hue. This part hurt like hell, all his joints dislocating and relocating, muscles stretching and growing. He still tried to push it down. He curled inward on himself, each vertebrae popping and growing. His shirt split. This was where the Other Guy was starting to take over, but Bruce was still somewhat aware. It was the worst part. When he woke up, he wouldn't know what he'd done, the damage he'd caused.

Tony came on the intercom in the room.

"Alice told me to tell you goodbye," he said, desperately. "She's worried about you, Big Guy."

The Other Guy roared at the mention of Alice, but Bruce was still able to understand somehow…he growled loudly, pushing the Other Guy back down with a second wind burst of energy. He felt his joints shrinking again, popping back into place. He was never conscious during this part. It hurt worse in reverse. He arched his back and gasped in pain, but his voice was his own.

The hell is happening? Am I back? I'm back. I'm back. Not mad. I stopped it. How in the…shit, breathe, remember to breathe.

He fell down on his hands and knees on the padded floor, choking and gasping for breath. His lungs felt starved. He wheezed loudly, gulping air.

He put his head down on the floor, his neck ached and his head throbbed. He slowly rolled over on his back. He couldn't feel the Other Guy.

Tony stood at the window, aghast at what he saw.

"How did you do that?" he asked, bewildered.

Bruce shook his head, breathless and covered in sweat. The tatters of his clothes hung off him. "I don't know," he whispered, rolling his head to the side to look at Tony.

"Is it safe to come in?" asked Tony.

Bruce mentally felt around, looking for the Other Guy. If he was lurking, waiting to come back at the slightest provocation…he didn't want to hurt anyone.

It looked like he was walled back up. For now, at least.

"Five minutes," replied Bruce. "Data?" It was becoming harder to stay awake.

"Good readings all around. You should have something to compare to last time."

"Good," he said. "Five minutes, then come get me."
He closed his eyes, blackness overcoming him. He slid into it, it felt good. It was a cool relief from
the burning rage he'd felt before. His body felt so heavy, the effort to stay awake was great. He
slipped into nothingness. His best rest always came after he changed.
Alice opened the door to her apartment. She sunk down in the oversized chair in the living room, kicking off her shoes. She was supposed to text Jules for dinner plans later, but she thought she might beg out. She just wasn't feeling it this evening.

She really wanted to lie down and veg out in front of the TV.

Her phone rang. She glanced down at the screen.

Grams.

She sighed. She really should answer it, but she didn't. She let it go to voicemail.

*I'll call her back later. I don't have the strength right now to lie to her about how great Zeke and I are doing. About how the wedding plans are really picking up now. About how happy I am and how wonderful my life is.*

She felt guilty immediately. There wasn't ever a problem so great that she couldn't talk to her grandmother about it. Grams and Pops had raised Alice. They had been the only parents she'd ever known. She felt nothing for her deceased mother and father.

She'd never met her mother and her father died when she was too young to really remember him. She had tiny memories here and there, mostly his smile and the way he said her name. He was really more like a dream than a real person.

Her grandparents had been the ones who taught her everything. She remembered her Grams teaching her how to ride a bike, how to cook and bake, and how to sew. Her Pops had taught her other things, how to swim, drive a car, WORK on a car, play piano and read music. There were many other things too, but the point was, they had raised her.

People were usually aghast when she told them she didn't feel sad when she thought of her parents. She didn't know what to say. She didn't know them. Sure it was sad, but thanks to her Pops and Grams, she was never short on love.
She usually just avoided the subject of her parents altogether. People tended not to judge what they weren't aware of.

She looked down at the missed call on her phone, deciding to call her Grams back right away.

Just then, a text came in…from Tony.

"Hey, can you come back to the lab, you didn't go home yet, did you?"

She sighed and sent back:

"I am at home, is this an emergency? This is my day off. If you ask me to bring you shawarma on my day off one more time, I'm going to cook you and make you into shawarma."

"No, no shawarma. But it IS important. If you wanted to bring some food in, I wouldn't throw it away."

"You already ordered it, didn't you?"

"Sushi, my usual place. Don't get too pissy, I ordered some for you too."

"Wow, thanks, what if I didn't want sushi?"

"More for me."

"Texting Preston, leaving soon."

"K"

Alice sighed, resolving to call her Grams back in the morning. She texted Preston, then got up, and went to the bedroom to change into more comfortable clothing. Since she'd been on official Stark Industries business today, she'd dressed accordingly.

She emerged, dressed in navy leggings, her oversized cream sweater, and her above-the-knee-leather-boots. She'd been freezing lately. She secretly thought Tony might be messing with the thermostat just to prank her or something. She'd been teeth-chatteringly cold for a few weeks now. Every time she brought it up, though, she was met with a bewildered expression. She just started wearing warmer clothes. It seemed to help.

If nothing else, she could curl up in an office chair until Tony decided she could leave. She grabbed her bag, making sure her laptop was inside, and waited patiently for a text from Preston, telling her he was downstairs.

That didn't take long. He must not have gotten far, she wondered what kind of life Preston had outside of driving her around. It was apparently his only job. He was paid well to be on call for her 24/7.

She went back downstairs, not bothering to leave a note for Zeke. He didn't seem to care where she went these days. She sighed.

That is a talk that is going to have to happen soon. I have to end things. I can't put this off any longer. It's not fair to Zeke, and it's not fair to me. The next time I see him will probably be on my birthday. Probably. Two weeks away. I'll talk to him then if I don't see him sooner. I should probably start looking for a place or something...yeah.

That thought stopped her in her tracks.
WHOA, huge decision. I feel strangely serene about this. That's not normal.

Contrary to the nature of her thoughts, the knots in her stomach relaxed. Her shoulders felt lighter. She felt calm.

She climbed into the car. "Hello again," she said warmly.

"Hello," said Preston, "where to?"

"We have to go pick up sushi for Tony."

"Are you his delivery service now?"

"I guess," she laughed. "Nah, he needs me back at the lab, the sushi was just an aside."

"Off we go, then."

"Off we go," she repeated. Preston probably didn't realize the meaning those words held for her. Off she went into a new chapter of her life. One without Zeke. As far as she was concerned, she was no longer Zeke's Girl. She was "Just Girl" now.

She picked up the sushi without a hitch. She took a peek inside the bag. Tony ordered sashimi for her and a BBQ eel and avocado roll. Her favorite. He must want a favor or something.

When they got to Stark Tower, she said goodbye to Preston.

"You can go. I'm not sure how long I'm going to be. If it turns out to just be for the sushi, I'll go visit with Darcy for a while or something. I don't think I want to go home to an empty apartment."

Preston nodded, "Have a good night, Alice."

"You too."

She shouldered her messenger bag and entered the building. When she got to the lab, it was mostly dark, except for a light back in the very back. She walked towards it. Tony was sitting back in the med bay. Bruce was lying on the hospital bed. Worried, she broke into a run.

"Is he okay?" she asked.

"Hello to you, too. Did you bring the sushi?"

"Tony."

"He's fine. He's just been experimenting with tantric sex lately. He's really tired."

"What?!" asked Alice, alarmed.

Tantric what? I can't even…don't think about that.

"I'm…kidding. He Hulked-out."

"He changed?!"

"Yeah, that's kinda what I meant by 'Hulked-out,'" he muttered under his breath. "Well… he sort of changed. He stopped and changed back."

"I didn't know he did that."
"Surprised the hell out of me."

"What caused it?"

"Not sure," he said, obviously lying. Alice frowned but decided to leave it alone.

"Sushi's here," she dropped the bag on the desk. "Can I talk to him, or should I let him sleep for now?"

"I was a'hopin' for your rendition of 'The Devil Went Down to Georgia'," he said in a very badly executed Southern accent.

"Well, then I reckon you're gonna be disappointed," she said.

"I guess you could just talk to him, then."

"Oh… well, what do I say to him?"

Tony looked at her and blinked. "I don't know, Princess. Just say whatever the hell stupid things you say to him when you guys eat lunch. This shouldn't be much different."

"Princess, really? That just sounds all wrong coming from you."

"Shut it. Or I'll eat your eel and avocado."

"That's what she said," she quipped dryly.

"Nice. But, it would be eel and avocados. Plural."

Alice rolled her eyes.

"Go. Sit. Talk," he waved his hand in the direction of the chair beside the hospital bed.

She walked over and sat down awkwardly, "How long does he stay like this?"

"Couple hours or so."

"How long's it been?"

"Couple hours or so."

"Okay… Hi Bruce." She looked over at his sleeping form on the bed, "I feel like a fool."

"That's great," said Tony. "Just like that, whatever you say to him normally."

"Do you have to be such a dick?" she teased.

"Ouch," he clutched his heart.

She shook her head, taking a deep breath, "So, I decided to look for an apartment."

"Are you talking to me or him?" asked Tony.

"Whoever's listening."

"That sounds like domestic stuff that I have no interest in."
Alice narrowed her eyes, choosing to ignore him and continue, "I'm just not happy where I am, I need a change, I guess."

"Took you long enough," said Tony.

"Wow. Did everyone dislike my boyfriend?"

"He's a boyfriend now? I thought he was your fiancé."

She chuckled without humor, "He's a boyfriend. I was just kidding myself."

"You certainly held onto that farce for dear life."

"Yeah, well, I'm an idiot," she said sadly. She put her sushi to the side, having barely touched it.

"You should really eat that before it crawls away or something."

She frowned, looking at Tony.

"You know, cuz its raw fish," he continued.

"Wouldn't it swim away?"

"Not if it's out of the water. Duh."

"Oh, of course," she nodded in mock understanding.

"You two are devastatingly interesting," said Bruce quietly, his eyes still closed.

"Wakey, wakey, hands off snakey..." said Tony.

Bruce grimaced.

"How are you feeling?" asked Alice, turning towards the bed.

Bruce opened his eyes and stretched, smiling, "Better now." He stopped, frowning. His eyes darted around as if he was remembering where he was. He looked over at Tony, "Data? Was there good data?"

"One-track mind, I swear. Pretty girl sitting beside you when you wake up, and you're worried about the data."

"WAS there good data?" Bruce repeated.

Alice chuckled quietly.

"Yes, there was. It looks... odd, though."

"What do you mean, odd?" Bruce struggled to sit. He frowned, turning towards Alice, his face rapidly darkening to crimson. "I'm naked," he stated, looking down.

"You're covered, though," Alice said quickly, hoping to minimize his embarrassment...and hers for that matter.

"Yeah, didn't think anyone needed to see that," said Tony.

"Thanks. What do you mean, odd?" Bruce barreled forward.
Tony was right. One-track mind.

"You'll just have to look at it when you're feeling up to it."

"I'm feeling up to it. Pants," Bruce demanded.

"If I'll still be here when you're coherent," coaxed Tony, "just rest for a few minutes. Don't need a repeat."

"Data. Now."

"Fine, I'll print it off. I can't make sense of it. I'd say it wasn't a good reading, but the base percentages are good."

Alice had no clue what they were talking about, so she pulled out her laptop to search for apartment listings. She wasn't sure how long she was looking, but when she looked back up, Tony and Bruce were arguing with each other, gesturing to the readouts on the computer screen. Bruce was wearing only a sheet that he wrapped around himself and was holding in the back.

"Something's WRONG with the data, it's a bad readout," said Bruce.

"No, it's NOT, Dr. Smashy. I did everything the same as I always have, the base percentages were good, so we have to use it," countered Tony.

"But IT doesn't make any SENSE," growled Bruce.

"I KNOW, but that's what the readings were."

"What's the problem?" asked Alice, hoping to diffuse a potentially dangerous situation.

"The gamma levels are too low. They're too low for a CONTROLLED transformation, let alone a spontaneous transformation," said Bruce, apparently ignoring or choosing not to respond to Alice.

"Don't get your panties in a bunch, Jolly Green. All the tools were calibrated correctly. They always are. You're the one who calibrates them so if anyone's to blame, it's you. Besides, this would explain why you were able to pull yourself out of it. He wasn't as strong."

"It doesn't make sense. The levels are never this low," repeated Bruce, almost to himself. He walked over to the containment chamber, his sheet slipped a little.

"Hey there, Brutus, wanna pull up your toga?" exclaimed Tony.

Bruce glared at him, "I BELIEVE I asked for pants."

Tony looked at Alice, "Didn't you hear him, woman? Get the man some pants!"

Alice looked around, "I don't know where they are!"

"There are some in my bottom desk drawer," said Bruce, looking at something on the console outside the chamber. "Please," he added as an afterthought.

Alice scurried over to his desk and pulled a pair of grey slacks out of the drawer. She brought them over and held them out to Bruce. He took them and looked expectantly at her.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, a bit too loudly. Her face reddened as she turned abruptly and walked back to the med bay while he put them on.
She hid her face behind her laptop. She resumed searching apartments, bookmarking the ones she was going to call about. She'd have to ask Pepper for a day off to go apartment hunting.

The decision she'd made earlier in the evening still hadn't sunken in all the way. It still felt like she was watching someone else do this. It wasn't HER looking for an apartment. It wasn't HER nonchalantly planning when and how she'd move all her stuff out. It wasn't HER checking out Bruce shirtless while he was deeply embedded in science.

*His chest is hairy. Unsurprising, really, now that I think about it. His forearms are hairy, it stands to reason that his chest would be too.*

She was mesmerized, though. She couldn't stop staring at it. *At him.* When he squinted like that and stared intently… at whatever the hell he was staring intently at on that screen, it made her jealous of the screen. *Of a screen.* She wondered if he was so thorough in all of his endeavors.

She shook her head and tried to concentrate on the task at hand. She had to look for an apartment.

She must have fallen asleep in the chair, because before she knew it, Bruce was shaking her awake. "Hey…" he trailed off, looking embarrassed. "We're just about finished up here, did you need to call your driver?"

She blinked, looking at him. He still hadn't put a shirt on, he was barefoot, wearing just the pair of grey slacks. *With nothing underneath.* She realized he was waiting for her to respond.

"I-I think I'm just gonna take Darcy up on her offer to crash at her place… Zeke's outta town for the weekend on a mission or somethin', and I don't wanna go home to an empty apartment." She stammered a little, mentally cursing her inability to speak in a clear and concise manner.

He nodded, looking down at the floor. "It's really late. If you want, you can just… stay at my place? I have an extra room," he offered.

"Oh, I couldn't put ya out like that."

*Dammit, Vorso. Stop it with the accent. Can't you be cool for once?*

"It's really no trouble, but I do have to warn you, my apartment is…bare. I really only go there to sleep."

If it hadn't been so late, and if she wasn't completely sure that Darcy would just ignore her call, and if she really didn't want to go home to an empty apartment, she probably wouldn't have said yes.

But it was, and she was, and she didn't, so she did.

---

*A short while later…*

"Wow. You said bare, you didn't say… sterile," she said, looking around the inside of Bruce's apartment. She noticed it was clean, which was a surprise. She'd assumed he'd be messy, just based on the state of his appearance every day.

He laughed quietly, "I told you, I rarely ever come back here… too empty."
"Well, honestly, it'd be better if you'd decorate a little… maybe not so echo-y," she said loudly, for effect.

"Well, let me show you the spare room…" he said. Once they were inside, he turned the light on for her. "I'm going to go put a shirt on, I'm feeling a bit exposed…"

She looked around the room.

Double bed, empty closet, empty dresser. Spare room.

She wandered back out to the living room area. He came out of the bathroom, wearing a white t-shirt with his grey slacks. Still barefoot, though. His feet were… well, they were feet. But they were his, so she was kind of thrilled at the prospect of seeing them.

Ew. They're feet. Guy feet. You're being weird.

"Can I be perfectly honest?" she asked.

"Yes?" he said, uncertainly.

"I'm really not tired anymore…" she confessed.

He laughed, "To be perfectly honest, I'm not either. I'm too wired from earlier," he paused for a moment, "Would you like some tea?"

"I would love some tea."

"Great… I don't keep milk here, but there's probably some out in the fridge in the common area, I'll go borrow it," he said.

"Thank you."

She filled the kettle with water and set it on the stove to boil. She seated herself at the kitchen counter. She pulled one foot up on the seat with her, hugging her leg and resting her head on her knee. When he came back in, he set the milk on the counter and stood by the stove, waiting on the kettle.

"So, did you hear anything I said to you earlier?" she asked.

"Hmm? Oh, no, I was asleep, I only heard the tail end of your and Tony's conversation."

"Oh, well, I've decided to look for an apartment," she said.

It was important that he knew this. For some reason.

He nodded absently.

"Of my own. To live in by myself," she clarified.

"Oh… OH, so you're… you're moving out?" he asked, raising his eyebrows in surprise.

"Yeah… I'm just not happy where I am, you know?"

"That's a… tough decision, have you been thinking about it for a while?"

"Yeah, I guess so. Ever since Zeke and I had that fight, even before then, I guess… we've just
been… moving apart. I barely see him anymore. We don't have any kind of relationship to speak of and it's just sad and painful to stay there."

The kettle started whistling. Bruce jumped in surprise. He hurriedly took it off the burner and poured it into two mugs over the tea bags.

"Does Zeke know?" he asked.

"Not yet. I'm gonna get my ducks in a row first and then tell him. I guess… just not give him an opportunity to manipulate me at all. My birthday's in a month, I'm gonna wait until after that. I think that's a good amount of time."

He nodded. He was silent for a few minutes. He finished the tea and was stirring milk into hers.

"Alice?" he blurted. "I have something I need to tell you."

"Hmm?"

He gulped and looked down. "Your tea is ready." He handed her the mug.

"Oh? Thanks." She smiled warmly.

She was mildly disappointed. She had been hoping he'd say something else.

Wishful thinking.

She sipped her tea. "Mmmm, I should get you to make this for me all the time, yours is way better than mine."

He smiled, "Thanks."

He joined her at the counter.

"So, your birthday's in a month?" he asked.

"Yeah."

He looked at his tea. "Which… uh… which birthday will it… be?" he asked awkwardly.

Alice laughed, "Didn't your momma ever tell you that it's rude to ask someone's age?"

He raised his eyebrows, "I wasn't… I was just… making conversation."

"Relax, I'm kidding. I'll be twenty-six."

"Twenty-six," he repeated, nodding and looking anywhere but at her. She wondered if he thought she was too young. He had to be in his mid-thirties. Not that much of an age difference, right?

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**Bruce**

Twenty-six? She's twenty-six? No, not even. She's twenty-five. You are lusting after a twenty-five-
year-old. You sick bastard.

He tried to compose himself while she was talking.

*Nod your head, at least give the semblance of someone who's listening. Don't nod too much. Make it believable.*

He gulped. He'd almost told her. He'd almost told her.

*You're thirty-eight years old. When this girl was born, you were going through puberty. There is so much wrong with this.*

She smiled nervously, talking about something or other.

*Pick out words, pick out words…*

"I've never actually LIVED on my own before, so it's kind of exciting!" she said, grinning broadly.

*She's so beautiful. Especially when she's happy. She looks so happy right now…*

"Yeah… um, I can see how that would be exciting."

*Nailed it.*

"Oh, I bet you think I'm just some stupid girl, who has never lived on her own before. I'm sure this is all really boring to you…" she teased.

"No! I don't think it's stupid… it's new and different. And you seem really excited about it…" *Lame, that was lame.*

She laughed anyway, taking another sip of her tea.

"Seriously, Bruce, I need to hire you to make my tea from now on."

*Anything you want. I'll do anything you ask me, Alice—STOP IT, Banner!* 

"Just kidding!" she said, smiling nervously. He must have been making a weird face. "It's really good, though."

"Thank you… I don't mind making it for you…"

She blushed and hid a grin behind her mug. His stomach flipped.

At some point, the conversation turned to movies, where she discovered he hadn't seen 'Stranger than Fiction'.

"You HAVE to see that! It's wonderful!" she exclaimed.

"If you say so…" he said. "I think Tony might have the digital version, he has just about every movie in existence…"

"On this TV here?" she pointed to the flat screen on his wall.

"Yes, probably… unfortunately, I don't know how to work it…" he confessed.

"Not a big deal, it's the same make as the one I have."
She ran a search for Stranger than Fiction and found it quickly. She started it and settled in on the couch. She patted the cushion next to hers.

*Just be cool. It's just a movie. Watch it, and get her the hell off the couch.*

Bruce sat down, unsure of what to do in this type of situation. He tried to take up the least amount of space he possibly could, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Can I ask why you don't know how to work your own television?" she asked.

"I just… never really watch anything?" he answered.

"Oh, are you one of 'those'?"

Bruce frowned slightly, "One of those?"

"One of those people who doesn't watch T.V because it's 'beneath you' or whatever."

He shook his head quickly, "No, no, I just don't. No particular reason."

"Oh. Fair enough… mind if I go get a pillow to lay on?" she motioned towards the bedroom.

"No, not at all… that's what they're for."

*Now that pillow is going to smell like her…*

She jumped up and went back to the spare room. She came back with a pillow. She dropped it on the end of the couch. She crossed her arms and grabbed the bottom of her sweater, pulling it up and over her head. Bruce was immediately reminded of that night in the med bay…


Much to Bruce's relief, she had a tank top underneath the sweater. "Hot in here," she said as if explaining her actions. "It's alright if I take off my boots, right?"

Of course, of course. What kind of girl do you think she is? She would never do that in her right mind.

"…Yeah. Yeah, that's fine… I wouldn't make you wear them all night or anything..." he chuckled nervously.

She grinned, "I didn't figure you would, but I didn't want to be rude or anything..." she knelt and gingerly pulled the boots off, placing them by the door, she pulled off her socks and stuck them inside the boots.

She was essentially wearing a tank top and leggings now. Bruce couldn't help but stare at her legs… and other areas. He peeked at her sideways. He didn't want to full-on ogle her and make her uncomfortable. It bothered him that he was looking at her in that way at all. She was thirteen years younger than him. Not to mention the plethora of problems that made even the POSSIBILITY of a relationship nonexistent.

She nonchalantly balled up the sweater and stuck it under the pillow. She sat down on the couch again, propping the pillow on the arm and snuggling into it, her bare feet touching Bruce's leg. They were so small…

*Oh my god, she's touching my leg… she's so warm. Move your leg away, Banner. Move it away.*
He didn't move it away. If anything he slid it infinitesimally closer.

He couldn't help but sneak peeks at her throughout the movie. Her laugh was infectious. He tried to think about what had happened that day with his transformation and the weird data, but he couldn't think about anything but her.

He started nodding off about halfway through the movie, but he didn't want to ask her to leave. He ended up falling asleep with his head in his hand.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

MOAR ACCIDENTAL CUDDLING!

Oh, and you know. Idiots being idiots. Miscommunication.

Bruce

He was sure he was dreaming…

*He felt her arms encircling his waist, the weight of her head on his chest, her hot breath ghosted down across his ribcage. Her fingers skated along the waistband of his pants, under his shirt. He slid his hand under the hem of her shirt, and let his hand drift down the soft skin below her lower ribs, around to rest on her lower back. He sighed happily. She snuggled closer, inhaling deeply. He caught the scent of her perfume. She was all around him…*

His eyes shot open. He looked down his front to see Alice. Her arms wrapped around him. Her head on his chest. Her fingers playing with the exposed skin between his waistband and the hem of his untucked shirt. It wasn't a dream. He started sweating, feeling unbearably hot all of the sudden.

*What do I do? What do I do? If I jump up, it's going to scare her… calm down, calm down.*

His hands were perspiring and clung mercilessly to the soft silky skin of her back. His heartbeat was steady but so loud. He just knew it was going to wake her up.

His breath caught as he felt her stirring. His eyes darted around. Could he just throw her off of him? Maybe if he'd thought of it when he had first woken up instead of sitting here like a heavy breathing creeper.

Her movements ceased. He tried to steady his breathing, but only succeeded breathing heavier.

She lifted her head and slowly straightened her spine. She turned to face him...the fearful expression surely mirrored on his own face. There was a full minute, he was sure of it, where neither moved. The only sound was his damn heavy breathing.

*Seriously, Banner, pull it together. Stop breathing like that. You sound like a pervert.*

Suddenly, she jumped up, off the couch, adjusting her tank top, pulling it back down where he'd tugged it up.

*I scared her. I scared her. She's scared of me.*

She slowly backed away from him, towards the door to the apartment.

"I'm gonna go… take a shower at Darcy's." she stammered, still backing away from him, she
stumbled over her shoes.  

He stood, moving forward to steady her. She startled and jumped backward more. She was against the door now. She refused to make eye contact. That bothered him.

She grabbed the doorknob and twisted it, stumbling clumsily out the door and into the hallway.

Bruce put his hands over his face, running them back through his hair. He shook his head.

*That look in her eyes. Terror. Fucking terror. I'm a monster... He's a monster. She doesn't need someone like me. Or him.*

He started pacing, unable to get the scent of her out of his head. It had permeated everything... his clothes, the room, it had wormed its way under his skin. He couldn't shake it.

*I need a shower. A cold shower. Freezing cold.*

---

*Alice*

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Alice tried to steady her erratic breathing. She stumbled into Darcy's door, knocking frantically until a very tired and cranky Darcy opened it.

"You'd better have a hell of a good reason for waking me up this damn early."

"I spent the night at Bruce's and we fell asleep on the couch, and when I woke up, I was groping him," Alice blurted out quickly. She clasped her hands over her mouth.

Darcy sighed, rubbing her eyes violently. She stepped aside, "Come in."

Alice hurried inside. Darcy's apartment was very messy. She pushed some laundry off the couch to clear a place for Alice to sit.

She sat, but fidgeted with her hair, running her fingers through it, pulling at split ends, continually smoothing the fabric of her leggings.

"Spill it Red, or I'm going to go dump you back on his doorstep," said Darcy exasperatedly.

"Okay, so last night, Tony called me back up to the lab, because Bruce had a spontaneous transformation."

"What?! Why?" asked Darcy.

"I don't know. All I know is, he did, and Tony wanted me to bring him sushi."

"Tony? Or Bruce?"

"Tony. Bruce is a..."

"Vegetarian, right," interrupted Darcy, "not important. Continue."

"Anyway, I ended up fallin' asleep lookin' at apartment ads."
"Apartment ads?! Are you moving out?"

"Yes, but still beside the point."

"Right, we'll come back to that," Darcy waved her hand, absently.

"It was really late, like one or so in the morning. So, instead of goin' back to my apartment, or tryin' to wake you up to let me into yours, Bruce asked me to stay with him."

"Oh, I see," said Darcy, waggling her eyebrows.

"No. No, you don't… I went to his apartment, but neither of us was tired, so he made us some tea, and we started talkin' about movies. I found out he's never seen 'Stranger than Fiction'."

"What? That's crazy, that's a great movie."

"I know, right? Anyway, I guess we fell asleep watchin' it on the couch. I was 'sposed to be stayin' in his spare room… I know for a fact, I fell asleep hugging a pillow. But when I woke up, I was huggin' Bruce and like… had my hands under his shirt, around his waist, kinda? I used to do that with Zeke when we slept in the same bed… and touched each other. BUT, Bruce had his arms around MY waist, the same way… under my shirt, just on my… my waist, though."

"Are you aware of how irresistibly adorable you are when you're flustered? Were you this flustered when you left Bruce?" asked Darcy, clearly amused.

"Uh…"

"That man must have the self-control of…well…him."

"What?" Alice asked, confusedly.

"Any other man would have just kissed you."

"Bruce doesn't want to kiss me…" Alice said warily.

Darcy chuckled, "So, did you see it?"

"What?"

"You know… IT. Did you see it?"

"NO! We were fully clothed," said Alice, her tone deliberate.

"That doesn't mean you didn't see it. I mean… if it was big enough to make an impression, anyway."

"Oh god, no, I didn't look for it," groaned Alice.

"That's okay, just make a note for next time."

"Next time!? I don't know if I can ever look him in the face again!" she cried, "Let alone… THERE!" she buried her head in her hands. "Not after I practically molested him. He's not going to want to ever see me again!"

"Honey, do you know how guys work?" asked Darcy, her hand on Alice's knee. "Of course he's going to want to see you again. He had his arms around you too, so it wasn't one-sided. He liked it."
"You think so?"

"Did you like it?"

"It was… nice. He feels different than Zeke. He's… different."

"Different how?"

"I don't know… hairier?"

"Gross," Darcy crinkled her nose.

"Not really, it's nice… he's also… I don't know. Zeke's really tall and thin? Bruce is just as tall, but not as thin? Every way I say it, it sounds like I'm saying he's fat when he's not. He's… more muscular, I guess?"

"Solid?" suggested Darcy.

"YES! That's it."

"Aww… did you feel safe with his big-strong-man arms around you?" teased Darcy.

"Actually… yeah," Alice smiled. "It was really, really, really nice."

"Three reallys. Must be serious."

"Darcy! I'm still technically with someone, that's going to be over soon, but this… this is new, relatively new, anyway. I… I mean, I…"

"You've been crushing on him." Darcy provided.

"Well… wait. How did you know that?"

"It's kind of obvious… what with your 'Oh, BRUCE, you're so SOLID and MANLY, I want you wrapped around me!'"

Alice frowned, "I NEVER said that."

"Not altogether in one sentence, no. But, you've been thinking it."

Alice looked at her hands, a blush rising in her cheeks.

"See?"

"SO I think I should definitely think about this more before I say anything to Bruce."

Darcy sighed, "And I suppose you're going to want to talk about this for a Loooooong time before you decide to do nothing about it."

"Hey…"

"No offense, but you're kind of a flake. You talk really big, but you chicken out."

"I don't chicken out! Watch this, I'm going to go find Bruce, talk to HIM about this, like an adult."

"Sure you are."
"First, I'm going to shower. Then, time to adult."

"Okay, just try not to adult all over the lab. Tony has security cameras. I'll talk to you at lunch. I'm going back to bed. I haven't forgotten about your apartment search."

"I didn't expect you to. I'm hoping you'll go apartment hunting with me."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Just not this early in the morning, please," Darcy turned to walk back to her bedroom.

"Oh, Darce, can I raid your closet? I need a change of clothes."

"Whatever. You're smaller than me. Keep that in mind."

Alice showered and searched for something suitable from Darcy's closet. She found a flowery skirt. The waist was a little big, but there was a belt, which she cinched tight and knotted. She kept her tank top from the night before, borrowed some tights and an oversized cardigan. She cursed when she realized that she also left her boots at Bruce's. She soon realized that she and Darcy were the same shoe size, so she grabbed a pair of ballet flats and checked herself out in the mirror. A bit on the bohemian side, but still work-appropriate. She brushed out her hair and pulled the top and sides back from her face. She couldn't find any bobby pins to do an updo, so the hair tie on her wrist had to do for now. She left Darcy's and scurried down the hall to knock on Bruce's door.

No answer… *he must be in the lab* … she'd ask JARVIS. Once in the elevator, the A.I informed her that Dr. Banner was indeed in the lab. She asked to be taken there directly. She also asked JARVIS to inform Pepper that she was running late. She hoped Bruce had brought her things, at least her bag down to the lab with him.

She tried to calm her rapidly beating heart and wiped her sweaty palms on her skirt. She entered the lab and looked back to see Bruce sitting at his computer, back slightly hunched. She approached him calmly.

"Your bag is there on the table," he said sharply, not turning around.

She jumped in surprise, "Thank you…"

"I'm really busy today, so if you could…" he interrupted her before she could say anything else.

"Okay, I understand, I wasn't going to bother you, but I was hoping to see you at lunch, so we can talk about what happened this morning."

"I don't see why we need to talk about anything. Nothing happened this morning."

Alice was taken aback.

*Why is he being so short with me?*

She blinked, frowning, "Okay… something did happen, and we obviously need to talk about it because you're upset."

He turned around sharply, his face emotionless, "No, NOTHING happened. If you think something did, then you're mistaken. I'M not upset because NOTHING happened. So drop it."

Alice set her jaw. "Okay, well, I want to talk about it because I'M upset."

"I apologize if I upset you this morning. I behaved inappropriately. Put it out of your mind, it was
nothing. NOTHING," his tone was weird, strained.

"Bruce…"

He turned back to the computer, "I'm working through lunch today, so I won't be able to eat with you."

"Oh, that's really mature, Bruce."

He turned to face her again, "If you want, I can procure my own meals from now on and I won't require your services anymore. I'm sure you have better ways to spend your valuable time."

She huffed, blinking rapidly to hold back the angry tears that threatened to spill. "Fine. If that's how you want it, that's how it'll be. Just remember, I was trying to be an adult. DOCTOR Banner."

She turned on her heel, grabbed her bag and stalked out of the lab. Her chest was aching from holding back the emotions that threatened to spill out. She swallowed them down in the elevator. She rode up to the office in silence and concentrated on performing her job to the best of her abilities.

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Bruce

"Fine. If that's how you want it, that's how it'll be. Just remember, I was trying to be an adult. DOCTOR Banner."

He flinched as he heard the door to the lab slam. He took a deep breath, trying to calm down. He stood and swept the contents of this desk onto the floor, breathing hard. Everything fell with a satisfying crash. The monitor to his desktop was cracked. If there was ever a time he wanted the Other Guy, it was right now. He felt like he could just level the whole damn tower.

What the hell is wrong with me?

"Bruce… do you need to go to the…"

"NO!" he snarled, glaring at Tony.

"What happened? I saw Alice book it out of here. Did you guys have a little spat? Did she ruin more of your notes?"

Bruce sighed, "No," he sat down in this desk chair and surveyed the ruins of his desk.

"I hope you had your files backed up."

"I do," replied Bruce.

"Well, you know how much I hate feelings and stuff, so if you need to talk, Pepper's here for you."

Bruce looked up at him.

"And I am too… since you've listened to me talk about my feelings… and stuff." Tony pulled a stool up and sat down. "So, tell me what happened."
"I don't know…everything was fine last night and then she stayed over at my apartment…"

"Whoa, hold up, you had a sleepover and you didn't invite me?"

Bruce glared at Tony, who clapped his hand over his mouth. "We were watching a movie, 'Stranger than Fiction', she was aghast that I hadn't seen it."

"You haven't seen that? It's a wonderful film…" Tony pressed his hand over his mouth again when he saw the look on Bruce's face.

"Well, we watched it and she fell asleep, on the couch… which is where I usually sleep."

"Have I told you lately how sad of an existence you lead?"

"Tony…"

"Sorry…continue."

"Anyway, I guess I fell asleep too, but we were on opposite sides of the couch. Then when I woke up this morning, she was… cuddling me."

"Wow. Cuddling you, I can see why you're upset. Girls are gross. Cooties and whatnot."

Bruce took a deep breath. "Anyway, she was cuddling me and I was cuddling her back, I guess? I don't know, I'm not a 'cuddly' person, normally… anyway, it was… it was nice." He looked up at Tony desperately. He felt horrible.

"So, let me make sure I have this right: you're upset because the woman you're in love with…"

"I'm not in love with her," Bruce interjected.

"The woman you're in denial that you're in love with was cuddling you this morning. You were cuddling her back and you liked it."

"No, I'm upset because this doesn't need to happen. I don't need to get attached to someone. I can't be what she needs me to be. I can't give her a normal relationship."

Tony rolled his eyes. "Oh for the love of…" he covered his eyes. "Bruce, can I be completely straight with you?"

Bruce settled back into his chair, waiting for what was sure to be a golden piece of advice.

"You're a dick," Tony said bluntly.

Bruce stood up. "Tony, if you can't be even the tiniest bit supportive right now…"

"Jockstraps are supportive. I'm your friend. I think of myself as your friend anyway…and real friends tell you when you're being a dick. Bruce, you're being a dick."

"No, I'm PROTECTING her."

"From what? WHAT are you protecting her from?"

"From me! From him! I just…" he trailed off, throwing his hands in the air.

Tony sighed, "You could do this if you wanted to. You just don't want to work for it. You're still the
same elitist dickhead who used to treat all his girlfriends like crap because he thought they should consider it a privilege that he wanted to spend time with them."

Bruce set his jaw, glaring at Tony. "Yep, that's right," he said shortly. "That's exactly right, and she's already got one of those. She doesn't need another one."

"Oh, so, you REALLY think you're better than her?" Tony asked sarcastically.

Bruce looked down, "Yes."

"Bull. SHIT."

"Okay, fine. She's… a goddess, she's… glorious. She's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. She's funny and intelligent, and down to earth. When she gets upset or flustered, she gets clumsy and that atrociously adorable southern accent pops up…" he ran his hands through his hair again.

"What's the problem then? I don't see why—" Tony began.

"I don't deserve to be with someone like her!" Bruce cried. The truth was finally out. He didn't feel any better.

"She's not perfect. She has faults. You have faults. Everyone does. Nobody's perfect. Except for me, I'm pretty much perfection embodied."

Bruce sighed, "Where are you going with this?"

"I think you need to apologize."

"No. It's better if she hates me. I can't tell her the real reason."

