**Shortness of Breath**

by Blankdice

**Summary**

Tony is out of control, Bruce is missing. This is a recipe for disaster. Thankfully, there are things to blow up.

Little bit of plot, little bit of fluff, with a happy ending.

**Notes**

Two things before you start reading: one; chapter 33 has additional warnings, you'll see it when you get to it. Two; I've retconned Tony's arc reactor back in. That whole thing didn't make a lot of sense to me and I preferred him with it, anyway.

This story (except for the first chapter) is set sometime after Age of Ultron. The first chapter is before that and after Iron Man 3. All the chapters are very short but at least there are a lot of them.

Enjoy!
“Hey, big guy.” Tony slumps down on the balcony next to Bruce. The party inside is roaring at their backs, but there's a wall of glass between it and them. In front of them: the city, dark and glittering.

“Hello Tony,” Bruce says. He sounds resigned, with a faint edge of amusement.

“Want a top up there?” Tony asks. He throws back his own drink and slides the empty glass back on the tiles, away from the edge. “I can do that, anything you want. You name it, and I'd be surprised if it isn't in the tower somewhere.”

“Are you still talking about alcohol?” Bruce smiles a little. His legs are dangling over the edge, swinging in the breeze. Tony is glad the gap is only wide enough for his legs. “Because I'm fine, I don't really drink.”

Tony rolls his eyes, nudges Bruce's shoulder with his own. “Of course you wouldn't. You're worse than Cap, at least he drinks that Asgardian stuff. Hey, anyway,” he hesitates. The city in front of him seems quiet. Bruce doesn't say anything, so he pushes on: “There was something I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Is this like last time?” Bruce says. He looks up, apologetic, and finally sets his empty glass down on the balcony. “Because I'm not that kind of doctor,” he raises both hands, “not, not that I don't appreciate your trust in me.”

Tony waves the complaints away. “No, not like that. Maybe a little like that. Don't worry about it, okay?” Bruce gives him a resigned look. “I just wanted you to know Pepper and I broke up. We decided not to make a big deal about it but it feels weird not telling you, you know. You're my science bro.”

“Please don't call me that,” Bruce says, a little distracted. “You broke up with Pepper.”

“Technically she broke up with me.” Tony fidgets with his tie, loosening the knot. He almost considers picking the glass back up, just so he has something to do with his hands.

“I'm sorry,” Bruce says. “Are you okay, are you two okay?”

“Oh yeah, no problem,” says Tony, but even he can tell it's obvious he's breathing a little too fast. “Totally peachy, she's a real champ. Still does all my scheduling and everything. Wouldn't know what to do without her.”

“Breathe, Tony,” Bruce says. His voice is steady as always and Tony just has to turn, to see his face.

It's not until Bruce rests a cautious hand on Tony's shoulder that he actually follows the advice and takes a deep breath. It makes things a little better, and the panicky tightness in his chest eases a little bit. A few breaths later he starts feeling almost normal again.

“I can teach you some breathing exercises,” Bruce says. His hand is still on Tony's shoulder.

“I thought you weren't that kind of doctor,” says Tony. He reaches for his glass absent-mindedly, only to find it empty. Of course it's empty.
“I'm not,” Bruce says with that cynical smile. “I've had to diversify.”

His hand is still on Tony and it squeezes a little and suddenly, it's just too much. Tony decides he needs some distraction, so he gets to his feet with his empty glass. He's a little more unsteady than he'd like, but not nearly as drunk as he needs to be. “Hey, I'm going to get smashed,” he says. “Really, really smashed. Don't tell Pepper.”

He leaves before Bruce can answer, but he sees him wave a hand goodbye. Later, Nat joins Bruce on the balcony but Tony finds it hard to convince himself to join them. He's really, really drunk and there are people around him. The people seem to think he's a pretty good guy, so that's nice.
From ground level, Stark Tower looks untouched. Tony knows that isn't the case, but the damage inflicted by Ultron isn't nearly as bad after the whole Chitauri clusterfuck. Every time he looks up at the tower, at the sky over the tower, he still feels uneasy. Maybe it's time for another large-scale rebuild. Make the thing look different. Maybe, if it looks different, it won't remind him all the time.

He wonders when he'll ever have to stop rebuilding his things, and it's almost a comfort when he admits to himself, probably never. There's always work to be done.

In the private elevator up from the carpark he checks his phone. The major repairs are already finished, courtesy of Pepper, and the security is fully operational. This only leaves some of the hardware for him to tinker with. You know, the fun stuff. He also has three messages. Two are from Steve, which still makes Tony a little proud. He's the one who finally managed to teach the fossil how to text, after all. The first is an update on Bruce: no news. The second is a spelling correction for the first, and Tony snorts.

The last text is from Rhodey. Tony opens it as he sheds his suit jacket and tie on the floor somewhere between the the elevator and his walk-in closet. Jarvis will take care of it.

He freezes in his tracks halfway down the corridor, still staring at his phone, realising that no, Jarvis won't take care of it. Friday, though, she -will- take care of it. There is always someone to take care of it. He keeps walking.

Finally, he reads the text from Rhodey. He asks when Tony has some time off to meet up, without the explosions. “No fun without explosions,” Tony mumbles to himself and texts back: “No can do, working on a project.” He isn't, yet, but he's sure he can make something up. There are always more suits to design, to build, to test.

In his room, he sheds the remains of his expensive suit and digs a pair of sweatpants out of a drawer. He is very high up and the tower is soundproofed so well he can't even hear the whistle of the wind, not to mention the bustle of the city below. It's perfectly quiet. It's starting to annoy him.

“Friday,” he says, “start my playlist in my workshop.”

“Yes, sir,” she says smoothly from somewhere in the walls. Tony can't hear the music from up here, his private workshop is on a different level to start with, but knowing that there is noise waiting for him just a few floors below makes him feel better.

“There we go,” he murmurs and allows himself to relax a little.

“Sir,” Friday says, unprompted. “If the silence bothers you, I provide background music anywhere in the tower.” She actually sounds stern, as if he would have forgotten the specs of something he designed himself.

“Don't get too smart with me, Friday,” Tony says. “We don't need a second Vision.”

Friday says: “Yes, sir.”

Tony shakes his head and heads back to the elevator. If the silence bothers him that much, he should go down and into the city. The tower itself, or at least the upper twenty floors or so, they're all abandoned now that the Avengers have their very own HQ upstate. He doesn't resent that. It gives him an excuse to remodel, maybe get rid of the Avengers symbol on the side of his tower,
replace it with him name again. It is -his- tower, after all, even if it feels a little empty without the
team.

No, he's here because he wants a little peace and quiet, that's exactly right. Some time away from
everyone, because they're starting to give him glances, and he doesn't like the fact that these people
know him well enough now that they suspect something.

He walks into the workshop to an AC/DC song and cranks up the volume. On the other hand, he
doesn't like being alone for too long. It's nice to have someone to talk to, some attention, maybe
someone he can work with. But that isn't a problem he can fix, because the only person he would
like to see right now isn't around.

He hasn't given up hope yet, he's still looking. Sooner or later, he's going to find him. And when he
does, well. He's a charming man. He's good at convincing Bruce to do things, surely he can
convince Bruce to stay with him for a while. Bribe him with a lab, maybe. He has the space.

Things will be better if he finds Bruce. He's confident he can do it, with enough time and sleepless
nights. And if the man doesn't want to be found, well, he just has to hide better.
Quinjets are surprisingly silent on the inside. Cruising along at altitude, stealth mode engaged and with no incoming alerts, there is hardly anything that would tip someone off to the fact they were in a jet. That is, so long as they don't look out any of the windows.

Bruce finds himself waking from a doze on the floor. This isn't uncommon. He feels unconcerned, which is stranger. He knows the other guy came out to play, and he still isn't sure what happened, but he wakes up knowing he's all right where he is.

When he lifts his head and realises he's in a jet, he remembers why.

He stumbles over to one of the seats and checks on fuel levels and flight path. Stealth mode is still on. The flight data tells him he's only been in the air for a little while. The jet can hold him here for a long time still, on a randomised flight pattern. With the stealth, he's reasonably sure no one can find him.

He gets up again, goes in search of a drink. Eventually, in the evening, he lands the thing in the middle of nowhere. There is a river with a long gravel bank and a thick forest on either side.

He looks out the windows and remembers why he left. There is a roaring in the back of his head. He looks out the window into the forest. There is nothing for miles around but trees and wildlife and the occasional river. It's so tempting to let go. Here, at least, maybe it can't hurt.

We need the jet, he thinks to himself, to the other guy. Don't damage the jet.

Outside, a safe distance away, he remembers Ultron, he remembers Natasha. He understands what she did, he doesn't even blame her but emotions aren't always rational and there is so much anger there, anger he can't just forgive away. He even remembers South Africa, and he flinches away, into himself. The roaring is louder, the familiar pain. He lets the green take him.

When he wakes up, it's with the familiar anxiety. It's morning and he is by a river in the woods. That much is consistent with his memories, but he can't see the jet anywhere. There are uprooted trees around him, wood splintered and torn.

He picks a direction, upstream, and starts walking. When he finds a fork in the river, neither branch looking anything like what he remembers around the jet, he turns around. It's a brisk walk, well into the morning, and he starts getting a little hungry. The walking keeps him warm, and he feels peaceful. There is no roaring in his mind but the calm whisper of the river. The other guy is there, he's always there, but they are both content to leave Bruce in the drivers' seat.

Around a bend in the river is the jet, or at least the warped outline of the jet, bending light around it and distorting the trees behind it, the gravel it's sitting on. The tension in his chest only loosens a little once he's checked the thing out, made sure there are no stowaways and all systems are still working.