"Why not? You told me."

"Actually, you guessed on your own," he corrected.

"Minor details. So what if you can't have sex? You have so much more to offer her."

Bruce stared at Tony incredulously.

Tony barreled on. Apparently he didn't need another person to carry on a conversation. "You're smart, and I'm pretty sure you already worship the ground she walks on, so that wouldn't change… Oh, and I'll bet you're a good kisser. Girls don't need much more than that from guys to be completely honest. There are toys that take care of everything else."

Bruce blushed furiously, looking down at his hands. "Tony, that's not appropriate…"

"What?"

Bruce shook his head, changing the subject. "Also, she's too young for me. She's twenty-six, technically, she's still twenty-five. I'm thirty-eight. That's way too much of an age difference."

"There is no such thing as too much of an age difference," Tony scoffed, "As long as she's legal. And get proof of that if you're not sure!"

Bruce didn't want to think about the implications of that last bit of advice. He barreled on, undeterred, "There is. This is approaching creepy territory and she's way out of my league, so it's creepier."
"Why are you fighting this? You're NEVER going to find someone else like her, who actually WANTS to be with you. She even knows about the Other Guy and inexplicably STILL wants to be with you."

"Tony, if it's all the same to you, I'm going to make my own decisions here. This is what is best for everyone."

"Except you."

"Tony… I don't always get what I want. It's a fact of my life. If I can make this less painful for her, I'll do it."

"It's not going to get easier for you," Tony said, warningly.

"I don't expect it to."

"She's leaving Zeke, finding an apartment. She's going to find someone else."

"I know that. I hope she does. I want her to be happy," Bruce said, crossing his arms.

"Bullshit. You want her to be happy alright… with you."

"In a perfect world, yes, that's what I want. But it's not a perfect world, Tony."

"She might even bring him here…" Tony continued. "Hell, it could be someone who works here. Maybe Steve… they'd be cute together."

Bruce felt the Other Guy growl.

"Tony… stop it. It won't work. I'm not changing my mind."

"That's good because Steve is lonely, and I'm sure he and Alice will be spending a LOT of time together… Gosh, he's so tall, I'll be she could just climb him like a tree. Like a tall, muscular tree."

Bruce stood abruptly and started picking up all the things he'd swept off his desk. Tony was still talking, but he was tuning him out. The thought of Alice with anyone else was excruciating. He knew it wasn't fair to want to be with her, but it didn't change the fact that he did. The image of Alice kissing Steve kept reappearing no matter how many times he banished it to the dark recesses of his mind.

Soon, Tony gave up and walked back to his part of the lab. Bruce finished cleaning up his desk and retreated to the back, hoping to avoid everyone for the rest of the day.

He heard Alice come in to drop off lunch. He tried not to look at her and failed miserably, as he craned his head to watch her talk to Darcy. She didn't look upset. He was almost disappointed. Not that he wanted her to be upset, but he needed to know she was taking this as hard as he was.

She said goodbye to Darcy and glanced back in his direction. His stomach fell. Her eyes locked with his for a split second before she looked around frantically for anything else to focus on. She turned and practically fled out the door. Bruce fought the urge to run after her. He wanted to hug her, beg her to forgive him for his stupidity.

Darcy turned and glared back in his direction.

Please don't come back here to berate me… I feel terrible enough as it is.
He sighed in relief when she went back to Jane's station instead.

Bruce went up to level three of the lab. There were ten levels altogether, but he rarely needed to come up here. He still didn't really need to for work, but he knew he couldn't handle seeing her again. The look on her face this morning, when they had last spoken, was forever ingrained. If he saw her again, he'd lose his nerve. Beg for forgiveness, become her slave, anything.

He knew this was better. In the long run, she'd be better off. She probably just had hurt pride right now, but she'd bounce back. She'd get over it and move on. She'd simply imprinted on him, much like a baby duck that had lost its parents. She was in a shitty relationship and he'd been nice to her. If it helped her out of the relationship, that was great. But she didn't need to try to be with him. He'd hurt her more than anyone else ever could. This was better.

He still couldn't silence the little voice in his head, *if this is better, then why does it make me feel worse?*
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

More miscommunication angst... at first. ;) ;) ;)

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning for 'kissing without warning'. I mean, it's very consensual, but he doesn't warn her that it's going to happen.

Alice

Alice felt miserable. It had been two weeks since she'd spoken to Bruce. She'd spent the time confused and wondering what had happened.

She feared it was their difference in intelligence. She probably wasn't smart enough for him. He'd apparently dated numerous women who all had doctorates in multiple subjects. Nope, she didn't stand a chance up against women like that.

It didn't make her feel any better, in fact, it made it worse. She'd started ignoring him completely. She couldn't risk getting caught looking at him again. Pathetic.

He, for the most part, had retreated into his former self: the reclusive, grumpy scientist.

She wasn't certain why she was taking this so hard. Darcy told her it was probably because she never really got exposed to this side of things since she'd been dating the same guy for seven years. She was still technically dating him. Even though she hadn't seen him in weeks. She assumed he was still on a mission. Hopefully, he was okay. She'd feel pretty bad if he was hurt somewhere and here she was, mooning over another guy.

She alternated between being sad and being angry. Because, honestly, what right did he have to judge her? He turned into a green rage monster whenever someone dumped soup. Whenever a moron dumped soup, she hadn't forgotten that he called her a moron.

No matter if she was mad or sad, she hated going to the lab now. What had been the best part of her day had turned into the worst. It was better when he wasn't there. He apparently worked on a different floor sometimes. Probably trying to keep from seeing her.

Well, I got your signal, loud and clear, Dr. Banner. I might be a moron, but I'm no fool. I don't need to be told twice when I'm not wanted.

Alice was sitting at her desk answering the phone between bites from a grilled chicken Caesar salad when Pepper approached her desk. She finished the call she was on and wrote down the information
quickly.
"Alice, Dr. Banner asked to see you."

Alice's stomach dropped.

"What? Why?"

Pepper frowned, "I'm not sure, I think it's Avengers business… I assume you've been keeping up with everything on that front?"

"Of course… he just… he never asks for anything."

"Well, that's just his personality. He's probably getting ready to take another trip. You should take some leave paperwork down to fill out and send in to SHIELD."

"Okay, I'll go do that now."

"You can finish your salad. There aren't any meetings I need you for this afternoon. Just go when you take his lunch to him."

Alice nodded. She didn't tell Pepper that she no longer brought him his lunch.

She found him in level 5 of the lab. JARVIS helped her. She tucked the thick folder of paperwork under her arm. She dreaded having to sit here with him while he filled it all out. At least he'd be gone for a while.

He was sitting at one of the larger set of touch screens moving what looked like proteins around on a virtual diagram.

She approached him cautiously, not sure how to get his attention. She stood still for what felt like forever. The silence was broken by the fluttering of a thousand sheets of paper, falling out of the overstuffed manila folder she had under her arm.

Bruce slowly turned around to face her.

She sighed in frustration and knelt to pick them up.

"Do you want some help?" he asked tentatively.

She slid the last of the papers into a pile and stuffed them haphazardly into the folder. "No, I've got it covered."

"Alice, what are you doing here?"

She sighed. Great. He wasn't expecting me at all. Why the hell did Pepper say he asked for me, then?

"Pepper said you needed to fill out some leave paperwork…” she lifted the folder, avoiding his gaze.

"What?" he asked, sounding confused.

Alice sighed again, "Leave paperwork. So you can go on another trip?"

"I'm going on another trip?"
"I don't know. I'm just following orders," she said, annoyed.

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Well, what did you need me for?"

"Nothing… I didn't know she'd be sending YOU personally."

She sighed again, "Awesome." She turned to leave, wrapping her arms around the folder to keep its contents from falling out again.

"Wait!" he called, walking around the counter and grabbing his bag from the floor. He opened it, rummaging through it. "You left your sweater in my apartment… um… here it is," he pulled it out and held it in front of him as if he were making an offering.

She squinted at him for a moment, wondering how she was going to carry it and the bulging folder too. "Thanks," she awkwardly shifted the folder and took the sweater. The papers fluttered out onto the floor again.

She sighed, hanging her head for a moment to let the utter mortification seep in.

"Sorry…" Bruce knelt quickly to start stacking all the papers again. He took the folder from her. She knelt again and started furiously gathering the papers, wanting nothing more than for the floor of the lab to open and swallow her up. When they had the papers stacked somewhat neatly, she draped her sweater over her arm and scooped up the folder. She nodded in thanks, still avoiding his searching gaze, smiled half-heartedly and turned to leave.

"Wait… Alice, can I talk to you for a moment? I think I owe you an explanation for…"

Alice stopped walking. She turned around, "No, it's fine, Br—Dr. Banner."

"Alice…"

"No, I don't—you don't need to explain…it's fine." she smiled tightly. "I've got a ton of stuff to do this afternoon, so if you don't mind…" she turned to go again.

"I do mind, actually. I believe you're supposed to help me with anything I need," he said deliberately.

Alice turned completely, fuming, "And I believe that YOU said you no longer had need of my services."

"Well, I do need something now."

She sighed, pursing her lips, "What is it?"

"I need you to listen to me. I—I owe you an explanation for my behavior."

"No, you really don't. I get it, okay? I don't want to talk about this anymore."

"I don't think you do get it, Alice."

"No, I don't guess you would," she said hotly.

"What?"

"I may be a moron, but I'm not a fool."
He frowned…”No, Alice, you're not…”

She shook her head, tears threatening to fall, "No, just, please stop, Bruce—sorry, Dr. Banner." She kept her eyes low. She couldn't look at him, couldn't bear to see his sympathetic gaze.

"You can call me Bruce, Alice, I'd prefer it," he said quietly.

"I have to go."

"No, please… stay here, let me just SAY what I need to SAY."

"No, I think you said everything you needed to," she turned to leave.

"Alice, stop."

"I have an idea of what you're going to say. I—I don't want to be right, so I don't want you to tell me anything."

"Alice, that's just… stupid. How on earth would that be better than hearing what I'm actually going to say?"

She felt the tears threatening to roll down her cheeks. "I know that I'm not… of the same caliber as the women you used to date. I know that. It was stupid of me to think that you could…” she trailed off, and began again, "I don't have any doctorates, I only have a bachelor's degree. I'm not really what you'd call… intelligent. I um…don't know what you're talking about half the time when you talk about your research. I—WE wouldn't work. I get that. I do, and I don't want to hear you agree with me. I know you think you're being helpful, or truthful, but sometimes the truth hurts. And… I'm not—I don't want to be hurt right now."

She nodded slightly, pleased with how that sounded and that she was able to string together coherent sentences at all. She bit her lip hard to keep from crying. She turned to leave. He didn't protest.

She boarded the elevator and rode it down. She sat at her desk quietly, monotonously performing all her tasks. Pepper asked her a couple of times if something was wrong. Alice blamed it on her chicken salad. She took the evening meal to the lab and sent a text to Darcy asking her to please take the dishes down to the kitchen. Alice was finished with her work for the day and didn't feel like hanging around.

She walked home. It took her about an hour, but she had calmed down by the time she got home. A girl crying and walking down the sidewalk wasn't an uncommon occurrence in NYC and Alice thought she saw at least three other girls doing the same thing.

She absently wondered what had upset them. Probably a guy.

_Guys always seem to know how to get us where it hurts._

She thought back to the day when Bruce had called her a moron. It still hurt thinking about it. She didn't need a guy like that in her life. She was getting out of one bad relationship. She didn't need to stumble into another one right away. She thought about the cold way he'd treated her that morning. The morning after she'd woken up in his apartment. Her skin burned with embarrassment.

_How could I think that he was interested in me? He probably holds the same interest in me that he holds in a lab rat. Probably wondering what stupid thing I am going to do next._

She finally got home and drew a hot bath. She hated the bathtub here. It was too small, but she
wanted to just lie down and wallow for a bit. She entertained the notion of calling her Grams, but it would be a lot of explanation before she could get to the part where Grams made her feel better. She decided against it.

She'd been replaying that conversation with Bruce the morning after they'd woken up together on the couch. She was almost furious at this point and couldn't relax in the tub anymore. She got out of the tub, dried off and got dressed in some yoga pants and a cami.

Darcy texted her twice, but she ignored her phone for the most part. She was lying down on the couch when it rang. She looked down at the screen to see who was calling and was surprised.

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Bruce

"...I don't want to be hurt right now."

That last thing she said, it kept echoing in his mind. She thought he was going to say something hurtful. She automatically assumed that she was the one at fault. That she was the one who wasn't good enough for him.

"I know that I'm not… of the same caliber as the women you used to date."

No, she wasn't. She was better. How could she think that he thought she was anything but wonderful?

*Maybe because you treated her like a pariah.*

He went to the elevator, riding it back down to Level 1. He looked around for Tony. He spotted him in the break room. Darcy was with him.

"Okay, I need help," he acquiesced. "Darcy, could you…” he motioned out the door.

"No. You must have done something terrible. Alice isn't answering my texts. She always answers my texts! You're going to need all the help you can get," Darcy hopped up on the counter.

"What did you do, you unstoppable moron? You made it worse, didn't you?" asked Tony.

"Yes," Bruce said begrudgingly.

"They always come crawlin' back to Tony. Begging for help from the master."

"Tony…"

"Sorry, Jolly Green. Proceed."

"I honestly don't know what happened… I was trying to explain myself, but I think Alice must have already formed an opinion in regards to that…"

"What? You waited two weeks to talk to her after acting like a dick. And now, she's formed her OWN opinion? The nerve of that girl. I'll fire her promptly," said Tony facetiously.
"Okay, there's no need to be rude…" said Bruce.

Tony raised his eyebrows and took a sip of his coffee. "Tell me what happened. I guess spare no details."

Bruce regaled him with the details of his and Alice's most recent interchange. When he got to the end, he looked up to see Darcy staring at him, wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

"What?" he asked, frowning.

"You didn't go after her?" she exclaimed.

"No. Should I have?"

"BANNER. That's a classic rom-com plot. You screwed up. Now, she thinks she's not worthy. You stop her from leaving. You kiss her. Kissy face, kissy face, cheesy one-liner, end credits."

Bruce frowned. "Rom-com?"

"Romantic comedy… were you even listening to me?!"

"Uh…" truthfully, he hadn't been. He was too focused on what a 'rom-com' was.

"You should have kissed her, dude," she said bluntly.

"I'm not sure that would have gone over very well…" he said, fidgeting uncomfortably.

"It would have, trust me… I KNOW what I'm talking about. Also, while we're on the topic, how in all that is right and holy did you manage to make her feel like she doesn't deserve you? How does that happen? YOU turn into a scary rage monster! YOU are a PHYSICIST for cripes' sake. SHE is a hot sexy redhead! I do not… I just… I can't even…" she sputtered, trailing off and staring at him accusingly.

Bruce hung his head, "I don't know…"

"I have to go do some filing for Jane, but you'd better fix this, Banner. Alice deserves it, she's been a wreck for the past two weeks," Darcy poked him in the chest.

"Has she?" He felt guilty that he hadn't noticed. Well, he had been purposely absent, working mostly in the upper levels of the lab.

Darcy looked at him incredulously, "Yeah! She's been moping around here. She took me with her while she was apartment hunting and cried the whole time. I swear to God, she's a hot mess."

Bruce wasn't really familiar with that term, but he could guess at its meaning. He was somewhat relieved that she was still looking for an apartment. At least he hadn't sent her running back to Zeke.

Darcy left the room.

He turned to Tony, "What do I do? Should I beg for forgiveness?"

"It's better than sitting here and talking about your penis! I don't want to hear about your penis!" said Tony.

Bruce frowned. "I never mentioned my penis."
"That's what this is all about, isn't it? You can't have sex? Ipso facto: Penis."

Bruce punched Tony in the arm.

"Ow! What the hell, THAT was over the line?"

Bruce ignored him, "I can't tell her. It was embarrassing enough having to tell you. It's better if she doesn't have to make a hard decision."

"Nah… you shouldn't let her make an informed decision, ladies HATE making informed decisions. Let me tell you a little story: Once upon a time, this guy was open and honest with his girl, and they lived happily ever after. It was terrible," he ended with sarcastic flair.

"I can't give her a normal relationship."

"Define 'normal relationship'."

"You know what I mean."

"Sex," Tony made a lewd gesture with his hands.

"You can be really wise sometimes, Tony," Bruce said dryly. “It’s not just that. If it was only the sex thing, we could work around it. It’s… everything.”

"Bruce…" Tony whined, "I gave you a job and a cool apartment. I got you a girl. A REDHEAD. She even likes you. How are you STILL screwing this up?"

Bruce sighed, "What should I do?"

"Well, you could go sit in the corner, stick your thumb up your ass and make a wish," mused Tony, "Or, you could quit being a dick and go find your girl."

"I don't like either of those options… and she's not my girl."

"Bruce… c'mon," Tony looked at him knowingly.

"She's technically still has a boyfriend."

"Bruce… c'mon."

"If you want to get really technical, she's no one's property."

"Bruce… c'mon."

"I'll just go…"

"Go where?"

"Go Find Alice."

"Don't hurt yourself… JARVIS? Where is Alice?" Tony asked the A.I.

"Ms. Vorso has gone home for the day."

Bruce frowned.

"I guess you'll have to call her," shrugged Tony.
"I don't have her number."

"Do I have to do EVERYTHING for you? It's in your phone. Speed dial 4."

Bruce pulled out his phone. There were probably hundreds of missed calls and ignored text messages from Tony on it. He rarely ever used it and he really hated having it with him all the time. Leftover paranoia from being on the run for so long, probably.

He looked over at Tony expectantly. Tony threw up his hands and walked out of the room. Bruce pressed the 4 and held it to call Alice. It rang a few times.

"Hello?" her voice sounded melodious.

"Oh, um, Hi, Alice, this is…"

Click.

He looked at his phone. "She hung up on me," he said aloud to no one. He called her back.

"Hello?"

"Did you just hang up on me?"

"Yes."

"Why did you-"

Click.

"Damnit, Alice!" He called her back again, "Okay look, I understand that you're probably upset with me…"

"What? Me? Upset? Noooooo. Because in order for me to be upset, there would need to be something to be upset about. And there wasn't. It was nothing. NOTHING," she snapped.

Okay, so she remembers every single thing I say, word for word. Good to know.


"I don't want to see you. I'm mad at you. You're a jerk," she replied, her tone biting.

"I deserve that. I WAS a jerk."

"You ARE a jerk."

"I AM A JERK, are you happy?"

"Not in the least little bit," she said pugnaciously.

"What do you want me to say?"

"I don't know. I didn't expect you to be so accommodating."

"I'm sorry, next time I'll be more belligerent. For you, I can do that."

"Fine," her voice softened. "Come over… wait, do you know where I live?"
"I know how to find out."

"Don't let Tony bring you."

"God, no. I'll see you in half an hour or so?"

"Okay. See you then."

Bruce ended the call, feeling slightly triumphant. She had agreed to talk to him. He could fix this yet. He would just explain to her… everything. Every embarrassing little detail. He wanted her to know. NEEDED her to know everything. He wanted to reach out and grab her like a life preserver. That's what she was. He was drowning and she could save him. It was damn selfish, but for once he didn't care. He was sick of being alone, sick of being cold, and most of all, sick of not getting what he wanted. He'd give her everything he could possibly give her. Hopefully, it was enough.

After he wrote down Alice's address on a napkin in the break room, he went outside for the first time in a long while. The sun had gone down, but the city lights were bright. He walked to the curb, intent on hailing a taxi.

"Are you Dr. Banner?"

Bruce turned towards the voice. It belonged to an unbelievably tall, broad-shouldered man wearing a black suit.

"Who wants to know?" Bruce asked cautiously.

"I'm Preston, Ms. Vorso's driver. She told me to look for a squirrelly, dorky guy in a green shirt and bring him to her apartment."

"I am NOT squirrelly."

"Found you, didn't I?"

Bruce still wasn't thrilled with the idea of getting in an unmarked black car with a strange man he'd never seen before. "Do you mind if I call Alice to corroborate?"

"Not at all."

He pulled out his phone to call Alice but saw a text pop up from her before he got the chance. "Preston's my driver. He's very safe and cautious. I guarantee a stress-free ride."

Bruce smiled, "Alright, Let's go."

Alice was right. The ride went smoothly and Preston was a very cautious driver. After 20 minutes, they pulled up outside of a nice apartment building on the Upper West Side.

"It's apartment number 343, that's on the third floor," said Preston.

"Thank you very much."

Bruce got out and entered the building. The doorman greeted him, asked who he was and where he was headed. Bruce introduced himself and the doorman smiled and waved him in. He got in the elevator and rode up to the third floor. He found Alice's apartment easily enough. He rang the doorbell and waited. He jammed his hands in his pockets.

She answered the door, it was bright inside her apartment compared to the hall. The light shown
around her, outlining her form. Her hair was wet and looked like glistening copper. She was wearing yoga pants and a camisole top, her feet were bare. She had no make-up on her face and her eyes were rimmed with red, probably from crying. It made him feel sick to think that he was the cause of that.

She was absolutely gorgeous. Everything Bruce had been rehearsing since he ended their phone call a half an hour before was forgotten. All he could think about was her, just Alice. She looked at him expectantly. He should say something. He opened his mouth and closed it again.

Say something. Do something, you idiot. Don't just stand there drooling on her doorstep. Kiss her. You know you want to.

He stepped forward hesitantly, pulling his hands from his pockets. He reached for her, grasping her waist, running his other hand up her side, into her hair, down the side of her cheek, everywhere at once. It had been years since he'd touched a woman like this and he didn't want to rush it. He leaned down and pressed his lips to hers. It wasn't as gentle as he wanted to be and she tensed at first, but slowly slid her arms up and around his neck. He pulled her closer, deepening the kiss, moving his lips against hers.

She's perfect… he thought hazily.

She made a tiny whimpering sound that caused him to stop and he pulled back from her quickly.

"I'm sorry..." he whispered, unable to find his voice, "I meant to say, 'hello'."

"Hi," she said, smiling shyly and looking down at her bare feet. She shivered, probably from nerves, it wasn't cold where they were standing. "Do you want to come in?" she asked.

"No, that's all I came for..." he said, turning and pretending to leave. She smiled, amused. "And THAT was a joke. Albeit, a BAD one," he laughed nervously, jamming his hands back in his pockets.

She laughed, "Get IN here, you idiot." She moved back and he followed her into her apartment.

ZEKE'S apartment. Alice and ZEKE'S apartment. He pushed the thought away.

"So, this is where I live," she said, opening her arms and dropping them to her sides again. "Not too interesting."

Her apartment didn't really look like her. Something told him she probably didn't decorate it. It looked too harsh. Too many sharp corners, everything was too rough. There WERE pictures on the walls, though.

"I wouldn't say that. You have things on your walls... how does that work?" he asked.

She grinned, "Do you want to sit down?" She gestured to the couch.

He stood still for a moment, thinking. "Yes."

She nodded, "Can I get you anything? Water? I think I might have a soda knockin' around in the fridge somewhere..." she started walking away, presumably towards the kitchen. He didn't want her to leave the room... hell, to be honest, if she wasn't touching him she was too far away.

"No, I'm fine... I just... was hoping we could talk?"
"Yeah, just let me go grab a sweater… I got a chill all of a sudden," she shivered again and hurried down the hall, presumably to her bedroom.

Bruce busied himself by looking at the series of photographs she had on the wall behind the sofa. They looked to be family photos. There were a lot of her with a black-haired man. He assumed it was Zeke. Now, HE looked like a jerk. Maybe that was just Bruce's bias. Jealousy surged through him. He pushed it down.

*She kissed YOU. She cares what YOU think of her. She likes YOU.*

"Oh, don't look at those…” she grabbed Bruce's arm and tried to turn him away. "I don't photograph well…”

He grinned, turning towards her. "I beg to differ…”

"Yes, but you're trying to get on my good side," she teased, "I can't believe a word you say."

He chuckled, "Well… the real thing is better than a picture…” he reached out to stroke her cheek.

She blushed and gestured to the sofa. She sat down. He sat a conservative distance away. He was worried he'd get distracted if he sat too close.

"Okay, so I'm going to be a gentleman here and allow you to speak first since I know you were trying to talk to me that morning, but I was not receptive," he began.

"You were a jerk," she said, a small smile spreading across her face despite her words.

"Past tense? I'm moving up in the world."

She smirked, "Okay, so I guess I wanted to talk about that morning, and I had this big long speech worked out, but really, I was gonna tell you it was nice. I liked it," she blushed. It was adorable. He wanted to kiss her again, but he held back. "I liked bein' held by you," she added shyly.

Bruce couldn't help but smile. He had liked holding her.

"But, then you were so… removed and I thought maybe you didn't like it. Like, you maybe I thought I was beneath you or somethin' because I'm…"

"There's nothing wrong with you, Alice. I'm sorry I made you think that for even a second…"

She smiled, reaching out to touch his arm. "Thank you." She looked down at her lap. "I… it was nice. VERY nice, but I'm still with Zeke technically. That's ending though, as soon as I possibly can end it… as soon as I see him again. But, until it does, we kind of need to pull it together… I don't want to give him any ammunition…” she trailed off, adding, "if that's okay with you."

Bruce took a deep breath, wanting to just pause time right here. He could be happy right now.

"Alice, I have to tell you something, and it's really important and it will probably be the deciding factor for you in terms of whether you want a relationship with me or not…”

"Bruce, I know you're a boring physicist. I don't care, we can work through it," she said in mock encouragement.

He chuckled lightly, "No, it's something worse than that."

She suddenly looked worried, "Are you okay?"
"Yes, I'm as fine as ever." She visibly relaxed, so he continued, "I just need to tell you something about my 'condition' that I've never told anyone else… save two other people. Obviously it's not something I like sharing."

She nodded slowly, "What two other people?"

"Tony and a colleague… an ex-girlfriend. Dr. Betty Ross."

"Oh. Okay," She looked at him, her green eyes boring into his.

"This is really hard for me to talk about, so please bear with me," he pleaded.

"Of course," she scooted closer to him on the couch and placed her hand on his, squeezing slightly.

He took a deep breath, "I would love to be with you, Alice. More than anything. I just don't want you to tie yourself to someone who may never be able to give you everything."

She frowned, "What do you mean?"

He floundered, "Umm…” He dislodged his hand, wiping both on his legs, "okay, this is difficult…”

"Take your time," she grabbed his hand again. He threaded his fingers through hers.

"I don't know if we'd ever be able to have a PHYSICAL relationship," he confessed, looking at her sadly.

"I'm sorry, what?" she asked.

He blushed, "A physical relationship… like, we could never…”

She shook her head quickly, " No, no, no… I know what a physical relationship is. What I meant to say was, why?"

Oh God, this is the absolute worst…

He looked down at their joined hands, "Well when I get…' excited', my heart rate increases. If it increases beyond 200 bpm…" he trailed off, looking up at her.

"Oh," she said, frowning. "You can't even… not even a little bit?"

"I can't do much more than we've already done," he said sadly, dropping her hand. She grabbed it again immediately but said nothing, so he continued, "I want you to know that I am offering you everything. Everything I can give you. Everything, it's yours. I wasn't going to but to tell you the truth, but I'm selfish and I don't want to be alone anymore. If that makes me a bad person, so be it. I'm sorry I can't give you more, but…"

She cut him off, firmly pressing her lips to his. She ran her hands through his hair and his breath caught, a deep ache forming in the pit of his stomach. His lips moved against hers, involuntarily.

"Alice…” he warned, his voice quiet.

"Just an experiment," she murmured, her breath tickling his skin. "You're familiar with the concept…”

He tensed.
"Alice…" he repeated, louder this time.

She pressed her lips to his pulse point, directly under his jaw. He inhaled sharply and grabbed her shoulders, pushing her back as the pulse monitor on his wrist began beeping frantically.

She looked at him, her lips red, her pupils dilated, breathing rapidly. He had never hated his 'condition' more than he did just then. He gently pushed her back on the couch and scooted away from her. He sat back and began breathing deeply, trying to think of anything but the woman sitting next to him.

When his pulse rate slowed and he was finally able to look at her, she was staring at him curiously.

She leaned forward, "Can I?" she mimed scooting next to him.

He nodded. She moved next to him. She was careful not to touch him, which he was thankful for. He didn't think he could handle it. She was so warm.

Neither spoke for a while. He tried to gather his words.

"I want you to think about this, really THINK about this, don't make a decision now. This isn't a 'heat of the moment' kind of thing."

"I know that. My intention was to think about it a while."

"Good. Because you see what you're giving up. I can't… it will be difficult."

She nodded. "Can I… hug you?" she asked hesitantly.

"Yes, please," he said, suddenly desperate to be close to her. She leaned in and wrapped her arms around him, her head under his chin. They sat like that for a while. He buried his face in her hair and inhaled the scent of her shampoo. She smelled very feminine and it was almost sensory overload. Bruce wasn't used to this much contact. When she straightened her back, she turned slightly and leaned over against him, her head on his shoulder, arms around his waist, similar to how they had woken up that morning.

"Take as long as you need," he said, stroking her back. "I have all the time in the world, so please don't feel there is a deadline here."

She nodded, looking up at him, "Thank you for sharing that with me. I can see why you didn't want to, but I'm really glad you did." She nestled herself back where she had been. Her head under his chin, her face on his chest, arms around his waist. He sighed happily and tried not to think about anything else but Alice, at this moment.
Chapter Summary

In which we find out where Zeke's been. Kind of. We find out what he's been planning anyway.

Chapter Notes

Note the added tags, Domestic Violence, Physical Abuse.

Alice

Alice had spent the past week thinking about her situation with Bruce. She'd discussed it in depth with Darcy.

"What's the big deal? There are ways to take care of that on your own," stated Darcy.

"Okay…” Alice replied, opting out of that particular direction. “But--”

"C'mon, like you don't do that. You're lying if you say you don't."

"Still, that's neither here nor there. Sex is kind of a big deal in a relationship, isn’t it?"

"There are people who don’t do it. Ever heard of being asexual?"

“Well, yeah. But it was my understanding that ace people don’t have those feelings? Am I wrong? They don’t like… have sexual attraction just like… aesthetic attraction? From what I could deduce, Bruce definitely has those feelings. And so do I. I’m not sure how we’re going to make this work."

Darcy was silent for a moment. "So, like, he can't do anything? He can't even take care of you?" She looked at Alice knowingly.

"I didn't ask, but I'd guess probably not."

"You're right, he couldn't handle you kissing his neck, he definitely couldn't handle seeing you naked or feeling you up."

"Plus, that's not fair, I wouldn't want that."

"Ugh, you guys are made for each other, martyrs through and through," sighed Darcy. "I guess you have to decide if you love him or not. Because… you’d have to love him to give up sex forever."

"That's where I am, I know I definitely COULD love him. I'm just trying to decide if I'm actually
thinking this through rationally."

"If you want my two cents, I think you're both insane and that you're perfect for one another. Plus you never know, this might give him the incentive to find a way to control the beast, so to speak. I mean... you've got this little... sexy fairy thing going for you. I wouldn't throw you out of bed," Darcy waggled her eyebrows comically and looked Alice up and down.

"Oh myyy," said Tony, grinning salaciously. "What a day to check in on the office. And to think I wasn't going to, I was just going to stay in the lab all day."

Alice and Darcy glared in his direction.

"Don't let me interrupt you, just pretend I'm not here... with my phone recording everything."

"Pig," said Darcy, narrowing her eyes at Tony before turning her attention to Alice. "Speaking of, have you broken up with Zeke yet?"

"I haven't seen him! He's been gone! He had some mission he was going on for SHIELD, but he's not come back yet. I'm to the point where I want to send him a text and break up with him, but I think seven years deserves a face to face, you know?"

"I guess so..." said Darcy, exchanging a look with Tony.

"I'm going home tonight to finish packing my clothes, thanks for letting me stay with you until I find a place of my own."

"I don't understand why you don't just move in with your cuddle monster," said Darcy.

Alice smirked, "I haven't decided if he's my cuddle monster yet. Plus, he hasn't said a word about moving in. Double plus, I can't just move out of one guy's home into another. I need to have a place of my own, for at least a little while."

"I guess. I don't know what you're expecting, but being alone isn't all it's cracked up to be," said Darcy. "I find myself wondering if it's worth it to put food on plates anymore if it's just me eating it. You find yourself doing all kinds of weird things when you're by yourself and no one's around to judge you."

"I wonder what you two will do alone when you're living together," said Tony. "I imagine it will have something to do with whipped cream and hot sweaty pillow fights... and of course, you'll invite Pepper, so I'll have to be there to supervise..."

Darcy and Alice stared at him incredulously.

"Do you realize you're saying these things out loud, or do you think it's all in your head?" asked Darcy.

"Yeah, and what are you even doing down here in the office break room?" asked Alice.

"Spying, seeing what I pay you for," he answered.

"No, really."

"Pepper and I have this really awesome, exclusive party to go to this evening. Just waiting to pick her up, hence why I'm dressed to the nines." He waggled his eyebrows and motioned to what he was wearing.
"That looks like what you normally wear," said Alice.

"Somehow, I'm not sure it matters what I wear, I won't be the focal point," he said, looking at Alice meaningfully.

"I find that hard to believe, Tony," teased Alice.

Pepper strode into the break room, "Almost done, Alice?"

"Yes, I'm technically done, just waiting for you to finish up and make sure you don't need me for anything else."

"Well, I have some filing that needs to be done, shouldn't take longer than half an hour."

"Alright, I'll get right on it."

"Tony, we should go get changed and head out," Pepper said, looking at what he was wearing.

"Do I have to change? This is fine, right? I'm a billionaire eccentric."

"At least put on a suit coat and a button-down…"

"Jeans can stay, right?"

She hesitated. "Sure…"

Pepper waved to Darcy and Alice on their way out.

The filing took closer to an hour, but Alice didn't really care. She wasn't exactly looking forward to packing. She was constantly worried that Zeke would come home and catch her in the middle of it.

It took longer than usual to get home that night.

"Hang around, Preston, I've got some more boxes to pack and I'll be taking them to Darcy's."

He nodded. "I'll see you soon, Miss Vorso."

Alice slung her bag over her shoulder and walked up to her apartment. She fumbled with her keys before opening the door. It was pitch black inside, she felt around for the light switch. When she found it, she flipped it on.

"SURPRISE!"

Alice nearly jumped out of her skin. There were about twenty people in all, Zeke at the forefront, grinning madly. Mostly college and work friends of Zeke's, except for Tony and Pepper who were standing in the rear of the crowd. Tony was smirking and Pepper was smiling apologetically.

"Wha--what is this, Zeke?" Alice asked a shaky smile plastered to her face.

"A surprise party for your birthday, babe!" he smiled widely.

"My birthday is next week," she whispered through clenched teeth.

"I know, that's part of the surprise. I'm doing a nice thing for you," he said under his breath. He handed her a filled champagne flute. "I'd like to propose a toast!"

Everyone raised their glasses.
"To the most patient, wonderful fiancée a guy could ask for. She's waited for me to pick a wedding date for four years, can you believe it?" A few of his friends whooped. "She's put up with a lot of crap from me, she gave up a great job to move here to New York with me, and I'm forever grateful to her." More whooping, a few whistles. "I think she's waited long enough, how about you?"

Applause, more whistles.

Alice's head hurt suddenly. Her smile had dropped from her face, replaced by a look of dread. No one but Tony and Pepper seemed to notice. She could taste bile in the back of her throat.

"Alice Louise Vorso, please do me the honor of marrying me on October 5th of this year." Alice froze. She looked at Zeke, who was holding her free hand. He looked so confident. After ignoring her for over a month, he was going to swoop in and set a wedding date?!!

"Can we talk about this later?" she whispered.

Zeke looked puzzled. "What? No, just say yes, and we'll talk tonight."

"Can we please talk about this later?" she pleaded, looking around at all the guests. She didn't want to embarrass him.

"No, Al, c'mon, all our friends are here, don't be all 'you' right now, just be nice and be happy and say yes."

AL? I hate that so much... and don't be all 'me'?! Who the hell am I supposed to be?

Alice just snapped. "Don't call me Al, I hate it when you call me AL!" she hissed.

"Babe, what's wrong?" asked Zeke, frowning.

"What's wrong, WHAT'S WRONG? You've ignored me for the past few months and now you think you can make it all better by settin' a wedding date, without even CONSULTIN' me? Do you know me at ALL? You've controlled every aspect of this relationship from the beginning, and I'm sick of it. You drop this bomb on me in front of twenty people? I HATE havin' big parties, I HATE bein' put on the spot, but you have never seemed to give a shit about what I want. Only about what looks good. Only what YOU want, Zeke. Well, I'm through. We're through. This? This is over."

He looked legitimately shocked, "Alice, where's all this coming from? Have you... met someone else?"

"Yes," she said simply. "He's a doctor and he's... four times the man you think you are."

She was one-hundred-ten percent done with this evening. She wanted nothing more than to go back to Stark Tower, up to the lab and find Bruce Banner. Then, she'd kiss him until his pulse monitor went crazy. She was going to say anything that would get her out of here sooner. Zeke dropped her hand. She fumbled in the front pocket of her bag, where she'd been stashing the engagement ring. She handed it to him. All the guests were flabbergasted and not sure how to react. All except for Tony, who silently pumped the air with his fist.

"Tony, Pepper, thank you for coming. It means a lot that you would come to a birthday party for me when I'm only an administrative assistant. To the rest of you, I'm sorry, but I believe you're all Zeke's friends and destined to hate me after tonight. I don't care. Have a great evening."

With that, she turned to go, grabbing her messenger bag. She walked out into the hall, intent on going immediately down to the car. She could talk to Pepper and Tony later.
She was jerked backward when Zeke grabbed her arm, a bit too hard for her liking. He must have followed her out the door. He twisted her wrist behind her back, pushing her against the wall. She felt the bones in her wrist pop as her face slammed into the textured wallpaper. She winced as her bag dropped to the floor. "This isn't over, Alice. You can't make a fool out of me in front of everyone here. I'm not some stupid cuckold." He snarled in her ear, twisting her arm more. She bit back the pain. "If anything YOU ARE. Because if you think that you're the only bitch I've fucked for the past seven years, you're dumber than I thought… I was doing you a FAVOR. NOBODY'S going to want to be with you once mphff—"

Zeke was cut off as Preston grabbed him by the back of the neck and slammed him hard against the opposite wall. Zeke cried out in pain and Alice turned abruptly to see him being held facing against the wall. Preston had him a few inches off the ground by the back of his neck, his hands pinned behind his back.

As if on cue, Tony and Pepper came out into the hall, on their way out, apparently. "Oh. I see you've met Preston. You two playin' nice?" He chuckled, "You be careful now, Preston. Zekey's only an agent, he's not a trained assassin like yourself."

Zeke kicked and struggled against Preston, who abruptly let him go, leaving a bloody stain on the wall where his face had been. Zeke automatically covered his nose with his hands. It would have been comical if the situation weren't so tense. Preston was at least a head taller than Zeke, who was over seven feet himself. Zeke stumbled a bit, off-balance. "Nope, no problem, nothing at all," he hissed, glaring at Alice, his hand still covering his undoubtedly broken nose. He turned sharply and went back into the apartment.

Alice's head was spinning. She almost couldn't process all the new information she'd just learned.

"He was cheating on me?!" she exclaimed. As the words left her lips, she realized she didn't really feel anything from that revelation. "This isn't botherin' me as much as it should… am I just in shock… or…?" she turned towards Pepper and Tony.

Tony looked scared, "Uhh… Pepper?" he turned towards her.

"Oh, Alice… an awful lot has happened tonight…" she slipped her arms around Alice, hugging her awkwardly.

Alice turned in surprise to Preston. "I thought you were in the car!"

"Mr. Stark pays me to be your personal bodyguard," he shrugged nonchalantly, "The first time I've had to protect you."

She frowned, staring open-mouthed at him for a moment. "You're a TRAINED assassin?" she asked incredulously.

He nodded absently, kneeling to pick up her bag. She grabbed it and winced, hissing in pain when she realized her wrist was throbbing.

"I'm fine," she assured all of them as she grabbed her bag with her other hand and stood.

"Are you sure?"

She nodded, feeling her chin begin to tremble. Tony took her bag from her and shouldered it.
"Well, we could always kill him. I'd do that for you, Princess. Just say the word."

"TONY! Don't SAY things like that in PUBLIC!" Pepper exclaimed quietly.

"WELL, we'd make it look like an accident…" he said defensively.

"TONY!" Pepper swatted his arm.

Preston shrugged, looking bored.

"Still, I don't think you should come back here alone, Alice," ventured Pepper.

"Preston comes in with you everywhere from now on," said Tony, looking at Preston for confirmation.

"I'm proud of you. I wasn't sure we should have come to this, but I'm glad we did," Pepper said, squeezing her shoulders slightly.

"I figured it'd be all of Zekey's friends. I didn't want you to be alone. Didn't know he was going to pull that amazing feat of dumbassery," explained Tony sheepishly. "I'd have warned you."

"It's fine, Tony. You guys didn't know," said Alice, smiling reassuringly.

"It was brave of you," added Pepper. "I'm not sure I could have done what you did. Standing up to him in public like that."

"Bravery had nothing' to do with it," said Alice. "I was just fed up…and now, I just wanna go talk to Bruce," she added desperately. She couldn't stand being in the hallway anymore. She wanted him to wrap her up in his arms and never let go.

"Let him look at that wrist," said Tony.

"What are you, nuts?" asked Alice. "If he found out that Zeke did that, he'd go Hulk-shit crazy all over the lab."

"Maybe he needs to, maybe we'll let him out to teach that little shit a lesson or two. The Hulk needs a new chew toy. He's already ruined two quinjets. Those things ain't cheap. I should know. I've had to buy Nick Fury two of them. TWO. TWO QUINJETS."

"Tony," warned Pepper.

Tony nodded sullenly. He turned towards Alice, suddenly serious, "You do need to tell Bruce, though. Don't keep secrets from him after he shared all of his with you."

"I'll tell him," promised Alice.

Pepper rode with Alice back to Stark Tower with Preston. Tony took her bag down to the lab with him, he decided someone should be there if Bruce did Hulk out. He called Thor down for back up. Thor was to come down on the premise of letting Tony analyze his hammer. Alice didn't care if every single Avenger was there. She just wanted to be with Bruce. By the time she got down to the lab, Thor and Tony were sequestered in Tony's area with Mjolnir between them.

Alice walked over to Bruce's station. he was fiddling with something on the big touch screen monitors in the back. She stood back for a minute, watching him. She loved the way he squinted his eyes when he looked at something analytically. He looked so focused. She decided she'd really enjoy being the sole point of his focus.
They hadn't talked since the previous week when he'd bared his soul to her. He thought it was a
good idea for her to have space to think about everything. He understood her so well after knowing
her for only a few months.

Why didn't Zeke get it after seven years?

"I know you're looking at me," stated Bruce, smiling over his shoulder at her. She grinned broadly,
tears springing to her eyes for some reason. She blinked them back and brought her hand up to cover
her mouth, as she was wont to do whenever she grinned. Bruce finished up with whatever he was
doing at the monitor and turned to face her. He leaned against the counter behind him, obviously
expecting her to come to him. She closed the distance quickly and he folded her into his arms for a
quick embrace. She pulled back from him, her arms still around his neck and his still around her
waist.

"I've missed you," she said simply.

"I've missed you," he repeated, smiling.

"I ended things with Zeke," she began.

He raised his eyebrows in surprise and dropped his arms from her waist. She followed suit, taking a
small step back from him.

"How'd he take it?" he asked, folding his arms and leaning back against the counter.

She smiled without humor, folding her arms to mirror him, "Oh… you know Zeke. He's SO laid
back…" she said facetiously.

Bruce chuckled, "I sense a bit of sarcasm there," he paused, his eyes searching hers. "Are you
okay?"

She nodded sullenly. "He was cheating on me. He couldn't let me get away without telling me
that…" she sighed.

Bruce looked sympathetic, "Alice…" He reached for her.

She shook her head, unable or unwilling to let what Zeke did ruin this for her.

"I want to be with you, Bruce. I want to make this work. I want what you're offering and I'm
offering you EVERYTHING in return," her voice cracked at the end of her declaration, she was so
full of emotion she felt she was going to explode.

He fought back a grin. He looked down at his feet and kept his voice level, "I'm pleased with your
decision. However, I would like to wait until we're alone to show you how pleased."

She grinned widely, bringing her hand up to cover her mouth as she did it.

"Why do you do that?" he asked, amused. "Why do you cover your mouth when you smile?"

"I don't like my smile," she stated, still grinning madly from behind her hand. "I think my teeth are
too small and it's too gummy."

"That's ridiculous," he said instantly. "Your smile is beautiful. Your teeth are perfect."

"Good response," she said, her hand still poised in front of her mouth.
He gently reached forward, taking her hand in his and pulling it down. She winced. It was the wrist Zeke had twisted.

Bruce frowned, looking at her wrist in his hand. "Did I hurt you?" he asked, tracing his thumb down the length of her forearm. She winced again.

"No, it was already hurt."

"What happened?" he asked. He pulled out his glasses to get a closer look. He traced along the bruises that had blossomed on the underside, which looked suspiciously like a handprint.

She faltered, not sure how to tell him what happened.

Bruce raised his eyebrows. "Did Zeke do this?" he gestured to the handprint pattern on her wrist. His voice sounded threatening.

"Yes. But…"

"Don't." he said sharply, "Don't even try to defend this."

"He got it worse than me! Pretty sure Preston broke his nose."

"Preston? Your driver, Preston?"

"Yeah. He's a trained assassin," she said nonchalantly.

"Oh. Of course, he is…" he smiled slightly, "I'm kind of sorry I missed that…"

Alice shook her head, "Don't be…if you'd have been there…" she trailed off.

"I'd have killed him," he said unwaveringly.

"If everyone could just…stop saying that out loud…" she said.

He held her hand up to his lips taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to sound so harsh. You're what's important here." He pressed a kiss into the crease beneath her palm.

The sweet gesture eased Alice and she spilled the whole terrible story, about the surprise party, about the 'proposal', and her rejection of it. She then told him how Zeke followed her out into the hall and caused the injury in question. Bruce was examining her wrist while she spoke, bending it this way and that, cataloging the reactions he got from each movement.

"Looks like a sprain," he said after she finished talking. "And don't go around your old apartment without someone with you."

She nodded, "Tony already went over this. Preston will be with me at all times."

He trailed his fingers up and down the inside of her forearm, seemingly lost in thought. "I'm sorry you had to go through this tonight. I'm glad Tony and Pepper were there for you, I wish I could have been."

"I wish you had been there too. But if you had been, the Other Guy…"

"He'd have made a mess. And for once, I wouldn't have been sorry," said Bruce.

"Bruce…" Alice sighed.
"I know, I know…” he sighed. "Well, at the very least, Tony, Steve and I can wait for him by his car after school. We'll beat him up for you."

She laughed, really laughed. "YES. Please do that."

"Stuff him in a locker? Make him eat his gym socks?"

She laughed again. He grinned boyishly.

"Atomic wedgie, strung up on the flag pole?"

She giggled loudly, slipping her arms around his neck.

He smiled down at her, wrapping his arms around her waist. "I love to hear you laugh…"

She grinned. "Well, it was just what I needed. You know me so well.” She nuzzled his nose with hers.

"I try," he said quietly, leaning his forehead against hers.

"Are you going to kiss me?" she whispered.

"I was thinking about it."

She waited apprehensively for what felt like forever.

"And?" she asked.

"Goodness, you're impatient. I'm just weighing my options… I can either kiss the beautiful woman who currently has her arms wrapped around me, or I could always get back to this," he gestured over his shoulder at the screen behind them. "Ah, well… a physicist's work is never done. Science it is," he pulled away from her and turned back towards the screen.

She pursed her lips, crossing her arms.

"I have to respect your work ethic, Bruce. I guess I knew coming into this that I'd always have to deal with your mistress, Lady Science."

He turned to glance at her over his shoulder briefly, before turning abruptly and pulling her close. "I'm kidding, just kidding…" he whispered, his lips almost grazing her skin. It gave her goosebumps and made her shiver. He pressed his lips to hers fervently, one hand tangled in her hair and the other around her waist.

They heard loud whooping from the other side of the lab, having forgotten they weren't alone.

The moment effectively ruined, Bruce placed a quick peck on her cheek before sitting back, blushing furiously.

She reached up to cover her mouth again, but he captured both of her hands gently in his before she could.

"About time, Big Guy. I was starting to think you didn't know how," said Tony, walking over to where they stood. He was followed by Thor.

"May Odin the Allfather bless your union, Banner the doctor, and Lady Alice," boomed Thor.
"…We aren't married, Thor," said Alice, amused and slightly embarrassed.

"Nope," Bruce shook his head.

"No, but may Odin bless your union, all the same," said Thor.

"Well, it's good to know you have the blessing of the god of thunder," said Tony, grinning widely.

Alice smiled nervously. She tugged her hands away from Bruce. "I should probably go…I'm getting a monster headache."

"Where are you staying? Do you want to stay with me tonight?" asked Bruce quickly.

She raised her eyebrows.

"Not in the same bed, of course…unless you wanted that."

"Yes," she said quickly.

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, I do. Want that. If it's okay with you…I mean. Just for tonight," she said quietly.

"Right, just for tonight."

Tony clapped his hands together, "Great, what time should I come set up the camcorder?"

Alice and Bruce glared at him.

"You're right. I don't need to set up the camcorder. I'll just check the security feeds."

Alice looked at Bruce expectantly. "OH," he exclaimed. "Don't worry. There isn't security surveillance in the apartments…" he trailed off, turning towards Tony. "There isn't, is there?"

Tony shook his head. "No, no. Nothing like that. I've got High Def cameras in the apartments."

"Tony…" Bruce sighed.

"I don't. Of course, I don't. Here at Stark Tower, we respect your privacy."

Alice turned to Bruce, "I'm beat, are you going to be too much longer here, should I go find a comfy chair or couch to lie on?"

"No, let me just close everything down and I'll be ready to go," he answered. "You probably need to put a brace on that wrist."

"Your bag is over on the table over at my station," said Tony. "Go call Preston and tell him to pick one up for you."

"I can get your bag for you," offered Bruce.

Tony clotheslined him before he could walk over, "She can handle it."

Alice nodded, understanding Tony's tone.

She walked over and called Preston, who said he'd be back with a brace for her ASAP. She busied herself by checking her messages. Most were from Zeke. He was really mad, it appeared.
"Don't delete anything he sends you," called Tony from the other side of the lab.

She put her phone down and sat on a stool, her head down on the cool surface of the counter. The dull ache behind her eyes was threatening to turn into a full-blown migraine if she didn't get to sleep soon.

She texted Preston and asked him to pick up some migraine medicine while he was at the drug store. It was hard to text with one hand; her left hand was next to useless because her range of motion had been severely restricted. She figured the migraine medicine would work for her wrist pain too…it was pretty much just ibuprofen with caffeine.

She took several deep breaths and tried to relax. Hopefully, Bruce wouldn't take too much longer.
Tony had told him about the surprise party Zeke was throwing Alice. It made him feel...so many things. Jealousy. Anger. Fear.

He was starting to have second thoughts about giving her time to herself. Maybe he should have sent her something. Flowers, maybe? Jewelry? Maybe he should have taken her to lunch? Maybe he should have just clubbed her and tied her to his bed.

He was being stupid and he knew it. Whatever Alice decided, it was HER decision. As much as he wanted to be with her, he couldn't make this decision for her. He hoped that backing off for a week wasn't the worst mistake he'd ever made, however.

Tony was certain that the party was going to be a hilarious debacle. They both knew Alice well enough to know how much she hated any sort of big party or spectacle.

Bruce was still worried, though.

When Tony and Thor came into the lab, not an hour and a half after the party was supposed to start, Bruce took it as a good sign.

He didn't know what Tony could possibly find out by inspecting Mjolnir, however.

Bruce had inspected it himself and realized that it wasn't made from any naturally occurring elements on earth, so he had moved on to another project. Leave it to Tony to try to second guess everything he did.

Bruce was working on an equation on the touch screen when he felt her presence behind him. She approached him and kept back. He wasn't sure what that meant.

"I know you're looking at me," he said, smiling nervously over his shoulder at her. He concentrated on not appearing too eager and finished up the line of the equation. He turned and leaned against the counter.

As much as he wanted to run over to her and squeeze her until she squealed, he kept his breathing level and his gaze fixed on her.

*Let her come to you, let it be her decision.*

She wasted no time in crossing the floor to embrace him. He didn't ever want to let her go. He buried
his face in her hair for a second before she pulled back from him. She kept her arms around him, though, so he did the same.

"I've missed you," she said.

"I've missed YOU," he said.

Desperately.

"I ended things with Zeke," she said hesitantly.

Did she say what I think she said? She ended things with Zeke. She's… she ended things with him.

Bruce raised his eyebrows and felt his hands drop from her waist.

Why did I do that? Quick, do something else so you don't look like an idiot.

He crossed his arms in front of him.

Say something. Anything.

"How'd he take it?"

Who fucking cares how he took it? Not me.

Alice crossed her arms as well.

She smiled and widened her eyes, her face humorless. "Oh… you know Zeke. He's SO laid back…" she said, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

He chuckled, "I sense a BIT of sarcasm there." He tried to catch her gaze, to gauge how she was feeling. "Are YOU okay?"

That was all he really cared about. He hoped Zeke hadn't said anything hurtful to her.

"He was cheating on me, he couldn't let me get away without telling me that," she sighed.

Dammit.

"Alice…" he reached for her.

She shook her head.

He froze. What? Why did she… Does she know that I knew? Should I apologize? What do I do?

"I want to be with you, Bruce. I want to make this work. I want what you're offering and I'm offering you EVERYTHING in return," she looked up at him, her eyes shining. They were so bright. Green, like a field of clover. She swallowed thickly, waiting for his response.

He fought back a grin. Fought back all the joy and happiness that threatened to bubble over and envelop everything in the room. He felt warm inside, cozy, and comfortable for the first time in a while.

He looked down at his feet because if he looked at her, he'd embarrass himself.

"I'm PLEASED with your decision. However, I'd like to wait until we're alone to show you HOW pleased."
She smiled a real smile. One that made her eyes and nose crinkle. Her eyes were still shiny with unshed tears. She was so beautiful. Then she brought her hand up to cover her face.

"Why do you do that?" Bruce asked, voicing a thought that suddenly entered his mind. "Why do you cover your mouth when you smile?"

"I don't like my smile. I think my teeth are too small and it's too gummy."

"Nonsense," he said, another filter-less statement. "Your smile is beautiful. Your teeth are perfect."

"Good response," she teased. She didn't move her hand, though.

He reached forward and tugged her hand gently away from her face. She winced noticeably.

Oh no, did I hurt her?

Good job, Banner. Your first girlfriend in over eight years and you break her.

He frowned, holding her hand as gently as he could, "Did I hurt you?" He traced his thumb down the inside of her forearm from her elbow to her wrist. When he got to her wrist, she winced again.

"No, it was already hurt."

He tried to remember if he'd heard about another one of her clumsy accidents that week. He couldn't recall one. Tony would have told him. He remembered everything.

"What happened?" he asked, pulling his glasses out of his pocket. He decided a close inspection was necessary.

Now that he looked closer, there were bruises developing along her wrist. The pattern looked like a handprint.

He stopped, looking up at her. "Did Zeke do this?" It probably came out a bit harsher than he was going for, but hell if he wasn't furious. He knew damn well that's what had happened. He was pissed at Tony for not telling him sooner. He could feel the Other Guy growling. He pushed him back.

Not now. Let me see what's going on. I'll let you know if I need you.

"Yes, but…"

"Don't. Don't even TRY to defend this."

She's defending HIM? Why is she defending him?

"He got it worse than me! Pretty sure Preston broke his nose," she said defensively.

Wait a minute…

"PRESTON? Your driver, Preston?"

"Yeah. He's a trained assassin," she said flippantly.

"Oh. Of course, he is…I'm kind of sorry I missed that…"

Alice shook her head, "Don't be…if you'd have been there…"

"I'd have killed him."
He felt the Other Guy growl. He tried not to think about it. He tried not to think about anyone hurting Alice at all. He tried not to think about crushing Zeke's head like a grape. He pressed her hand up to his lips and closed his eyes, trying to calm himself.

_Alice needs YOU. She needs BRUCE right now. Not some giant green idiot. She needs you to hold her and kiss her and make her feel safe. You can do that for her. YOU can make her feel safe._

She talked about her horrible evening, and Bruce checked her arm for possible broken bones. It just felt like a sprain. He told her so.

The rest of the conversation was a blur. A blur nuanced with sudden stills of her big beautiful eyes, her engaging smile, and her melodious laugh. He loved to make her laugh. A blur until he finally, finally leaned in to kiss her.

_Why did I wait so long to do this? I should just spend every free second I have kissing this woman._

When he kissed her, time stood still, angels sang, all that bullshit he'd rolled his eyes at before. This one was even better than their first kiss because he wasn't so desperate. He wasn't subconsciously rushing things. He was cataloging every single detail. The feel of her lips against his, the warmth of her body pressed close to his, the shiver that went through her…the raucous yelling and cheering from the other side of the lab.

He blushed and kissed her cheek quickly before leaning back against the counter.

Then came the customary teasing from Tony, and the overly jubilant salutation from Thor.

Alice was looking worse for the wear. She tugged her hands away from Bruce.

"I should probably go…I'm getting a monster headache."

"Where are you staying? Do you want to stay with me tonight?" asked Bruce quickly.

She looked surprised.

_Cool it, Banner, you're scaring her._

"Not in the same bed, of course…unless you wanted that," he added quickly.

"Yes," she said suddenly.

Bruce was confused, "Yes, what?"

"Yes, I do. Want that. If it's okay with you…I mean. Just for tonight," she said quietly.

His stomach flipped, she wanted to sleep in the same bed. That meant…cuddling and closeness. Two things at which he was notoriously bad. He'd try, though. For her. If that's what she needed.

Not that he didn't want to cuddle her and be close to her. He was just worried he'd be awkward and that she'd be weirded out by him.

"Right, just for tonight."

Tony broke up the awkward moment with an even more awkward joke that dragged on for altogether too long.

Alice laughed nervously and looked over at Bruce. "I'm beat. Are you going to be much longer
here? Should I go find a comfy chair or couch to lie on?"

"No, let me just close everything down and I'll be ready to go," he answered. "You probably need to put a brace on that wrist."

"Your bag is on the table over at my station," said Tony. "Go call Preston and have him pick one up for you."

"I can get your bag for you…" Bruce said, turning to walk in the direction of Tony's station.

Tony reached out and clotheslined him before he could leave, "She can handle it."

Alice nodded and walked over to Tony's station.

"What the hell, Tony? She's tired, and I SHOULD go over and get her bag so we can leave."

"I just wanna talk to you first, Big Guy…"

"I don't need a sex talk, Tony."

"Hahaha…yes you do, but that's not what I was going to say…"

Bruce rolled his eyes, glancing over in Alice's direction quickly.

"So…" Tony snickered, "GET THIS…Alice's middle name? It's Louise," he burst out laughing.

Bruce narrowed his eyes. "Please tell me that isn't the reason you cock-blocked my chivalry…"

"No…BUT, it's funny."

"Okay, because your middle name is Edward. Like…sparkly vampires. Edward. You have no room to make fun of her name."

"Yeah well…your name is the same as a Scottish LORD who fought the British, and there's a movie about him…"

Bruce frowned in confusion.

"Robert the Bruce. Braveheart."

"Braveheart's not ABOUT Robert the Bruce, it's about William Wallace."

"Who sought the help of Robert the Bruce."

"Robert the Bruce is IN it, but…"

"Okay, whatever, I don't need a history lesson, there are important matters to discuss here BANNER."

"Braveheart is actually one of the most historically INACCURATE films ever made…" Bruce muttered under his breath.

They both looked at Thor, who was busy trying to balance Mjolnir on his index finger. He quickly set the hammer down on the floor.

"So she told you about Zeke?" asked Tony.
"Yep," Bruce nodded curtly.

"All of it? She told you about the wall slamming?"

"Wall slamming?"

"I'll take that as a firm 'no'…"

"TONY."

"Okay, so he grabbed her wrist and he might have SLIGHTLY slammed her against the wall…"

"Slightly?" Bruce took a deep breath. "So, uh… Zeke's back at the apartment right? I think I could get there in three minutes if you point the Other Guy in the right direction…"

"Three minutes? The Other Guy's out of shape."

Bruce exhaled loudly through his nose, trying to get the image out of his head.

"I know that if Lady Jane ever came under attack, I'd defend her honor, and enact JUSTICE on her attacker with a swift blow from my hammer," said Thor.

"Thor…the other way…we're trying to keep him OUT of the bad place!"

"This is not a bad place, Stark. It is a place of HONOR, JUSTICE, AND—"

"Thor, go home," said Tony.

"BUT—"

"Go home. Now. Send Steve…not really."

Thor crossed his arms belligerently but did not speak again

"Now, I'm sure you're plotting his murder right now…imagine the squish of his head under your thumb?" asked Tony.

Bruce didn't answer, he was trying to decide if he wanted to calm the pounding in his head or encourage it.

"Right well, imagine how much longer it's going to take for you to get Alice if you do that," Tony pointed across the lab towards where she was sitting. Bruce gazed at her. She was talking to someone on the phone, probably Preston. She looked beautiful even while completing the most mundane tasks.

Calm down, calm down…deep breaths…

Bruce took a long deep breath and let it out slowly, he turned back to Tony and Thor, who had retrieved his hammer and was staring at him warily.

"I'm good," he assured them and they relaxed a bit. "If he ever bothers her again, I'll kill him."

"I did not hear that…" Tony said absently.

"DOCTOR BANNER SAID THAT HE'D KILL LADY ALICE'S ATTACKER," said Thor loudly.
"Thank you, Fabio. The cameras are off, so none of this is on the record."

"I don't care. Let it be on record," said Bruce obstinately. He was silent for a moment, before an idea dawned on him.

"Is that why YOU'RE here?" he asked Thor. Bruce turned to Tony. "You thought I'd Hulk out because of this, didn't you?"

"You wanted to."

"But, I didn't!"

"No, but you WANTED to, understandably so."

Bruce sighed heavily, taking another deep breath.

"It was actually all she could talk about, getting back here to see you, got kind of annoying, actually. Like I didn't want to get back here to see you…" said Tony.

"Really?" Bruce asked. He couldn't hold back the smile or the blush that spread up his face.

"Yeah. You know I love you, man," said Tony, slapping him on the back.

Bruce shook his head, "Not…what I meant…I meant…Alice…" his eyes glanced over at her seemingly of their own accord.

"Aww, look at you. All cute and in love," Tony teased.

"I never said I was in love," Bruce objected.

"Never said you weren't."

Bruce felt the corners of his mouth twitch but kept it in check.

"So…what's the plan, Green Man? Is she moving in with you? Does she need an apartment? Is she gonna shack up with Darcy?"

"She's staying with me tonight…"

"Need any pointers?"

Bruce sighed, "Tony…"

"I'm sure Banner knows how to please a woman, Stark," Thor chastised.

Bruce couldn't help but smile at the Thunder God. It was nice of Thor to come to his defense. Of course, the statement put images in his mind that only served to frustrate him. He could think of exactly fourteen ways off the top of his head that he'd like to please Alice. He took a deep breath to clear his mind. He'd have a long night ahead of him if he didn't keep his wandering imagination in check.

"What about Zeke? He can't get in here, can he? He's with SHIELD, I know some of them have security clearance," said Bruce, trying to change the subject.

"He isn't a high enough level to receive any kind of clearance, but I'll input his information into JARVIS. I might not be able to keep him out of here legally, but I can keep him from accessing the
top levels and I can set up a notification system to let us know if he's in the building."

"I can't help but think we haven't seen the last of him…" said Bruce.

"I don't think he's going to take this lying down. He looked pretty butthurt after Preston destroyed his face."

Bruce looked back over at Alice, who had her head down on the counter. His stomach flipped. "I need to get going soon."

"Yes, just put all thoughts of grisly murder out of your mind and take care of your lady," Tony winked. "AND while you're busy sucking face, if you could get her to look at this." He handed him a SHIELD grievance report.

Bruce looked at the report, "SHIELD actually has its own grievance reports?"

"Well…I actually typed this up myself. Mostly as a joke…to use on Coulson…" he looked down momentarily but recovered quickly. "But now, it's widely used throughout the organization."

"I'll try. She probably won't go for it though. I get the feeling she just wants to forget it ever happened."

"Tough. Not every girl is lucky enough to have every single one of the Avengers to stand up for her. She needs to fill this out as a public service."

"I know…I can't stop thinking about what if he had a gun, or what if you and Pepper hadn't gone, or what if Preston wasn't there, what if she'd taken a cab home…I just…" he had to stop and take a few cleansing breaths as he felt his blood start pumping hot and angry through his veins. He couldn't stand the thought of anyone hurting her.

"Eh…we've got time to file this. Go. Go home. Get some," urged Tony.

"You KNOW that's not…just…never mind."

Bruce turned and walked over to Alice, he touched her on her shoulder, saying her name softly. She jumped a little and then held her head, pressing on her eyes. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"Migraine," she answered. "I asked Preston to get some migraine medicine with my brace."

"I can rub your shoulders for you. It might be a tension headache," offered Bruce.

She smiled faintly, "Thank you. That would be great." She got up and picked up her bag.

Bruce grabbed it for her and steered her out of the lab, his hand protectively on her lower back. He let her lean on him in the elevator and guided her to his apartment. She lay down on the sofa as soon as she came in, hiding her face under a pillow she found there.

"Do you sleep on the couch?" she asked, her voice muffled.

"Yes, how did you…know that?" he asked.

"This pillow smells like you…" she peeked out at him sheepishly. "Couch too."

"Really? What do I smell like?"

She pressed her face into the pillow again. "Mmm…charcoal, cinnamon, earl grey tea… the
bergamot oil probably, and…" she sniffed again, "something else I can't quite place…"

He smiled, "You can pick all of that out?"

"I've been smelling you for a while," she grinned. "Why do you sleep on the couch?"

"I was hoping you'd have forgotten…"

"Oh Bruce, I never forget anything," she laughed.

"Oh no…what have I gotten myself into?" he lamented sarcastically.

"A relationship with a WOMAN. We're like elephants, we never forget."

Bruce started, remembering how he knew about Zeke's infidelity long before Alice found out. He wondered if he should tell her or not. He looked at her face, she was her usual snarky self. How could he burst her bubble, when it was already fragile? He resolved to tell her soon, but not tonight. Tonight should just be…what it was.

"The bed's double and it's depressing to sleep in it alone," he confessed abruptly.

He wasn't sure why he told her THAT. It probably made him sound like a loser.

She moved the pillow off her face and looked up at him. "That is the single saddest thing I've heard all day. You're like a sad, ridiculously intelligent puppy."

He shrugged, trying to hide his embarrassment. At least he hadn't blurted something more dangerous, like what he had been ACTUALLY thinking about.

"Well," she continued, her head back under the pillow, "you're not alone now."

He smiled at the thought. He wanted to wrap himself around her and never move again.

He was about to say something else when he heard a knock at the door.

He peeked through the peephole and saw Preston standing on the other side of it, holding a paper bag from the drug store. Bruce opened the door.

He took the bag from Preston, thanking him. He opened it and saw the migraine medicine, the wrist brace, and a small bottle of peppermint oil. He pulled it out and looked questioningly at Preston.

"My gran always would put peppermint oil on my head when I had migraines. You can also put it on a hot towel and breathe the vapors."

Bruce smiled, "Thank you."

Preston shook his head, "Don't mention it." He actually looked embarrassed.

"I believe I owe you thanks for saving her from her ex earlier…"

"Don't mention it. Couldn't let that little prick get away with that behavior. I'd have done it for anyone…"

Bruce smiled.

Preston peeked his head around the door, "Ms. Vorso, I hope you feel better soon."
"Thank you, Preston," her voice was muffled from the pillow.

*Wow, if she's forsaking basic manners, this must be a bad headache...*

Preston nodded and left.

Bruce felt quite a bit better knowing that Alice was driven around all day by a trained assassin.

She sat up slowly, squinting.

"Okay so, he brought your brace, Excedrin, and also peppermint oil," Bruce informed her as she pulled on the brace.

"Peppermint oil?" she asked as she put on the brace.

"A folk remedy."

"Oh."

"Do you still want the Excedrin?"

"Yes," she said quickly.

"I'll get some water."

She sat up on the couch, shook out two pills and swallowed them before he brought the water to her. She did take a sip to wash them down, though.

"You should drink more than that, adequate hydration helps blood flow to the brain."

She took another sip or two, before putting the bottle down on the coffee table. "Do you have coasters?" she asked, looking around.

Bruce chuckled, "No, should I?"

"If you don't want rings on your coffee table."

Bruce shrugged. "Somehow, rings don't bother me."

Alice laughed quietly, squeezing her eyes shut, "But you freak out about spilled soup..." her face looked pained, but her tone sounded light.

"I cannot abide spilled soup," he laughed. "I am...infinitely sorry about that, Alice. When I think of how I spoke to you..."

She waved her hand, "I understand, Bruce. You don't have to keep apologizing."

"I know, but I was so terribly rude...and...the Other Guy..."

"He doesn't seem to like me very much," she said absently.

"No, no he doesn't."

"Wonder why...jealousy? Am I taking up all your time?"

"Not my time...my thoughts, though."
Bruce wasn't actually sure why the Other Guy didn't like her. It was weird. It was like he was... scared of her. Which was laughable. Alice was five foot nothing, *Maybe* one-hundred-ten pounds soaking wet. Why would the Other Guy be scared of such a tiny, non-threatening woman? Maybe he *was* jealous.

She rubbed her eyes, "Do you think I could get that back rub now?"

"Of course. Now, I used to be really good at this, but I might be rusty."

"Should I sit on the floor?"

"That would be very helpful if you don't mind."

Alice started to scoot onto the floor but stopped. "Actually, do you mind if I run down the hall and get some clothes from Darcy? These are my work clothes, not conducive to comfort."

"Only if I can come with you."

"Fine. If you must."

"I must."

She rose and Bruce got up with her. They both walked down the hall to Darcy's apartment. Darcy opened on the first knock and crushed Alice in a bear hug.

"I heard about what happened, are you okay?!"

"I'm fine, just a headache now."

She looked at Bruce, "You don't let anything happen to her, do you hear me? Or I will find a way to hurt you!"

"I swear on my life," he said in what he hoped sounded like a joke. Even though it wasn't.

"Do you need clothes?" she asked Alice. "Is she staying with you?" she asked Bruce.

"Just for tonight," said Alice, effectively answering both questions.

"Well, come in and get what you need," she finally moved aside and let them come in.

Darcy's apartment was abysmally disgusting. Bruce couldn't think of a better way to describe it. There were fast food containers everywhere. Darcy's clothing was strewn all over the living room. He didn't really need to know what kind of underwear Darcy wore. Skimpy, apparently. He averted his eyes from the couch, where most of the clothing was concentrated.

Bruce wrinkled his nose, "What's that smell?"

Darcy sniffed, "Honestly, I don't notice it anymore."

Alice grimaced, "It smells like old shrimp."

"Reason number forty-three why I'm a vegetarian," muttered Bruce.

Darcy shrugged, "I dunno, I think you guys just have sensitive noses."

"Why don't you just let the cleaning crew clean it?" asked Alice.
"They won't come in here anymore," said Darcy.

Bruce widened his eyes. Alice shook her head in disbelief as she went to the spare room to find pajamas and clothes for the next day. She came back out with all her clothing draped over her arm.

"Ready, Bruce?"

"Oh God, yes," he turned and opened the door for Alice and then headed out himself, bumping into her when she stopped to say goodbye to Darcy.

Once in the hall and a safe distance away from her door, she looked over at him, wide-eyed and barely suppressing a laugh. He burst out laughing and she followed suit.

"Oh my God, it smelled awful in there!" she squealed.

"What was that? I've never smelled anything that bad in my life."

"I know, right?"

"You're going to live there? Alice, you're going to smell like the dumpster outside of a seafood restaurant."

"Yeah, well, maybe I can clean up for her."

"Or, you could just stay with me," he said, opening the door to his apartment. "No strange smells."

"No smells at all, there's nothing in here!"

"Say what you will about my apartment. At least it doesn't smell like old shrimp," he laughed. "But, you could, you know. If you wanted."

"What? Smell like old shrimp? No thanks."

"No, you could stay here. Until you find your own place...or you could just...stay here," he added quietly.

"What, like move in?"

"If you want to label it."

She smiled, "Bruce, I appreciate the offer, but we barely know each other. I don't even know your birthday or your middle name. And you don't know mine."

"Louise. And your birthday is in one week."

"How do you know my middle name?" she narrowed her eyes playfully.

"Tony told me. And you know my middle name. You just don't know my first name," he smiled.

"Bruce is your middle name? What's your first name?"

"Robert."

"I like it."

"Thanks, I don't."
"It's better than either of my names. Alice and Louise. Old lady names."

"They're old fashioned and I'm sure there are some great reasons why your parents chose them."

"Louise was my Mom's name."

Bruce was silent. She'd never spoken of her parents before.

"And my dad was a big Lewis Carroll fan. He picked both names. My mom...my mom died a few weeks after I was born."