He feels paranoid, but then again, it isn't paranoia when they really are out to get you.
Chapter 4

He makes it to the second week before the restlessness gets too bad. Worse, he's bored. Even when he was laying low, he always had something to do. He's no longer looking for a cure, and there are only so many breathing exercises you can do before going utterly insane.

Carefully, using the skills he picked up when on the run to hide his tracks, he gets an internet connection going on one of the tablets the jet had lying around. They really shouldn't leave so much tech unsupervised. You never know who's going to come along and fly off with it. He smiles to himself a little.

He finds himself watching the news, one evening, looking for familiar faces. He isn't ready to contact anyone, not yet, but he still wants to know how they're doing. He misses them, the whole messed-up group, despite himself. He hasn't spoken to anyone since he took off, and technically since before then as the other guy doesn't do a lot of chatting.

He's tried to look them all up, but information is scarce. Most of it concerns the battle itself, the battle of Sokovia. He remembers that, in scattered bits and pieces, so he doesn't watch the footage. Anyway, he's more interested in what's going on now, after.

Along the bottom of the screen scrolls a message, brief and uninformative. The word “Ultron” jumps out at him. Then: “black market”.

He spends the rest of the night combing the grimy, anonymous corners of the net for information on the sale of mechanical parts. He's not stupid enough to look for Ultron by name, but he knows how to recognise the shape of something when it's not being named. He knows ways to find things here, he's spent a lot of time looking for his own salvation. The broken and scattered parts of Ultron, it turns out, are much easier to find. Almost anything is easier to find.

He combs through auction listings and message boards. Some if it is intentionally old-fashioned, tucked away with forged timestamps that suggest this is nothing but the debris of old, forgotten websites. Some of it is different, locked away with more sophisticated tools. He knows something about encryption, but he starts with the easy ones, the ones that are hidden in plain sight.

He's only a little surprised when he finds one, for sale in an as-yet undisclosed location in Canada.

Thankfully, there is a picture with a tiny corner of landscape, and there are always ways to narrow down the location. He's no expert, he's a biochemist, but he learns fast and before long he has a good place to start.

He has landscape matches and a decent idea of the structure the piece is in. He's running more matches and thinking of the best way to survey the possible sites without being seen, before the piece is sold or moved. He's almost about to launch the quinjet when he shakes some sense into himself. When did he start getting this reckless?

He sits with the tablet for a while, cross-legged on a blanket on the floor. He finds he can't put it down. He is responsible for Ultron, at least in part.

Him and Tony, they created it. Maybe it was mostly Tony, but Bruce let himself be swept up in the whole mess. He should know better, should know when to disagree, when to put his foot down. Tony is pursuasive though, and now there are more lives on his record. His responsibility. Theirs.

After a long moment, his fingers go back to work on the screen.
Tony is sure he's only been in the lab for a short while when Friday interrupts him. When he looks up, ready to snap at her, he notices it's been almost fourteen hours. He looks down at the schematics, glowing a steady blue under his fingers. They're as good as done.

“Fine, what is it?” he says.

“Someone has contacted your phone, sir,” Friday says.

Tony looks down and sure enough, he has a new message. It's a strange one, no name, no number. “Who is this from?” he asks.

Friday is quiet for a moment before she says, sounding faintly embarrassed: “I don't know, sir.”

“Be ready to quarantine the phone,” Tony says, and opens the message. There is a line of text and a media attachment. The text says: “Stumbled across something of yours, thought you might want to know.”

Tony frowns and opens the attachment. There is too much information for the tiny screen on the phone so he grabs the thing and blows it all up into one of the holographic displays. There is a picture of a piece of scrap metal, barely more than shrapnel really. He still recognises it.

It doesn't take him long to find where the picture came from, and he has to admit that it's convincing. Apart from the fact that some shadowy figure secretly sent the information to him, there is really nothing that makes him doubt it is legitimate. He decides that, real or not, he has good enough reasons to check it out. Even if there never was a piece of scrap metal, he wants to know who set this up. He's always best at charging in with repulsors blasting, so that's what he'll do.

“Friday, run checks on,” he waves at the phone, “all of this stuff. I'm suiting up.”

“Sir, where will you go?” Friday says. “There are no coordinates.”

He looks back, scrolls through the information, finds what he's looking for. “No, but there are four likely areas, that will do,” he says. The suit closing around him is like a blanket. He is wrapped tight in metal and displays and information. Without him asking, Friday shows him the information on the Ultron shrapnel in one corner.

“Sir,” she says, “I feel obliged to inform you this may be a trap.”

“Sure,” says Tony. “I feel obliged to tell you that I don't give a crap. And anyway, anything's better than sitting around doing nothing. I want to explode something.”

Friday, wisely, keeps quiet.

There is the familiar rush as he takes off, the thrill of flying with nothing but a metal suit and the arc reactor in his chest. It's nothing like flying in a plane, not even when you're the pilot. He's doing this all himself and he is soaring, he is alive and amazing.

Every time he takes off, it's like the first time. Every time there is the thought, in the back of his mind: he made this, and he is relying on nothing but his own work. Sure, it means that maybe this time he made a mistake and something will fail and send him crashing to the earth below. But it
doesn't. He is good at what he does. Every time he flies, it feels like falling, until it doesn't, and he could just cry with joy as he soars.

The feeling carries him through most of the trip, and after that, he amuses himself by doing mid-air tricks, ducking and weaving and being generally reckless and having fun. Being careful is overrated.

The possible sites show up on his HUD like Christmas lights. They are clustered close together, located around a distinctive hill formation Friday has isolated in the background of the single picture. As far as Tony can tell, the sites all contain a rickety wooden shed.

He's in the countryside, just across the border in Canada. It's the middle of the day and there's nothing to hide his approach so even if he tried he's not going to be very stealthy. His suit is too loud, the thrusters too bright. So he simply strolls up to the first shed and breaks the lock. Oops, sorry, but not really.

There's nothing in the shed but some wooden planks and a broken fridge. The second is much the same, but without the fridge. Tony figures he'll have no results until shed number four. Things are always in the last place you look.

Number three is just as easy to find as the previous two. This one has a door that looks much sturdier than any of the others so he elects to go through the wall instead. It's not like these people don't have a ridiculous amount of wood lying around. They'll manage. When he lowers his hand and the woodchips settle, two things surprise him: first, the piece of tech is actually here and second, there is no one else.

Who leaves their stolen tech sitting in a shed in the middle of nowhere with no guards? It's really very irresponsible, and Tony doesn't trust it.

He expects to trigger a booby trap when he picks the chunk of metal up. He expects to be shot at when he flies up and out, breaking the roof of the shed out of something like spite. He expects to see someone following him away and out of town.

None of that happens. Over the ocean, he disintegrates the thing with a few repulsor blasts and a small explosive for good measure. He did promise himself explosions. It was only a part of one of Ultron's drones so it breaks apart easily, the ashes and specks of metal drifting down to the water.
When Tony gets back home he still expects someone to jump out at him from the shadows. He's so high strung, he has to force himself to get out of the suit. He skips the walkway, he doesn't like the idea of robot arms stripping him bare, even if it's only Friday.

So he lands on the balcony instead, the one he once sat on with Bruce while a party was going on inside. He shivers a little when he steps out of the suit. It will fly itself back to storage. He is sweaty and the cool air on his skin is not entirely pleasant, so he decides on a shower before he does anything else. Check on the ventilation, he tells himself. Maybe something is malfunctioning, maybe something can be improved.

When he checks the ventilation, projected on one wall of his shower, it's in perfect shape. He pointedly refuses to check his physical state against the baseline.

“Friday,” he says, turning on the water, “did you track whoever sent that message yet?”

“No sir,” Friday says, “but I may be able to send a message back.”

“Sure, do that.” Tony rubs a thumb over the glass and metal of his arc reactor. His other hand is fishing for some soap. Coconut scented, maybe. “Send the following: You were right, I love knowing where my stuff is. Now, who the hell are you?”

“Sent, sir,” Friday says.

By the time he gets a reply, it's been half a day and Tony is back in the main lab, the big one downstairs, looking into an upgrade for the ventilation system. Air conditioning in the suit, if you will. He likes being comfortable, and he likes having the best, so giving the suits air conditioning only seems logical. Next, he should install a back massager. Who's he kidding, a full body massager.

His phone chirps and he almost knocks it off the table when he jumps to grab it.

“Tony, it's me,” the message says. “Bruce. I'm sorry.”

“You always apologise, what is up with that?” Tony types back. He might be complaining, but something about the apologising puts him at ease. It's very Bruce. He tries to ignore the faint lightheadedness he feels, can't and sits down after all. “Some compulsive need to apologise? Are you okay?”

He sits for a little and stares at his phone, classic rock blasting through the workshop. It doesn't take long for a reply to arrive: “I'm fine, but please don't tell anyone else.”

Tony considers what he knows about Bruce. The man is a genius, he's used to being on the run. Sending him a message with this level of stealth is impressive, but not exactly impossible. If whoever this is isn't Bruce, they've done their homework. This is exactly the kind of message he would expect from the man. There's needless apologising, a need for solitude. All it's missing is a touch of sarcasm.

With a sigh, Tony leans on the workbench. He could just about cry. It's a good thing Natasha isn't here, or she would tease him about his mascara running. Ridiculous, of course. He only wears eyeliner, and never in the shop. He has to rub his hands dry on his sweatpants before he can reply. Maybe the workshop needs an improved ventilation system, too.
“You scared the shit out of me,” he types. After a moment, he adds: “Where are you?”

“I'm not telling you,” Bruce replies, “and I'm sorry. Again.”

“Switch text to voice mode,” Tony says. He turns to his schematics, but frankly, his head isn't in it anymore. He grabs a wrench and a cloth and sits down on the floor instead, gesturing Dum-E over. “Maintenance time, buddy.”

The bot chirps happily and rolls over to him, nudging his foot.

“Drive over my foot and I will turn you into a soap dispenser,” Tony grumbles. He starts with the wheels. They always wear out fastest. “Friday, send the following to Bruce's annoying undisclosed location: There you go again with the apologising. Hey, if you don't want to see people, which fair enough, no judgement, why are you getting involved with this Ultron business?”

After a moment, Friday says: “Incoming message from Dr. Banner: Either let me apologise or stop making me feel guilty, Tony. Frankly, I needed something to do and I thought you'd want to know that your tech is being sold on the black market.”

“Not my tech anymore,” Tony grumbles. He has to smile, though, because there is Bruce's annoyed exhasperation.

“Is that a reply, sir?” Friday asks smoothly.

“No,” Tony says, “yes, wait. Send this: Technically it wasn't my tech anymore but thanks anyway. Let me know if you find more.” He hesitates, but presses on: “And let me know if you want to come back to someplace. You have an apartment here. Even the guest rooms are all empty. All of them. It's very empty here at Stark Tower.”

He's tipped Dum-E over to one side. It's holding on to the table with its grabbing arm as Tony removes the wheels one by one and cleans all the little nooks and crannies where the dirt gets built up. There are a surprising number of long hairs clogging up the moving parts. Tony makes a mental note to blame Pepper for that, next time he sees her. He's never had hair this long, or this ginger.
It turns out the quinjets aren't just well-supplied with tech and blankets. There are entire cases of dried food, and a whole closet of bottled water. Bruce has been living on it for almost two weeks now and has barely made a dent.

He turns to his (borrowed) tablet and wonders how well Tony can track his messages. He knows how good he is at hiding, but Tony is a genius all on his own. If he really wanted, maybe he could. Bruce isn't sure what to do about this, so he decides to trust Tony will respect it when he says he doesn't want to see anyone right now.

“Actually,” he types back, ignoring the invitation, “I found something odd. Another listing, very similar to the first, same general area. The text is almost exactly identical.”

To his relief, Tony makes the same conclusion he does: “Any screennames? Identifying elements? Think it's the same person?”

Bruce smiles. If this is paranoia, at least they'll be paranoid together. “No, maybe, and yes,” he answers. “There is nothing to identify the seller easily, but people always leave a trace. I'm looking into it. In the meantime, I'll send you the info on the second listing, in case you want to check that out.”

“Awesome, taking a look,” Tony says.

Bruce keeps browsing while he waits. There are a few other suspicious listings, but only one is even vaguely believable after a closer look. One tries to pass off half a wrecked fridge spray-painted silver as anything remotely interesting.

When the notification pops back up, the message says: “Great, I can check this out before the, the nightmare later today and be back in time to make an appearance. Coffee, please. Oops, disregard that, talking to Friday without the proper command.”

Bruce smiles to himself before he really absorbs the content of the message. He remembers arguing with Tony about voice commands. He thinks it's too inaccurate, but Tony is impatient and doesn't want to let go of whatever his latest obsession is to type a reply. Looks like Bruce was right. His eyes skip back up and he has to frown.

“There is a nightmare?”

“Shit,” appears on the screen immediately, followed by: “I'm sorry, of course you don't know about the memorial.”

There is a long pause. Bruce can't tear his eyes away from the screen. He doesn't have to wonder for long what it's for. Surely it's about Ultron, or rather the damage left in his wake. Unless it's a little more specific. He realises he hasn't heard from anyone else on the team in nearly two weeks. If one of the Avengers died, surely there would be a memorial.

He starts ticking off the people least likely to die. Steve isn't a high probability, and neither is Thor. They are both too tough, have survived so many things. Neither are impossible to kill, he's sure, but he doesn't expect them to be the first ones to go. He forces himself to remember, tries to piece together who he saw.

What memories he has are vague, distorted by the other guy, a mist of green and anger. Tony is
ruled out, as he's talking to the man. That helps a little. It leaves five options. The two new kids, the Maximoffs. Clint and Nat, always the more vulnerable ones among their ranks. And then there's Vision, who Bruce tries to imagine dead but has barely gotten used to thinking of as alive.

Bruce is ashamed to admit that the least distressing option to him is the one that involves one of the kids. He doesn't know them as well as anyone else, and he doesn't have that strange mix of guilt and responsibility and awe as he does with Vision. They don't deserve to die, though. None of them do.

And maybe it is none of them. Maybe the memorial is a general one, something to mourn the people Bruce already knows Ultron has killed, the thousands he's left homeless.

A new message appears, and Bruce has to put his glasses back on to read it.

“To remember the Battle of Sokovia.”

Bruce rubs his forehead. “I thought so,” he types, and: “Is everyone okay?” He should have asked that first, it should have been the first thing he said to Tony, but he didn't. He didn't forget, exactly, he just wasn't sure he wanted to get involved like that.

His thoughts turn to Nat. The last time he saw her, he was the other guy. The last time he saw her as him she kissed him and pushed him down a hole. If nothing else, he wants to talk to her, explain that he just can't. It's not just the other guy, it's him. Not a conversation he's looking forward to having, but the idea of not having it is worse. He was also hoping to let her know how angry he is. It might not be as important and thoughtful as the other bit, but there it is.

“No,” the answer comes, and that's not good. “It's Clint. He went to save a kid but it wasn't, it wasn't safe. There were still bits of Ultron, his drones, they, some of them, they were around. In a jet. Started shooting and Pietro, one of the new kids, you remember him, fast little bastard, he tried to grab the bullets but I guess he missed a few. He, he.” After a moment, it's followed by: “Sorry about the syntax there, looks like I need to iron some bugs out of the transcription software,” but Bruce knows better. That software is flawless. It's up to him to translate the scrambled text to Tony's voice and when he does it's easy to hear the distress.

Bruce closes his eyes for a moment. When he opens them again, another message has appeared: “He's not dead, let me get that out first. The Avengers have him, are taking care of him. They'll fix him up, Bruce. They're saying it's not sure yet but any day now, he'll be just fine.”

“He's not a machine, Tony,” Bruce types. His fingertips feel strange on the tablet. “People can't always be fixed. I'm sorry, I need to go.”

He doesn't wait to read the next message that pops up, but when he returns, exhausted from throwing trees around and roaring into the wilderness, Tony has left him an address.
The memorial for the battle of Sokovia is held in a lovely bit of nature in upstate New York. It's kind of in the middle of nowhere, but not too far for the new Avengers Headquarters. There is a pavilion and a small pond and tables of food.

The whole team is there, both old and new. The whole team except for Clint. Of all of them, Steve and Nat look the most comfortable. Steve because he's used to this sort of thing, public appearances, shaking hands with people. There is a fundraising element to the party, and Steve knows how to please a crowd. Nat looks at ease just because she always does. She always blends in. There's no telling what she's really thinking, not from this distance.

He rubs the bridge of his nose, feet rooted to the grass and unable to move. It's probably better that he doesn't. He'd only get in the way. So, he sits and watches as the evening drags on. He can only hear the occasional word from here, but that's alright. Sometimes there's an outburst of laughter.

It's strange to see the team without Clint, knowing he's teetering on the edge somewhere. He wonders how many of the others are thinking about that. He can tell there is some heavy drinking, so he's probably not the only one.

He spots the twins from afar, clinging to each other in matching black outfits. Maybe they are just uneasy in the company of strangers. Maybe they feel guilty. Someone comes up to them and tries to get them involved. It's Nat, of course. She offers them drinks and food and the twins seem to thaw out a little, judging by their posture. Bribing with food is always a safe strategy.

When it gets darker, fires are lit to stave off the cold and dark. There are some speeches, but the wind has picked up and he can't hear a word of it.

Music starts, quietly at first. Then, someone comes out to fill the tables back up and the music gets louder and before he knows, people are dancing. The atmosphere is strange, somewhere between a party and a funeral, but people are still dancing so it can't be that bad.

He is the last to leave. He lingers until he's sure everyone is safely on their way. It's the least he can do.
Chapter 9

By the time Tony tumbles out of his suit and onto the walkway it is about two or three in the morning. If he'd gone straight home, he would have made it much earlier, but then he wouldn't be Tony Stark.

“I don't have a curfew,” he mumbles angrily at nothing in particular. “I'm fucking Iron Man.”

“Of course, sir,” Friday replies. “Is there anything I assist with tonight?”

“Clean up the suit, will you?” Tony says. “I think I hit a tree at some point. There's, er, sap. Pine needles. Sticky.” He's inside now, leaning heavily on the walls as he makes his way to his bar. His tower is equipped with all the comforts and luxuries a billionaire might want, and he decides to use them tonight.

He's already drunk, of course, and he's past the the stage of drunken revelry and loud music and making out with strangers. He's into the next phase, the more solemn phase. He almost manages to pull off dignified, but his tux is really wrinkly and he nearly falls over when he tries to sit down, clutching a bottle close to his chest.

It really doesn't help that when he stumbles, his shin clips the coffee table right where it hurts. He groans and slumps into the chair. With an eye on his priorities, he strips off his jacket and fans some fresh air at himself with his hands and ignores the leg. His vision is a little fuzzy, but he's sure he'll be fine.

“Sir,” Friday chimes in, “the suit is being looked after. Should you really be drunk, considering the painkillers this afternoon?”

“No,” Tony grunts. He wrestles with the bottle for a second but his fingers are clumsy and he can't remember if this is the kind you twist or pull. “Help me open this thing,” he says. “so I can get smashed. More smashed.”