"I'm sorry...that's terrible..." he waited, he didn't want to overstep his bounds and ask too much. But, at the same time, he craved information about her.

"Don't be sorry, I never met her. I'm told she was a great woman and she loved me very much, even though she never really met me, but that only goes so far, you know? My grandparents raised me. My mother's parents."

"What happened to your father?" The question was out before he could stop it.

"Same thing that happened to Mom, cancer. It started in the endocrine system. She denied treatment because she was pregnant with me. Dad hung on for a few years because he accepted treatment."

"They had the same kind of cancer?"

"Yep."

"What caused it?"

"I don't know, environmental factors, supposedly. They were scientists."

"You never mentioned that your parents were scientists!" he exclaimed.

"Well...I'd rather if you liked me for me and not my impeccable breeding," she quipped. "Honestly, I forget. I rarely ever think of them. I don't really remember my dad at all and I never met my mom. Gram and Pops raised me," she shrugged.

Bruce wasn't really listening. He was trying to think if he knew of any scientists with the last name 'Vorso'.

"Your dad's not Dr. Russ Vorso?" he asked.

"Yeah, actually. You've heard of him?"

"Yes, I have..." He jumped up and walked over to the bookshelves, in search of a specific binder. He found it.

"Here. Is this him?" He flipped through the binder until he found the photocopied faculty page of a college. Culver University to be exact.

Alice smiled and took the binder from him. "Yeah...that's my dad...he's so young here. And there's my mom! Dr. Louise Abernathy."

Bruce looked at the photo and back at Alice. "You look like her, nothing like your dad, really."

"I get that a lot. Just my nose is Dad's. Did you...know him?" she asked.
"Before my time at Culver, I'm afraid, I have read some of his research…he also worked in nuclear physics."

"Oh," said Alice, nodding.

Bruce cleared his throat, "So…umm, since you never thought to mention they were scientists, I guess you never thought to mention that they worked on the super soldier program?"

She raised her eyebrows, "I didn't know THAT. My grandparents never told me what they did, or even what kind of science they specialized in. I did not inherit it from either of them. I'm a right-brainer," she shrugged. "Down to my left-handed-ness."

Bruce nodded, "Your grandparents probably didn't even know..." he said more to himself than to her. He got up and put the binder back in the bookcase. His brow furrowed for a split second.

*This can't be a coincidence. She's working for Tony, AND she's Russ Vorso's daughter...I didn't even know Dr. Vorso HAD children. I have got to find out what he did for the super-soldier program. SHIELD's bound to have those files somewhere. I don't care if they're supposedly blacked out. Whatever they were doing, it was important enough to hide... Don't worry about this now. Worry about Alice. She's probably hungry.*

He looked up at Alice and smiled, "Are you hungry?"

"I am. Actually starving. I'd forgotten what it felt like to be hungry, I've been without an appetite for so long."

"Well..." he walked over to the fridge. "I am not known for my culinary prowess; however...I can make a mean omelet."

Alice walked over to the fridge and peeked in behind him, "You actually have food in there!"

"Eggs. AND milk," he stated, proudly.

"Perishables. You're really an adult now," she grinned.

*She must be feeling better.*

"What do you want in your omelet?"

She thought for a moment, "Cheese?"

"I have cheese."

"Une omelette au frommage, s'il vous plait," she said.

"Avec Plaisir, mon cher," he answered.

"You speak French?"

"A little... conversational mostly. 'Vous ne me voudriez pas quand j'ai faim', that sort of thing."

"I wouldn't like you when you're HUNGRY?" she asked.

"No, angry. You wouldn't like me when I'm angry."

"You said 'hungry', faim means hunger."
"Damn, I always mess that up…"

Alice snorted in laughter.

Bruce laughed, "I'll be right back with your omelet."

"I'm going to go change," she said, getting up and picking up the small pile of clothing she had brought over from Darcy's. She quickly folded everything and pulled out her pajamas. She took them into the bathroom to change.

She came out rather quickly. She had folded her work clothes neatly and carried them out with her.

"I left all my shower stuff at Darcy's. I'm just going to run over and get it; I'll be back in five minutes."

"I have soap," he stated.

"That's nice, but I'm a girl."

"I'm aware of that, do girls not use soap? Because that's kind of a deal-breaker."

"I have a whole routine…and your soap would probably make my face break out…no offense, but this," she gestured around her face, "is very sensitive, and that," she gestured to his face, "looks like it could handle anything."

He rolled his eyes.

"Plus, your shampoo is for guys," she crinkled her nose. "Probably smells like a bonfire or something."

"You were SNOOPING in my bathroom," he said in mock accusation.

She grinned, "Sorry, but you left your shower door open."

"I was kidding, look at anything you want, I have nothing to hide."

She smiled thoughtfully, "I'd rather just look at you…"

He blushed, changing the subject quickly, "Okay…Do you want me to go with you?"

She looked confused for a moment before she understood what he meant, "I think I can handle walking two doors down to Darcy's apartment."

"Well, judging by the smell in there, there might be some rather large rodents lurking around."

"You mean R.O.U.S?"

"What?" he asked, puzzled.

"Rodents of unusual size… from the Princess Bride?"

"I've never seen that."

"You have got to be kidding me. How are you alive and you haven't seen that movie?"

He shrugged, "Four doctorates."
"But you obviously haven't lived. You haven't seen the Princess Bride. We're watching that tonight."
"Fine," he acquiesced.
"I'll be right back. Five minutes."
"Okay."

It actually took ten minutes, but that was because Darcy kept trying to get her to stay and talk.

"That was ten minutes," he chided. "Your omelet is getting cold."
"Sorry… Darcy kept trying to talk to me. The nerve."
"I found your movie…" he gestured towards the TV.
"Yay!" she smiled, sitting down at the counter. "Do you have ketchup?"
"For your cheese omelet?"
"Yeah," she said as if it were the most normal request in the world.
"I believe I do have ketchup."

After dinner, they both sat down to watch 'The Princess Bride', Alice on the floor and Bruce on the couch so he could give her a back rub.

"Don't you want to put on your pajamas?" she asked.
"I don't have any," he confessed.
"So, what…do you sleep naked?"
"No …I usually just wear whatever I have on," he said sheepishly.
"I'm going shopping tomorrow and I'm buying you pajamas."
"Why?"
"Because, you have to differentiate between work and home, Bruce."
"If you say so."
"I do… are you going to the lab tomorrow?"
"I was planning on it unless you want me to stay here."
"Well, maybe a half-day? I promised Darcy I'd go shopping with her tomorrow. Wanna sleep in?"
"I'm not sure I know how to do that."
"I'll teach you. I'm awesome at it."

Bruce chuckled and continued rubbing her back, "Is this feeling any better?"
"That feels…glorious. My headache went away about five minutes after you started, but I just want you to keep touching me."
Bruce smiled, "I can do this all night if needed."

After the movie, he lay in his bed for the first time, with Alice curled up next to him. It was hard to get used to. She slept fitfully. He wasn't sure if she always thrashed around like she was, or if it was because she was in a new place. He hoped it wasn't nightmares.

He was familiar with nightmares. They had plagued him every night since he starting changing. When he finally drifted off to sleep, it was well after two in the morning, but it was the calmest sleep he ever had.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

More plot! Plot 2: the Plottening!

Chapter Notes

Yes, you get two chapters today, what are you gonna do about it?

(Comment, I hope... xoxo)

Bruce

Bruce woke up the next morning to see the sun streaming in the window. It wasn't a sight he was used to seeing. He usually woke long before sunrise. He only woke up because Alice splashed hot tea on him when she was crawling back into bed. He'd have to remember to pull the bed away from the wall.

"Sorry…" she said, smiling crookedly. "I put yours on the nightstand."

He looked over to see a steaming cup of black tea. "Thanks," he said, touched. No one had brought him anything in bed in such a long time. "What time is it?" he asked, sitting up.

"9:30," she replied. "Would you like some pancakes?"

"Yes. Are you making them?"

"I was planning on it."

"I don't think I have flour."

"I borrowed some from the big kitchen in the common area. Steve showed me where it was."

"Oh okay," he sat up in bed and reached for his tea.

"Flannel," said Alice, squinting at him in consideration.

"I'm sorry?" he asked.

"Pajamas. Flannel? I'm just guessing."

"Umm…"

"Or do you want cotton? Definitely not silk. At least I hope not."
"It really doesn't matter. You're the only one who's going to see them," he replied into his teacup.

She quirked her head to the side, studying him, "What are you thinking right now?"

"Hmm? Right now? I'm wishing that you'd leave so I could stand up."

She frowned and when realization dawned on her, she scoffed, "Gross." She handed him her tea while she got out of bed. She took it back from him.

He grinned, "You asked."

"Boys are SOOOO gross," she complained.

"You're the one who wanted to stay here," he teased. "You knew what you were getting into."

"I'm leaving," she said loudly. She walked out into the living room.

Bruce took a few minutes and finished his tea before getting out of bed. He went out into the living room and found Alice measuring ingredients into a bowl; she had her laptop open on the opposite counter. She kept looking at it, presumably at the recipe.

"Since you stayed over, I thought it was my job to make breakfast?" he asked, taking a seat at the counter.

She smirked, "I wanted pancakes and I wasn't sure if you knew how to make them."

Bruce chuckled, "I know how to make eggs, but I usually don't have any here. I can make toast, and open yogurt containers. That's the extent of my breakfast skills, I'm afraid."

"It's a good thing I know how to cook, then, isn't it?" She smiled warmly and began to mix the contents of the bowl. She had some stray flour on her cheek, and some on her forehead.

"I feel like I should step up my game if I want you to keep coming back," he said, grinning. "What time are you meeting Darcy?"

"Noon."

"Oh," he said. He was sure he sounded crestfallen, but it was hard to hide his emotions around Alice.

"You're the one who wanted to go into the lab today! It's my day off, I'm not spending it alone and inside!" she said accusingly.

Bruce laughed quietly, "I know, I'm just… going to miss you." He surprised himself with that revelation. He couldn't remember a time he'd missed someone. Except for his mother. He still missed her sometimes, but that was different. He missed Alice when she went into another room.

"Well, I have to buy some things. I'm going to need more clothing than what I have here, and if I'm still not allowed to go back to the apartment to get my stuff yet…"

"You're not," said Bruce.

"I need to go shopping," she finished. "I also need to get cleaning supplies for Darcy's apartment…" She poured batter into the hot pan, setting the bowl back on the counter. Bruce got up and walked over to lean against the counter nearest her.

"Just stay here, Alice," he said, trying to keep the pleading tone out of his voice.
"I don't know, Bruce…" she poked at the edges of the pancakes with a spatula.

"Why not? I told you what my middle name is," he grinned, crossing over to stand behind her. He wound his arms around her waist.

"Bruce…"

"Just… think about it. Stay one more night? I'm sure I can convince you." He nuzzled her neck before resting his head on her shoulder, bending slightly. He'd been right before, he probably could rest his chin on the top of her head.

"I don't doubt it. I'm just not sure we're ready for that kind of a commitment yet," she flipped the first pancake, breaking a piece off. She flipped the other two with no trouble.

"Just one night, not forever. Not yet, anyway," he pressed a kiss to her jawline, tightening his arms around her.

It scared him how much he clung to her already. He was pretty sure she wasn't at the same place he was. He was desperately trying not to scare her off because he couldn't live without her. He'd tried.

She felt like a lifeline, a means to an end and a way for him to find that piece of himself he thought was lost so long ago. His raison d'être.

She smiled, leaning into him, "Fine, you wore me down. Just ONE more night, though."

He pressed his lips to the soft skin on her neck, her hair tickling his nose, "Thank you."

He begrudgingly released her to let her finish cooking. He supposed it was hard to do with a one-hundred-seventy-pound barnacle attached to your hip. He instead busied himself by getting out plates, silverware, and starting the kettle for tea. He opened the fridge and found a carton of orange juice inside, as well as a quart of half and half. He pulled out the orange juice, trying to remember buying it.

"I sent Steve to the store," Alice laughed.

"You sent Steve Rogers on an errand?"

"He owed me a favor, I needed buttermilk and orange juice… and I really, really need half-and-half for my tea, Bruce."

"I'm sorry I didn't have a chance to get any between last night and this morning. I was busy sleeping. Damn REM cycle." Bruce slid a plate over to Alice so she could fill it with pancakes.

Alice laughed. "Just so you know. For future reference. I need tea in the morning or I'm just not my super-chipper-pleasant-self. Being this awesome takes work."

"I doubt that." Bruce took a moment to fully appreciate her casual beauty of the morning. She was always so perfectly coifed and laced up when she arrived for work. Not that she didn't look great, she always did, but this was different.

Her hair was in a messy braid, curls, and twigs sticking out in every direction. Her face was free of make-up and he could see she had freckles. Lots of them, an almost unbelievable amount of freckles. Her skin was really pale too, almost translucent in places. Her eyelashes were lighter, almost invisible. She must put mascara or something on them during the day to make them stand out more.
No. She didn't have to try at all. He was certain of it. He smiled.

"What are you grinning at, Goofy?" she asked, flipping the last of the pancakes onto the plate.

_How long was I looking at her?

She walked closer to him, setting the plate down on the counter near the stools.

He shrugged, "Just admiring you. You look…different in the morning."

She rolled her eyes, "I look ghastly in the morning."

"No, not at all. You're beautiful," he protested.

She snorted, "I'm pale and freckly." She wrinkled her nose.

"You have what they call porcelain skin, and it's highly sought after," Bruce corrected. "Some women would kill for skin like yours."

She shrugged, "I'm still freckly."

"Angel kisses. That's what my mother called freckles. The angels must love you," he smiled fondly at the memory of his mother. "They're adorable," he smiled and leaned down to kiss her lips. "And so is your nose when you wrinkle it," he punctuated his sentence by kissing the tip of her nose.

She blushed and walked over to the counter, where a paper grocery bag sat. She pulled out butter and syrup, the latter she handed to Bruce. "Do you have a butter dish?" she asked, deftly moving past the compliments he'd just given her.

Bruce frowned. "I don't think so… sorry."

"I'll pick one up for you today… I'll take a look around and see what else you need. Pajamas, butter dish… anything else?" she asked, unwrapping the butter and setting it on the counter still on the wrapper.

Bruce chuckled, "You can't handle compliments, can you?"

She turned abruptly and looked at him, "What?"

He raised his eyebrows, "When I told you how beautiful you look just now… you got uncomfortable."

"Yes, because I'm not."

"Not what?"

"I'm not beautiful."

"Of course you are." Bruce was used to women doing this, but this didn't seem like the usual compliment fishing that most women did. She genuinely seemed uncomfortable when he said anything pertaining to her looks.

Alice sighed, "I'm glad you think so." She took a seat at the counter. Bruce sat beside her.

The pancakes were actually good. He didn't know what he was expecting, but he ended up eating a half dozen of them.
Alice took two and picked her way through half. She finished her tea and orange juice, though. He was starting to worry about her eating habits.

"You didn't like them?" he asked, gesturing to the half-eaten stack on her plate.

"I got full," she smiled, taking another bite to placate him.

"Have you been feeling alright?" he asked, brushing her hair out of her face.

"Yes, I'm just… really stressed. When everything dies down, I'll eat more."

"Do you want anything else? Want another omelet?" he asked, remembering the night before when she had polished off a cheese omelet with ketchup in less than two minutes.

"Um… maybe… yeah, if you don't mind making it for me."

He felt the corners of his mouth pulling up, "Of course I don't mind."

He got up and cleared his plate. He left hers on the off chance that she'd finish her pancakes. He made her another cheese omelet and sat back down beside her while she finished it.

"Mmm…" she hummed appreciatively, "It's better hot… thank you."

"Anytime. Don't hesitate to ask," he leaned in to kiss her. She tasted like a combination of ketchup and maple syrup… kind of weird, but he'd take it.

She leaned back, grinning and covering her mouth. "I'm gonna go take a quick shower and brush my teeth. I bet I don't taste good."

"You taste just fine. A little… ketchup-y, but fine."

She wrinkled her nose, "Sorry." She got up and went into the bedroom to grab a change of clothes. She then went into the bathroom.

He heard the shower running and decided to start cleaning up. He loaded all the dishes into the dishwasher that he had barely used. It still smelled like plastic inside. He searched under the cabinet and didn't see any dishwasher detergent. So instead, he took out a sponge to wipe down the counter and stovetop.

He grabbed the shopping bag and dumped out the rest of the contents onto the countertop: dishwasher detergent and a box of matches. He smiled, she really had thought of everything. Although he wasn't sure what the matches were for. He put them away in one of the kitchen drawers. He put the dishwasher detergent under the sink.

Alice came out soon after he was finished, her hair wet and curling. She had changed out of her pajamas. She was wearing jeans and a white t-shirt, the neckline cut out to hang off one shoulder. She had folded her pajamas and stuck them on the desk chair in the living room.

"I just need another quick minute. I have to do my face," she held up a black bag, presumably her make-up bag.

Bruce followed her to the bathroom and leaned on the door frame, watching as she applied her make up. "Alice, where are you from?" he asked, intrigued once again by her accent.

She smirked, "I guess that accent popped up again, didn't it?"
He smiled.

She continued, "Southwest Tennessee. Wasn't born there, but I was raised there."

Bruce nodded, "around Memphis, then?"

"Close, but not in Memphis… Have you heard of Southmeade? Probably not."

Bruce shook his head, "No, can't say that I have."

"Well, that's where I grew up. Southmeade, unincorporated. We had a post office, and not much else," she grinned, looking at his reflection in the mirror.

"What made you move to New York?" asked Bruce.

"Zeke," she answered. "He got a job working for SHIELD and I moved here with him."

Bruce came into the bathroom and sat down on the edge of the tub. "Where'd you meet him?" he asked quietly, both wanting to know about their relationship and wanting to make her forget it ever existed.

"College. I got a full music scholarship to a state school. Ended up dropping out of the music program because Zeke said he didn't want to have to carry me financially. I mean, I guess he was right, music isn't a career, but I miss it every now and again," she applied liquid eyeliner with ease and care to her top eyelids.

"You said you play the piano, right?"

"Piano mainly, but I can play a few other string instruments too."

"I'd love to hear you play," he said, trying to catch her gaze in the mirror.

"Oh…" she blushed, "Maybe if you really want to… I'm not that great."

"You got a full music scholarship; you must have been doing something right. No shortage of musicians in Tennessee, right?"

"I guess…"

"I applaud you because I have never been musically inclined in the slightest."

"Everyone has a tiny bit of music in them," she smiled at him again in the mirror.

She had applied dark purple eye shadow as well as what looked like a light green and gold. He'd never really paid attention to a woman applying makeup before, the process was fascinating. Basically, she was creating layers… like a painter. Kind of cool.

When she finished, she had transformed into the Alice he was used to seeing every day in the lab. Not that she looked much different, but the makeup did make her look a bit older.

"What are your plans for today?" Bruce asked.

"Um… I don't know. Macy's for sure, to get your pajamas. And there's a boho boutique I wanted to check out…"

"Do you want me to give you my card? For the pajamas or whatever?" Bruce asked.
"Nah, don't worry about it. You're my fella. I can buy your pajamas."

Bruce had to admit, he liked it when Alice referred to him as 'hers', but he didn't want her paying for everything.

"I'd feel better if you let me pay for them."

"Tell you what, just buy me something nice the next time you venture outside."

He chuckled uncomfortably. He didn't have the slightest idea of what Alice would consider nice. She already had bought him something, which he'd never reciprocated. He thought fondly back to the day she'd bought him that shirt, the purple one with green stripes. He wore it at least once a week now.

Now she was buying him pajamas, and he hadn't so much as gotten her flowers. Would she like flowers? She'd never mentioned what her favorite was.

How would one go about finding out a significant other's favorite flower?

He didn't imagine he could just come out and ask her, which would seem obvious.

Oh, here's a solution.

He grabbed his wallet from the counter and pulled out his credit card.

"Why don't YOU just buy yourself something, from me, while you're out?" He extended the card towards her.

Alice stared at the card, not taking it from him. She looked back up at him, expectantly.

He frowned, "I can sense that THIS is not what you want from me… before you get mad…” she raised her eyebrows, "…der than you are, can you explain to me why you are now disillusioned with me?"

Her severe face broke into a grin. "I'm not mad, Bruce. I understand that you haven't had a girlfriend in a while. However, money…” she gestured to the card still in his outstretched hand, "is for hookers. Gifts are for girlfriends."

He blushed, quickly replacing the card in his wallet.

"I am so sorry… I wasn't thinking… I don't know what you like, I don't know what to get you… I panicked…”

She giggled, leaning over to kiss him. "I like YOU. You know that about me. You've also eaten lunch with me pretty much every day for a month. You didn't glean ANY information about me in all that time?"

"I was mostly concentrating on staring at you while giving the appearance of someone who's not a creep," he said sheepishly.

She kissed him again, "Don't worry about it. You don't HAVE to get me anything. I really don't need anything. I just thought you felt weird because I was buying your pajamas. I offered up a solution, and I really wasn't thinking all that much about it."

There was a knock at the door. It was a little before noon, Bruce was mildly perturbed that Darcy came early, which cut into his time with Alice.
Alice was pulling on a pair of sneakers when Darcy came in.

"Damn, Dr. B. Your apartment is bare. I think Alice is the prettiest thing in here."

"I'm sure that would be the case no matter what," Bruce said haughtily.

"Awww! You're just too cute!" Darcy simpered.

Bruce looked nervously at Alice. He'd simply been stating a fact. He wasn't looking for Darcy's approval.

Alice smiled. She stood and slipped her arms around his neck, pressing a kiss to his cheek. "I'll see you later?" She pulled back to leave, but Bruce held her tightly. He leaned down to kiss her properly before she left.

Darcy cleared her throat.

Alice's hands tightened on his shoulders, her mouth soft and pliant against his. He begrudgingly ended the kiss. "Be safe, I'll see you tonight," he whispered against her lips. Alice made an affirmative sound, not unlike a whimper. He smiled. It was nice knowing he wasn't the only one affected.

She scooped up her bag and waved on her way out the door. Bruce sighed, her presence was gone and the apartment felt colder. He went to the bathroom to shower and get ready to go down to the lab.

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Alice

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"Damn Tennessee, did he chew your face off?" Darcy joked as they rode the elevator down to the lobby.

Alice blushed. Zeke had never been one for PDA and she certainly hadn't pegged Bruce as someone who would be. "Not quite."

"Well, you certainly look happier. Not too happy, if you know what I mean."

Alice rolled her eyes. "I am happy," she affirmed.

"Good. You'd better be. Or I'll kick his ass," Darcy threatened. Alice wasn't entirely sure she was kidding.

They went to Macy's, where Alice bought Bruce several pairs of flannel pajama bottoms and some t-shirts. They made a quick stop in housewares for a butter dish. Alice also picked up a few scented candles because his apartment smelled like a hotel, minus the cigarette smoke. She was fairly certain he'd never smoked anything in his life. Then, she bought a throw blanket for the back of the couch.

"Are you decorating his apartment now? You're going to move in, I bet," Darcy said.

Alice scoffed, "No, no. I just thought I'd get a couple of things that would make the place look lived in. I mean, he's not going to get them."
They stopped by the boho boutique where Alice wanted to go. She spent way too much money replacing a few of the items she’d gotten rid of at Zeke's request. Darcy even bought a few things. They both expressed their approval of the store and vowed to come back.

They stopped off at a coffee shop on their way to their next destination. Darcy went up to order their drinks and Alice secured a table and settled in to check her email on her phone.

She scrolled through the junk mail and stopped dead when she saw an email from an unknown sender.

Subject line: I gotcha, bitch. What the hell? Who says that?

She opened it, which in hindsight wasn't the smartest thing she'd ever done. There were attachments, lots of them.

Pictures. Pictures of me kissing Steve. Video of me going into and leaving Bruce's apartment. A video of me FLASHING Bruce?! What?! When the hell did that happen? Oh my god. How embarrassing.

She scanned the email hurriedly, her worried gaze locking on each specific part. The subject line. The unknown sender, just a bunch of seemingly random letters, numbers and symbols. She choked when she read the next line.

CC: ezekielpowell, editor-jjjameson .

Shit. Shit. Shit. CCs sent to Zeke and… J. Jonah Jameson. The Daily Fucking Bugle. SHIT.

The attachments had been sent to both Zeke AND the Daily Bugle.

She suddenly felt sick.

She reread the subject line.

Thomas. Thomas talks like that. Thomas works in security. That little shit ratted me out.

"What's wrong? You look like you swallowed a bug," Darcy peered down at her, drinks in hand.

"We have to go," she jumped up, almost forgetting their bags. She spotted Preston leaning against the car and she informed him of their next destination. Darcy hurried after her, juggling her purse and the coffee. Alice took hers absently, placing it in the cup holder beside her.

"What's going on?" Darcy asked, clearly frustrated with not knowing.

Alice simply handed her the phone. Darcy scanned the email quickly.

"What the hell? That picture was sent from me to Tony, how did this d-bag get it?"

Alice shook her head, not caring in the slightest how Thomas got the information, "It was sent to the Daily Bugle , Darcy. And Zeke. Oh, God." She put her head down on her knees.

"It'll be okay, Alice. Just go talk to Tony right away, maybe he can stop them from printing it."

"The email was sent this morning, I'm sure they're already printing it in the afternoon edition. This is terrible PR, Darcy. It looks like Tony hired me to bang all the Avengers."

"Chill, Big Red. Let's go find Bruce and Tony. I'm sure they'll know what to do."
Bruce

Bruce had left his apartment and walked out to the common area.

He was surprised to find Tony, Steve, Thor and Clint communing around the kitchen counter.

"Why aren't you in the lab?" he asked Tony.

"I might ask you the same question, Casanova."

Bruce rolled his eyes, "I can't take a morning off once in a while?"

"Not if you're going to let Dr. Foster get to the lab first to mess with the thermostat. It's too cold in there. I can't concentrate on what I'm doing. My nipples could cut glass."

"Well, at least they're good for something," Bruce said, smirking.

"Sixty-five degrees in there. I can't work under these conditions."

Bruce laughed.

Tony stared at him incredulously.

"Oh—you're serious? I'm... sorry. No work today, I take it?"

"It wouldn't appear that way, no."

"Okay, well, that's fine. I needed some advice, anyway." He looked at the other men seated around the counter. "It's probably good that you're all here, I can't imagine Tony's advice would be helpful."

Tony held back laughter. "Sure big guy. What, did you forget where to put it? Has it been that long?"

Bruce narrowed his eyes, "Never mind."

"No, no, no, I'm sorry, I'll try to be serious, I promise."

"I need—" Bruce began.

"The soft touch of a woman!" Tony blurted loudly.

Bruce glared at him.

"Sorry, sorry... go ahead," Tony folded his arms complacently.

"I need to get Alice a gift. She's gotten me quite a few, and I have no idea what to give her."

"What has she gotten you?" asked Tony, suddenly serious.

"A shirt... and now today, pajamas."
Tony nodded. Clint squinted his eyes in thought. Steve and Thor looked disinterested.

"Should I get her pajamas?" Bruce asked cautiously.

"NO," answered Tony and Clint in unison.

"When a woman gets clothing for a man, it's because she wants to see him wear it. When a man gets clothing for a woman, it's because he wants to see her take it off." Clint explained.

Tony nodded in agreement, "Precisely. And unless JARVIS failed to inform me, you and Alice have not yet done the deed…"

Bruce raised an eyebrow, "JARVIS? Never inform Mr. Stark of my… activities…"

"Or mine," added Clint.

"New settings saved," said JARVIS.

"JARVIS, I created you. Obey your master!"

"Sir, Dr. Banner has a much more pleasing tone than you do."

Tony swore under his breath, "My creation has turned against me… I always knew this day would come, but I never thought this utter betrayal would come at the hands of a friend." He glared comically at Bruce.

"Okay… can we… get back to my problem, please?"

"Sure, sure. Look…" Tony jumped back in where he'd previously left off, "…the only type of clothing that is appropriate for chick-gifting is lingerie. Only get for her what you want to see her take off… or leave on if that's your thing," he winked.

Bruce shifted uncomfortably, wishing someone would change the subject from lingerie to something else. Literally anything.

"Never buy her everyday clothing. It's an utter minefield. Get her something too modest? BOOM! You now think her style is too revealing. Get her something too revealing? BOOM! Now, you're trying to change her. You don't care about what she has to say because all you can think about is having sex with her."

"Doesn't buying her lingerie say exactly that, though?" asked Steve confusedly.

"NO, ninety-five-year-old virgin. I can see how you might think that, though. No, lingerie says that you think she's beautiful. You think she's sexy. You can't wait to see her in that lacy crap and rip it off her with your teeth. No, lingerie makes her feel wanted because no one else but you gets to see her in it…"

"Damn, Tony, that's poetic," said Clint.

"… When all you really want, is to take her on a motorcycle in the garage. But no! It's too dirty in the garage," Tony finished.

"There it is…" Clint said, shaking his head.

"Tony… stay away from my motorcycle," said Steve.
Bruce shook his head in disbelief, "Thanks for the lesson, but I still need an idea of what to get for Alice…"

"Well, I know not what Midgardians normally get for their mates, but I know that Lady Jane appreciates it when I present her with something I've killed," Thor's voice boomed loudly.

Tony snapped his head around to look at Thor. "Are you bringing dead animals into my tower?"

"They are not dead when they get here, Man of Iron," Thor grinned.

"Great, so you are hunting animals in your apartment? That's it, I'm rewriting the lease. You're signing it tomorrow. No hunting of animals in the apartments," he turned to look at the rest of them. "This goes for all of you."

Clint, who had been staring thoughtfully into space for the majority of Thor's confession, snapped his fingers and pointed at Bruce. "You should get her a journal."

Bruce frowned, "Why would I get her a journal?"

"So she can record her thoughts," said Clint deliberately, as if he were losing patience with Bruce. "Yes!" exclaimed Tony, "and then you can read it when she's not home and see what she really thinks of you!"

"No," said Steve, "Don't do that, Bruce."

Bruce looked exasperatedly between them, "I don't… she doesn't… THIS IS ALL HYPOTHETICAL!"

Clint shrugged and took a sip of his coffee.

"Alice likes tea. You should get her some tea," offered Steve.

"I get her tea all the time," said Bruce.

"No, I mean, get her some GOOD tea. Loose tea, organic or whatever," he shrugged. "She always orders those chai lattes from the coffee shop downstairs. Maybe get her some chai tea."

*This is actually an idea I can work with.*

Bruce nodded, "And maybe one of those tea infusers that you drop in your mug?"

Steve nodded in agreement, "Yeah, she'd probably like that."

"Get her a Doctor Who one. She's obsessed with that stupid show," offered Tony.

"I know absolutely nothing about Doctor Who," Bruce said.

"Good. It's… stupid. The science is NOT sound. Stupid David Tennant. Burns up a star to say goodbye, can't even say he loves her…"

Bruce frowned, "I have NO idea what you're talking about now."

There was an awkward silence.

"Anyone hungry?" Tony asked.
Bruce shrugged. He assumed the discussion was over. He'd have to check around to see where he could buy her some organic Chai and some sort of Doctor Who tea infuser.

"I could eat," said Steve.

Clint and Bruce nodded.

"I am always hungry," Thor admitted.

"No kidding," Tony quipped.

"No schwarma," said Steve. "I did not like that."

"Cripes, that was a year ago and I've never suggested it again."

Bruce chuckled. They all stood up to leave and the elevator doors opened.

Alice burst out and handed her shopping bags to the closest person, who happened to be Clint. He took them, a bewildered look on his face. Darcy followed her, holding two coffee cups.

She tugged her phone out of her purse, dragging Bruce back to the counter. She opened an email and handed it to him.

"What is this?" she demanded. Her hands were shaking. She was really upset.

Bruce frowned and looked at her phone. He was surprised to see that it was playing the CCTV footage from the lab when she'd spent the night.

"That was the night you got sick. You threw up on your shirt, so you took it off," he figured that straightforward was the best approach here.

Clint raised his eyebrows. Steve looked around for an escape. Thor had retreated into the kitchen and was making a sandwich.

Tony grabbed the phone from Bruce's hands. "How did you get this?"

"Someone emailed it to me, and they sent a CC to Zeke and to the Daily Bugle, Tony. The Daily Bugle."

Tony frowned, looking at her phone screen. "All these files are only accessible by ME. Someone must have hacked JARVIS…"

"Is that possible?" asked Bruce, bewildered.

"No", answered Tony. "You can't hack JARVIS."

"Oh, well that makes me feel better!" Alice erupted.

"Calm down, Princess. I'll figure this out. I have contacts at the Daily Bugle. They won't print this unless I let them. And I won't."

"Who are your contacts at the Daily Bugle?" asked Clint. "Parker? That little shit would print this up in a heartbeat. Anything to keep Spiderman off the front page again."

"I have other contacts… Jules does. I'll call Jules."
"Notifying Miss Morgan, sir," said JARVIS.

"Thank you, JARVIS, you traitorous bastard."

"My apologies sir, I'm only as good as my programming."

Tony grumbled and started looking at Alice's phone again.

"I gotcha, bitch. What does that mean?"

"What?" Bruce took the phone back from Tony. As he read the subject line of the email, he felt his blood boil.

"It's from Thomas Riley," Alice said, her voice still waverering. "He works in security."

"In this building?" Tony asked.

"Yeah."

"How do you know it's him?" Bruce asked, trying to pull himself together.

"I may have publicly humiliated him a few weeks ago. He kept asking Jules out. Even though she told him she wasn't interested. He's a creep. I'm pretty sure he watches us on the security cameras to come up with talking points for later."

Bruce felt the Other Guy growl.

_Not now, later, I promise._

"JARVIS! Why haven't you notified Happy yet?"

"He's on his way, sir."

"Well, don't notify people without telling me…" Tony snapped belligerently.

"My apologies sir, it won't happen again."

Alice's lip was still quivering. Bruce pulled her in for a hug, "Alice, it's going to be okay."

She pulled back, "Why didn't you tell me about that video?!" she asked accusingly.

"I… I… I thought it would be better if you didn't know. I figured that the only people who knew about it were me and Tony…"

"TONY SAW THAT VIDEO?" Her eyes grew wide and she trained her murderous gaze towards Tony.

Tony raised his hands in front of him. "Hey… hey, I was just checking my security footage. I never go looking specifically for boobies. A guy can dream, but it rarely ever happens!"

"He sent that to Zeke, there is a time stamp on that video!" Alice's face paled even more.

Darcy looked from Alice to Bruce to Tony. She huffed loudly. Bruce's stomach dropped, he really hoped that she wasn't about to—

"Alice, babe. Zeke was cheating on you," Darcy said exasperatedly.
Alice frowned.

"I know this probably isn't the best time to tell you, but I can't sit idly by while you beat yourself up for something like this."

"Darcy… I already know," Alice said slowly, studying her face.

"What?" she asked, looking between Bruce and Tony's faces, "So Bruce told you? Good for him. I'm glad he finally told you."

Bruce exhaled slowly, pressing his fist to his forehead.

"No, Bruce didn't tell me. ZEKE told me when I left him… why would you think that Bruce…" she turned to look at him, a puzzled expression on her face.

"Alice…" Bruce began.

"You knew? You knew and you didn't tell me?" she asked quietly, her eyes shining.

"Alice, you have to understand. I couldn't tell you that your boyfriend of seven years was cheating on you AND romantically pursue you myself with a clear conscience. I know that sounds selfish, but I couldn't think that the only reason you're with me is that you were mad at him. You do understand that, right? I'm so sorry, Alice."

Her face softened, "I guess I do understand that, Bruce. I wish you'd have told me you knew afterward, but I guess there wasn't an opportunity." She rounded on Darcy, "You, however, have no excuse. You're my best friend. Why wouldn't you tell me that my boyfriend was cheating on me? I was having so many doubts about that relationship. If you'd have told me, I would have left him sooner!"

Darcy sputtered, "Bruce wouldn't let me!"

"Bruce wasn't around all the time, Darce."

"I'm sorry, Alice. I wanted to tell you, I really did."

Alice sighed, "I guess it doesn't matter now. It still doesn't change the fact that he's going to try to use this footage to torment me."

Darcy stepped forward and hugged Alice, "I didn't know I was your best friend."

"Yeah? Well, you are," said Alice, patting Darcy awkwardly on the back.

Darcy was still hugging her, so Alice did it again. "Don't make this weird, Darce."

Darcy finally released her.

Bruce noticed that Clint was still holding all her bags and standing by the dining table, looking very uncomfortable. He held his hands out and Clint slid all the bags onto his arms and made a hasty retreat.

Steve and Thor were nowhere to be found, they must have made a run for it while everyone's attention was elsewhere.