“I highly disapprove of this course of action,” Friday says, but a robot arm unfolds from the bar Tony's chair is shoved up against. He always wanted a robot bartender, so at some point in the endless remodeling, he made sure he had one. “Should I contact miss Potts?”

“No!” Tony says. He snatches his bottle back and the arm offers him a glass. He tries to pour himself a shot of, whatever the hell this is. Part of it spills. Ah, it's whiskey. Probably. “Don't call Pepper.”

“Perhaps Colonel Rhodes?” Friday suggests.

“Stop trying to get me a babysitter,” Tony says. “Don't need one. I never need a babysitter, I'm an adult, and I'm Iron Man.” He sips at his whiskey, glowering at the robot bartender arm, as it's hard to glare at Friday, who has no physical body.

“Of course, sir,” Friday says but adds, in a last ditch effort: “Perhaps you want to contact Dr. Banner?”

Tony has already opened his mouth to shout Friday down but he hesitates and says: “Yes, call Bruce.”

“I am unable to call Dr. Banner, but I can relay a text message,” Friday says.
“Fuck,” Tony says, “Yes, he's hiding, of course. I didn't forget that. You can send him, uh.” Tony slumps deeper in his chair. His shin, where he hit it earlier, where he got hit even before that, feels oddly damp. He feels like maybe he should do something about that. Or maybe later. “Send the following: hey, Bruce. You can't tell because this isn't voice but text but I'm pretty drunk. I'm drunk dialing you right now, how about that. I bet you wish this was voice, those sorts of clips are sold for a small fortune.” He grins. “Or so I hear.”

He leans back, sips at his glass. Really, he barely tastes it at this point. Barely feels it either, as his head is already swimming. The pain in his leg, the ache in his chest, it's all fine. It's all going to go away. At the very least all the booze makes sure his breathing stays even, his heart doesn't feel like it's going to exit his ribcage at high speeds. For a moment, he imagines having a panic attack while being drunk. He shudders a little. It's a good thing flashbacks and drunken hallucinations never join forces.

“Any reply yet?” he asks. “it's been like an hour, right?”

“It's been approximately three and a half minutes,” says Friday. “There is no reply yet.”

“Send Bruce another message.” Tony gestures with his glass. At some point he emptied it so there's no risk waving it around like a madman. “Bruce, are you awake? What time is it where you're hiding? I hope you're awake and annoyed because,” he pauses, “well, this is me we're talking about. I like being annoying. Ego the size of my whatsitcalled. Tower. Hey, do you think it's phallic? Pepper always thought it was phallic.” He pauses again. “Actually, it was meant to be phallic. I'm pretty sure. I mean, it's a tower, they are phallic by definition, right?” He sighs.

When, after another excruciating seven minutes, there is still no reply, Tony sends the following: “Bruce, I could really use someone to talk to.”
He wakes up the next morning, slumped in his chair. His eyes are dry and his mouth tastes like that time he accidentally took a sip from a cup of motor oil left out in the rain. That isn't a surprise. If he didn't already remember being extremely drunk, he would know now.

He clutches his fleece blanket and says, not opening his eyes: “Friday, did I do anything stupid last night?” His voice come out creaky but not unintelligible.

“Not particularly, sir,” Friday says smoothly and without judgement. “You left Dr. Banner several messages and drank a glass of whiskey before falling asleep.”

“Oh, that's fine, then.” Tony mumbles. He raises his hands to his eyes to block out the sun. Why does the damn tower have to have so many windows everywhere. Why does he have to live in a tower and not, say, underground. He pulls the blanket over his head. It's too warm and he pulls it back again.

Something occurs to him, but his mind seems to be made of syrup or something equally sticky so it takes a while for the thought to make it from the edge of his awareness all the way to the front. Tony cracks open one eye and peers around the beautifully and painfully lit room.

“Fridaaaay,” he says.

“Yes sir?” she answers.

“There's a blanket on me.”

“Yes sir.”

Tony looks at the blanket. It's red, and definitely one of his. It has TS embroidered in gold thread, and that's a major clue right there. “Did I put it here?”

“No sir,” Friday starts, “I should inform you-”

“That's alright Friday, I'm back,” Bruce interrupts her.

Tony jerks upright, and immediately doubles over his knees, hands pressed to his eyes and groaning softly.

“Hello, Tony,” Bruce says.

“Bruuuuce,” Tony manages. “I'm really hungover.”

“I bet.” Bruce sits on a chair next to him and put something on the coffee table. It makes a noise of glass against glass and Tony risks a look. “I made you this,” Bruce says. “It looks horrifying but Friday told me the recipe so if it's wrong you can yell at her, not me.”

“Vitamin shake,” Tony identifies the greenish slush.

“So I've been told,” Bruce says wryly, half a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “I'll get you some water once you finish it.”

Tony carefully unfolds from his collapsed position. The light is still too bright, and everything still hurts, but he smiles anyway and grabs the glass. Despite the sickly greenish tinge, the shake tastes
just right, mostly of kiwi with a hint of mint.

“Glad to have you back, science bro,” he says once the glass is half empty. Slowly, he's starting to feel better.

“Don't call me that,” Bruce says, in the tone of an argument already fought and lost. “Are you wearing eyeliner?”

“It's called guyliner when it's on guys,” Tony says and finishes his drink. He's more thirsty than he thought, so he hands the glass over to the barkeeper arm and says: “Water with ice.”

“It's er,” Bruce hesitates. He looks at Tony, the bottom half of his face a smile but the eyebrows knitting into an almost disturbed frown. “It's just that its,” he gestures before his hands fall back to fidget with his shirt. “It's kind of runny.”

“Oh, do I look like a panda?” Tony wipes at his eyes, but his fingers come away clean. The stuff has been on overnight, and doesn't seem to want to come off anymore. “Friday, do I look like a panda?” he asks.

“Panda,” Bruce mouths, horrified.

“No sir,” Friday says. “As Dr. Banner said, it's a little smudged.”

Tony huffs, takes the glass back from the robotic bartender. He should name the thing, but to be honest, he rarely ever uses it so he keeps forgetting. “I'll fix it later. Don't look so shocked, Bruce. A man can wear some eyeliner.”

“Yeah, no, yes, of course,” Bruce says. This is when Tony notices how disheveled the man actually looks, like he's been living in a forest for two weeks. Well, he probably has, and Tony sure looks no better.

“And be honest with me,” Tony barrels on, “it makes my eyes look really nice, right? No need to answer, I know it does.”

Bruce blinks at him and says nothing. The blush creeping up his neck is a clear sign Tony's managed to push the right buttons somewhere though, so Tony sits back, satisfied, and drinks his water. His head still feels a mess, and funnily enough the pain in his chest and leg have gotten worse now the immediate symptoms of dehydration have abated. He'll look into that later.
Chapter 11

Bruce almost can't look away from Tony's face, his eyes. He's not shocked by the eyeliner, the fact he's wearing it. Now that he's aware of it, Bruce is reasonably sure Tony wears eyeliner regularly. He's is right anyway, though Bruce won't admit it out loud; it makes his eyes look nice. Even the way it's smudged, just a little, it's not so bad. Bruce is fairly sure it means he's been crying, but he's determined not to call attention to it.

So it takes him a moment before he looks away. When he does, he looks outside. The view is lovely, the city is almost abstract from this distance. He's always liked the view from the top of the tower. It makes the city look unreal. Despite the location, that makes it feel very far from civilisation and Bruce is rather glad. He figures they can both use a little more quiet.

Trekking through the city on the way here was a nightmare. He's lucky he has a lot of experience staying calm, and he's grateful the tower still lets him in without question, without having to talk to anyone or pass any checkpoint.

“When did you get here?” Tony asks. He's finished his water and is holding the empty glass just over his arc reactor. The blue light is coming through his shirt, very faintly in the sunlight.

“Last night,” Bruce says. “It was pretty late and I didn't want to wake you up. Don't worry, I didn't park the jet in your garage.” He smiles a little, knowing exactly where he left the jet. It will take them a while to dig all the sand out.

“Awwwsome,” Tony says. He seems to hesitate over something. “I saw you yesterday.”

“Did I wake you up after all?” Bruce asks. He takes his glasses off, starts polishing the glasses. They're scratched again. Glasses never last too long with the other guy, he's lucky they're not broken.

“No, at the,” Tony swallows. He seems to swallow whatever he was saying, and starts again: “At the thing last night. Out in the forest, you were just standing there.”

“I,” Bruce starts, “I'm sorry, I didn't want to come over and bother you all. It would just put all the attention on me.” He grins a little again. “Unlike you, I don't like that sort of thing.”

“Yeah, no, I get it.” Tony nods. The movement makes his glass clink against the edge of the arc reactor. He adds, quietly: “You're not a bother though.”

“Right,” Bruce says, giving him a look. The things people say. “Do you want some breakfast?”

“God no,” Tony says with feeling. “And that means I probably should have some, huh?”

“The kitchen is fully stocked,” Friday supplies, helpfully.

“What would you like, eggs?” Bruce stands and scratches his neck. This room has a bar, a sink, some very fashionable couches and chairs. It isn't the kitchen, though it could fool some people. “Some toast?”

Tony waves a hand and struggles into a more upright position. Sadly, the chairs are made for relaxing, and don't allow good posture. “Make whatever you like,” he says, “I'll have some and pretend I don't feel sick to my stomach.”
Bruce offers him a hand and hauls Tony to his feet. The man is heavy, especially when he leans so heavily on him. “Can you stand up?” Bruce says, after a moment. It's not exactly that he minds Tony being draped over him, shoulder to shoulder, his head bent down.