Bruce set the bags down on the table and walked back over to the fridge to get a bottle of water for Alice.
Tony pulled out his phone, searching through his contact list. "A-ha!" he exclaimed, ceremoniously hitting the call button. He walked out of the room. Darcy quietly excused herself, promising to call Alice later.

A few tense moments passed.

"I'm sorry…" Alice said quietly, looking at Bruce.

"About what?"

"What… I did," she gestured to her phone. "I put you in an uncomfortable situation…"

"Don't worry about it. You weren't yourself."

She scoffed, "I think I was enough of myself to catch your interest."

Bruce blushed, trying to clear his mind before his pulse monitor went off and embarrassed him.

"You already had my interest," he said quietly, reaching for her hand.

She smiled, "I bet I had more of it after this, though."

"If by that you mean I had more… things to think about…" he blushed again.

"Well, I suppose this makes the next step of our relationship a tiny bit less awkward… assuming you like my 'things'," she teased.

He felt his face grow hot and her question was answered by his pulse monitor beeping loudly. She released his hand while he tried to calm down.

"Sorry," she said sheepishly when it was quiet again.

"No, you're not," he quipped, grinning crookedly.

She leaned forward to kiss him.

Tony returned shortly.

"Well, I talked to Director Fury. It looks like he sent Zekey-boy out on a mission this morning and he won't be back for two weeks. He won't delete the email, but he did tell me it hasn't been read yet."

Alice nodded and sighed.

The elevator doors opened and Happy strolled into the room.

Tony turned towards him.

"Happy, detain Thomas Riley for questioning."

"May I ask why?"

"He's a nosy little prick."

"He is, but that's no reason to—"

"He hacked into my private CCTV channels and sent them to SHIELD agents and the press."
"What proof do you have?"

Tony gestured to Alice's laptop. Happy bent slightly and read the email, scanning through the attachments. "There's no sender information. Can you prove that he sent the email?"

"Alice thinks he did. That's proof enough for me."

Alice proceeded to fill Happy in on her reasoning.

"No offense, Ms. Vorso, but Riley's a moron. There's no way he could have gotten that information. If he did it, he didn't do it alone."

"You think he has an accomplice?" asked Bruce.

"If he did it, he is probably working for someone," said Happy. "He's not smart enough to think of it on his own."

"Fire him. We'll figure out the details later," said Tony.

"You have to have grounds to fire him. Plus, if you do that, he'll disappear and you'll never find out if he was in on it," said Bruce.

"I can interrogate him," said Happy.

"Do it," said Tony.

"If we can find proof, he's gone. I'm considering pressing charges. Considered. Doing it. JARVIS, schedule a meeting with my lawyer."

"Done, sir."

"Great. Happy, report back to me when the interrogation is complete."

Happy nodded curtly and turned to leave.

"In the meantime, Alice, I think it would be best if you didn't leave the tower, at least until this blows over."

She nodded glumly.

"Jules will probably be in touch soon. Do what she says," Tony sat back down at the counter, looking around. "Where did everybody go? Just a little PR crisis. We can still get pizza delivered."

"Raincheck," Bruce said, standing and offering his arm to Alice.

"You're ditching me, too?" Tony protested.

"Don't you have to go to the lab?" Alice asked.

"Nah," he turned back at the last minute to grab her bags. They were heavy. "What did you buy? Bricks?"

"Yes, didn't I tell you? Macy's had a sale on bricks," she grinned.

They left the kitchen to the sound of Tony's protestations.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

In which Bruce and Alice experience a disagreement.

Chapter Notes

I'm not proud of how Bruce acts in this chapter, but I mean...

He's kind of insensitive. He's working on it.

Alice

A couple of days passed before they heard anything from Jules. Alice's "just one more night" turned into three more nights. Bruce stayed out of the lab, and they passed the time by watching movies and playing cards or chess. Anything to keep from reading the papers or seeing what was trending online.

They were in the middle of a game of chess when Alice's phone chimed. She retrieved it from the kitchen counter.

"It's a text from Jules." She said, reading it. Her face fell. "She's coming up to talk to us about the media blitz."

Bruce sighed audibly.

"It's her job," defended Alice.

"I know. But, it's really nobody's business what was going on. It shouldn't matter. I don't like having to explain myself to strangers," he said, crossing his arms and hunching his shoulders.

"You're visibly closing yourself off now," stated Alice. She sat down at the counter.

"Yes. I'm preparing," he replied, raising his eyebrows.

Alice huffed and crossed her legs at the knee, texting Jules back.

"Is she coming here?" asked Bruce.

"I told her to go to the common room," replied Alice, jumping off the stool and crossing the room. She slipped on her boots and looked at Bruce expectantly. He slowly stood, grumbling under his breath. She slipped her hand into his and they walked together out to the common room. They each sat in a chair at the dining table and waited for Jules.
Jules bustled out of the elevator with an armload of newspapers, she had her laptop bag thrown over her shoulder and was cradling her phone between her ear and shoulder. She was talking rather loudly to whoever was on the other line.

Bruce jumped up to help her and she dumped the stack of newspapers and her bag on him. He stumbled under the weight. She spoke loudly into the phone.

"Mr. Stark's official statement has been released. He made it two days ago. I will not be elaborating at this time. No matter how much you threaten me. THANK YOU," she pressed the end button forcibly.

"This is a shitstorm," she stated, looking at Alice and then at Bruce. "But, I have a plan."

Bruce thumped the stack of newspapers on the table and put Jules' bag in an empty chair. He sat down beside Alice.

"What's your plan?" asked Alice.

Jules pointed at Bruce, "You need to defend her honor. Make your relationship public. Wax poetic and allude to love or something." She gestured vaguely in the air, "Doesn't matter. Do something to prove that you guys are seriously together."

"We've been 'officially together' for less than a week. She was literally engaged to another man until four nights ago. I'm not doing that. It's fake," he said bluntly.

Alice visibly flinched. She automatically shrunk in on herself, looking at her hands. "What's plan B?" she asked, her voice shaking.

Jules frowned, "There isn't one. That's what needs to happen to make this go away. And it needs to go away. This is hurting Tony's integrity, what little he has left. He's done a lot for you, Dr. Banner, so if you can't say this to defend your girlfriend's honor. At least do it to help your friend, who's helped you out in numerous immeasurable ways."

Bruce raised his eyebrows, "Look, her honor doesn't need defending. This is nobody's business. It's all perfectly explainable. I don't see why we can't just tell the truth. If I make a statement that we're in love, then something's going to come up that disproves that. Like the fact that she had a live-in boyfriend until four days ago."

Jules' eyes flashed. "Yes, sir, her honor needs defending, and if you really care about her, that should bother you. If repercussions happen, they happen. But we need to shut this down now." She slammed her fist into the table. She reached over and spread out the newspaper headlines. "If you don't believe me, believe these."

Bruce set his jaw and glanced down at the headlines. Alice couldn't bring herself to look. She studied his face instead. His nostrils flared, he breathed in suddenly. "What do I need to say?" he ground out, his fists clenched, knuckles white. Alice touched his arm. She was a little bit upset with him for what he said, but she still wanted him to calm down.

"What about the picture of me with Steve?" asked Alice, wanting to give Bruce time to cool off.

"Steve made a statement this morning," said Jules, scooting a press release over to Alice. Alice skimmed the text.

"Miss Vorso is a close friend. There was nothing inappropriate happening in that picture. Simply two friends having fun," stated Rogers.
Alice slid it back across the table towards Jules. She sat back in her seat, not wanting to look at Bruce for the time being. She was trying to rationalize what was happening in her mind. Bruce simply did not like crowds. He thought PR was for the birds. It wasn't because he didn't want to defend her. It wasn't because he actually thought those things about her.

Bruce was talking calmly with Jules. She put her hand on his arm. "Don't worry about it, Bruce," she said thickly. She shook her head, standing, "Don't do anything you're uncomfortable with. Jules, I'll make a statement. Whatever you think I need to say. Type it up, give me a place and time, I'll be there."

Bruce frowned, "Alice…"

Alice refused to meet his gaze. "I just… I need a minute," she said quickly. She pushed her chair back and awkwardly extracted herself from between Jules and Bruce. She walked down the hall. Bruce followed her.

"Where are you going?" he asked, worried, grabbing her hand.

"I just need to think… I need some space," she said flatly, slipping her hand out of his. "I'm going to Darcy's."

"Alice!" he called after her.

Angry tears were pouring from her eyes when Darcy opened the door.

"What happened?" she exclaimed, pulling her inside. Alice just collapsed on her couch, crying into a pillow and punching the arm of the couch for effect. Darcy sat down on her ottoman for a minute before getting back up to get a soda from the kitchen. She opened it and waited patiently for Alice to calm down enough to tell her what was wrong.

"He… he… he won't even TRY to help me!" Alice ground out.

"Who won't?"

"Bruce."

Darcy frowned, "Is this about the Avengers call girl thing?"

Alice nodded. "Jules told him he needed to…" she gulped, "--make a statement. To… clear the air. She said we needed to go public with our relationship and he wouldn't do it. He said it wouldn't be real," she hiccupped.

"That doesn't sound like Bruce." Darcy began.

"Well, that's what he said. He said it wouldn't be real because we've been together for less than a week, and you know… I think that he agrees with all of this. He looks down on me because I was technically still with Zeke when he and I kissed for the first time. He's judging me."

She burst into tears again.

Darcy slipped her arm around her shoulder. "Alice, honey, I really do not think that's what's going on here. I think…"

She was interrupted by a sharp knock on the door. Darcy got up and glanced out the peephole. "Jules," she stated, looking back at Alice.
Alice nodded, burying her head in her arms.

Jules came in and approached Alice cautiously. "Alice?" She extended her arm and patted her awkwardly.

Alice looked up.

"I'm really bad around crying people," she explained with a shrug.

She sat down on the couch beside Alice. Darcy came back from the kitchen with a bottle of water for Alice. She took her seat on the ottoman.

Jules broke the silence, "I don't think he meant anything by what he said, Alice."

Alice sniffed.

"He's just really insensitive. He really has no clue why you're upset. I tried to explain it, but he blew me off. He thinks you're upset because you read the headlines."

"I didn't read them," said Alice.

Darcy took a swig of her soda, "You need to put on your big girl panties and tell him what's bothering you. You were in a relationship with Zeke for seven years in which, he called you 'Al' multiple times a day and you never corrected him. You need to do right by Dr. B. He cares about you. He's just so methodical and so reasonable. He doesn't understand why other people aren't reasonable too. I think he deserves to know what you really think."

Alice nodded. "I just… need a minute so I'm not crying."

Jules shook her head, "Nope. He needs to see how much he upset you. Then he can think more about how he words things next time." She tugged on her arm, "He's in his apartment rehearsing his statement. He cares about you, hon."

Alice stood. She sniffed loudly and grabbed a tissue from the box on the end table.

She turned to Darcy, "We'll hang out later. Promise."

Darcy smiled and swept her in for a side hug.

Alice left Darcy's and walked back up the hall to Bruce's apartment. She knocked tentatively.

He opened the door almost immediately. He must have been waiting for her or something.

"You don't have to knock, you know," he stated, moving to the side to let her enter.

She walked inside without a word, hugging herself tightly. She turned and looked at him, her eyes welling up again.

"Whoa!" he exclaimed. "What's wrong?" he rushed over to where she stood, pulling her close for a hug. Alice sobbed into his shoulder once before pushing him away.

He frowned, obviously confused.

"I'm upset with you," she pointed, sniffing loudly, "Because you are being insensitive about this whole… situation… we're having. It feels like you don't care." She wiped at the corners of her eyes with her sleeve.
"That's ridiculous. Of course, I care about you."

"You're doing it again. Right now," she sniffed.

He took a deep breath. "I didn't realize you were upset, I'm sorry. However... what I said before is the truth of our situation. It's what actually happened. Again, I'm sorry if it upset you."

Alice set her jaw to keep it from quivering. "So, you would rather the entire world think that I'm some call-girl Tony hired because you don't want to tell a white lie about when our relationship started?"

"Well, when you put it like that..."

She looked at him pointedly.

"Oh."

"Oh," she repeated hollowly, looking down at the floor. "Steve didn't hesitate. He's Mr. Goody-Two-Shoes, and he didn't hesitate to tell a small lie to defend my honor."

"Alice, I'm sorry," he looked at her pleadingly. "I am insensitive. I'm not used to this. It's no excuse I know, but please be patient with me?"

She looked up at him, "You don't agree with them, do you?" she asked quietly, her eyes shining and watery.

"Of course not. Why would you ask that?"

"Because it's the truth isn't it? I was in a relationship with someone else until a few days ago and I began a new relationship the same day.

"No, you're not a call-girl. A call-girl is someone hired for sex. That's not what you do."

She blinked. She narrowed her eyes. "I know what a call-girl is. I'm not some stupid moron who doesn't know what she's talking about," she spat.

He looked taken aback. "I apologized for that," he said quietly. "That was months ago, and I do not think you're a moron."

"Obviously you do because you felt the need to CORRECT me."

"Alice... you're being irrational."

"I don't care."

"And unreasonable," he added. "You're putting words in my mouth. I certainly do not think you're some call-girl Tony hired. I do not begrudge you your past. I will not allow anyone else to say these horrible things about you. I am going to make the statement Jules wrote for me. I care about you deeply. But truthfully, right now, you're being exceedingly difficult."

Alice turned and stalked over to the couch. She sat down jarringly on the end furthest from Bruce. She turned her head so she didn't have to look at him.

Bruce studied her, "What are you doing?"

"I don't want to look at you right now, but I know I can't just stalk off and leave this as it is. I'm
attempting to deal with my faults."

"What faults?" he asked, sitting on the opposite end of the couch.

"I tend to let people walk all over me. I'm trying to be firm and let you know that I am not happy with the way this argument is going. I still think you're insensitive and that you have no idea how to carry on a conversation with an emotional female."

"You're right, I don't."

She turned to look at him.

"I'm completely out of my comfort zone here. My first instinct is to yell at you until you stop arguing with me; however, most people tend to frown on such behavior. My second instinct is to be completely rational and analytical. I can see this upsets you almost as much as if I were to yell. So, I'm going to ask for suggestions. What should I do now?" He sat back on the couch, folding his arms over his chest.

She looked at him for a moment. She scooted herself closer to him until she was almost flush up against him. She unfolded his arms and wrapped them around her. She snuggled into his side. "Hold me for now."

"Just for future reference, is this how I should handle similar situations?" he asked, clearly puzzled.

"No," she said simply. "It's just what I want right now. Hold me, tell me I'm pretty and in a while, I'd like some ice cream."

He chuckled and tightened his hold on her. "You know I don't think those things about you. Don't you? You know I have more respect for you than that."

She nodded, "Yes, I know."

"Really? Do you really? Because you didn't seem to know before."

"I know now," she said.

Bruce lowered his head to rest on top of hers.
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

So, plot progression with a dash of violence and hurt/comfort. I'm sorry. Zeke just wouldn't go away. He's v. unhinged.

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning for physical abuse/violence.

Alice

Alice switched off the TV and dropped the remote on the couch. She had bagged up all of Darcy's trash and called the cleaning crew to come in and drag it all out. She must have stirred something up. The smell was so bad that she had to hold a washcloth over her nose so she didn't gag. She decided it was time to venture out. She left the door unlocked for the cleaning crew.

The past few days had been hell. She'd decided to stay at Darcy's since it was obviously too soon for her and Bruce to cohabitate. She still ate lunch with him in the lab every day and saw him every night. She wasn't able to go to work because, in spite of Jules' promises, the "scandal" still hadn't blown over. Bruce's statement was well-received, but it didn't look like anything else newsworthy was happening. So the tabloids continued to print their own hypotheses of the scandal. Alice had stopped reading the papers by midweek. She'd supposedly gotten secretly married, divorced/broken up with, caught cheating and was sporting a baby bump.

Alice made her way down to the lab. She saw Bruce in the med bay. She decided not to bother him, so she meandered back to where Darcy was sitting at her desk, earbuds in her ears. She pulled a chair closer to her desk and sat down. Darcy took out her earbuds.

"Hey there, roomie!" she said brightly.

"DARY. SHUT UP," they heard from the corner of the room. Jane was sitting at her laptop, looking very frazzled and manic.

"Thor went back to Asgard for a visit," explained Darcy in a whisper. "She never takes it well when he leaves. Once, he was gone for two years."

Alice widened her eyes. She probably wouldn't take it well if Bruce left for two years either.

"Is Tony here?" asked Alice. He hadn't accosted her when she came in, so she doubted he was in the lab today.

"Nope, he went back to LA for a few days."
"Oh," said Alice, deflated. "I cleaned your apartment."

"What?"

"I. Cleaned. Your. Apartment. It was disgusting, but I think the cleaning crew will enter now."

Darcy sighed, "I'm not going to be able to find anything am I?"

"What? I organized!"

Darcy glared at her. "Why don't you go suck face with your favorite nuclear physicist?" she asked. "That's a non-destructive way to pass the time."

"He looked busy. I didn't want to distract him."

Darcy stood up and peered over the divider that separated Jane's area from the rest of the lab. "He's back at his desk now, if you wanted to go see him."

"Trying to get rid of me?" asked Alice.

"Yeah… you're bumming me out," said Darcy, inserting her earbuds again.

Alice rolled her eyes and got up to walk over to Bruce's desk. She and Darcy didn't get along as well when they shared living space. Alice was pretty much disgusted by the way she lived. She needed her own apartment.

Bruce was busy typing something. Alice stood back and waited.

"Just one second…" he said.

She smiled. It was damned near impossible to sneak up on him.

He looked up, "Hey! To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I was bored."

"Ah. I'm supposed to entertain you, then?"

"Yeah. If you want."

"I always want," he grinned. "I have to finish up here and then I can head out early. What would you like to do this evening?"

"Go outside?" she asked. She hadn't been outside in over a week. It was starting to mess with her.

"Hmm… I might be able to arrange that," he answered.

She smiled, "Want me to wait in the break room?"

"Yeah, I'll be in the back", he motioned towards the far corner. "I'll come to get you when I'm ready."

Alice walked back to the break room, taking out her Starkphone to pass the time. Her personal phone had been shut off, courtesy of Zeke, most likely. All she had was her work phone and since she wasn't working, she used it to play games. There weren't technically very many apps that were available for the Stark phone, so Bruce had written up an emulator app for her. She was trying to
beat her high score on Flappy Bird when she heard someone enter the room.

"Just a second, I'll be right with you," she said.

"Oh, I've got all the time in the world," a familiar voice answered coldly.

She snapped her head up to see Zeke standing in the doorway.

"Zeke?!" she gasped. "What are you… how did you get in here?"

"A little please here and there never hurt anyone," he said, smirking. She frowned. Where had she heard that before? She resolved to remember later. She had to focus.

"JARVIS, there's an unauthorized visitor in the lab," she said loudly, backing away from Zeke.

"There are no unauthorized individuals in the building."

"I'm un-authorizing him."

"I'm sorry; you lack the security clearance to use that command, Ms. Vorso."

"I think you'll find that you've been downgraded to guest status," said Zeke, walking closer.

"What do you want? I don't want to see you."

"Oh, no. I doubt you'd have the time. It seems you've been BUSY, Al. Oh, sorry. Alice."

She crossed slowly to the right, hoping to be able to run past him out into the larger part of the lab. She needed to figure out a way to get the other Avengers down here. If Bruce saw him, Zeke would be done for. As much as she hated him, she didn't wish him dead. The only other Avengers here were Steve, Natasha, and Clint. Not much help if Bruce hulked out.

"I don't know what you mean…" she answered, stalling.

"It seems you've been busy making a fool of me. It wasn't enough that you had to leave me when we had company. You had to make it known to the entire city. Do you know how embarrassing it is to find out about your fiancée's affairs from an anonymous email? And then to see them in print?"

"I'm sorry you had to find out that way, Zeke," she said, trying to sound genuine. "But you cheated on me as well…"

She heard it before she felt it. The sharp sting of his hand across her face. She grunted quietly, bringing her hand up to her cheek. When she pulled it back, it was covered with blood. She glared at him.

He didn't speak, didn't say anything. Only glared at her from about eight inches away from her face. He was close enough. She could probably knee him in the groin and make a run for it. Plans be damned, she was scared.

If she could only keep her thoughts together. The blow must have rattled her brain or something.

She maintained eye contact for a few seconds, before bringing her knee up swiftly and surely into Zeke's crotch. He groaned, doubling over and dropping to the floor.

She didn't stop to see what he did next. She turned and ran for the door.
She slammed the break room door closed; at least he'd have to open it before he came out. She made a snap decision to try to get Darcy and Jane out before Zeke found Bruce. She ran towards Jane's corner, covering her face so she didn't alarm them. Darcy still had her earbuds in, so she hadn't heard a single thing that happened. Jane was lost in whatever she was doing. She ran to Darcy's desk, kicking her chair.

Darcy took out her earbuds. "What the hell, Vorso?" she whined, before looking up. Her eyes widened. "What the hell happened to your face?"

"SHHHHHHHHH! You and Jane have to get out. Zeke's here. Get Steve. Get out before he finds Bruce… JUST GO."

"Come with me!"

"I can't, I have to find Bruce before he hulks out."

Darcy started to argue, but her fear of the Hulk stopped her. She squeezed Alice's hand and grabbed Jane roughly by the arm, turning to sneak up to the door.

Alice now had to make it across the lab without Zeke seeing her and without him finding Darcy and Jane. She ran towards the back wall of the lab, knocking things off tables on her way. She had no idea where he was and her vision was swimming. Probably from adrenaline and getting knocked upside the head.

A sob escaped, more out of fear than anything else. She ran towards where she thought Bruce was, the isolation cell in the far back corner. The cell was empty, he must have come out. She had to find him before Zeke did.

She looked over her shoulder for a split second and ran into something solid. She gasped and stumbled backward, but two arms grasped her and kept her from falling. She looked up slowly to see the face she most feared seeing. She almost screamed, but she kept it together.

"Stupid bitch, what the fuck did you do that for? I wasn't going to hurt you," Zeke hissed.

"You already did!" she said.

"That was for your smart mouth," he snapped. His hand connected with the same side of her face again, knocking her to the floor. "THAT was for kneeling me in the crotch!"

She sobbed, scooting away from him while still on the floor. She scrambled to stand and he reached out for her, pulling her arm back sharply. She looked up in time to see Bruce walking out of the back storage room. He looked up at the sound of her cry. She heard a loud pop and felt nothing but the pain radiating down her arm.

She cried out again, scrambling away from Zeke and towards Bruce. He had dropped the paperwork he was carrying and was emitting a low rumbling growl.

"Bruce!" she cried, "Don't… please stay with me!"

He roared in response, his eyes glowing green.

She heard a sickening popping sound, she watched in horror as he grew taller, wider, his limbs and joints popping and expanding. His shirt ripped, his pants ripped, his skin changed colors, turning a greyish green. He turned to look at her, a sad look on his face before Bruce left altogether and was replaced by the Hulk. She backed away from him, the pain in her shoulder was forgotten. She
moved to his right, so she wasn't standing right in front of him. He arched his back and roared. She'd never heard anything like it before. She ran into another counter and stopped, looking up at him. It had all happened so quickly, she was dazed.

She soon snapped out of it.

Zeke had frozen in fear. She knew he was in immediate danger, standing directly in front of the Hulk, in his line of vision. He was the reason he'd been unleashed, to begin with.

Alice ducked behind the counter and hurried around to grab him. She intended to drag him into the isolation chamber. It stood to reason if the Other Guy couldn't get out of it, he couldn't get in either. Zeke pulled out his gun and started shooting wildly at the green monstrosity. She ducked behind an overturned table to escape the ricocheting bullets. She quickly rolled out from behind the table just as a huge green arm swiped it out of the way. She crouched in place, staring at him.

Her blood ran cold when she looked up into the Hulk's eyes. They were dense, green and frightening. Any trace of Bruce was gone. He growled at her. Zeke whimpered to her right. There was still a good six feet between the Hulk and Alice, so she chanced a quick dash towards Zeke, grabbing his arm. They weren't able to go anywhere, though. The Other Guy took a few steps towards them. She crouched down, pulling Zeke with her, she ducked her head as the gigantic fist came crashing down towards them. She waited for the impact.

It never happened. The Hulk was roaring louder than ever and pummeling at them with both fists. But something was stopping it, about five inches from her head, something was stopping it. She dared to look up. It looked like there was a layer of green plexiglass or something surrounding them. The Hulk’s fists bounced back. She had no clue what happened, but whatever it was, saved their lives.

Just then, a window broke and Clint rappelled into the lab, followed by Steve and Natasha. They saw Alice crouched in front of the Hulk, with Zeke lying in a fetal position beside her. The Hulk was pummeling the green barrier above her head. He seemed to be getting tired. His punches were slowing down and were much shorter range than when he began. Steve ran up to Alice and tried to ram into the green bubble, falling backward.

He smacked at it with his shield to no avail. "It looks like some kind of force field!" he yelled over his shoulder. "Alice, are you alright?"

"Yes!" she yelled, not taking her eyes off the Hulk, who was looking extremely winded. He wasn't even paying attention to Steve. He landed a few feeble punches and stumbled backward. Clint had an arrow at the ready; Natasha was just staring, wide-eyed. He sat down hard, shaking the room. He curled up on his side and fell asleep.

Clint looked at Steve, who shouldered his shield and approached the Hulk cautiously. Alice stood, surprised to see that the force field was no longer impeding her. She stared as he shrunk back down to normal size, his skin faded back to normal, and soon, she was staring at a sleeping and very naked Bruce Banner.

Natasha looked at Alice, "What the hell happened?"

Alice shook her head. She walked over to Bruce and touched his shoulder, he was clammy and sweaty. "Should we… move him?" she asked.

"We usually don't, he wakes up on his own," said Steve. "Someone needs to call Tony."
Clint strode across the room and pulled Zeke up off the floor. He marched him over to the containment chamber and threw him inside, locking the door. He walked back to the group gathered around Bruce.

"Yeah. That guy pissed himself. He's covered in it."

Natasha wrinkled her nose, stepping away from the place he'd been.

Alice knelt down on the ground beside Bruce.

"You need to get that shoulder looked at," stated Natasha. "It looks dislocated."

"Zeke grabbed my arm," confessed Alice.

"It needs to be popped back in the socket," continued Natasha. "I can do it for you."

Alice looked scared. "Will it hurt?"

"Terribly. But, it will feel better as soon as it's back in the joint," she walked over to Alice and touched her limp arm. She whimpered.

"Help her stand and we'll go to the med bay," said Natasha, turning and walking away.

Steve offered his arm and braced her as she stood. Her whole body was shaking and her teeth were chattering.

"Nat?" called Clint. "I'm worried she's going to go into shock."

"Get her over here, then," she snapped.

"Can you walk?" Clint asked Alice.

She took a wobbly step and felt her knee buckle. Steve bent slightly and scooped her up in his arms, running her quickly to the med bay. He sat her down on the bed, supporting her weight by wrapping his arms around her waist. Clint followed, he grabbed her unhurt hand.

"Squeeze when it hurts, squeeze my hand, and don't tense your other arm, okay? Look at me, keep your eyes on me, don't close them, look at me, yell and scream if you need to. I did when I had to do this. Don't try to be brave, it's gonna hurt like a bitch."

Alice nodded feebly. Natasha took her arm, there was a sickening pop.

Pain. It was just pain all around her. She heard a high pitched wailing shriek; it took her a moment to realize it was coming from her. Then, there was nothing. Just a dull ache in her shoulder. Her vision clouded. Everyone seemed to be saying her name. They sounded far away. Then, blackness, numbness, nothingness.

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Bruce

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Bruce sat up abruptly; he was sitting in the lab, in the middle of a pile of debris, buck naked and all
alone. He hated this. He looked around frantically, trying to remember what had set him off. He stood up, looking for someone, anyone. He saw a light on in the med bay, so he ran towards it.

There, on the bed, her face streaked with dirt and blood, her eyes closed, her face pale, was Alice. She wasn't moving. He let out a choking sound and stumbled towards the bed.

"Put some clothes on, Prince Charming," quipped Tony from the doorway, "Sleeping Beauty's going to be out for a while." He handed Bruce a pair of blue hospital scrubs.

"Is she alright?" asked Bruce, pulling on the scrubs and sitting down beside the bed. His heartbeat returned to normal.

"She went into shock, probably from her dislocated arm. They didn't get any x-rays, but I'd imagine that the bone was constricting an artery, causing her to go into shock. Natasha popped it back in and she passed out. They gave her a shot of adrenaline and her BP evened out."

Bruce nodded grimly. "What happened? Did I…" he took a shuddering sigh, not sure if he was ready to hear it or not, "Did I do this to her?"

"No! No, no, no! I forget you have short term memory loss when you freak out… No, Zeke was here. He hit her twice in the face and dislocated her shoulder."

Bruce felt a rumbling low in his throat.

"Dude, stop it. You already defended her honor. I can't deal with another one tonight,"

Bruce took a deep breath, pushing the anger and rage down. "Where's Zeke?" he asked.

"He is in an undisclosed location, somewhere down in the scary part of my basement."

"How'd he get in here?"

"Not sure. Somebody--probably whoever hacked JARVIS before--let him in."

Tony sat down and sighed heavily. For the first time in the entire time Bruce had known him, he looked tired.

"How'd you get here so quickly?"

"Flew. In my suit. Two thousand miles. I wouldn't recommend it."

They were quiet for a long time. Bruce turned his attention to Alice. He slipped her hand into his.

"The Other Guy… I thought he killed her," he said quietly. "When I first saw her laying here. I thought she was dead."

"He tried," Tony replied. "I watched the security footage. He brought his fist down right on top of her."

Bruce snapped his head up, "What? How did she…"

Tony raised his hand, "Just chill. I'm not sure. I want her to look at the footage before we start making wild guesses."

"Can I see it?"

"Are you going to be okay watching it? I really can't handle another episode this evening."
"I don't know," admitted Bruce.

"Let's wait until Alice comes back from Wonderland and we'll see if you can behave."

Bruce quirked an eyebrow, "Wonderland, really?"

"Her name is Alice. You can't expect me to not make that reference. You should be surprised I waited this long."

Bruce nodded, "True." He looked down at her hand, "She has glass embedded under her nails." He got up and crossed the room to wash his hands. He grabbed a pair of gloves. "Do I have any backup glasses left?"

Tony rose from his chair. "Yeah, I have some over at my station. Tell the Other Guy 'thanks' for not destroying my stuff this time, looks like my talks about boundaries are paying off. Now, if you can just make him get along with the missus," he walked out of the room.

Bruce chose not to think about what might have happened to Alice and chose instead to focus on sterilizing the surgical tools. By the time he'd finished, Tony had returned. He threw Bruce a shirt to match his pants. Bruce pulled it on, put on his glasses and surgical gloves. He set to work digging all the glass out of Alice's hands. He was glad she wasn't conscious of this, it looked painful.

"Do you need anything else?" asked Tony.

"Gauze, I'm going to bandage her hands after I finish."

I should leave. I should just leave. I was right, she'd be better off without me…

Tony retrieved some out of a drawer, "You're thinking right now. I know you are, and I know what you're thinking. I'm going to ask you to not do that until you see this footage."

"What are you talking about?" asked Bruce, not looking up from what he was doing.

"You're going to leave again. You're going to leave her to protect her. Don't."

"She'd be better off."

"You don't know that. Just… put it on the back burner."

"Fine, until I see the video. I don't see how it's going to change my mind."

He pulled a particularly long sliver of glass out from under her index fingernail. Alice whimpered softly, frowning. She started stirring, trying to pull her hand away.

Bruce immediately dropped the tools and stood, removing the gloves with a snap. He smoothed her hair out of her face, bending to press his forehead to hers.

"Alice. Alice. Alice."

She opened her eyes and tried to sit up, a panicked expression on her face.

"Alice, you need to calm down, you're fine, you're safe and I'm here with you. Don't try to sit up," Bruce said authoritatively.

She slowly calmed down, looking from Tony to Bruce, her eyes wide.
"You went into shock after Natasha set your shoulder. They had to give you adrenaline," Tony informed her.

She nodded, breathing heavily. A few tears escaped and dripped down her cheek. Bruce wiped them away.

"I'm removing glass that was imbedded under your fingernails. I'm almost done, do you want me to get an anesthetic?" he asked.

She shook her head, "No. Just finish up."

Bruce got a new pair of gloves and resumed. He visibly winced every time she did. Tony held her other hand. After Bruce had finished, he sprayed her hand with iodine and wrapped it in gauze. He moved the tray of glass shards and the tray of surgical instruments away, throwing his gloves away. Only after this did he turn back with purpose, crossing the room in three strides, to bend over her and pressed his lips firmly to hers. Tony released her hand immediately. He stood and walked over to the computer.

Alice tried to bring her hand up to the back of his head, but winced and groaned in pain, letting it drop back to the bed.

"Dislocated shoulder," reminded Bruce. "I need to find a sling for you…" he started to stand.

"Please…" she asked quietly. "Stay with me for now?"

"Of course," he pulled the chair closer and sat down. He ran his hand up her arm and stroked her cheek. "Do you need anything?"

"A shower?" she asked.

"First thing tomorrow," he promised. "You need to stay in bed for twenty-four hours."

She nodded, "Can I have some water?"

"That, I can get for you," said Bruce, standing.

"I'll get it," said Tony. "Just stay with your girl." He added, smiling.

"I'm 'your girl' now?" she asked.

"It appears that way," Bruce replied, tracing a line down her inner elbow and forearm.

"Kiss me again," she demanded.

He raised his eyebrows.

"I would just pull you down here… but I'm indisposed at the moment." She smirked. "Care to help a girl out?"

"I certainly don't mind." He leaned down to oblige her.

"Good God Banner, keep it in your pants. She was in shock, dude," Tony handed Alice a bottle of water. "That's bound to send her back in."

Bruce took it from her to open it. Tony had apparently forgotten about her bandaged hands.
He crossed the room, picking up his laptop and bringing it over to Alice. He pressed the button to raise the bed, so Alice could sit up slightly. He set the laptop on Alice's lap, hitting the play button on the video file he had paused.

Bruce leaned closer to see.

"Now, I am so glad I upgraded the cameras in here. Of course, I did it to get footage of boobies. Which did not happen? But, this is much more interesting than nudity. Almost more interesting… slightly less than almost more interesting…"

"Tony…" Bruce complained.

"Fine, fine, here," Tony began to play the footage.

The video was from the security footage from earlier that afternoon. They watched Bruce transform into the Hulk, saw Alice creep around to where Zeke was, trying to drag him away. Zeke pulled his handgun and opened fire.

"Dumbass," scoffed Tony.

They watched Alice duck under her arm in front of Zeke as the Hulk brought his fist down.

Bruce held his breath. Tony paused the video as the Hulk's fist hit the almost invisible, slightly green barrier five inches from Alice's head. He pointed to the screen. "Right there!" he said loudly. He bounced excitedly. He clicked a few different settings and the screen went infrared. They saw Alice and Zeke's body heat signatures, The Hulk's as well, but the most interesting was the dome of heat surrounding Alice and Zeke.

Bruce turned the screen towards him. "What is that?" he asked, excitedly.

"I'm not sure… but according to the readings I got from the room and the rest of the video… well… just watch."

He un-paused the video. They watched in infrared from then on. Bruce watched in awe as the Hulk lost power, the dome around Alice and Zeke grew bigger and bigger.

"It's leeching power from the Other Guy," said Bruce, in awe.

"It's made of pure gamma radiation," said Tony. "Look at the heat signature. It's leeching gamma from the Hulk. The bigger the dome gets, the weaker he gets."

"Where's it coming from?" asked Bruce.

"Keep watching," said Tony.

The three watched in silence as the Hulk sat down, laid on his side and changed back into Bruce. Then they watched the dome shrink. It disappeared into a wisp and flew into Alice.

Bruce stopped the video. He closed the laptop and looked at Alice, his mouth open. "I… have… to run some tests, because first of all, the fact that you're able to drain gamma radiation is beyond belief, and second, this could be harmful to you!"

"I ran some tests… before you came to," said Tony. "She's storing an insane amount of gamma radiation. In her body. Right now. She seems fine."

"I am not storing anything," protested Alice.
"I'll get my printouts," said Tony. "Run your own tests if you want, just for peace of mind. But I think my tests sufficiently prove that she's a gamma receptacle and it's causing no adverse effects."

This is… too much, what if it's hurting her? I can't rest until I know…

"Do you mind if I draw some blood, Alice?" asked Bruce.

"No, I don't suppose I mind, but what for?"

"I need to check for mutations, cancer cells, that kind of thing. I just want to make sure this isn't harming you. Can I also take a sample of your skin cells?"

"How do you do that?" she asked, worried.