Tony moves a hand to the bar and says, in a slightly strangled voice: “Yeah, I may have forgotten something.”

“What's wrong?” Bruce says. This is when he notices quite how pale Tony looks. Noticably paler than a moment ago, before he got up.

“There was a, uhm, incident,” Tony says. He pulls himself to his full height on the bar and visibly shakes himself. “Nothing to worry about, of course, I should really have remembered not to put my full weight on it just yet.”


Tony points to the right one and Bruce kneels to roll up the trouserleg. Around the shin, some the cloth is stiff with dried blood. At some point, Tony has made an effort to bandage the leg up, but those bandages have soaked through in a jagged line down the front some time ago, probably last night.

“How's it looking, doc?” Tony says. He doesn't sound concerned. Tony is always getting hurt and pretending he's not mortal.

“You need to sit down,” Bruce said. “I can't see like this.”

“Sure, we'll sit in the kitchen.” Before Bruce can say anything, Tony starts walking off, one hand still on the bar, and then the wall. He's surprisingly steady.

“Do you have a death wish?” Bruce grumbles. He almost expects some smartass remark in return, but the other man rounds a corner. He has to follow, thankfully he knows where the kitchen is.

Tony is pulling up a chair for himself. He sighs a little when he sits down. “Let me know if there's anything you can't find,” he says. “No, correction, let Friday know. I barely know what's in my kitchen. If you have a question about the labs or something though, fire away.”

“You'll need to take your pants off,” Bruce says.

“Really.” Tony raises an eyebrow.

Bruce, who is already moving a second chair in position, gives him a look. “I know it's some sort of compulsive thing with you, but can we skip to the part where we find out if you'll still have a leg after this?”

“I'm not losing a leg,” Tony says, but he's squirming out of his trousers and obediently lays his leg over the second chair.

Bruce wads up the trousers to use both as padding and in case the bleeding starts again. Thankfully, the kitchen has a first aid kid, and he uses the scissors included in it to cut away the old bandages. They're stuck together so badly, there really is no point in trying to unwind them. Even cut through, they stick to Tony's leg and Bruce has to carefully pull the fabric away from the wound. To Tony's credit, he is very quiet.

“Okay, that's not too bad,” Bruce says, bent over the injured leg. With all the blood-stained fabric out of the way, he can tell it's really just a cut, lengthwise down the front of the leg. Nothing too
deep, just a lot of bleeding. “How did you get this?” he asks as he starts wiping it all down. He's used to this sort of thing by now. At least it's not broken.

“You know how you sent me another listing?” Tony says, airily. It almost masks the strain in his voice. “Yeah, so I went there before the thing. The get-together yesterday. Turns out it was definitely ours and this time they were prepared. I think you were right and it's the same person, they just didn't expect anyone last time but after that time they put some guards on the place but, hey,” Tony grins. “They were still not prepared enough.”

“What did they have that could shoot through your armour?” Bruce says, frowning. He turns back to the first aid kid, dedicated to his search for a pair of tweezers.

“Oh no, this happened after I took the suit off,” Tony says.

“You,” Bruce rubs his forehead with the back of his hand and sighs. He takes a deep breath and tries again: “You took it off?”

Tony shrugs. “Tactical decis-OW.”

“Something stuck in your wound,” Bruce mutters and holds up the tweezers with the scrap of bandage for inspection. Tony rewards him with an ugly look.

Tony refuses to speak for the remainder of the time Bruce is wrapping up his leg. It isn't until he starts making scrambled eggs that Tony resumes his running commentary. The man is terrible at staying quiet and focused, unless he's fighting or working on a project.

As he stirs the eggs, back towards Tony, Bruce smiles a little. It's soothing, once you get used to it.
Chapter 12

“There is a visitor at the front door,” Friday announces when Bruce is halfway through cooking their eggs.

“Who is it?” Tony asks, but Bruce is already putting the second plate back in the cupboard, putting the extra cutlery away. He can't get rid of the smell of eggs, so he's decided to make it look like a breakfast for one instead of two.

“Captain Rogers is requesting entry,” Friday says.

“Steve?” Tony scratches his chin. “I wonder what he's doing here. Hey Bruce, you want to come out and see him or-” Tony trails off.

Bruce has already catalogued his exits from the kitchen, from the floor and then the tower. The windows are a definite no at this height but the relatively open floorplan leaves him with several routes to several banks of elevators. He knows he has access to the private one, the one that goes the entire length of the tower, but that might well be the one Steve arrives on so it goes in the 'maybe' category.

He isn't even sure why he's reacting so strongly. All he knows is that he doesn't want to go back, not yet. He doesn't want to talk to anyone and he doesn't want to be debriefed. He's not angry at Steve, but he's sure the man is going to try and convince him to come in, and the thought makes him feel ill, it makes him feel like he's bursting out of his skin, and that's exactly what he doesn't need to be doing right now.

He can deal with Tony. After all those hours in the lab together, he feels some measure of trust. And, not insignificantly, Tony has always been very prepared to ignore any authorities, to do whatever he wants or what he thinks is right. Steve is a good person, but Steve follows orders. Bruce knows what orders can buy you.

“Bruce?” Tony says, and it takes some effort for Bruce to turn his brain away from his flight response. “Hey, you know, you don't have to talk to Steve. I'll tell him I have no idea where you are, all right? It's fine. He's probably just here to lecture me about staying out of the gossip magazines and not drinking so much.” Tony pauses. “I'm pretty sure someone took some embarrassing photos of me yesterday. And I may have destroyed a tree.”

“It's the jet,” Bruce says, “I left it too close. I should have crashed it somewhere, in the ocean. Made sure there was no trace.”

“Hey, you know what you keep telling me?” Tony says.

“What?” Bruce snaps. It's more than irritation, it's anger.

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“What?” Bruce snaps. It's more than irritation, it's anger.

“Breathe.” Tony smiled and gets up on his feet. He walks over to Bruce with his hands out, and the fact that he's limping noticeably really helps tone down the threat level. “This is my house, you're okay here. So what we're going to do is this: I'm going to go and say hi to Steve. You'll go somewhere else, I suggest my workshop, okay? It's on a different floor and you should have full authorisation to everything there already so just mess around a bit until the coast is clear. I'll send our capsicle on his merry way and then we get to have some actual breakfast.” He glances at a clock. “Brunch.”

“You have, wait.” Bruce cocks his head. Tony is patting his shoulder, and he feels he should get a
Tony shrugs. He must have seen something in Bruce change, maybe the edge of green leaving his eyes, because he's grabbing at him now, and actively steering him out of the kitchen. "What can I say, I'm always prepared. You go up here, Friday will open the doors and answer your questions and everything. I'm giving you authorisation to check the camera feeds as well, so you can spy on us if you really want to, alright Friday?"

He says this with a grin, and when Friday replies she sounds almost as smug: “Already arranged, sir.”

“Fine,” Bruce says. He rakes a hand through his hair. One thing is true, he is definitely distracted from his situation. The initial panic is tamped down and with the urge to flee out of the way at least temporarily he has to agree it makes sense to stay put and gather information. He even considers that Steve might understand, might not push him. Briefly. "I'm sorry for my outburst. Let's hope you're right.”

“Great,” Tony says. “Of course I'm right. Stop apologising. To the elevator, now. Go on.” He's making shooing motions with one hand.

“Tony,” says Bruce.

“What? I have to answer the door soon or he'll get suspicious.”

“You're not wearing any pants.”

Tony looks down. He is, in fact, wearing briefs. Bruce is sure they're designer something or other, but that hardly matters if he's about to open the door in his underwear. When Tony looks back at him, he's got that smug little smile going. “You really think this is the worst I've looked answering my door? I can tell you don't read gossip mags. Good for you, you know, but if you ever want to see my naked ass, it's only a search query away.”

Bruce sighs and rubs the bridge of his nose. Eyes closed, he says: “Point taken, thank you. Do what you want.”

With that, Bruce heads to the elevator. Friday starts it up without needing a command, and he comes out on one of the private floors. The very private floors. This isn't like the big lab, or the floor that has his apartment or the communal areas downstairs. He's never been here before, doesn't think anyone has except probably Pepper. There is an extra door in in front of him and it slides open. Just like that, he's in Tony Stark's private workshop. The benches are littered with half-finished projects. A prototype Iron Man suit sits proudly against one wall, part of its arm gutted and laid out.

Once he stops feeling so much like an intruder, he locates all exits. There is the elevator, and an old-fashioned staircase. Next, he calls up the tower's camera feeds and is not particularly surprised by just how many there are. The audio quality isn't half bad either.

He -is- surprised, at least a little, at the fact that Tony has found some sort of bathrobe or housecoat and is shrugging into it before making his way to the elevator.
At the last moment, Tony grabs a pair of dark sunglasses from some convenient spot he probably never put them down. Everything is still too bright and he's sure his eyes look a little bloodshot anyway. He hopes the limp isn't too noticeable. It's not like he's wearing pants and the bandage is in plain view so either way, he'll have to dodge some questions.

“Hey, Cap,” he says when the door finally slides open. Steve isn't wearing his uniform, but something on his face suggests the visit isn't all pleasure. “Sup?”

There is a moment of doubt on Steve's face. “Is this a good time?” he asks. “I figured, it's past noon, but you're still...” He gestures at Tony's everything.

“Sure, buddy, come in.” Tony steps aside. “This is pretty normal for me, you know, and on that note, if you could keep down any potential loud noises that would be great.”

“Of course,” Steve says. He sounds a bit subdued and doesn't say another word as he follows Tony back to the kitchen.

“I was just making some brunch,” Tony says. He peers into the pan. In the panic, no one remembered to turn off the burner. He does so now, before the whole place starts smelling like burnt eggs. “Nevermind that. What I meant is: I am about to make brunch. Want anything? I can order in.”

“That's okay, thank you,” Steve says, perfectly polite. “I already ate.”

“Any news on Clint?” Tony asks, hopefully.

Steve shakes his head and doesn't say anything.

“Okay, so what brings you here today?” Tony pulls the fridge open and starts pulling out ingredients for some sort of smoothie for himself. He may not be interested in cooking most of the time, but he can manage blending things up for easy nourishment. “Not that I don't appreciate your company but, uh.” He glances over. “Last I checked you had a team to train.”

“We found the quinjet,” Steve blurts out. “The one Bruce was in. He wasn't in it when we found it, but it's definitely the same jet. He's been using the supplies and some of the spare clothes.” Steve smiles a little. It's the weary smile of a man who knows his job is not done yet, who has to go back to finish the chores. “He even left the jet in reasonable condition for us, except for all the sand.”

Tony stands very still for a moment. Part of is it genuine shock, as this is what Bruce had been afraid of. Part of it is a more calculating stillness, and he considers how he would react if this was really the first time he heard news of Bruce's whereabouts.

And then the third part is the hangover and its accompaniment of aches and nausea. Can't forget that. No, literally, cannot forget. His body won't let him. He considers painkillers.

Tony turns his head cautiously. He lets a little hope creep into his voice. “Any sign...?”

“There was a note,” Steve says. He folds his hands and looks down. “The important part is that he says he's fine. He's fine, Tony.”

“Right, yes,” Tony says. He turns fully know, accidentally knocking a bag of blueberries on the
floor. “I can tell from your voice that you think I won't like the rest, so you might as well get it over with. What was the rest of the note?” He's still holding on to the countertop for balance, or he would have taken a step forward.

Steve cringes a little. “He doesn't want us to look for him. He says he needs some time alone.”

“Where was the jet when you found it?” Tony asks. This time he does take a step forward.

“Tony, he-” Steve starts. He raises his hands, palms out.

Tony interrups with: “Where was-” but it seems neither of them is destined to finish their sentence because he trips over the bag of fruit and stumbles knees-first into a chair. The chair skids back and he lands on the floor on his hands and knees. He sits there for a moment, sunglasses slid partly down his nose. All in all, it could've been worse.

“Are you drunk?” Steve asks disapprovingly. He still offers his hand, because he's Steve and Steve values proper manners.

“I'm hungover,” Tony says, graciously accepting Steve's help getting up. “It's different. Just because you're too wholesome and impervious to drink doesn't mean I can't have a little after spending all night pretending it's normal we're missing both Bruce and-” he stops, actually chokes on the name and has to take a deep breath.

It's not just Steve either, Bruce is watching too. Listening, perhaps. There's a very good chance they both heard his shell crack there and the thought makes his heart beat faster, or maybe it makes him more aware of his heartbeat. Either way, he has to force his face into a neutral expression, his breathing down to a normal level.

“Oh, the memorial,” Steve says, quietly. “I'm sorry, I didn't realise it was so hard on you.”

“It wasn't,” Tony says, “I'm used to public functions.”

“Right,” Steve says. Tony has to admit he wasn't very believable so he forgives Steve for sounding so dubious.

With a sigh, he picks up the blueberries. The whole bag goes into the blender one by one. It's a welcome distraction, the blender slowly filling up, the cold berries against his fingers. He follows them with some spinach and bananas. “You're not going to tell me where the jet landed, are you?” he asks, inbetween spinach leaves.

“No, I'm sorry.” Steve is fidgeting with his hands again, but the look he gives Tony is full of genuine regret. “We have to respect his wishes.” He hesitates and adds: “Also, Friday contacted me and we all agree you need to take a break.”

Tony turns away from the blender, his mouth falling open. “Traitor,” he says.

“I'm sorry, sir.” Friday does not sound sorry. “You were working too hard.”

“You're all ganging up on me,” he says and points at Steve. “You and Friday and,” he doesn't say Bruce, he leaves that silent and lets Steve make whatever conclusions he wants. “Can't a man have a few sleepless nights?” he mumbles, jabbing the blender.

The noise prevents Steve from answering for a little while. When the blender is done, Tony pours himself a glass and pointedly does not offer Steve any. He lets his sunglasses sink down his nose a little as he drinks, so he can give Steve a look over the shades.
Of course, this is when Steve notices the bandage.
“What's that?” Steve says, and points at Tony's bandaged leg.

“Training exercise,” Tony says, his face blank.

Steve rolls his eyes. “Yeah, even I know not to believe that.”

“You know me,” Tony says, “testing new tech all the time.” He puts his glass down. “Sometimes things go wrong. You should have seen the first time I tried autonomous assembly. I mean I occasionally miscalculate or misjudge the output of the thrusters but I swear there was something in the targeting software, some error or value I got wrong, maybe combined with the individual mass of the pieces as opposed to the suit as a unit-”

“Okay,” Steve says, looking a little pained. “I'm going to stop you before you get into specifics, because I am already having trouble following you. Just know that I know you're changing the subject. Are you hurt badly?”

“Just a flesh wound,” Tony says.

Steve blinks. “I think I get that reference,” he says, faintly proud, and also horrified, “but if I do that means you're implying it's really bad.”

“Hey, who showed you Monty Python?” Tony smiles. “And no, seriously, it's fine. I'll be fine, everything is fine. Ask Friday if I'm lying, go ahead.”

“It was Clint, actually,” Steve says, and bows his head.

“Oh,” Tony says.

“It was a bit strange,” Steve admits, “but Clint liked it so I figured I should give it a fair shot.”

“And hey,” Tony says, “look at all the references you get now.”

Steve nods. “You're not wrong there. Now, will you tell me how you got that or am I going to have to make do with 'training exercise'?”

Tony glances at his leg and decides he might as well tell the man. He feels bad enough for hiding the truth about Bruce from him. “In Sokovia,” he starts, and Steve groans a little. Tony pushes on, however. “We got rid of Ultron, but not all his tech. There were bits, shrapnel, debris leftover and they're turning up on the black market.”

“So you decided to hunt it all down on your own?” Steve sighs. “Tony, we've got the Avengers. The new team.”

“This isn't nearly big enough for that,” Tony says, waving a hand. “Just cleanup. Just some assholes with knives. I only got hurt because I got stupid, I'll admit that. Won't happen again, I won't make the same mistake twice.”

“You'll make a new one instead?” Steve says.

“Hey, have a little faith,” says Tony. “I'm Iron Man, okay? I can deal with some black market goons. Big deal. They had nothing but knives, for fuck's sake.”
“I trust Iron Man,” Steve says quietly, “but Tony, you got hurt by guys with knives. Friday's telling me you're running yourself ragged. Why don't you let us take over for a while?”

“If you trust Iron Man, you trust me. I-am- Iron Man.” Tony takes a breath. That came out sharper than intended, so he makes himself sound deliberately calm the next time he opens his mouth: “Look, I got it, okay? I promise to play nice. Pinky promise.”

“Bruce would agree with me,” Steve says.

“He would,” says Tony, knowing it for a fact. He looks down at his hands.

“He'll be back before you know it.”

“Right,” says Tony.

Steve coughs a little. “I should get going,” he says. “Stay in touch, okay? We'll let you know if we find anything.”

“Sure,” Tony says. Steve looks tired, and very small for a man his size, so after a moment Tony adds: “And thanks for coming over, Cap. It's almost as if you care.”

“I do care,” Steve says. He smiling, shaking his head.

Tony walks him back to the elevator and finds himself pulled into a brief hug. They say their goodbyes a bit awkwardly and as soon as the door is closed, Steve is out of sight, Tony leans against the nearest wall.

After that, he goes back to the kitchen and finishes his smoothie. It's his second hideously coloured drink of the day and he thinks it might be doing him some good. This one looks brown, and no less disgusting.
Bruce switches to the parking garage cameras when Steve enters the elevator. He arrived on a bike, and leaves the same way. That can't be his main mode of transport, unless he's not going very far. Bruce suspects a jet somewhere in the vicinity. He hopes, for their sakes, that they didn't land it next to the one he borrowed. Too sandy.

After Steve is definitely gone from the premises, Bruce makes his way back to the kitchen. He find Tony sprawled in a kitchen chair and looking very tired. A quick glance at his shin shows him that the wound, at least, is not bleeding through its bandages again.

“Hey,” he says.

Tony jumps a little. “Bruce,” he says. “I'm glad to see you're still around.”

“You might not be in a second,” Bruce says. He sits down as well, on the chair next to Tony's.

“Uh,” Tony says. He draws out the vowel as his eyes dart around the room, no doubt looking for some reason for the threat.

“I was listening in,” says Bruce. He smiles a little but he knows it comes out cynical. It often does. “I figured it was okay, I'm sorry.”

“No, no, that's fine,” Tony says, but he hardly sounds fine. He sounds skittish.

Bruce pulls his glasses off, bends and unbends the legs. “Steve mentioned you working too hard. He was very insistent that you don't go looking for me.” He looks up. “What's going on?”

“WEEEell – hey,” Tony says, eyes landing on the pan. “You haven't had anything to eat yet. I ruined your eggs but I'm sure there are more in the fridge. I'd offer to make you some but I'm the one who ruined them in the first place so maybe not a good idea, right?”

“Friday,” Bruce says. “Could you brief me on Tony Stark's behaviour in the past, say, two weeks?”

“Don't do that, Friday,” Tony says. “I swear, you people, and AI, you're all against me.”