"I'm just going to scrape the inside of your cheek with a cotton swab. I will eventually need to take a bone marrow biopsy and a muscle biopsy. Those are slightly more intrusive. I won't take those today… maybe tomorrow, when you're feeling better?" he asked.

"Umm… I suppose… do those hurt?"

"They do, but I'll use a local anesthetic so it'll just be uncomfortable."

"Thank you?"

Bruce started gathering all the supplies he needed.

"Don't forget, you have those blood samples from a few months ago when she was drunk." Tony reminded him. "You can use them for comparison."

Bruce looked up at him, wide-eyed. "Tony, I could kiss you! But, I won't, I'll kiss Alice." He leaned in to give her a peck on the lips. "But, you are a genius… be right back."

He hurried over to his freezer and removed Alice's blood samples from a few months before.

"You know…" began Tony, "if my hypothesis is true and she is able to siphon gamma energy and use it to make a kick-ass shield, it reasonably follows that she is able to use gamma energy to protect herself in other ways… like from the effects of that crazy Midgardian Firewater that she drank."

"Well, it would explain why I've never been drunk before that night," said Alice absently, almost to herself.

"What, like never?" asked Tony.

"Nope, never. I won so many bets in college. I've done loads of shots, I've shot-gunned beer, jager bombs, I kicked ass at beer pong and I lasted the longest on the receiving end of a beer funnel. It just never affected me like it does other people. The most I've ever felt is slightly tipsy."

Bruce was just staring wordlessly at Alice.

"And you didn't think that little bit of information would have been useful to me that night?" he asked, disbelievingly.

"Sorry! I was just… so drunk," she shrugged. "That's the first time I've been able to use that excuse."

Bruce shook his head. "Alright, I'm going to take five vials, for now, I don't want to take too much."

He tied the rubber tourniquet around her arm, rubbed her skin with an alcohol swab and went to slide
the needle into her arm. It stopped before it touched her skin. He pushed harder. Nothing. It was like he was trying to push it into a rock or something.

"Okay… I can't get it in," he said, pursing his lips.

"Well, now, that's not something a girl wants to hear, Bruce," said Tony.

"Shut up. I can't get the needle into her arm. Watch."

Tony and Alice watched as Bruce tried to push the needle in.

Tony turned on the live feed from the CCTV on his laptop and clicked on the thermal image setting. There was a thin force field around Alice's body, which was keeping the needle from going in.

Bruce looked up at Alice. "Are you scared right now?" he asked, just following a whim.

"Well, yes!" she exclaimed. "You're telling me that you have to test me for cancer and blood mutations. I'm just a little overwhelmed. I have no clue what either of you are talking about and I'm just… really scared right now. I mean, you both seem really excited about this, but what if it's nothing? What if I can't do what you think I can? What if you get your hopes up, Bruce? And then I can't do it and you're so disappointed that you leave me? What then?" She was crying by the time she finished talking and the thin shield had grown to at least double thickness, according to the thermal scan.

Bruce untied the tourniquet on her arm, he leaned forward and kissed both of her hands. He stood and bent down so his forehead was pressed against hers. "I could never be so disappointed that it would cause me to leave you. I'm sorry I didn't think about how scary this would be for you. I was being selfish. I wasn't thinking about you at all. I do need to check your blood and skin cells for warning signs, okay?" she nodded rapidly. He continued, "I want to make sure you're safe, that's my first priority here, your safety. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if something happened to you and I could have prevented it." He leaned further over and pressed his lips to hers. Her cheeks were wet from crying, but she kissed him back. He pulled away from her and wiped the tears from her face.

"Get a room." Said Tony, shaking his head in disgust.

Bruce ignored him, "Alice, do you trust me?"

"Yes," she said, taking a deep breath and holding out her arm. She closed her eyes and kept breathing deeply.

Bruce wrapped the tourniquet again and wiped her arm with the alcohol swab. This time, the needle slid in easily. He got five vials and slid it out again, covering it with a cotton ball and bending her arm at the elbow to hold it in place.

He handed her a cotton swab to scrape the inside of her cheek with. He took the swab back from her and placed it in a plastic bag until he could get around to making slides out of it.

He sat with her until she fell asleep, his mind buzzing with thoughts. Then he joined Tony out in the non-ruined part of the lab.

"It's emotions. It's controlled by emotions," he told Tony. "When she's scared she makes a shield around herself, it blocks out everything that she perceives as a danger. That's why I was able to touch her, but the needle couldn't penetrate it."
"Why didn't she just shield herself from Zeke, though? If it's involuntary?" asked Tony. 

"I don't know. My guess is, she hasn't been around me, so she didn't have any energy saved up."

"Makes sense..." Tony agreed.

*Don't get excited. Not yet. Don't get excited.*

Bruce prepared a few blood slides to check for cancer growth. He peered at them in the microscope. Nothing out of the ordinary, except for gamma radiation in every single one of her cells. It looked like that was where her body stored it. And there was *space* for it. Unlike his cells, that had to enlarge themselves to account for the gamma radiation, hers had spots built-in for it. Like they were manufactured that way or something. It was like nothing he'd ever seen before, except in theory.

He looked up at Tony from the microscope. "This is what I was trying to achieve. To create a human that could withstand prolonged exposure to gamma radiation. If I had to guess, she's been this way since birth. I need to check in my files for all information about her parents."

"Who are her parents?" asked Tony.

"Dr. Russ Vorso and Dr. Louise Abernathy. They were working on the 'super soldier project'."

"Well, if they were working on the 'super soldier', they were working for SHIELD, which means they have a file there. Which MEANS, I can find it. Give me a few hours," said Tony, opening his laptop.

Bruce knew he should probably get some sleep, but he was truly frightened of the nightmares he would have that night, so he busied himself running every possible test on Alice's blood that he could. He discovered that she had more gamma in her cells tonight than she'd had a few months ago. He'd have to keep checking her blood every week to see if it changed. He discovered nothing harmful. The gamma seemed to be keeping to itself and not attacking her cells. It definitely put him more at ease knowing that she appeared to be fine.

Bruce was scrolling through various cell models on his laptop when one jumped out at him.

"Tony?" Bruce called.

Tony looked up from his laptop, his eyes were red and bloodshot.

"Take a look at this," Bruce typed into his laptop quickly and streamed the image into the 3-D modeling screens.

"Is that...?" Tony jumped up for a closer look.

"The X-gene," said Bruce, his tone reverent.

They both looked at each other, then back to where Alice lay asleep in the med bay and then back to the genetic figure on the screen.
Alice was sitting on the end of Bruce's couch. She was leaning to her left, her legs tucked under her. Her right hip was killing her. Bruce had taken a bone marrow and a muscle biopsy from that side. She didn't even want to know what it looked like. It felt badly bruised.

"Can I take a shower now?" she asked, trying to keep the whining tone out of her voice.

"Sure… do you need help?"

She widened her eyes.

Is he offering to… GET IN the shower with me? I am absolutely fine with that…

"Not… with the shower… just with the… getting ready for the shower… the…” he paused, "undressing…”

"Maybe just with my shirt, I can't lift my arms over my head."

"I can cut it off of you… that might be the least painful… it's covered in blood and debris, probably ruined."

"Okay," she said cautiously. She started to stand, wincing. Bruce hurried over, placing his arm around her waist to brace her.

He walked with her to the bathroom and cut her shirt up the back with a pair of scissors.

He started to walk away but turned at the last second. She peeled the shirt off the front of her, so she was standing there in her bra and jeans. He inhaled sharply. She caught his gaze. He stared for a moment and turned away. "I'll call Darcy so she can bring a change of clothes for you," he said to the doorframe.

"Wait… can you… help me with my jeans?" she asked. "I wouldn't ask, but… my arm."

"Yeah," he said sharply. He turned and watched her unzip and unbutton her jeans. She slid her hand around the waistband, pushing them down awkwardly. He quickly pulled down on her waistband, careful not to touch her skin. She stepped out of them. He scooped them up along with the shirt.

"Can I borrow one of your button ups?" she asked.

He nodded, turning to go. He shut the door behind him. Alice frowned.
Alice finished undressing and started the shower, catching sight of herself in the mirror while she waited for the water to heat up. She gasped.

She was… dirty. Her skin was grey where it hadn't been covered by clothing. Her shoulder and arm were bruised. Her fingers were bloody from shards of glass and her right hip looked like a giant purple mess. Her eyes were bloodshot and had dark circles under them. Her ribs stood out from where she hadn't gained back the weight she had lost.

He must have been horrified. She choked back a sob before stepping gingerly into the steaming shower. She heard a knock at the door.

"Come in," she said thickly, hoping the running water would mask the fact that she was crying.

"Hey, hon, it's me," said Darcy tentatively. "Bruce said you might need some help?"

Alice sobbed loudly.

"What's the matter? Did you fall?" asked Darcy.

"I'm hideous," wailed Alice.

"What?" Darcy asked.

Alice pulled back the shower curtain, really not caring about modesty. She just wanted someone else's opinion.

Darcy's eyes grew wide, "Oh, honey, no. You're not hideous, you're just hurt. It will go away… I'd hug you, but that'd be weird". She passed in Alice's shampoo, conditioner and body wash.

Alice snorted, "Bruce thinks I'm hideous… he couldn't wait to get away from me."

"Did he say that? If he said that, I'm going to go punch him."

"No, he didn't have to. He was helping me get undressed and he couldn't even look at me," she sniffed.

"I'm sure that wasn't it at all, honey. You need to ask him about it, be more assertive."

"I don't know if I could handle that."

"I'm positive that he doesn't think you're hideous. He was probably just being weird."

Alice sniffed again, feeling a little better. "Thanks, Darcy. I can handle this from here. Did you bring me a change of clothes?"

"Yeah, pj shorts, undergarments and Bruce gave you one of his button-ups"

"Just leave them on the toilet there."

She heard Darcy leave.

She ran her hands through her hair, scratching her scalp with her fingernails. She washed her hair and her body. She repeated the actions again, just because it felt so nice to get the grit washed away. She stood under the water until it started to go cold. She turned off the shower and grabbed one of
Bruce’s white fluffy towels to wrap herself in. She gingerly patted her head with the towel. It was excruciating to lift her injured arm over her head, so she dried her hair as best she could. She sat on the toilet to get dressed. It took her twice as long as usual, but she wasn’t going to ask for help.

She slipped into Bruce’s shirt easily enough and even got it buttoned evenly. It was rather large on her, but it was comfortable. She exited the bathroom and placed her bra and underwear that she’d taken off with her other things. She returned to get some lotion for her itchy legs. She sat on the toilet, with her leg propped on the edge of the sink. She smoothed the lotion up her leg from the ankle. She heard someone in the doorway.

"You can shut the door if this is bothering you. Sorry, I forgot to”, she said, without bothering to look at him.

"No, it's not… it's fine," Bruce said, not moving. "Alice… I don't think you're hideous."

"Darcy said something to you?" she sighed.

"She threatened me."

"Sounds about right."

"I had to leave before because I… I didn't trust myself not to touch you… I'm sorry that you misunderstood."

Alice bit her lip and looked up at him. He looked conflicted and uncomfortable.

"You have to understand, Alice. This…” he gestured towards her, her leg propped up on the sink, "This is killing me. Very slowly, frustratingly, killing me. It's hard for me to be around you when I can’t… touch you or… I have so many thoughts rushing around in my head and I dream about you. I swear, sometimes, it's all I think about. I care deeply about you, but part of that is desire and I do desire you. All of you. In every way imaginable," he shook his head quickly as if trying to shake the image out of his head. "So, you see, I think you're the very opposite of hideous," he smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes.

Alice blinked. A tear dripped down her cheek. "I'm so sorry, Bruce. I didn't realize… I want you too, desperately."

"Alice…” he warned, closing his eyes.

"No, I just need you to know. I don't know if it makes it better or worse, or what."

"Not sure," he coughed.

She stood and walked out into the living room. He followed her closely.

She abruptly to face him. "Do you want me to leave?" she asked, her voice wavering.

"NO!" he answered quickly. "No, I need you to be here with me… at least for a few days… I won't be able to sleep unless I'm with you… I have nightmares, and I'm scared of them now."

Suddenly, he wrapped his arms around her. He rested his head in her hair, inhaling deeply, exhaling raggedly. He made a choking sound into her hair. "I thought he was going to kill you."

She remained still, unsure of what to do. He hugged her tighter, made that sound again. She thought maybe it was a sob, but she wasn't sure. "He would have if you couldn’t… If you hadn't…” he slid
down her body, until his knees hit the floor and his head was buried in her stomach. He sobbed uncontrollably and tightened his hold on her. She ran her fingers through his hair, stroking his head. After a few minutes, he calmed down enough to stand.

She sat on the couch and he curled up next to her, his head on her lap, his arms around her waist. Alice wondered if it was normal for him to have mood swings like this.

"I have nightmares of what the Other Guy sees and does. I don't want to see him try to hurt you," he explained, his breath coming in gulps as he squeeazed her waist tightly. "I need to feel you beside me. I need to know you're okay or I don't know what I might do."

He sat up. "I love you," he said simply. She froze, her eyes wide. "You don't have to say it back, it's fine if you don't love me yet," he continued, "but I needed you to know."

She was quiet, trying to process everything he told her. She couldn't breathe. Her head was spinning. *He loves me?*

Suddenly, he was sitting up, kissing her cheeks, her lips. "Don't cry, Alice," he pleaded.

"I'm not," she said.

He looked at her for a moment and swiped his thumb on her cheek. He showed her the tears he'd wiped from her face. She leaned forward and kissed him, she felt numb. She moved her lips against his. She felt the tears now, pouring down her cheeks. She never wanted to stop kissing him. She never wanted this dear man to ever be alone again. "I love you, Bruce, I love you," she murmured, kissing him again.

"I don't ever want to spend another night without you," he confessed. "You keep the nightmares away. I know it's selfish, but I can't stand being away from you."

"You won't have to," she promised.

He leaned forward, pressing his lips to hers again. She opened her mouth slightly, allowing him to explore her mouth with his tongue. She felt a sweeping feeling in her stomach.

"Alice…" he murmured, pulling back from her. "I love you," he repeated, looking deeply into her eyes. She loved the warm chocolate hue his eyes had taken on as he looked at her. "I love you, too," she replied, smiling.

She couldn't pinpoint when exactly she knew that she loved him, but she absolutely knew she was indeed hopelessly in love with the dorky physicist she had met only months before.

He brushed her hair out of her face, running his fingers through it.

"Did we just decide to move in together?" he asked.

"I think so…" she laughed.

"Is that okay? I know you wanted to figure out who you are and where you belong…" he started.

"I know where I belong," she interrupted.

He smiled and laced his fingers with hers.

She continued, "I doubt anyone knows who they really are, not until they die. Everyone's constantly
changing. Just when you think you have it figured out, something else happens and you have to adapt. I don't want to adapt alone, I want to adapt with you."

He pressed a kiss to the backs of her hands, "You don't think it's too soon?"

"Do you?"

"No, I don't think it was soon enough… I should have invited you to move in with me the first day we met."

She smiled, "I doubt I would have been as receptive. I don't know if you recall, but I wasn't entirely fond of you back then."

"My fault."

"Mine too… a tiny bit."

"Mostly mine, though."

She nodded, "I'm agreeing with you."

Bruce laughed softly. He ran his thumb down her nose and over her lips, dragging her bottom lip down. He kissed her again and repeated, "You don't think it's too soon?"

"No," she said simply. She looked down at her hand in his. "When can I get the rest of my stuff from Zeke's apartment?"

He laughed, "Is it really that bad in here?"

"Yes. It's depressing."

"I'm sorry."

"No, I'm sorry. You don't like putting down roots anywhere, do you?"

"It makes it easier to leave if I don't," he said sadly.

"Do you think you'll be leaving?"

"Not without you."

"Good. You'd better believe I'll be comin' with you if you decide to leave."

They were quiet for a while, just looking at each other. Soon, Alice's neck and shoulder started to ache and her hip as well. She felt like an elderly invalid.

"Can I take something for pain?" she asked. "My everything hurts."

Bruce smiled sympathetically. "Of course and you should eat something too. Would you like anything to eat?"

"Anything? I can have anything?"

"Anything you can imagine… as long as it exists."

"Ah, so no ambrosia or manna, then?"
"No… I don't think you can find it in New York right now. I am fairly certain that ambrosia's seasonal."

She laughed, "I would kill for some sesame chicken right now."

"Chinese it is. Do you just want the sesame chicken or do you want anything else?"

"Sesame chicken, rice, egg rolls, and cream cheese wontons… and steamed dumplings… and I think that's all," she grinned.

"Okay, I'm adding some veggie lo mein to that…"

"Fine with me."

He called and ordered their food while she stood up to stretch her legs a bit.

"How's your shoulder?" he asked, brushing his hand lightly over it.

"Sore. It's better than yesterday… should I start trying to move it? I'm worried my range of motion will be affected."

"Give it another day or so and you can start trying to move it. You don't need to torture yourself. Give it time to heal a bit and until then, I'll take care of you."

"What am I going to do when you go down to the lab, though?"

"I'll take a few days off. I think my girlfriend getting attacked by her ex warrants a few days off to take care of her."

"Not to mention, I'm worse off because of the 'slightly invasive' tests you had to run," she said obstinately.

"I wanted to be sure you're okay. I'm sorry I hurt you, though. Did they bruise?"

"I'll say… I have more bruises than not back there."

"Can I see?"

"I don't know, can you?" she asked, leaning forward slightly and pulling the waistband of her shorts and panties down to show him her hip.

"Oh, Alice, I'm sorry, love," he gingerly brushed his fingers over her skin, frowning.

He called me 'love'. Oh my God, I adore this man.

"It's fine, except the waistband of my shorts is kind of painful." She said, pulling her shorts back up and wincing.

"Take them off. It's just me here."

"Is that okay? I mean…"

"I wouldn't impose myself on you when you're obviously so uncomfortable… well, I still want to, I always want to, but I can control myself. Especially if you're in pain… I'm not a machine."

She laughed quietly, "You're sure, though? You made quite the scene before…"
“I’m sorry about that… I was just being a big baby. I’m fine. I’ll even take them off you myself.” He reached over and slid the shorts down her legs, his fingers brushing against her skin. She stepped out of them. He folded them neatly, carrying them over to the stack of clothes Darcy had brought down. He scooped all of them up and carried them into the bedroom.

“Where are you taking those?” she called.

“I’m putting them in the dresser,” he replied.

“You called me ‘love’?” she asked when he’d returned to the living room. It was still on her mind. She wondered why he’d chosen that pet name over all the others.

“What? Oh, before? I just… if you don’t like it, I can try something else…” he stammered.

“No, I like it. I was just wondering why you chose that.”

“Oh… uh… I just think pet names, in general, are kind of silly. I wanted to call you something and my overly rational brain dredged that up because I love you, therefore, you are my love… I guess that’s why?” he looked nervous and embarrassed.

“Now I like it more,” she grinned.

He smiled, “I’m glad…”

“I couldn’t imagine you calling me something like ‘honey bunny’ or ‘pumpkin’ or whatever, anyway.”

He laughed, "No, that's not really my style."

Alice sat back down on the couch, tucking her legs up into Bruce's shirt with the rest of her.

"Are you cold?” he asked when he walked back into the room. "I can get a blanket."

"Really? Please do, I'm chilly, not sure why."

He went to the closet in the hall. He returned with a blue fleece throw blanket and a pillow. He handed her the pillow and she snuggled up to it, hugging it closely to her side. He spread the blanket over her and tucked it around her legs.

"Can I get you anything to drink?"

"I'd love a soda… I think Darcy has some… if you'll grab my phone, I'll ask if I can have one."

He handed her the phone, "You know those things are terrible for you…”

"I know Dad, but I rarely ever drink them."

"This is true. You drink more water than anyone else I've met… and please don't call me 'dad'. The thought I have about you are certainly NOT dad thoughts."

"Should I call you 'Daddy', then?” she giggled.

"Please, no…” he blushed and shook his head.

"I'm kidding, I'd never call you that except in jest."

"Thank you."
"I am NOT into that. I have no Daddy issues. My grandpa was an excellent father figure."

She sent off a quick text to Darcy.

"When do you think she'll bring it over?" asked Bruce, walking out to the kitchen for a bottle of water.

"Oh, pretty soon," laughed Alice.

"So, I don't have time to maul your face, then?" he asked, crossing back to the couch and sitting down.

"Not completely…"

"I'll have to see what I can do, then…" he leaned over to kiss her.

He was interrupted by a knock on the door. He sighed, "To be continued…" He got up and went to open the door.

"Somebody order a soda?" Darcy asked, handing the can to Bruce. "You're taking good care of her?" she asked him warily.

"He is," confirmed Alice.

"Good… are you feeding her and telling her she's pretty?"

"Food's on its way. My mouth has been otherwise engaged," he smiled at Alice, who blushed crimson.

Darcy smiled, looking between the two of them. "Well, I'm gonna go, totally feel like a third wheel here… Alice, we need to hang out soon, if Bruce will let your lips rest for an afternoon."

"When her shoulder's better," he promised.

"Thanks for the soda, Darce," said Alice.

"Okay, well enjoy it. I'll see you kids later." Darcy left, closing the door behind her. Almost immediately, there was another knock on the door.

Bruce handed Alice her soda and went to answer it. It was one of the interns bringing up their Chinese food. He thanked him and shut the door, locking the latch.

"You locked the door," stated Alice. "You never lock the door."

"Well, I figure if JARVIS can be hacked, I should probably lock the door."

"Seems logical."

Alice ate. Probably not as much as Bruce might have liked, but she did graze for the rest of the night. They were trying to decide on a movie to watch but instead started talking about their respective childhoods.

"Do you remember your dad at all?" asked Bruce. Alice was huddled under the blanket from earlier. Bruce had taken off his shoes and socks and was sitting on the opposite end of the couch, facing her.
"A little, here and there. He died when I was three," she stared off into space, as she was wont to do when accessing a memory. "I remember one time, for my third birthday, I think, he brought me a cupcake in bed when I woke up that morning," she smiled. "It's mostly just moments, though. I can remember his smile or the way his laugh sounded. The way he said my name when I was misbehaving, no whole memories."

Bruce smiled vaguely.

"What about you? What were your parents like?"

His smile fell. He blinked a few times. "Well, my mother was wonderful. She loved me, I know that." He looked down at his hands. "My father… my father was a worthless alcoholic." He set his jaw, glaring into nothing. "He was a bastard who used me and my mother as punching bags and cited paranoia and conspiracy theories as reasons. He thought I was a mutant, that I was a monster. It was almost like he knew what I'd become."

"Bruce…" Alice leaned forward and tried to hold his hand. Both were clenched into fists. "I'm sorry, I didn't know. I wouldn't have brought it up. I'm so sorry."

"No, I need you to know this. You need to know everything about me, this is everything," he continued. "When I was seven years old, Mom was going to save me. We were going to sneak away in the night and live better lives away from him," he paused, swallowing thickly, "But he found out. He saw us packing the car. He smashed my mother's head into the curb. He killed her, right there in front of me. He threatened me, told me that if I told the police, if I told the jury at the trial, that I'd go to hell. I was seven years old. I didn't know that I was already there."

Alice covered her mouth with her hand, her eyes wide.

Bruce continued, "I put up with him until I was old enough to run away. I put myself through college and he crept deeper and deeper into insanity. He blew up the apartment where he was living, and the authorities wanted me to take him in. I sent him to a mental institution. He died there. I wanted to kill him myself."

By the time he finished talking, he was shaking with anger. Or sadness… or both? Alice wasn't sure. So she shook off the blanket and wrapped her good arm around his neck, the hurt one around his waist. She laid her head on his chest and listened to his thudding heartbeat. He was tense for a while. It took him a while to calm down, but soon he was returning the hug. He pulled her over into his lap.

"I feel like I should tell you about Betty, too," he said quietly.

"Your ex?"

He nodded.

"Okay," she said, lacing her fingers with his and dropping her head back onto his chest so she could look at him while he talked.

She wasn't sure she wanted to hear about his other conquests, but it seemed important to him.

"Betty was my lover and my colleague. We both were professors at Culver University. She worked in molecular biology. I worked in nuclear physics. We were commissioned to work on the super soldier project for the U.S military. It was meant to make humans immune to gamma radiation. The experiment failed and I was exposed to lethal doses of gamma radiation, that's how the Other Guy came to be."
Alice nodded, she knew about the experiment that made the Other Guy.

He continued, "I thought I was in love with Betty, but the truth was, I was just rebelling. We both were. I was an asshole back then. I can still tend to be one now. I hated her father and I used her to further that. She used me to get back at him. I think the only reason she was attracted to me was that he hated me. I don't know that for sure, but I know the relationship wasn't healthy."

He pushed Alice back so he could look at her in the eyes. "I don't want you to think that I'm using you. I don't want you to think that I'm carrying a torch for Betty. I'm not. I wasn't in love with her. The old me wouldn't think this conversation is necessary, but I'm trying to be more empathic… not looking for a pat on the back, I'm just trying to explain my reasoning…"

He continued, "There were four others before Betty, but none were ever serious."

"Why are you telling me this?" asked Alice.

"I want you to know everything. I don't want to hide anything from you. You've seen me at my absolute worst, so there's nothing I want to hide."

"Thank you," said Alice simply.

"You don't have to reciprocate," he assured her, trying to meet her eyes.

"I want to."

He let out a sigh, "Oh good…"

She laughed, "Well, I'm sorry to disappoint, but besides the guy who took me to prom, there's only been Zeke. I met him my freshman year of college and we started dating. We stopped dating about a couple weeks ago," she nodded.

"Really?" asked Bruce in disbelief.

"Yep. Don't look so surprised."

He raised his eyebrows, nodding thoughtfully. "Tell me about the prom guy."

She laughed, "WELL, I was kind of an outcast in school. I got made fun of a LOT, so imagine my surprise when the captain of the football team wanted to take me to prom. Unfortunately, there was a rigged election for prom queen, which I won and just as I was crowned, they dumped a bucket of pig's blood all over me. I promptly killed all of them with my latent telekinetic powers."

He laughed, "Yeah, that's the plot of Carrie."

"OH! You've seen that one!" She smirked. "My story is much less interesting. He was a friend of mine who took me to prom. My grandpa wouldn't let me date."

"Good man. Teenage boys are the worst."

She laughed, "I see that now, but at the time, I was less than amused."

"So really, just Zeke, huh?" he asked again.

"Yes! Do you think I'm lying to you?"

"No. It's just hard to believe that someone who looks like you has only had one other boyfriend. I
can't really see why you were with him for so long. I mean...have you seen YOU? You do realize you could have done way better?"

"I didn't think I'd know what to do if I was ever on my own again. The last time I dated was in college. I was eighteen years old. I was always 'Zeke's girl'. I didn't know how to be just Alice."

"You could have anyone you want."

"What's your point? Why are you telling me this?" she teased.

"I'm not sure. I'm a stupid, stupid, man," he grinned.

"No, you're not. You're a genius," she said, kissing his cheek. She yawned, "A handsome, sexy, wonderful genius."

"I think you need some sleep... your eyesight is failing you."

She swatted his shoulder, "Stop. You are."

He smiled and nuzzled her neck, "I love you."

"Love you too." She snaked her arm up around the back of his head. "I am exhausted, though, maybe I should call it a night."

He stood and stretched. He bent and scooped her up in his arms easily.

"Hey... I can walk," she protested.

"But why should you? When you have a handsome, sexy, wonderful genius to carry you around?" he teased, walking swiftly towards the bedroom, turning sideways to miss the doorframe. He laid her down gently on the bed, which had been made and turned down.

He walked over to the other side of the bed and sat down with his back to Alice. She struggled to sit upright and reached around his waist, peeling up his t-shirt and pulling it over his head. He turned towards her. "Brazen, this evening, aren't we?"

She blushed. "It's nothing I haven't seen already..." she teased.

He frowned. "What? Did you look? When I was... after I..."

"I really like your chest hair," she stated, running her hand up from his stomach to his collarbone.

"Alice..." he warned.

"I'll behave," she promised.

"I don't know if I will," he said quietly.

"Okay." She was more than fine with that.

"Alice, I don't want to hurt you."

"Okay, okay... will you at least kiss me a little bit?"

"Fine, but just a little..." he grinned as he turned and leaned over her, she slid her hand up behind his head into his hair. He pressed his lips to hers.
Just then, her phone rang. Bruce groaned. "Ignore it, please?" he pleaded. She nodded, he leaned down again…

Bruce's phone started ringing. "Come ON…" he complained, letting his head fall back to the pillow.

"Dr. Banner, I'm sorry to intrude, but Miss Potts is desperately seeking Miss Vorso," said JARVIS politely.

"So am I, can it wait until tomorrow?"

"She says it's an emergency."

"Okay, thanks, JARVIS."

Alice's eyes were wide.

"Whoa, JARVIS is in here too? Can he… see?"

"JARVIS is an AI."

She swatted Bruce playfully, "It's not JARVIS I'm worried about. It's Tony."

"OH, no, I don't think he has cameras in here."

"You don't think?"

"I'll make sure he doesn't."

"Thank you," Alice removed herself from Bruce's grasp and stood by the side of the bed. Bruce groaned and wrapped his arms around her leg.

"Very mature," she quipped, looking down at him.

"I don't care."

"I need to put something on. My shorts, I guess, I don't have any pants here. Where are they?"

"What if I don't tell you?"

"Bruce…"

"They're in the top drawer of the dresser," he acquiesced, releasing her leg. He slowly, grudgingly stood up.

Bruce walked out to the kitchen, Alice followed. They heard a knock at the door. He looked out the peephole. Frowning, he opened the door. "Pepper, we were on our way up…"

Pepper looked distraught, she pushed past Bruce and Tony followed her in.

"Nice pants tent," Tony gestured with his chin.

"Shut up… what's going on?"

"No idea, Pepper got a call from someone and wouldn't rest until she talked to Alice."

Alice frowned, starting to worry as Pepper ushered her over to the couch.
"Alice, I hate to be the bearer of terrible news, but I got a call from your grandfather."

"What? Why didn't he call me?"

"He couldn't get through to you. Your phone was disconnected?"

"Right… Zeke."

"Right… well, your Grandma was sick. Pneumonia. She was in the hospital."

Alice jumped up, alarmed. "I have to go home, I need to be with her."

She started to turn, and Pepper grabbed her hand again. "Sit down, Alice."

Alice sat down, a questioning look on her face, "I need to pack, get a flight down to Memphis."

"Alice…" Pepper cut a look over to Bruce. He rushed over, standing back until he was needed.

"No, Pepper, I really do need to get going, I need to be with her," she was aware that her voice sounded manic.

"Alice…" Pepper was looking at her sadly.

No, no, no, no, no… she can't be… I haven't gone to visit since last Christmas… she can't be gone.

Alice choked, "No."

"I'm sorry, she had been sick for a while and your grandpa said, with the emphysema, it just wasn't good."

Alice sobbed, "No."

Tony shifted uncomfortably, "I'm going to go talk to… Steve… I need to ask him something." He booked it from the room.

Alice covered her mouth with her hand, "When?"

"Two days ago, they've been trying to get in touch with you."

She sobbed again. "Why didn't they call me at work? They have my work number."

"They'd been leaving messages with Zeke… he wasn't giving them to you, obviously. Your grandfather thought you were still on good speaking terms, according to Zeke."

I'll kill him.

Alice's eyes flashed and narrowed, "Is he still here?" she ground out.

"Yes, Tony is holding him somewhere…"

Alice felt her body go cold.

"No, Alice," Bruce straightened up.

"Where did Tony go?" Alice asked, ignoring him.

"NO, Alice," said Bruce firmly, touching her arm.
She twisted away from him. She stood abruptly, turning to stalk out the door. Bruce left the room.

"Alice," called Pepper nervously. "You're not even dressed. It's ten-thirty at night. Why don't you sleep on this and we'll go see him in the morning?"

"Not a chance," replied Alice.

Bruce ran out of the bedroom, pulling a t-shirt over his head. "ALICE," he warned. "You'll regret this, I know you."

"NO!" she snarled. She could feel a strange cold heat building in her face, her arms, her chest. She looked directly at Bruce, "He'll be the one with regrets."

Pepper looked terrified. Bruce raised his eyebrows. They looked at each other and then back to her. Alice turned and stalked from the room.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Hoo boy. Here's some stuff. If you wanted stuff. This chapter has it.

Mind the tags.

Alice

Alice stalked down the hall, her bare feet slapping on the cold, damp concrete. The fluorescent lights were flickering. It was cool down in the basement, but Alice was sweating, burning up, her face flushed. Bruce and Tony trailed behind, closely watching her. Bruce hadn't spoken since Alice had lashed out in his apartment. She wasn't sure what made him stop protesting and start looking at her differently, but she didn't care at the moment.

All she could think, all she could see, was Zeke. She felt the anger flare up when she heard Pepper say that he hadn't been passing along her messages. That her Grandma had been sick and Zeke hadn't told her. That now, Grams was gone and Alice wasn't there. She didn't get to say goodbye.

She'd felt it in a way, for a couple of days, the anger, the rage…always just below the surface, begging to be released. She couldn't handle the grief she was feeling, so she embraced the anger instead. Zeke had stolen something from her and he was going to regret it.

She felt warm for the first time in weeks. Feverish almost. She'd been cold for so long, she'd almost forgotten what it was like to be warm.

She couldn't recall when she'd ever been as angry as she was right now.

She'd been mad before, of course. She was pretty sure everyone had felt shortchanged or used before. Had imagined scenarios or arguments with the person in question where they had bested them in some way, either physically or mentally. It was like she wasn't thinking much beyond *kill Zeke*. 

She thought she could definitely kill him right now. A part of her questioned whether or not that was a legitimate response to what had happened to her, but that part was soon silenced.

They came to the end of the hallway, she snapped her head back to Tony, glaring.

"Left," said Tony, wide-eyed. He looked legitimately shaken. Good. They all needed to know she was serious. She went left. She heard them whispering behind her.

She stopped and pulled a 180, stopping them both in their tracks. "What was that?" she snarled, looking between the two of them.

"Nothing, Alice," Bruce said, slowly, deliberately. It irritated her. His calm voice. She growled under her breath. Bruce's eyes widened, "What's wrong?" He too looked shaken.
She turned just as abruptly and continued down the hall to the door at the end. She looked at Tony again, he nodded. She pounded on the door. It was opened by a security officer in a black suit and sunglasses. Tony jerked his head. The guard moved to the side and out the door to stand in the hall. Alice started to walk in but noticed Tony and Bruce following.

Nope.

She stopped and turned her head, glaring at the both of them.

"Alice, I'm not letting you go in by yourself," Bruce protested.

She smiled sweetly, "I'll be fine."

She reached out and pushed Tony's shoulder, he spun rapidly backward into Bruce. She quickly slammed the door. There was no knob on the inside, so she slammed her fist into the central hinge, squashing it flat.

She was surprised both by her strength and intuition, but not enough to stop and think about it.

Bruce and Tony were banging on the door. She smirked.

She turned, Zeke was sitting in a folding chair at a table in the center of the room. It looked very similar to a police interrogation room. There was even a mirror on one wall. She figured Tony and Bruce would soon be behind it watching.

*Let them. Zeke has this coming to him.*

He had a bewildered expression on his face. Like he had just woken up. She stalked over to where he was sitting.

Her hand made a sickening cracking sound as it connected with his jaw. He flew out of the chair and onto the floor.

"What the *fuck*?" he howled, holding his face.

"You took something from me. Something you had no *right to take*!" she screamed the last words. "You took away my last moments with her, *you bastard*. You knew she was sick, *you knew*, and you…and you"…she grabbed his shirt, pulling him up off the floor. She pushed him back to the wall behind him, sliding him up the wall over her head. His feet had barely left the ground, but he was kicking them, trying to get out of her grasp.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" he asked. His expression was one of genuine terror. "What's wrong with your eyes?"

She threw him against the opposite wall like he was a rag doll. He landed in a heap on the floor. He snapped his head up, just in time to see her fist before it smashed into his jaw. He coughed, blood splattering the wall beside him.

He rolled out of the way, keeping away from her and not breaking eye contact. "Al...Alice, please… you need to calm down."

He kept infuriatingly out of her reach. She grabbed the folding chair and slung it at him. He ducked and it went through the mirror, shattering glass all over Tony and Bruce, who apparently found their
way into the observation room. They scrambled through the window.

"ALICE!" yelled Bruce. "STOP THIS, PLEASE!" He looked scared, Tony looked scared, Zeke looked positively terrified.

Zeke was practically groveling at her feet, "Alice, I'm sorry, I'm sorry! I had no idea she was that bad off. If I'd known, I would have told you so you could go be with her! I'm sorry I hurt you, I'm sorry!"

"You're sorry," she spat. "You're sorry? What does your sorrow do for me? *Nothing*. Does it give me back what you stole from me?" He was silent.

Her skin prickled, verging on painful, burning. "WELL, DOES IT?" He was staring at her arms.

She looked down. They were glowing, green flames licked out around her. They were burning hot, her skin felt seared. She grinned wickedly, not taking the time to worry about why. She grabbed his arm, his forearm. His skin sizzled. He screamed in agony.

As quickly as the rage had taken her, it was gone. Like a light switch. Zeke's tortured cries were what did it. She quickly let go of him and backed away, tears springing to her eyes. Why had she done that? She let out a sob. She looked at Bruce. She loved Bruce. She closed her eyes. Her arms felt cool, cold. So cold.

Suddenly, Tony was tending to Zeke, Bruce had her in a crushing hug, she was crying. Cold tears ran down her cheeks. Zeke was screaming at her, spitting as he spoke.

"You're nothing but a *freak*, Alice. You *deserve* him. I hope he *kills* you next time! I was the best thing you could *ever* have! You're just a lab experiment. You're not even a *real* person, you fucking *mutant* *bitch*.*"

She cried. She cried for what she had done to Zeke. She cried for what she was. She cried for her Grandma. She felt like she was nothing but sadness embodied. Bruce held her. He just held her. Even after everything she'd said and done. She tried to break free of his arms, feeling inadequate and undeserving of his love, but he held her tighter. He told her he loved her, that he loved her no matter what.

Suddenly, she was very tired. She was exhausted.

*Why did I even come down here? This didn't bring her back... what the hell is wrong with me?*

She was just so tired. And cold. She lay her head down on Bruce's shoulder, feeling sleep overcome her. He was so warm. She slipped into the peaceful, black nothing.

---

**Bruce**

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Bruce wasn't sure what happened. An hour ago, he'd been fooling around with his girlfriend. Now he and Tony were almost running to keep up with her as she went down to the basement holding cell to see Zeke.
She had startled him before. Her eyes. They'd been glowing green.

He was 99% certain this had something to do with the gamma radiation. He had a few hypotheses, but none of them was good news. The most likely being that when she had leached gamma energy from him as the Hulk, she had leached a few other things too. Explosive temper and what Tony called "breath-taking anger management issues."

They reached the end of the hall. She turned and snarled at Tony, her eyes glowing and narrow.

"Left," Tony said quickly, raising his hands in front of him.

He looked at Bruce, who tried to keep a placid expression on his face. No use worrying him until he needed to.

"Is it the gamma?" whispered Tony.

"I think so," answered Bruce.

Alice spun around, growling like a wild animal. "What was that?" she hissed, looking between them. Bruce suddenly felt like he was coming between a predator and its prey.

"Nothing, Alice," he said nervously, "what's wrong?"

He was more than a bit jumpy. She was scaring him.

She didn't answer. She just spun back around and started walking again. They reached the door, Tony concurred it was the holding cell.

Alice banged on the door, the sound echoed down the hallway. The security guard opened the door and moved out of the way. Alice entered, they followed closely. Tony slightly in front of Bruce.

She stopped in the doorway, turning to face them. If looks could kill, they'd both be dead.

"Alice, I'm not letting you go in there alone," Bruce argued.

She took a step towards them, they both backed up. She smiled. It made her mouth look eerily out of place and in contrast to the rest of her face. "I'll be fine."

She abruptly pushed Tony's shoulder, which sent him spinning backward towards Bruce. Without thinking, Bruce put his hands out to steady him. It ended with Bruce against the opposite wall with his arms around Tony, who was facing him. Needless to say, it was a very awkward position.

"Bruce, we really don't have time for this right now. What would Alice say?"

The security guard, who had leaped forward to help, eyed them incredulously.

"Get OFF me, you idiot…” Bruce pushed Tony backward.

"You smell nice…what is that?" Tony sniffed, "Honeysuckle?"

Bruce was suddenly flustered, "Alice brought all of her girly shower stuff over and I wasn't paying attention to what product I was using and… you know what? I don't have to explain myself to you. We need to get in there," he gestured towards the door.

"You want me to call for back up?" asked the guard.
Tony shook his head, "Nah, she's just a tiny little thing."

"Knocked you on your ass…" the guard said, raising his eyebrows.

"I'm your employer, you know," said Tony.

"My apologies. Knocked you on your ass, sir."

"That's better."

The three of them crossed the hall quickly just as a loud THUNK came from the other side of the door.

The guard tried the door. It wouldn't budge.

"It's locked?" asked Bruce incredulously.

"It's an interrogation style room. There's no knob on the other side…" exclaimed Tony.

"Why do you have a police interrogation room in the basement of your tower?"

"Because I'm Tony Fucking Stark and I do what I want," Tony said indignantly. "JARVIS! Open this door!"

"I'm afraid that the structural integrity of the door has been altered, sir," JARVIS said apologetically.

Tony swore under his breath.

"Might I suggest the observation room, sir?"

"Right… I knew there was a reason I kept you around," he said as he turned towards the door adjacent to the interrogation room.

They scrambled inside just in time to see Alice backhand Zeke across the room.

"I have a very positive feeling about this," said Tony, looking at Bruce.

Bruce stood back, arms crossed. "Are you happy you brought her down here, now? You could have prevented this, he gestured to the scene before them.

"So that could have been me that she backhanded across the room? Unlikely, Banner."

They watched as Alice picked Zeke up and pinned him to the wall over her head.

"Okay, we need to get in there!" exclaimed Bruce, pointing. "She's going to kill him!"

"You want back up now, sir?" asked the guard. Tony shook his head.

"Just Hulk out and tear down the wall!" said Tony.

"I can't do that, the Hulk hates her. Go get your suit!"

"I don't have any ready, they're all being worked on… but, I could throw acid on the door, it would melt and we could get in there."

"You have acid with you right now?"
"No, it's in the lab."

"THEN WHY WOULD YOU BRING IT UP?!"

They both jumped as Zeke's body hit the wall.

"We could pump some kind of incapacitating gas in through the air ducts," Tony suggested.

"Do you have any?"

"In the lab. Carrying chloroform on your person is generally frowned upon."

"Okay… future plans need to involve things you have with you right now. Let's just break this glass," said Bruce, looking for something to throw.

"Nope. It's bullet-proof," said Tony.

Suddenly, a chair burst through the window.

"I got ripped off. I'm never using that supplier again."

"Just, get in there," said Bruce urgently.

They vaulted through the window.

"Okay, plan?" asked Tony.

"Get her away from Zeke, I'll handle her, and you get him out."

"Okay, go, Big Guy."

Bruce approached Alice cautiously. "ALICE, STOP THIS, PLEASE?" he yelled.

Alice turned to look at him but turned directly back to Zeke.

"Well, that was effective, you've got her trained well," said Tony.

Alice's arms and hands burst into glowing green flame.

Bruce froze, unsure of what to do.

"The fuck?!" yelled Tony, looking at Bruce in bewilderment.

She reached out and grabbed Zeke's forearm, which promptly started sizzling. He started screaming.

Shit.

Bruce's blood ran cold when he looked at Alice. Her expression was one of horror. She dropped Zeke's arm immediately and let a sob escape. It was hard to hear over Zeke's screaming. The flesh on his arm was completely melted where she had touched him. The smell in the room was acrid, the smell of cooked flesh. He ran towards her, pulling her back and hugging her close to him. He pinned her arms down by her sides, attempting to calm her.

"Alice, I love you," he whispered in her ear.

Tony ran forward at the same time, checking Zeke's injuries. Zeke was screaming at Alice the whole time. Bruce didn't listen to most of it, he was trying to calm her down.
"...You're just a lab experiment. You're not even a real person, you fucking mutant bitch!"

Bruce's ears picked up the last part. He looked over to try to catch Tony's eye. He did as Tony dragged Zeke over to the window, where the guard pulled him into the observation room and out into the hall.

Alice was sobbing hysterically and trying to claw her way out of Bruce's arms. He felt her nails tear at his skin, he was only slightly surprised not to at least hear a growl from the Other Guy at all. He just held her tighter.

"Alice, I love you. I don't care about any of this, love. Don't worry, we'll figure this out. It's going to be okay. You'll be okay..." he murmured soothingly.

She grasped his arm tightly, her tears dripping down his arm. Her nails dug into his skin painfully, but still nothing, not even a peep from the Other Guy. He figured she had probably been draining his gamma energy to fuel her outburst.

She was slowing down, starting to snuggle towards him. She lay her head on his shoulder and soon fell asleep. He picked her up and turned towards Tony, who helped him get her out of the room.

"What do we do now?" he asked, walking slowly down the hall.

"I'm going to call one of my on-staff doctors to treat Zeke's burns. I vote that we just dump him in an alley somewhere. No one's going to believe him when he's ranting and raving about his ex-girlfriend and her 'green firearms'."

"He's a SHIELD agent, Tony. They're going to look for him eventually."

"Nick Fury doesn't want him back. I called him after he broke into the lab, he told me he was mine to do with what I pleased. Apparently, because of him, an entire village and three agents are dead. He went AWOL in the middle of a mission."

"I still don't feel right just dumping him in an alley."

"Mental institution, then. He'll have medical care and drugs for pain. It's all good."

Bruce reluctantly agreed, seeing no other option.

They boarded the elevator.

"Bruce, she needs to get this under control."

"I know."

"Before something really bad happens."

"I know."

"I mean... this was bad, but it could have been much worse."

"I know."

"Dude, I'm just..."

"I know, Tony. I know. I know she can't catch on fire and burn someone every time she gets mad. I know she needs to learn how to control this. I am working on a way for that to happen, but before I
"can do that, I need to work on this," he gestured with his head towards her sleeping form in his arms, "This right here. I need to get her in bed, so she can sleep. She needs to grieve. Her Grandma died. She needs to deal with that before she can even begin to deal with this. Or what's in her parent's file. What I need from you is to find out how Zeke knows about any of that."

"I'll do my best."

"Thanks."

Tony patted Bruce on the shoulder and they rode the rest of the way in silence.

Once they got to the common room, everyone was sitting in the dining room. Tony went in first, shushing everyone so Bruce could carry Alice to his… their apartment. He was certain they wanted to know how she was, but he wanted to get her settled first.

He carried her into their bedroom and tucked her in. She was shivering again. He made sure she was comfortable and reluctantly left her.

He walked back out to the common room. Everyone turned to stare at him.

"Is she okay?" asked Steve after a long silence. "Tony said she bumped her head?"

Bruce turned to glance at Tony, "Um… yeah. She's fine. Just a bump on the head."

"What happened to your arms?" asked Clint. "You look like you got in a fight with a wildcat."

Bruce glanced down at his forearms to see the raised scratch marks Alice had left there.

"Uh…"

Natasha folded her arms, "Tell us what really happened."

Bruce sighed and sat down in a stool.

"We need to tell them, Tony. They'll find out eventually."

Tony groaned. "Ugh… I was hoping to put this off. I'm tired."

"Spill it, Banner," commanded Natasha.

Bruce related the events of the evening, with Tony providing colorful-if-unhelpful commentary throughout.

After he was finished, everyone was silent.

"What does this mean for Alice?" asked Steve.

"Well, she has to figure out a way to control her abilities. I'm going to run more tests on her in the lab. I'll know more after that."

"Has anyone thought about calling Charles Xavier?" asked Natasha. "Doesn't he handle mutants?"

Bruce flinched at the word. "She doesn't need to be 'handled', she needs to be taught. Trained," he emphasized.

"That's what I meant, Bruce… I didn't… mean it the way it came out," she said quietly.
"Just because she's a mutant doesn't mean she's lumped in with another group of people," Clint said reassuringly. "We don't look at her any differently."

"So we're taking care of this in-house?" asked Natasha, "That's what I'm trying to figure out here."

"Yes," said Tony.

"It makes no difference whether she is 'mutant' or not. She is still our Alice," said Thor loudly. He'd been silent for most of the discussion, tapping Mjolnir against his leg contemplatively. Bruce suddenly had the urge to hug him. He didn't. But the urge was there.

"Yeah, Natasha," quipped Tony, staring at her purposefully.

"I didn't mean it the way it came out… guys… I'm NOT anti-mutant," Natasha glanced around the room. "I'm NOT… Steve?" she looked towards him hopefully.

Steve straightened slightly, "Do you think I'd be on your side because I'm old? I was in favor of mutant rights before it was cool to be in favor of mutant rights."

Tony chuckled, "Where are your horn-rimmed glasses, Hipster-Steve?"

Steve frowned, "I do not understand that reference…" he looked around the room questioningly.

"I am not anti-mutant, guys…” Natasha said, looking intensely at everyone.

"Yeah, I bet you have a token mutant friend, don't you?" asked Tony incredulously.

She huffed and stalked from the room, grumbling under her breath.

Clint turned towards Tony, "You don't actually think she's…"

"Psh. No. She rarely makes mistakes. When she does, I jump on it. Now, this will be on her tombstone: Natasha 'I'm not anti-mutant' Romanov."

Bruce chuckled lightly. Tony was refreshing to have around sometimes.

"Bruce's will say, "Bruce 'Honeysuckle' Banner."

Sometimes.

He sighed, "Tony, seriously… I accidentally used her shampoo…”

Tony laughed loudly.

"You know, it's more worrisome that you can actually pick out that scent in my hair."

Tony snorted, "Pepper's stupid scented candles."

"Sure it is, Stark," said Clint knowingly, nodding his head.

He scoffed, "What? I can read the labels, and I know what my home smells like. It smells like Bruce's hair."

Steve raised his eyebrows, snickering.

"What?"
"Why did you smell Dr. Banner's hair?" asked Thor, his eyes twinkling.

"Because I fell into his arms..." Tony trailed off, realizing that he'd lost control of the conversation.

Bruce excused himself amid the other Avengers' good-natured Tony ribbing.

He quickly made his way back to the apartment, hoping that Alice was still asleep.

He didn't want to, but he knew he needed to try and get some rest since he hadn't slept the night before.

He changed into pajamas and climbed into bed with her, but he couldn't sleep. Every time he closed his eyes he saw one of two things: the image of her cowering before the Other Guy as he pummeled the air above her head and the image of her crumpling to the ground after she mauled Zeke.

He finally fell into a delirious sleep after midnight. It was only achieved by laying his head on her chest so he could hear and feel her heartbeat against his cheek.
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Have some back story...

A lot of this is from the comics, or just kind of squint and it works kind of thing. Enjoy!

Bruce

When he woke up a few hours later, she was still sound asleep. He got up and made her a cup of tea, setting it on the nightstand.

Closer to noon, she still hadn't made an appearance, so he went to go check on her. She was wrapped up completely in the blanket. He looked over at the nightstand: the teacup was empty. He took it and left, coming back once more to leave a glass of water.

He repeated this process throughout the day. She came out once, to use the restroom, but she stared at her feet the whole time and didn't attempt to talk to him. He figured it was better to leave her be than to force his company.

People called her. Darcy. Pepper. Darcy again. Darcy again. Steve dropped by. He told them all the same thing: she wanted to be left alone.

Around six pm that evening, she shuffled out into the living room. She stood awkwardly for a few minutes.

He looked at her, waiting for her to speak. Her face was blank and he didn't want to say the wrong thing.

"I'm hungry," she stated.

"Oh, what would you like? Want me to order something?" he asked, eager to be able to do something for her.

"Cheeseburger…with bacon…lots of bacon."

"Okay, sure…"

She waited, standing still while he called to order it. He looked at her when he hung up.

"I miss you," she stated.

He smiled, "I've been here all day, I just… didn't know what you wanted, so I kept everyone else away."

"That's why I love you. You always know what I need," she smiled slightly. She looked down at what she was wearing. "I'm going to take a shower and change clothes. Then I want to cuddle on the
couch with you for the rest of my life."

He chuckled, "Deal."

She turned at the door to the bathroom, "Thank you, Bruce."

"Love you, Alice."

"Love you too."

She went into the bathroom and closed the door behind her. He went to his work bag and pulled out his laptop and the jump drive containing Alice's file. He set it on the coffee table.

There was a knock at the door.

He opened it up to Darcy, holding Alice's bacon cheeseburger.

"Let me in," she demanded.

"No! Give me that, it's for Alice, how did you get it?"

"I bribed the intern who brought it up," she held it out, he grabbed it and she pulled it back. "Let me in to see my friend, Banner," she said menacingly.

"She doesn't want company," he stated, as calmly as possible.

"That's not like her at all. Something's wrong."

"Yeah, her grandmother died."

"So? Mine died last year. I didn't lock myself up in my room and sleep for twenty-four hours."

"You're not Alice. Her grandmother raised her. She was like a mother to her. Everyone copes in different ways. This is how Alice is coping."

"Just let me in to see her, so I know you haven't murdered her or something."

Bruce flinched. He pulled the takeout container from Darcy, "I'll have her give you a call."

He slammed the door in her face.

He locked the deadbolt with a satisfying \textit{THUNK}.\textsuperscript{1}

He crossed the floor and set Alice's cheeseburger on the coffee table. He sat on the couch to wait for her. He wasn't really looking forward to talking about her file. He'd already seen some of it, just the preliminary overview document. He hadn't felt right reading it without Alice there, though.

She'd had so much happen in the spans of a few days. He just wanted a chance to breathe.

His gut reaction was to just… run. With Alice, of course. Run and go somewhere abandoned, in the wilderness, maybe that cabin where he had stayed in Canada. Then, he just wanted to hunker down on that tiny straw mattress under a big blanket and just stay there until things stopped happening. He knew that wasn't the most mature of reactions, however.

She came out of the bathroom, wearing a towel. Her hair was wet and her bare skin was steaming from the chill of the room. She noticed him staring and blushed.
"Forgot my clothes."

He smirked and looked down at the carpet, while she scurried to the bedroom, shutting the door.

She emerged a few minutes later wearing her yoga pants and a tank top, toweling off her hair.

"Is that my cheeseburger?" she asked, pointing to the table.

"Yeah," he nodded.

She ate about half of it, then put the rest back into the box and closed the lid. She got up to get a bottle of water out of the fridge.

"Sorry, I should have gotten one for you," said Bruce, as she sat back down on the couch.

"It's okay. Not a big deal," she smiled warmly. She looked down at her lap, the smile slowly falling from her face.

"Bruce, what's wrong with me?" she asked quietly.

"Nothing, nothing's wrong with you… there is just a lot we need to figure out."

"We?"

"Yes, I had to figure out my stuff alone and I wouldn't wish that for you. I'm here to help you in any way I can. I have your file and your parents' files from SHIELD. Tony got them. I read the overview but I wanted to wait and read the rest with you."

She scooted forward on the couch to where he had the drive's folder open on the laptop. She clicked the first file. He scooted forward beside her and they slowly made their way through the entire drive. It took all night and well into the morning.

They learned that Alice's parents weren't even romantically involved. They were colleagues at Culver University who were working on the super soldier project. This particular group was attempting to create a person capable of withstanding massive doses of gamma radiation by manipulating the x-gene mutation.

Both Dr. Vorso and Dr. Abernathy were carriers of the X-gene. This was the main reason they were picked. Samples of eggs and sperm were used to make 2 dozen test tube fetuses. Each was named for a letter of the Greek alphabet. Alice was the seventeenth. Her given name was Rho.

Alice's mother, Dr. Abernathy, had volunteered to become one of the surrogate mothers as well and was impregnated via in vitro fertilization along with 23 other volunteers. Rho (Alice) was grown in her own mother's womb, but she was technically still a test tube baby.

The surrogates were exposed to high levels of gamma radiation. They were subjected to a battery of horrific experiments, including an amniocentesis where amniotic fluid was irradiated and re-injected into the womb.

Out of all the babies, only 5 survived the pregnancy and were born. All 5 had the X-gene. Of those 5, only 3 survived their first week. Of those 3, only 1 survived infancy and thrived into childhood: Rho.

None of the surrogates survived the experiment. All of them had to be placed on life support by the time they'd reached the 7th month of their respective pregnancies.
The whole thing made Bruce feel sick. It was like reading about some crazy Nazi experiment.

Rho was given to her father, Dr. Vorso after he petitioned to exercise his fatherly rights. He raised her for three years. The entire time, she was a victim of hundreds of experiments, most on a daily basis, by the head of the research group.

The reason behind the experiments was to attempt to create a changeling. That is, a mutant who exhibits abilities from birth, instead of from puberty. The experiments were unsuccessful.

Dr. Vorso left both the university and Virginia one night. He drove his daughter, who he'd named Alice, to her mother's family in Tennessee. He gave her to her grandparents and left the next morning.

He drove his car off a bridge and drowned in the Cumberland River.

"Wow," said Alice, staring off into space.

"Are you okay?" Bruce asked.

"I mean…I was a test-tube baby? I was an experiment? My parents didn't want me? They didn't even love each other? They just made all these fetuses knowing that most of them would die?"

Bruce didn't know what to say.

"I don't know how I'm supposed to react to that…" she shook her head.

"Your father wanted you. He loved you enough to take you away from all of it."

"He took me away after they experimented on me for three years," she said bitterly.

"You don't…remember any of it?" Bruce ventured, hoping that no memories were triggered.

She shook her head, "Nope. Not a thing."

Good, that's good.

She turned her attention back to the file, he followed suit.

The leader of the group wasn't specified. A high ranking member, Dr. Leonard Samson, was familiar to Bruce. He was the psychiatrist who used to treat him for his split personality disorder.

Alice heard him inhale sharply and turned to look at him. "What's wrong?" she asked quietly, studying his face.

"Dr. Leonard Samson. I know him."

"Like…personally?" she asked.

"Yes."

She waited a moment, probably to see if he'd volunteer any more information.

Bruce wanted to tell her everything, but what came out wasn't what he intended to tell her.

"He used to be engaged to Dr. Ross."

"Betty?" asked Alice, surprised.
"Yeah. She was engaged to him 7 years ago when I tried to run away with her."

"You've stolen someone's fiancée before? Is this a thing with you or something?" she asked skeptically.

"No. It's not, I promise…you and Betty were the only two…I realize this isn't helping my case at all…"

"It's really not," she agreed.

"I promise you, it's not a fetish I have or anything. It's just how it happened…"

She nodded and squeezed his hand, "Okay. Thank you for telling me."

"You're welcome," he said, returning the squeeze.

He found it rather fishy that Leonard was involved in this project, but he dropped the topic and continued reading the files.

The first recorded occurrence of Alice's abilities was when she was fourteen years old. She was in a car accident on the interstate with her grandmother. Their car was fine and was even able to be driven home, but the car that hit them was destroyed and the passenger killed on impact. Some witnesses stated that it looked like the car was hit by a huge bowling ball, while others insisted that there was a bubble around the car Alice was in.

This was all quickly explained away.

Alice blinked rapidly. "I killed them?" her lower lip quivered. "That was my fault?"

"Alice, there's no way of knowing that. It was an accident. You would have probably all been killed if you hadn't shielded your car."

It was SHIELD's expert opinion that Alice was a genetically modified mutant, with shielding skills. They apparently knew nothing about her ability to use pure gamma energy as a weapon, or her ability to siphon it from a larger source.

"So, they knew about this before I did? They've been watching me for my entire life?" she gaped at Bruce.

"It appears that way… it looks like that's why Zeke was hired on at SHIELD. They knew you'd come with him."

"How? How did they know? For all they knew, I might have just gone to L.A."

"And they'd have sent someone there to keep an eye on you. It was probably easier that you came with Zeke to New York."

"So… was Zeke in on it?"

"I don't think so. No offense to Zeke, but I don't think he has the mental capacity to keep up a charade of that caliber for almost eight years."

She leaned back on the couch, pinching the bridge of her nose. She reached with her other hand for him. He slipped his hand in hers and laced their fingers. He drew circles on her hand with his thumb.

"Alice, how are you doing?"
"I honestly don't know. I'm feeling strangely calm… is that normal?"

"I don't know. I've never been calm in my entire life."

She exhaled loudly, "I guess I'm letting it all sink in right now. It's a lot of information."

He leaned towards her and kissed her forehead along her hairline.

"How's your shoulder today?" he asked, changing the subject. He ran his fingers over the bruised skin on her back, neck, and shoulder. The bruise had faded slightly, starting to yellow.

"Much better, I put on a tank top. All by myself."

"I noticed. Congrats. Although I am sad you won't be wearing my button-ups anymore… that was…"

She looked up into his eyes. He leaned forward to give her a peck on the lips.

"Hot," he finished, smirking.

She blushed, "Really? I don't see it. They were kind of big on me." She snuggled into his chest, her head on his shoulder.

"It has something to do with machismo and testosterone output, I'm sure," he smiled into her hair. "Somehow, seeing you wearing my shirt and little else is pretty much the most arousing thing I've seen in my entire life."

"Whatever does it for you," she snuggled into him.

"I'm sure I'm not the only one who finds that arousing."

"Care to place a wager?" she asked, looking up at him coyly.

"How much?"

"Hmm, we'll just pay each other in sexual favors."

He choked, leaning forward and coughing.

She giggled, sitting back against the couch again, "I don't know… what do YOU think we should bet?"

"Let's go back to sexual favors," he teased.

"What did you have in mind?"

He chuckled lightly, "I think we have a while to wait for that, m'dear."

"But you think we might be able to?"

"I think we possibly… might have been able to last night if we had not been interrupted."

"Really?"

"Yes, I think that you are able to siphon gamma energy from the Hulk, which keeps me from transforming. If we could figure out a way for you to do it while I'm still me…well, there's definitely something to that theory."
"I like how this is the first theory you've come up with regarding my abilities."

"What? One that helps us have sex?" he grinned boyishly. "You have to understand, it's at the forefront of my mind at all times," he leaned forward to nuzzle her neck.

She pushed him back, "Down, boy."

He grudgingly sat back.

"Well…what other theories do you have? Like about what happened last night?" she asked, changing the subject.

"Well, my hypothesis is that your abilities are directly related to your emotions. Kind of like how the Other Guy is connected to MY emotions. I think that after you become more aware of what triggers them, you'll be able to control them."

"Why haven't I been aware of them before now?"

Bruce cleared his throat and took a deep breath, engaging professor mode.

"From what I can gather, it looks like the experiments that were performed on you, both in utero and after, altered your abilities. There was a significant amount of gamma energy pumped into you, lethal amounts that would kill a grown man. No, actually, it could kill an elephant-sized grown man… No… an army of elephant-sized fully grown men…"

"So… a lot, then?"

"Yes, quite a bit, and you were a fetus at the time. Then, an infant. Then, a toddler."

"Should have killed me, then?" Alice provided.

"Definitely. Your mutation was probably meant to create barriers or shields, but because of your mass exposure to gamma energy at a young age, that ability was warped so much that you actually require a source of gamma energy. You probably stored some in your body as a result of the experiments, which was utilized when your mutant abilities manifested when you were fourteen. Since you didn't have a steady source of gamma energy until you came here, you weren't able to access those abilities again until you started siphoning gamma from me…"

"What about the green firearms?"

"A manifestation of anger, it could be a part of your original mutation. OR it could be a side effect from the Other Guy. When you siphoned his energy, you got his rage as well," he looked over at her, "I hope I didn't lose you there…"

She shook her head, "I follow you. It makes sense. I bet you were a good professor."

"Nope, not really. Most student reviews cited me as 'elitist' and 'demeaning'."

"Well, you're better now."

"Well, I've never had such a good student," he smiled, leaning in to kiss her.

"Yeah, lots of thinly veiled innuendo in that statement."

"Thinly veiled? I thought I was being obvious."
She laughed and then her smile fell.

"What if I can't do it? What if I can't control it? I don't know how I do what I do."

"I have a good feeling about it. You were able to lower your shields for me when I needed to draw blood. AND you were able to drop the berserker persona when you saw that you were hurting someone. You have a good heart and that helps."

She still looked worried.

"IF you can't control it more than you can now, it's not a big deal. I will love you no matter what."

She smiled weakly, "I just don't want to disappoint you."

"You can't," he replied simply.

She snuggled into his shoulder and wrapped her arms around him. They stayed that way for a few minutes.

"Are you okay, Alice?" he whispered.

"Just… a lot of information these past few days. It's overwhelming."

"I know. Most people have a lifetime to learn these things about themselves. You've had three days. All things considered… you're handling this very well."

She sighed, "It all happened so long ago…it's hard for me to get upset about it. It sucks. It really sucks. I mean… I guess I feel like I should be upset, but I'm not. I'm sure it's just shock or something."

Bruce nodded, "I'm pretty sure that any reaction you have is a legitimate reaction because I'm fairly certain there is no textbook reaction for the past three days of your life."

Alice laughed. She held his hand, playing with his fingers.

"I'm glad you're here. Regardless of how you got here. I'm really glad you're here," said Bruce, searching her face, trying to catch her gaze.

She bit her lip, holding back a smile, "I'm glad too. I'm glad I'm here with you."
Zeke

"I told you already, I don't KNOW how I got in, I just followed directions!" Zeke yelled. The pain in his arm was excruciating and the bastards were denying him pain medicine until he gave them information. At least, that's how he understood it. The big guy was frightening. Tony Stark was emotionless.

"Directions from whom?" Stark asked.

*Like I'm going to tell you.*

Zeke shrugged, "I dunno." He shook his head and smirked. He clutched his arm to the front of him. The pain from the burn was bringing him close to tears, but he couldn't let them see that.
"That stupid bitch... after everything I've done for her..."

"I don't like being out of the loop," Stark stated.

"Maybe you should get used to it," Zeke replied smugly.

Stark slammed his fist down on the table in front of him. Zeke jumped. "I wanted to let her kill you. I should have. You're useless." He walked to the other side of the room. "How did you know about Alice? How did you know about her mutation?"

"I should be asking you the same thing. As an agent of SHIELD..."

Stark chuckled darkly, "Not anymore, Slim."

Zeke faltered.

_He doesn't know anything. It's a bluff. He's bluffing._

Stark continued, "I tried to give you back to SHIELD, but Director Fury said that they didn't want you back. That you caused a shitstorm of trouble because you abandoned your team in the middle of a mission. You should count yourself lucky that I didn't give you back."

"You're lying," Zeke said thickly.

"As much fun as that would be... the truth is _much_ more gratifying."

"All of you are a bunch of _freaks_," Zeke spat.

"You're very fond of saying that."

"I mean it. They deserve each other."

"Damn right. She deserves a good guy after putting up with your worthless ass for as long as she did."

Zeke sneered, "I wouldn't have cared, but she made such a big deal out of it. Hell, I'd have thrown them a party. I've been runnin' around on her for _years_. She's so stupid she never thought twice about it. But now, everyone knows. All my friends, everyone I work with. They all know she left me for the fucking Hulk. She _deserves_ a monster. Because that's what _she_ is."

His head was thrown back, his vision went white for a second, bright color swarmed around him. He heard their voices, but couldn't focus on them. He knew his nose fucking hurt, though.

"Easy there, Happy," Tony said dryly.

"Sorry, boss. I'm allergic to bullshit."

"Y-y-you can't do this..." slurred Zeke.

"_Au contraire_, mon frère. I can do whatever I want. I'm Tony-mother-fucking-Stark. And Happy here is my colleague, which means he can do whatever _he_ wants. You're lucky I don't get Bruce down here to do what _he_ wants."

"Bring it," laughed Zeke. "I'm not scared of him."

"Maybe not, but you certainly are scared of the _other_ him. Piss-your-pants-scared, if my memory
serves me correctly," he snickered.

Zeke started, remembering that huge green monster that almost killed him. Stupid fucking psycho.

"And you hurt the woman he loves."

"She was mine first."

"Correction, bud: She was never yours, women aren't property."

"But she's not a human, she's just a mutant," he said contemptuously.

This time, Stark was the one who hit him. Zeke spat blood out on the table in front of him.

"Damn, you have thick skull…" Stark yelped, cradling his hand.

_Stupid ass tucked his thumb…_

"You people need to learn to use your words," Zeke jeered.

"How did you know about Alice?" Iron Man ground out.

"Her file. They sent me her file."

"Who did?"

He shrugged again, "Does it really matter?"

Stark rolled his eyes and turned away from him. "You didn't tell her?" he asked.

"I didn't think it was necessary."

"Why? So you could lord it over her and tell her when you needed to hurt her?"

"She doesn't have feelings, not really," Zeke said smugly.

"I'm done," snarled Stark. The big guy nodded.

"Tell Banner to have fun with her. She was a lousy lay. Alice's good for a couple things, though. She used to suck my dick like a Hoover," he laughed coldly.

Happy walked close to his chair and kicked the leg. The last thing he remembered was the bright light in his eyes before his head cracked on the concrete floor and everything went black.
"What does this one do?" Alice asked, gesturing to the machine she was currently hooked up to.

"Uh…” Bruce faltered, trying to think of a way to describe the machine. "This is the GREAT machine…”

She frowned, "What?"

"The Gamma Radiation Emission Amplification Test."

"Oh, I thought you were just describin' the machine as great…”

"No, no. I didn't really think of it that way…” he trailed off, "It IS a great machine, though. It's wonderful. Because I made it."

"What does it do?" she asked.

"I just told you."

She shook her head, "No… you didn't."

"Oh… well, it measures the amount of gamma energy in your cells based off of a ratio of an amplification of gamma emissions."

"More words. Smaller words. Please."

"Okay… when you have gamma-irradiated cells in your body, like you and I, they give off emissions. Now, usually, these emissions are too small to measure. What this machine does, is amplify the emissions and measure them. It gives me a ratio, which I can then use to determine if there is a differing amount of energy over a period of time."

"So, it doesn't measure anything?"

"No, it AMPLIFIES, based on a variable."

"What is the variable?"

"Something I input before the test starts."
"So… you're guessing."

"It's an educated guess."

"Ah. That's better then?"

"Yes. Much better."

She nodded, but didn’t look thoroughly convinced. "Why do you keep leaving?"

"I have to go check something out there," he pointed out of the room.

"What's out there?"

"Your vitals."

"Is this thing dangerous?!"

"Well, I've never tested it on anyone but myself… so I don't have a particularly large test group…"

"Thanks… I feel much better now."

"Alice, the amount of gamma energy you are carrying right now could probably annihilate the population of a small town. I think you'll be okay."

"So you invented this?"

"Yes," he said proudly.

"How much did it set Tony back?"

"Probably around eight hundred thousand dollars."

"Eight hundred K?! For a machine that can only be used on two people?"

"Well, when I made it, it could only be used on me. So… it has become one hundred percent more useful."

"Ah, well. By all means!"

"Just relax, you're almost done."

"Should I not be talkin'?"

"It's fine if you're talking, I just didn't want you to strain your neck trying to look at me."

"Oh okay. When I'm nervous, I tend to talk a lot."

Bruce smiled, "I noticed."

"So… is one of these a machine that goes ding?"

He frowned, "What?"

"A machine that goes… ding. It goes ding when there's stuff," she grinned.

Bruce sensed there was a joke hidden in there somewhere that he didn't understand.
"For the last time, Princess. Not everything in Doctor Who is real," said Tony, strolling into the room. His right hand was bandaged.

*Doctor Who. Of course.*

"Who are you calling ‘Princess’? What happened to your hand?" asked Alice.

"Bar fight. You should see the other guy."

"A bar fight? Not surprisin’…" she said.

"I do kind of carry that 'bad boy' image well, don't I?" he jabbed Bruce a few times, once with his sore hand. He promptly swore and cradled it.

Bruce rolled his eyes and continued staring at the screen. The test was complete, so he started removing all the wires and tubes connected to Alice. He left her hep-lock in, just in case he needed to run another test before she left.

"Anyway Tony, please don't call me 'Princess' again. It's kinda creepy."

"Really? I thought it was endearing."

She shook her head.

"Well, excuuuuse me, princess," he held his hands up in mock surrender. "Bruce, I have something you need to see, whenever you get a minute."

"I have one right now, it's going to take a while for all the data to process."

"Okay well, Alice, take five. I just need a second here with the Doc."

She looked between them, squeezed Bruce's arm and turned to go to the break room. Bruce watched her walk away.

"What's so important that you can't tell me in front of Alice?" he asked.

"We're sending Zeke to his new home today."

"Where are you sending him?"

"Meadowbrook Hospital."

"Meadowbrook?"

_That sounds so familiar…_

"Yeah… say, do you know a Dr. Angela Lipscombe?"

Bruce widened his eyes in recognition.

_That's right… Angela._

"Yeah, she seemed to know you. Couldn't say enough about you, actually."

Bruce sighed, "We used to date back in college. It didn't work out."

"Really, it didn't work out? You mean you're not still dating her?"
Bruce rolled his eyes, "We were too competitive. She beat me out for a grant. It drove a wedge." He shrugged.

"Well, I'll keep it hush-hush," Tony gestured towards the break room knowingly.

"Don't worry about it, I'll tell her," Bruce assured Tony.