“Don't change the subject, Tony,” Bruce says. He leans forward. “Tell me why Steve was worried about you.”

“Because someone,” Tony throws up his hands, “went and tattled to mister all-American soldier.”

“And why did she do that?” Bruce keeps his voice calm. He is starting to see the fractures. Tony is trying to hide it, but he's getting tired and edgy and he can't hide the way he keeps grabbing for his chest, like he's willing his heart to slow down.

“Because she's a traitor,” Tony says. He almost makes it sound nonchelant. One hand is at the collar of his bathrobe, fiddling with the embroidery.

“Tony,” Bruce says.

Tony crosses his arms, the picture of childlike petulance. Bruce crosses his legs and puts his glasses back on. He is aware that they make him look like a professor, and he uses that now to project patience.
Finally, Tony says: “I was just looking for you. You're my friend.”

“Would you have stopped?” Bruce asks. “Did,” he shakes his head, “did you remember to sleep? Eat?”

“Sometimes,” Tony says. He looks calmer, steely. “You know me, when I get stuck in a project.”

“Yes,” Bruce says and he sighs, “I know you get obsessed. You look exhausted. What else were you doing?”

Tony cocks his head, frowning. “There has to be something else?”

“No offense, but getting obsessed with a project is standard for you.” Bruce smiles a little. “That's not enough to make everyone worry.”

“Maybe everyone was already worried, Bruce,” Tony says. “We were worried about you. Especially with,” he takes a breath, tries to form a word and fails. When he tries again, it's a different word: “What. What happened in Sokovia.”

“To Clint?” Bruce asks.

Tony turns away, and Bruce knows he's found something important. He leans forward, places a hand on Tony's knee. “Do I need to start telling you to breathe again?”

“I'm breathing,” Tony says, but he sounds strangled.

Bruce moves his chair over and presses a hand lightly on Tony's stomach. “Try to breathe from here. Not from your chest, that makes your breaths shallow.” He raises an eyebrow. “I would have told you ages ago, but you didn't want to know breathing techniques.”

“Yeah and also you're not this kind of doctor.” Tony is gripping the chair, but he looks down at Bruce's hand and tries. Bruce can feel him consciously making the shift.

“What scares you so much?” Bruce asks, quietly. He keeps his hand on Tony. If nothing else, he figures it'll help him focus.

“Yeah, because asking me that question while I'm trying not to think of it is really helpful,” Tony says. He glares at Bruce over his sunglasses before looking down again. “Really fucking helpful, you know.”

Bruce presses his hand down with the rhythm of Tony's breathing, forcing him to slow down.

“Point taken, I'll have to ask you again later.”

“Please don't!” Tony gives him another look, his eyes large and pleading this time. Bruce wonders if he wears mascara as well as eyeliner.

“Your workshop is really nice,” Bruce says. “I didn't look around too much, you'll have to give me the, uh, the VIP tour later.”

“Are you sure, big guy?” Tony manages half a laugh. His fingers, curled around the chair, are no longer clenched as tightly. “The VIP tour includes a tour of the resident VIP. That is to say, me.”

“Of course it does,” Bruce says. He moves his hand to Tony's shoulder and squeezes it a little, trying to make it feel reassuring.

“Well, if you really want that tour, you know,” Tony smiles. The smile comes with what can only
be described as bedroom eyes. Dark brown irises almost eclipsed by the pupil. The eyeliner doesn't help, or rather, does. “Let me know, any time.”

“I think I’ll pass,” Bruce says. He looks away but feels the blush in his neck. He also notices the wicked grin on Tony's face and he swears, the man does it on purpose, to get this reaction from him. He should be angry but frankly, he's a little relieved that Tony is up to his usual tricks.

“Your loss,” Tony says. “Do you want the buddy tour instead? Maybe some tinkering after. I have no plans, we can do whatever you want.” He trails off a little, and yawns.

“I think you should get some sleep.” Bruce pats his shoulder one last time, only slightly awkwardly, and pushes himself to his feet. He's not sure if the tower will let him into Tony's bedroom, but if necessary he'll drag him to one of the guest rooms. A bed is a bed.

Tony doesn't follow. When Bruce looks back, he's watching him.

“Come on,” Bruce says.

Tony seems to come to a decision. “Will you be here when I wake up?” he asks.

“Can I use your lab?”

“Any time,” Tony says with that same grin. Finally, he starts moving.
Chapter 16

When Bruce follows Tony to the elevator, he expects some sort of joke, the usual taunting. Tony is a flirt, and he likes to see people squirm a little. Instead, the man waves him away quietly and steps into the elevator. Bruce stands manages to wish him a good rest before the doors close. He tells Friday to keep an eye on him and when she confirms the order, he swears she sounds relieved.

With nothing else to do, he goes back to the workshop. He's feeling calmer now, so he does his own tour around the place. It's not the kind of lab he used to be used to, but he's gotten familiar with it since he started working with Tony. Tony is primarily an engineer, a mechanic, a mad inventor. Bruce's specialities are physics, biochemistry and, of course, radiation.

Most of the surfaces are covered with things. Bits of Iron Man suits, prototype robotics. Unrecognisable bits and mechanical innards. Dum-E is in the larger lab downstairs, and it makes this one look a little empty. He supposes it feels less that way with Tony's playlist on at earsplitting volume, but he's not in the mood for that right now.

Instead, he sits on a random desk chair by the window. He's even higher in the building now, and has an excellent view of the city from above. He almost feels like he's flying. He wonders if that's why Tony built the tower so high. If he asked, the man would probably claim he did it for bragging rights.

“Friday?” he says.

“Yes, sir?” she answers.

“Do you have Natasha Romanov's number somewhere? I think I should give her a call.”

A holographic projection appears between him and the window. It has a picture of Nat's face, taken in the tower and probably without her realising it. That's a bit weird. There is her name, a number, and a list of options.

“I can call her from the number for Stark Tower,” Friday says, “I can also arrange a video call or a text message.”

“Is it okay if I use the number for Stark Tower?” Bruce asks. “I don't really have a phone on me.” He doesn't even have his own clothes on him. The ones he's wearing are rumpled and borrowed from the Quinjet.

“Of course, sir,” Friday says. She's being very accomodating to him.

A glowing button appears in front of him, with the pictograph of a green phone. He presses it, or rather, raises his finger to it. There is a dialing tone. Bruce has never made a call using this system, but he's seen Tony do it often enough. It still feels weird that there's nothing he needs to hold to his mouth to talk.

There is a satisfied beep and Nat's voice comes on: “Hello, Tony.”

Bruce scrapes his throat. He knows he doesn't have to look at the picture of her face, this isn't a video call, but he does it anyway. “Not Tony, actually,” he says.

There is a muffled noise on the other side and Bruce figures she's covered the phone and is talking to someone. The sound of footsteps and then: “You're at Stark Tower?”
“That, or Friday likes me enough to reroute my call,” he lies. He can't say he thinks it will fool her, but for his own peace of mind, he has to try. “Did you get my note?”

“Yes, the note,” he can picture her frowning, “I thought you wanted to be left alone.”

“I do, and I'm going to have to trust you not to go chasing after me.” Despite everything, he does trust her to keep the secret. It's what she's good at. “I just wanted to talk to you. Personally. Are you okay?”

“Oh, Bruce,” she says, and he can tell she's got the wrong idea. “I'm fine. I'm a survivor.”

“I'm still angry at you,” he says, quickly, before she can say anything else. “I don't blame you, don't think I blame you. You did what you had to do. I don't have to like it, but it's fine. It will be fine.” He leans his head in his hands as he gears up for the big confession.

“You should be angry,” she says, a little sad, when he leaves a long enough pause.

“It'll be fine. We're friends. I,” he swallows, “I value our friendship.”

After a moment, she says: “We could be more.”

“I'm sorry, Nat, but no.” His eyes are closed now. He can't look at the picture. “There are so many reasons not to go there.”

“Name one I can't counter with 'I know who you are, what you are, and I still want to go there’.”

She sounds so determined, and it's hard to say it, but Bruce does it anyway: “It's not just the big guy. It's me. I prefer you as a friend.”

He wonders what her face looks like when he says that. He's gotten better at reading her, but she's a hard person to read sometimes. She is very good at hiding, maybe better than he is.

“Well, you're right,” she says, “I can't counter that one. Is this because of Sokovia?”

“No,” he says, and he means it. “It was always going to be this way. I'm sorry. I hope you don't hate me now.”

“There's the Bruce I know, apologising all the time.” She sighs. “I don't hate you, but I think I'll need some time alone, too.”

“I can do that.”

“I'm glad you're okay,” she says.

He smiles. “I'm glad you are. I'm sorry.” He almost takes it all back, just because it would make her feel better. He can't, though. He would sacrifice himself for her, for all of them, if he thought it would make things better. He doubts, however, that lying to Nat would be an improvement, and that's what it would be. Even without the danger, the other guy, he would be lying to her. He knows her well enough to know that's not what she wants.

“Can I tell the others you called?” she says. By the sound of things, she's walking again.

“Yes, just don't go looking for me, don't let them look for me.”

“Alone time, got it.” The sound of a door opening. “I won't ask if you're spending your alone time with Tony. And before you go, you should hear this,” she moves the phone further from her mouth.
and says, to someone else in the room: “Bruce says hi.”

There’s a clamouring on the other side. There must be three or four people speaking at once. Bruce can’t make out anything in particular and the sound quality isn’t great, but he’s pretty sure Rhodey is in there, at least. Before he catches any actual words, Nat has hung up. Bruce looks up, at her picture, and smiles.
Chapter 17

The first thing Tony does when he wakes up is ask Friday if Bruce is still around. When she confirms the whereabouts of Dr. Banner, he drags himself from his bed. He probably needs a shower, but makes do with a bit of water splashed in the face. It takes care of the eyeliner, at least. He sticks out his tongue at himself in the mirror. He looks terrible.