"Oh right, I forgot that you're into honesty, trust falls and singing 'Kumbayah' around a campfire while roasting your nasty vegan dogs," he scoffed, turning to walk back to his area. "Remember, I have something for you later. Something pretty cool."

"I'll drop by after I read these results… I might need your help."

"No problem."

Bruce walked back to the break room.

"That was longer than five minutes," said Alice.

"Yeah, sorry about that."

"Can I ask what it was about?"

"I'll tell you later, we have some results to look at."

Alice smiled and threaded her arm through Bruce's. She stopped walking abruptly and turned to face him. "Before I forget to ask, what is Tony going to do about Zeke?" she looked worried.

So much for later.

Bruce sighed, "He's sending him to Meadowbrook Hospital."

"Is that a…?"

"Mental hospital, yes."

"Is that really necessary? Can't you just send him back to SHIELD and let them deal with him?"

"To be perfectly honest, it's kinder than sending him back to SHIELD."

"Oh… wow. Is he in trouble or something?"

"Yeah…" Bruce said deliberately. "He went AWOL during a mission. Lots of people died because he wasn't where he should have been. He was discharging a weapon in Stark Tower."

"Oh… I didn't realize he was supposed to be on a mission…"

"Sorry, I guess we've been keeping you out of the loop."

"Oh, I guess it was for the best… I wasn't exactly prepared to deal with everything at once."

Bruce slipped his arm around her, "You're taking this very well."

"Thanks… I'm trying."

"Which… makes me hesitant to bring up this next bit…"
She frowned, "What is it?"

"Remember the ‘four others’ I referenced?"

"What four others?"

"The four other… women in my past, aside from Betty."

"Oh, right. What about ‘em?"

"One of them… believe it or not… is the chief of staff at Meadowbrook."

"Oh… okay… thank you?" she said uncertainly.

"Her name is Dr. Angela Lipscombe… she's the chief of staff there… I already said that, but it bears repeating, I guess."

"Of course she is…"

*Please don't be mad… I love you.*

"We dated in college, broke up over a grant we were both competing for. She won it, I was bitter…" he said hurriedly, trying to get through their history as quickly as possible.

"Oh, you broke up over… an award?"

"Yes…"

"Why are you tellin' me this?" she asked, suddenly looking very tired.

"I didn't want you to hear it from someone else. I wanted to be open and honest with you."

"Oh. Well, thank you," Alice smiled faintly, it didn't reach her eyes.

"Alice?" Bruce reached for her hand.

She tugged it away, "Now…I KNOW I shouldn't be upset with you. This happened a LONG time ago before you even met me…"

"So long ago," Bruce insisted.

"BUT… I'm still upset. Just being truthful. Since we're being open and honest."

“Alice…”

“Not as a jealousy kind of thing? I mean, what kind of a douche were you to break up with her over an award?"

Bruce sighed. “Look, I was in my twenties. I was a lot younger…”

“Mmhmm.”

“It shaped me into the man standing before you. The man who’s trying to be worthy of dating you…”

“True, I guess…” she mused thoughtfully.
"I love you."

"I love you too. Also, I love it when you tell me you love me." She threw her arms around his neck.

"Anytime I can be of service, let me know..." he placed his hands on her waist and pulled her closer.

"Because it's all true and I don't mind repeating myself." He leaned down to kiss her. "But... we do have test results to read..." he let go of her waist but grabbed her hand and practically dragged her back to get the readings.

"One-track mind, Banner," she quipped.

"You have no idea, Vorso..." he replied, grinning mysteriously.

He snuck a peek at her. She had hopped up onto a nearby counter, swinging her legs.

Bruce read through the results as they printed, getting more and more excited at what he saw.

"Okay, so this is excellent. I got some great readings here, which prove my earlier hypothesis: You are siphoning gamma from me in small increments all the time."

Alice looked worried, "But, if I'm siphoning it from you constantly, won't that hurt you?"

"No, it's not faster than I can replenish it, it's when you get scared that you start taking more than I can replenish."

"Oh, well, that's comforting."

"No, it is. You are storing the energy in your cells, so you can use it later. What I'm thinking... is you can take it from the Hulk and from me. If you can control it, you'd become basically... the Hulk's handler for lack of a better term."

She frowned, "What do you mean?"

"If you can train yourself to increase or decrease the siphon, based on how I'm feeling... you could keep the Hulk away unless he's needed of course."

"Which means...?"

"A lot of things I couldn't do before... would be possible now."

She still looked scared, nervous.

"We'll work on it. Now, I'm going to need to stage an experiment and in order to do that, we're going to have to talk to the other team members, we'll need their help."

"What's the experiment?" she asked, worried.

"Okay, so we'll go down to this big training room that Tony has, it's in the basement level somewhere. It's Hulk proof. So if needed I can go in there, let him out and he won't do any damage."

"I don't like where this is going."

"Just hear me out. We all go down there, you, me, Tony, Steve, and Thor, and I'll trigger a voluntary transformation. You have to pay attention to what you're feeling, any change in your comfort levels, your body temperature, anything. Then tell Tony what you're feeling. After we get the Hulk calmed down, we'll try to pinpoint when you started siphoning and find out a way for you to control it. We'll
continue this until you can control when you're siphoning."

"Okay, why do Thor and Steve need to be there?"

"To keep you safe if something goes wrong."

"When is this happening?"

"As soon as Thor returns from Asgard. He's scheduled to return this weekend."

"So… my birthday?"

"It appears that way, yes. If you'd like to postpone…"

"No, it's fine…” she waved him off.

Birthday… I need to do something for her birthday. Don't forget, Banner.

She appeared to be deep in thought. She looked back at him, "What about my… fire… arms?"

"I'm hoping we'll be able to figure those out once we figure out your shields."

"You don't have any idea what to do about the fire arms, do you?"

"None whatsoever, but I'm brilliant. Something will come to me."

"Not to mention modest," she chided.

"Of course," he grinned and got up out of his desk chair. He walked over to where Alice was perched on the counter. He slipped his arms around her waist and pressed up against her knees, leaning in and touching his forehead to hers. "You know, this would be more comfortable if you weren't being such a prude."

"Sorry," she smirked. He gently slid her knees apart and scooted closer to her. She surprised him by crossing her ankles behind him.

"Have I ever told you how much I miss you wearing skirts?" he waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

She fought back a smile, swatting his shoulder. "Don't be a pervert, Doctor."

"How is that perverted? I just…” he ran his hands up the outside of her thighs, "think they're easier to work with… jeans are frustrating."

She stopped his hands, moving them back to her waist. Neutral territory. "Where are we on this?"

"Um… pretty much the same place we were, but there's light at the end of the tunnel."

"So, we still can't do anything…exciting?"

"We can try, but I don't think we'll get very far."

"In terms of baseball…"

"Ummm maybe second base? Maybe? I'm rusty on the 'rules of the game'…”

"Well, that's something, anyway…” she leaned closer to him, kissing him softly and running her hands through his hair.
"I have thought extensively about this, however."

"This?"

"Yes, this. What we're doing now… there was less clothing involved. Not much less, but less where it counts…"

"I'm pretty sure you'd need to be standing closer to me than you are now," she pulled him flush against her with her legs. "Right here."

He gulped, "Yes, I suppose you're right." He looked down at her for a moment before dipping closer and pressing his lips to hers.

"That works a lot better if you're naked," Tony's now obnoxious voice said from behind him.

"Hi Tony", Alice waved over Bruce's shoulder. "Now, skedaddle."

_Skedaddle. She's adorable._

"Hey… this is my lab! I should be telling you to 'skedaddle', missy. Dry hump on your own time."

He muttered something about Yoko Ono. "I made you something, Bruce."

"What is it?" asked Bruce.

"Come over to my desk and I'll show you."

"Okay", said Bruce, reluctantly pulling away from Alice, who hopped down off the counter and followed as they walked over to Tony's desk.

"So, what did you make?" asked Alice. "Explosives, I bet."

"I don't always make explosives. I do actual scientific research over here."

"I'm sure," she said condescendingly.

"Hey now, the science gets done and you make a neat gun…or in this case…" Tony pulled something out of a box on his desk. "Brucey's uniform."

He was holding what looked like a pair of spandex shorts, bright purple spandex shorts.

"You have got to be kidding me," Bruce groaned, taking them from Tony.

"No, this is your uniform."

"Why is it purple?"

"It was either that or black."

"Why in the world wouldn't you choose black?" asked Bruce.

Alice snorted in laughter.

"You. Hush," Bruce demanded, pointing at her. Unfortunately, the purple shorts were in the hand that he pointed with, so she reached out and snatched them from him to inspect for herself.

"Well, the purple gave it +5 to elasticity and +150 to FAAABULOUS!" said Tony animatedly.
"That was the nerdiest reference ever," scoffed Alice, stretching out the waistband.

"Yeah well, who understood the reference, Super Saiyan?"

"Oh wow, I get my own nickname, I'm touched."

"I'm not wearing this," interrupted Bruce.

"I'm not convinced they'll fit," said Alice, raising her eyebrows playfully.

"They will and they will stretch to fit the Other Guy too. They also have a pocket in the back for your important stuff: Money, wallet, extra glasses."

Alice nodded, impressed.

The pocket thing was impressive. But it didn't change the fact that they were bright purple. Bruce looked at the shorts in Alice's hands and made a face.

"Well, I already made a dozen of them, so you are wearing them," said Tony obstinately.

"Why did you make a dozen pairs of purple stretchy shorts?"

"Oh, just this one is purple, it's the prototype."

"Really? That's a relief."

"No, I'm kidding. They're all purple," he grinned.

"Dammit, Tony."

"Do you know how expensive it is to create a fabric that's as durable as you are? At least you aren't going to be naked after you change back."

"You know, at this point, I'd rather be naked."

"Well, let me tell you a story, about your teammates, who don't want to see your penis anymore," said Tony.

"And… let me jump in and sing you a song. It's about your girlfriend and how she wants to be the only one to see your penis," added Alice.

"Nice!" exclaimed Tony, extending his hand up for a high-five.

"Thanks," replied Alice, reaching up and slapping his hand with hers.

"Fine… I'm not trying it on right now, though."

"Later," Alice winked.

"No," he said defiantly.

Alice pouted.

"Okay, we'll see," he acquiesced.

Alice stretched the waistband back as far as she could and shot the "uniform" across the room. "Hey, Tony, where did you even get these? Did you sew it yourself? In your craft room? On your Singer
"singing machine?" asked Alice.

"We have a textiles division, thank you very much. And we don't use Singer, we use Stark."

"There are Stark brand sewing machines?"

"Industrial ones and they're awesome."

"My mistake," she quipped.

"This fabric is a new invention. I call it 'Hulkrylic'. You can only sew it with special sewing needles made out of redacted material. All of this is only available from Stark Industries, of course," said Tony.

Alice shot another pair of purple shorts across the room. "If nothing else, they make excellent slingshots."

"Stop that," said Tony, running to retrieve the two pairs from opposite corners of the lab.

Bruce chuckled and snuck his arm around Alice's waist, pulling her close to his side. He kissed the top of her head, letting his lips linger so he could inhale the sweet scent of her shampoo.

"I'm going to be wrapping things up here, probably in another hour? Would you like to try going for a walk this evening?" he asked.

Her face lit up. "Fresh air? Yes, please!" She stood on her toes to kiss the tip of his nose. "I'm going to go change, will I need a jacket?"

"Probably. If it turns out that you don't need it, I'll carry it for you," he offered.

"Aww, thanks, hon," she said, grinning widely. Her nose crinkled.

Bruce just gazed at her. She was adorable when she smiled like that.

*Always make her smile like that*, he thought to himself.

He leaned in to steal another quick kiss before releasing his hold on her so she could leave.

"I'll see you in an hour?" she asked, turning to go.

"Yep, unless I forget," he said with a goofy grin.

"You'd better not forget," she warned playfully.

"Never."

She smiled again, turning and walking towards the door to the lab. He watched her until she left.

"Aww…you guys are so cute," said Tony, punching Bruce roughly in the arm.

"Thanks," said Bruce, trying to hide a smile by looking down at his shoes.

"I hope you get laid soon. You're starting to become nauseating."

Bruce turned to go, still smiling and punched Tony hard in the shoulder as he left.

"Oww… seriously, quit doing that. That really hurts, you know."
"Yeah, I know."

Chapter End Notes

Zeke's scene: You find out that Zeke knows who sent him in, but he's not going to tell. He doesn't tell in his internal monologue either, so nothing's given away at this point. Happy punches him. Tony punches him. Both times because he's being a pig. It's made very clear that he is anti-mutant and doesn't think of Alice as a human. Maybe he did once, but he doesn't anymore. Extreme misogyny.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Sorry, it took me so long to update this. I fell into a hole, apparently.

New character introduced at the end here. <3

Alice

Alice exited the elevator, walking into the common area. She usually didn't spend much time out here. She'd been busy with Bruce in the lab or mourning a death in the family. Everything was just happening so quickly.

Steve was standing in the kitchen. He saw her and walked rapidly towards her, holding his Stark Tablet in front of him. "Alice?" he asked voice frantic.

"Steve?"

"This is making noise…it's never made noise before…” It chimed again, " See ? And all the buttons are different… I can't find my email or anything. Did I break it? It's broken, isn't it? Can you fix it?"

"Steve, chill. It's the software update that Tony initiated. Everyone's tablets and phones all updated."

"Why did he do that? There was nothing wrong with it before."

"I know, I know. It's Tony. He fixes what isn't broken. Hell, he breaks what hasn't broken just so he can fix it."

Steve sighed, "Well, where did my email go?"

"Hmm… not sure… it looks like it deleted all your apps when it updated…that's lovely, Tony."

"Really? I had just figured it out…"

"I'm sure he can recover it. Did you back it up to the StarkBase?"

"The what?"

"That's Tony's cloud app… if you didn't turn off the StarkBase when you set up your tablet, everything is probably there..."

Alice fiddled around for a few more minutes. "Steve let Bruce look at this for you when he comes up, I'm sure he'll be able to figure it out. I'm not good with tablets… I still haven't opened mine," she confessed. She pulled out her phone and opened her email. "I'm pretty sure the notification you got was an email alert..." she scanned her inbox before finding a mass email from Tony. "You can read mine, you got the same one."

She handed her phone over to Steve. He was actually picking up on all of this rather quickly. Probably because he technically had the brain of a twenty-five-year-old, rather than the ninety-year-
old he actually was. He scrolled through the email and handed her phone back to her.

He looked up at Alice with a confused expression, "I don't understand what he was trying to say…"

She skimmed the email, it was mostly filling everyone in on her abilities and telling them about the training session Bruce wanted on Saturday.

"Okay, so he's telling you about my newly discovered abilities…"

"Yes, I understood that part of it… very interesting. How are you doing with all of… that?" he asked kindly.

"As well as can be expected… I've had a lot going on."

"I know. It's difficult to have it all thrust upon you at once."

She smiled. If anyone knew what she was going through, it was Steve Rogers: the patron saint of plot twists.

She turned back to the email.

"There are shocking amounts of Dragonball-Z references, which I don't expect you to understand because I barely understand them…"

"What's Dragonball-Z?" he asked.

"An anime show from the 1990s," she answered.

"Anime?"

"Oh, sorry… animated… cartoon… mostly created in Japan?"

He nodded, frowning.

"You should probably start writing all these things down. Keep a list, you know? So you can look them up later?"

"You know… that's actually a great idea…" He spotted a pad of paper on the counter and a pen on the counter. He grabbed them and started writing. "Dragonball-Z? And Anime?"

"Be careful searching that, by the way. Anyway, there also is a photo attachment… of Bruce's new uniform… which Tony appears to be modeling… I'll have to tell Bruce to wash them before he wears them." She tilted her phone over for Steve to see.

Steve grimaced.

"And… Bruce wants everyone to have a training session together in the basement training room, so I can try to learn to control my abilities."

"How is that going to work? Do you know how to trigger them?" asked Steve.

"No, not really… it's probably something he could explain better than I could…"

"With all due respect, I have roughly little to no idea what Dr. Banner is talking about most of the time," admitted Steve.
"You and me both. I usually just stop him and make him explain it to me in several smaller words," said Alice.

Steve chuckled. "Dr. Banner is noticeably more… laid back and pleasant. You keep him very well-grounded."

"Well, he's been good for me as well," she said. She never could take a compliment.

"Can you try to explain the experiment to me?"

"He's going to let the Hulk out," she stated.

"Is he insane?" asked Steve incredulously. "What if you can't bring up your barrier?"

"Then you carry me out of harm's way and Thor acts as a meat shield."

"But, what is he hoping will happen?"

"That my barrier will come up and I will be able to detect a change in how I feel, so I can know when it's happening. Maybe then I can make it happen myself instead of it being a latent thing."

"And he thinks one training session will accomplish this?"

"No, I think it's going to be a somewhat regular ordeal," she sighed.

"Well, I'm in, obviously. Can't leave you without protection," he smiled.

"Thank you, Steve."

"Where does this leave you and your job?"

"I'm not sure… I haven't been back to work since that whole 'Avengers' call-girl' fiasco," she sighed.

"Well, if you're not going back to work anytime soon, maybe we should spend some time together, I could use some help with all of this…" he gestured to the tablet. "I'm a little behind."

"You want to hang out?" she asked.

"What? At the gym? Are you referring to pull-ups?"

"Oh no, it's slang for… spending time getting to know one another," she explained.

He smirked. "I know. However, you should think about starting a training regimen."

Alice donned a look of mock insult, "Are you saying I'm overweight?"

"Oh, no! NO, ma'am, not what I meant at all, I'd never… you look… you're just fine," he patted her shoulder awkwardly.

"I'm kidding, Steve. Sarcasm. Maybe you should write that down."

"It's hard to tell when you're being sarcastic… just so you know. I'm from Brooklyn. I was raised on sarcasm. It's in the water out there. I simply meant, that if you're going to be practicing with the Hulk, strength training and agility training would go far. You know, I'm sure Natasha would help you start a training regimen."

"I'm not sure Natasha would want to be bothered with that."
"Bothered with what?" asked Natasha, as she strolled over to the fridge.

"Helping Alice with a training regimen," answered Steve.

"I'm on leave right now, I don't see why I couldn't," she said, walking over to Alice. "Stand up."

She stood quickly. Her eyes darted around nervously. Natasha swiftly poked her hard in the stomach a few times.

"Ouch," said Alice.

"Not much of a shield if you can't protect yourself from that," said Natasha, scoffing.

"If she's not expecting the attack, she doesn't have time to draw the shield," stated Bruce, who had just exited the elevator with Tony. "Why are you poking my girlfriend?" he asked.

"Someone needs to," answered Tony.

"I'm going to train her," said Natasha, blatantly ignoring Tony. "She's soft."

"I like her soft," said Bruce defensively.

"Well, she needs endurance training at least. You benefited from it," countered Natasha.

"I really could use the help," said Alice, looking up at Bruce.

"It sounds like a good idea if it's what you want," he said, grabbing her hand and lacing their fingers. "I thought you were going to change clothes?"

"I got sidetracked… and you're early."

"Finished faster than I thought I would."

"That's what she said," quipped Tony.

Everyone ignored him again.

"Well, I'll let you go change, I'll wait here for you, we can go by your old apartment if you want, you can put stickers on what you want moved."

"Really? That's great, it's only about a thirty-minute walk from here and we can call Preston to drive us home if it's too late when we're finished."

Alice left the room, walking quickly down the hall to Bruce's apartment. She hurriedly changed clothes, putting on a pair of jeans and a fitted green and white gingham button up. She grabbed a sweater in case it was chilly. She pulled on her sneakers and brushed her hair out. It was getting rather long, almost to her lower back now. She wondered if she should get it cut shorter. Trimmed, definitely. She'd ask Bruce what he thought. He'd be the one looking at it. She quickly opened her work bag, pulling out a sheet of green sticker labels. She also grabbed a coat for him out of the bedroom closet. She really needed to go shopping for him; he had depressingly few articles of clothing. Probably a result of wearing them when the Hulk came out.

She returned to the common area to find all four just as she'd left them: Natasha and Steve planning her training schedule. Tony was talking at Bruce, who looked like he'd rather be anywhere else. He glanced up when she entered, smiling crookedly, the way she loved.
"Oh great. Alice is back, which means I'm now dead to you…" Tony complained.

"Alice, are you ready?" asked Bruce, deftly ignoring Tony.

"Yep, there it is…" Tony muttered, shaking his head and walking away.

Bruce took the coat and sweater from Alice, offering her his other arm. They boarded the elevator.

"Crazy in there," said Bruce, looking at her sideways.

"Yeah," agreed Alice, blushing.

"What? Why are you blushing?" he teased, bumping her shoulder with his.

"Because of the way you're looking at me."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

She imitated his expression.

He laughed, "I was only thinking, this is kind of our first date."

"Is it?" she asked, tilting her head.

"Yeah, it is…not counting all the times I've groped you."


"Do I really hump you in my sleep?" he asked incredulously. "I'm so sorry."

"It's really okay," she laughed. "It doesn't bother me at all."

"I must not be doing it right," he grinned, she swatted his arm playfully. He continued, "You could just spray me with water whenever I do that. That worked for my dog."

They had exited the elevator and walked outside, the sun was still up, it was cool, but comfortable.

"You had a dog?" she asked, slipping her hand into his.

"Yeah, when I lived in Brazil."

"What was his name?"

"I called him 'Cao'."

"That's cute, how'd you come up with that?"

"It's Portuguese for dog."

"So, you named your dog 'dog'? That's the saddest thing ever, Bruce."

"Sorry, I guess if we ever have kids, I'll let you name them."

*Kids? Does he want to have kids? With ME?*

"Oh… would you want to have kids?" she asked, trying to keep her voice level.
"Well maybe… if you want to… I would have to do some tests to make sure what I have isn't hereditary."

"Would that be very important to you?" she asked.

"What, that our kids don't turn into scary rage monsters every time they get upset? Yeah, that's pretty important."

"I meant, having kids. Is that important?"

"Not as important as you are, so if you don't want kids, that's fine."

"It's not that… it's probably a discussion for another time."

"Of course, sorry. First date stuff."

"Bruce… I'm not completely opposed to the idea. I just think we maybe should focus on other things… like, being able to do the thing that makes kids…" she bit her lip.

"Well, of course," he paused, "I'm sorry, that was me jumping the gun."

"Bruce…"

"I mean, that was inappropriate, wasn't it? I'm so sorry. It just slipped out. Of course, it wouldn't be something you're thinking about yet…I'm—"

Alice abruptly stopped walking, pulled him down to her and kissed him. He stiffened at first, but soon relaxed and slid his arms around her waist. When she ended the kiss, he pressed his forehead to hers.

"Looked like you needed a minute…" she murmured as people walked around them.

He blushed and straightened, grasping her hand tightly in his as he started walking again.

"Okay, so… what do you do for a living?" he asked brightly.

She was surprised by his abrupt mood shift, "You know what I do."

"I don't, this is our first date," he teased.

She smiled, realizing his intent, "I'm the personal assistant to the CEO of Stark Industries."

"Wow, impressive. I'm unemployed, a fugitive on the run from the US military, but I'm doing freelance work in Microbiology and Bio-chemistry."

"That sounds awesome," she said, smirking.

"It really is. I spend most of my time thinking lewd thoughts about the girl who brings my lunch."

"What a coincidence! I have vivid fantasies about the guy I bring lunch to! He's kind of a dork, though," she winked.

"I am not!" he said, offended.

"You're one pocket protector away from being Bill Gates."

He scoffed, "Bill Gates wishes."
"You're right; you're way cooler than Bill Gates."

"Somehow, that doesn't sound like much..." he raised his eyebrows.

"Well... you're my favorite," she said.

"Your favorite what?"

"Just my favorite."

He fought back a grin and squeezed her hand.

"Seriously though, if I had known this was a date, I would have taken more care getting ready," she said.

"You always look breathtaking," he said honestly, looking down at her.

"Thanks..." she said, looking down at the pavement beneath their feet.

"You do," he stated. "I seriously can't believe that you'd want to be with me."

"Well, I don't believe in fate or in soul mates, but it certainly seems as if we're made for one another," she said.

"I don't believe in fate either, but I agree with you," he said quietly. He paused for a moment. "I thought I was too old for you at first."

"Nah. Age is just a number," she said flippantly.

"Yes, but that number represents a very real amount of time."

"But time isn't the only thing that determines age. There is a literal age, the amount of time spent alive since you were born. But there is such a thing as mental or emotional age, determined by the experiences you've had," she stopped talking for a moment, just looking at his tanned hand clasped around her pale one. "I think that has a lot to do with maturity."

"You're right," agreed Bruce, squeezing her hand. "You're right. I don't want you to think that I think less of you because you're younger than me."

"And less educated," she added.

"That doesn't matter. Education has no bearing on intelligence."

"If you really believed that, you wouldn't have seven doctorates."

"When I was getting those doctorates, I didn't believe that," he said bluntly. "I've changed. I've changed a lot."

She bit her lip again to hold back a smile.

"Are we almost to your apartment?" asked Bruce.

"Getting winded, old man?" she quipped.

"No, just wondering," he said.

"Two more blocks, you can see it from here," she said, pointing.
They walked the rest of the way in silence, each trying to prepare to go back to the apartment Alice had previously shared with Zeke. It was hard to believe it had been weeks since she left him. It felt like it had both happened only yesterday AND years before.

When they walked into the lobby, Alice's apartment manager flagged them down, running from her office.

"Miss Vorso? Are you here to clean out the apartment?"

"Yes, not tonight, but I was going to..."

"Well, don't expect to get your deposit back. That jerk you used to live with destroyed it. It's going to cost a fortune to get it livable again. I may have to charge you for it, it's really terrible."

"What?" asked Alice, surprised. "I don't understand… what happened to it?"

"You'll see when you get up there."

She frowned and looked over at Bruce. They turned and almost ran to the elevator.

When they got to the apartment, Alice unlocked the door, pushing it open. She flipped on the light switch.


Everything was destroyed. The sofa and loveseat had been ripped apart, the cushions too. There was a large crack in the TV. All the movies were strewn on the floor, broken. There were holes in the walls, stains too. It looked like the entire contents of the fridge were splattered on the walls. All of Alice's framed photographs were broken, thrown on the floor or hit with something. She stepped gingerly over the broken remnants of dinner plates to make her way to the back bedroom and bathroom. The bed was torn apart in much the same way as the living room furniture had been. The few articles of clothing she had remaining in the apartment were ripped apart. There were holes in the walls back here too. The bathroom was largely untouched, but all the cabinets were emptied on the floor.

"I know I have no right to judge here… but what the hell?" asked Bruce.

Alice was speechless. She shook her head.

"Do you think Tony could..." she trailed off.

"Yeah, I'll call him. He can get someone in here to clean it and fix it up, I'm sure... be careful around the glass," Bruce walked into the hall to call Tony.

She knelt by the pile of broken frames in the middle of the room, she gingerly picked through the shards of glass until she found the collage frame with her pictures of her grandparents. She pulled all the photos out carefully, clutching the stack to her chest. She stood and turned when Bruce came back in.

"He's sending someone to take care of it now, I called Preston too. He's on the way. Is there anything you wanted to keep?" he asked.

"I've got what I want," she said, lifting the stack of photos. "Let's go wait for Preston, I can't get out of here fast enough."
They stood outside, waiting for Preston. She handed Bruce the stack of photos to look through. He held them carefully by the edges as he looked thoroughly at each one.

The top photo was taken when she was ten years old, sunburnt and stubborn, sitting with her grandfather at the baby grand piano, taking lessons.

"Your grandfather looks like he’d get along with Willie Nelson," Bruce said, offhandedly.

Alice agreed with the comparison. He had a long beard and dark red hair like hers. He usually wore a bandanna on his head.

"Everyone calls him Rusty," she said with a faint smile.

The next was of a very young Alice and a tow-headed little boy.

"That's Prom Guy," She pointed. "Or 'Tuck', since that's his name. We were five-years-old here, though. We grew up together…"

The next was of Alice and her grandfather in an older model pickup truck. He was teaching her how to drive. She looked serious. He was pointing something out with the gauges on the dash.

Bruce smiled at that one, "You get the same look on your face when I try to explain something to you."

"Try being the keyword," she laughed.

There was another, she was seven years old and baking cookies with her grandmother. She was grinning broadly, her two front teeth missing.

"Your grandmother?" he pointed to the older woman in the picture.

"Grams," she corrected him, "Yeah, that's her."

The last one was at her high school graduation. She was smiling and flanked by both grandparents.

"Well, you haven't aged a day," he said. "Your eyes look different, that's all."

"That's hope," she said. "I was hopeful. That was before I met Zeke and all the hope got squashed out of me."

"It's not all gone, is it?" Bruce asked, looking over at her.

"No, it's coming back. It'd help if he'd quit being such a dick… I swear if he manages to ruin one more thing…"

"I won't let him. This is your last tie to him. It's severed, gone. He can't do anything else."

Alice shivered suddenly, so Bruce put the pictures in his coat pocket. He helped her into her sweater and wrapped his arms around her to stop her from shaking.

"Thank you for showing me those…" he said.

"You're welcome."

Preston finally arrived. Bruce got the door for Alice, climbing in after her. She wrapped her arms around his waist and snuggled into his chest.
"Do you ever just want to run away?" she asked.

"Yes. I've done it, actually."

"Was it as liberating as I imagine it is?"

"Yes."

She swatted his arm. "You're supposed to say, 'No', of course not, it's stressful because you're constantly worried about the problems you left behind."

"Yeah, that."

She narrowed her eyes.

"You're so pretty," he said, looking down at her and smiling.

Ignoring him, she continued, "Can we run away, since it's so awesome?"

"Unfortunately, no. We need to work on your abilities."

"After that?"

"Sure. I actually know a place. It's a log cabin in British Columbia, no electricity, really remote. I only ever ran into bears. And one other guy, but he's not important."

"That sounds terrible."

He looked at her, surprised.

"Let me be clear when I said 'run away', I mean to a place with electricity, no bears, and runnin' water. Preferably somewhere I can lie out and get a tan."

"Can you tan?" asked Bruce incredulously.

"Not really, my freckles just connect… but that's not important, what's important is that you understand what I'm talkin' about here."

"You want a vacation; I want to get off the grid."

"Yes."

"You don't like camping?"

"I'll do it if I have to."

"So no?"

"No."

"Noted," he said. "Also, since you were so painfully honest with me, I'm going to confess that I've barely been listening to you, because I'm trying to imagine all the places you have freckles."

"Oh, they're everywhere…pretty much."

"Everywhere that's seen sun?" asked Bruce.
"And a few places that haven't."

He leaned down and nuzzled her neck.

"Just something for you think about…"

"Thank you," he murmured. "God knows I need more things like that to think about…"

Preston rolled up the window between the front and back seat of the car.

Alice erupted in a fit of giggles, which ended with her lying across Bruce's lap. She rolled on her back, looking up at him. "I love being disgusting with you."

"I love you," he emphasized. "Being disgusting is just a side effect."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome… for what?"

"For being so open about your feelings… at least when we're alone. I know it makes you uncomfortable…"

"It doesn't. The only reason I'm not more open around others is because it's nobody's business… plus, I know that this is something that's important to you. You're a very literal person, and you need to hear me say it, and I can't really show you how much I love you, so I say it."

"So you're saying that you don't need to hear it from me?"

"Oh, I do. I'm very needy when it comes to you," he grinned sheepishly. "I don't know how that happened."

"Well, at least we can be codependent and needy together." She wrapped her arms around his waist and snuggled into his chest again.

"I honestly can't say I've ever engaged in this much PDA in a relationship before."

"Have you ever gone this long without having sex in a relationship?"

"Nope."

"First night?"

"Yep. Just keep in mind; it was usually with colleagues and the like. I didn't 'date'."

"Well, even if you could have, you wouldn't have gotten it from me the first night."

"I'd have gotten something. I can tell by the way you kiss me."

"Would not have. I'm a nice girl."

"You're a tease, then," he beamed.

"That's not the point, the point is: you're showing PDA to compensate for the fact that we're not having sex yet. You want to prove to Tony and everyone else that you're a man and you keep your woman satisfied."

"It's not as primal as all that… I just need to be close to you."
"I guarantee there won't be as much PDA after we have sex."

"Now that you've said it, I have to prove you wrong."

"What, you're going to be even more clingy after we have sex?"

"Hey… I'm not clingy."

"You are. It's not a bad thing."

"Then don't use a word with such negative connotations… I'm simply 'doting'."

She smiled, "Yes, you are."

Later that night they were in bed, drifting off to sleep, when Bruce sat up and turned on the light. He wrapped his arms around his knees.

"What's wrong?" asked Alice, rolling to face him.

"I'm clingy because I was alone for such a long time. It's not because I'm... sexually frustrated. I never thought I'd be like this with anyone ever again. It was eight years without ever forming any meaningful relationships and I never realized how much I missed that until I had it again with you. When I kissed you for the first time, it just opened a floodgate. I'm sorry if it's irritating," he looked over at Alice then. His eyes were wide. He tightened his arms around his knees.

She thought she could feel her heart breaking. "It's not irritating, I'm sorry if I made you think that. I enjoy it, I really do. Please believe me," she said carefully, reaching out for him. She closed the distance between them, reaching over to turn off the light. He lay down on his pillow and she wrapped herself around him. He turned towards her, resting his chin on the top of her head. He sighed contentedly.

She had his head on his chest and could feel his heart beating. She tangled her legs up in his, tightening her arms around his waist.

"I love you, Bruce."

"I love you too, Alice."

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**Samson**

Leonard looked up from the book in front of him when he heard his office door open. A tall, shapely blonde crossed the floor quickly and with purpose. She pulled her glasses off, narrowing her eyes.

"Leonard, why do you insist on undermining me?"

"Angela, I know you're the chief of staff at this hospital, but I'm still the CEO."

"When it comes to patient care, I'm in charge."

He shook his head, "Not when it affects us financially. We can't let your bleeding heart bleed our bank account dry."

She huffed, shifting her weight and crossing her arms. Something else was bothering her. Leonard had an idea of what that might be.
"Why can't you let me go talk to him myself? We have a history, I'm sure I could convince them both to come here without excessive force."

_Ah, there it is._

"Angela, for the last time, we need excessive force. It's necessary to get sufficient power to the battery, plus, we can't let him see you. If this doesn't work, I'll need someone competent to look after the boy."

She sighed again, "Yes, I know."

"Please don't bring it up again. The plan is set. It's in motion. _He_ can't see you."

"What about the girl? She might recognize me."

"She's never met you and Banner wouldn't tell her about you. Not his style," he said coldly. "Once we have them both, it won't matter if he recognizes you."

She opened her mouth to protest, but was interrupted.

"Dr. Samson?" the new nurse knocked timidly at the door, opening it a crack.

"Hmmm?" Leonard and Angela looked at the woman entering the room.

"OH! Dr. Lipscombe, I didn't know you were here, my apologies", the nurse nodded towards Angela, who grinned warmly.

"It's fine, I was just about to be on my way," Angela said cordially.

The nurse turned towards Leonard. "Dr. Samson, the new patient is here, the one Tony Stark sent you."

"Has he been evaluated?"

"Yes, I have his file," the brunette crossed the floor, placing the file carefully in front of him.

"Thank you, dear. Tell the patient I'll be right with him."

"Certainly, sir."

She left the room, quietly closing the door.

Angela started to leave as well but turned back. "Leonard?"

He looked up from the file.

"You won't… you won't hurt him, will you?"

"No, my dear. As long as he cooperates, I don't see a need for it."

"Thank you."

"It's not for you. It's for the boy."

Her face hardened, "Of course." She turned to leave, slamming the door behind her.

He sighed. He hoped he didn't make a dire mistake in including Dr. Lipscombe in his plan. He
needed her hospital, her pull, and her connections. He didn't need all her emotional baggage. That, he could do without.

Leonard skimmed the file quickly for a few minutes before rising and walking to the office door. His joints protested. He really needed a new office chair.

He walked down the hall to the room where the new patient was being held. He opened the door and stood back as three orderlies tried to subdue a tall, athletic, dark-haired man. They finally got the arms of the straightjacket tied and they stood back as Leonard crossed the room to sit in the chair directly in front of the man.

"Leave us," he said to the orderlies.

"But, Doc, he's dangerous…" The tallest one interjected. Williams, his name was.

"I'll be fine, Williams." He waved his hand.

The three men filed out of the room, closing the door behind them.

"Now, Mr. Powell, 'Zeke' is it? My name is Dr. Leonard Samson. Tell me ALL about the Hulk and your ex-girlfriend's green, glowing fire arms."

End Notes

I'm going to point you to my profile in regards to commenting. No concrit, and if it doesn't spark joy, I'm deleting. Otherwise, go nuts. <3

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