In the two hours he's managed to sleep, he can remember only one nightmare; the one that woke him up, which is decent for his standards. It wasn't even a very bad one. Even so, he has no desire to do that again so he puts on something clean and heads down to the workshop.

“Have you built anything cool in my absence?” he calls out when he enters.

Bruce is on one end of the lab, close to the windows. He waves but doesn't look up. Probably doing something sensitive. Tony joins him and has a look at the table.

“I double-checked with Friday if you were using any of these bits,” Bruce says, still not looking up. He's looking through a magnifying glass at something on the workbench. “I really hope she was right, or I'll have to un-solder a few things.”

“I'm sure it's fine,” says Tony. “I can always get more components. What are you making?”

“I'm fixing my watch,” Bruce says. “It broke somewhere between Sokovia and here.”

“You could just have it fixed somewhere.” Tony kneels down, trying to make out all the bits. It looks like Bruce's watch, but it's been opened up and Bruce has done something to the inside, to the casing.

“Sure,” Bruce says, “but I figured I'd add some improvements.” He glances up, finally. “You could do it better, I don't doubt it. But you were asleep and, well, it's nice to make things.”

Tony grabs Bruce's shoulder, smiles serenely. “You've fallen for the siren song of the workshop. I'm so proud.”

“I called Nat,” Bruce says. He's taking off his glasses and fiddling with them. Tony wants to grab those hands and hold them still.

“Giving up your solitude so soon?”

The glasses unfold, refold. First one leg, then the other. “No, I told her not to try and find me. I just wanted to let her know.” Bruce looks at the floor.

“Got it, lovebird,” Tony says. He feels irritated, so he plucks Bruce's glasses from his hands and inspects the lenses. They're very scratched. He makes a mental note to get him new ones. He could make a set, work in some gadgets. Bruce would like gadgets, surely.

“It's not like that,” Bruce says. He's smiling, and reaches out to get his glasses. Tony holds them out of reach. “We're friends, I don't know why everyone assumes it's more.”

“Okay, okay.” Tony puts the glasses on his own face. They give him a headache, so he takes them off. “Just don't wait too long, big guy. She might go and find someone else while you're trying to work up the courage.”
“I was counting on it, but that didn't work.” Bruce says, and he finally gets his hands on his glasses. Tony isn't letting go yet, though, so they're stuck both holding the things. “Maybe now that I've told her she can take some time to get used to the idea, and then she'll stop flirting with me and we can be, you know, friends again.” He looks briefly terrified. “I don't have a lot of friends. The flirting was awkward, but it was better than silence. I thought I could wait it out, but she,” he gestures with his free hand, “she's insistent. I considered running with it, but that would have been dishonest.”

“Wait,” Tony says, and let's go of the glasses. Bruce's hand, and the glasses, falls to his lap. “You don't like Nat?”

“I like her as a friend,” Bruce says. He puts his glasses on, looks up at Tony and smiles.

“I could have sworn you liked her. You are a hard man to read.”

“I'm very good at controlling my emotions.”

“And hiding them, apparently.” Tony rolls his eyes. Bruce gives him another look, and he spends a moment calculating how much more sad it is than Bruce's usual looks. He figures it's at least twelve percent. And that's with him being stealthy and in control, strip that away and it translates to, like, twelve hundred. Definitely enough to warrant some cheering up.

“Hey, you know what? I have some blueberries in the fridge here. If not, there's more downstairs and I'll have one of the suits fetch them.” Tony marches over to his workshop fridge. He's better acquainted with this one than the one in the kitchen. He uses it more. Not even for projects, he has a bigger fridge for that. Something more fine-tuned.

Bruce turns in the chair so he can watch him. “Is that what we're using the Iron Legion for these days?”

“Please.” Tony rummages through his fridge. He has too many energy drinks, they're taking up space. “If there is a way to use my tech for increased comfort and convenience you can go ahead and assume I've already done it.”

Bruce gives him an odd look and Tony would pay to know what he's thinking about. “Noted,” he says, and takes a few blueberries from Tony's outstretched hand.
Chapter 18

The only reason Tony isn't solving the problem of too many energy drinks in his fridge by drinking them all is that Bruce is watching. He's fairly sure he would disapprove, and Bruce gives really good disapproving looks, so Tony refrains from chugging them all, or even one.

Of course, this means that he's nodding off over his work by the time it's dark outside, because even with his drunken passing out earlier, two hours of sleep isn't making up for all the all-nighters before that. He needs stimulants to do that. Food helped a little, for a while, but now he is just sleepy and unfocused.

He leans his head on his hand, his elbow on the workbench and promises himself he'll get up in just a second and get an energy drink, maybe some coffee. Yeah, coffee sure sounds nice.

He doesn't realise Bruce is talking to him until the man comes over and puts a hand on his shoulder.

"Your turn to fall asleep when I'm talking, huh?" Bruce says.

"I'm sorry, what were," Tony rubs his eyes. "I was listening, but if you could just recap what you said that would be great."

"Nothing important." Bruce gives him one of those looks. It's not the disapproving kind, and Tony is glad about that. There is something calculating in it, though. "I think you need more sleep. Before last night, how many times did you skip sleeping?"

Tony opens his mouth, but finds himself at a loss for something witty to say, so he just says: "Honestly, I don't remember. I'll get some coffee and be right as rain, okay?"

"Coffee is not a substitute for sleep." Bruce is holding his shoulder very firmly. Either that, or Tony has less energy than he thought.

"So you're a nutritionist now, doc?"

"I'm a biochemist," Bruce says, and he has a fair point. "Now, I get the feeling Friday likes me, so I can always ask her to send a suit to carry you to bed."

"She'd probably do it, too," Tony says. "Traitor."

"So you're going?"

"No."

Bruce sighs and rubs his forehead. Tony stares him down impassively. He's noticed before how fuzzy Bruce is, but he's never felt this strong an urge to reach out and touch his arms. Stroke him like a puppy. That's probably weird, isn't it? It is weird, so Tony doesn't do it.

"You need sleep," Bruce says, eventually.

"Okay," Tony says. "Alternative solution: I need energy. And really, I'm not going to have a nice, refreshing rest if I go to bed right now, so you can just let it go and let me deal with it."

"Why not?" Bruce asks. Uh oh.
“Back to psychologist?” Tony asks. “You should start doing new ones, add to the list of doctors you can claim not to be.”

“I've been spending so much time with you, it's almost as good as a case study.” Bruce flashes a cynical smile. “PhD in Tony Stark's evasion techniques. It's why I can tell you're having trouble sleeping but don't want to talk about it.”

He really should have seen that one coming. If he'd been more awake, maybe he would have. Tony shrugs and tries a different strategy: honesty. “Well, you're exactly right. I don't want to talk about it. So can we not talk about it?”

“You can't go without sleep forever.”

“I was making a good effort before you came back,” Tony snaps.

Bruce leans back, something dawning on his face. It's intimidating, considering what they're talking about. “That's why Steve was so worried, and Friday.”

Tony stays resolutely quiet. The look Bruce is giving him now is worse than disapproval. It has some of that, sure, but there's something softer too. Something close to pity. It makes Tony tense, his heart start to speed up.

Maybe Bruce sees it because he looks away and fidgets for a moment before he says: “Breathing exercises can help with sleep problems. I can show you some more.”

Tony considers this for a moment. The look Bruce is giving him is so hopeful, innocent almost, that he finally rolls his eyes and says: “Yeah, okay.”
Chapter 19

The two of them drag out a bit of foam padding to sit on, because Bruce insists on sitting on the floor and not a chair. Really, part of him hopes he can get Tony to fall asleep right there, and the padding is more comfortable than the floor if he falls over.

“So, are you having troubles getting to sleep?” he asks, and sits cross-legged on the mat. It's not unlike a yoga mat really, and Bruce has some experience with those. Not yoga, just the mats.

“No,” Tony says. He drops himself to the mat next to Bruce. “Not that part, really.”

“Staying asleep?” Bruce looks the man's posture over. He's slumped over, legs crossed not unlike Bruce's. His shoulders look tense, and his arms too.

Tony makes a noncommittal sound. Bruce shifts over to sit partly behind him, squeezing himself between a cabinet and Tony, and grabs his shoulders. He was right, they are stiff with tension. He squeezes a little and says: “Nightmares?” Suddenly, there is twice as much tension and Bruce rubs the palms of his hands along Tony's shoulderblades for a little. It seems to be helping, but it's slow going.

The next question doesn't help either: “How do you usually deal with it?”

At least Tony answers this time. “Coffee,” he starts, ticking off his fingers, “energy drinks, getting so tired I can't see straight, distractions, sex, alcohol, pills.” He looks down at his hands, seven fingers raised. “I think that's about it. Doesn't always work, though.”

“I bet.” Bruce keeps rubbing Tony's shoulders until he can see them sinking a little lower.

“You can add massage therapist to the list,” Tony says.

“You can keep the list,” says Bruce.

Tony grins, Bruce can hear it in his voice when he says: “Believe me, I am.”

“Take a deep breath and hold it,” Bruce says. He moves his hands down Tony's arms a little, still kneading away the tension.

“You're just saying that to make me shut up,” Tony says, but then he does as he's told.

“Now breathe out, slowly,” Bruce says after a few seconds. When Tony does, he notices his shoulders sagging lower still. Bruce is not an expert at massaging, but he's always liked doing it and he has some amateur experience, so he moves his hands back to Tony's shoulders and starts at the top again. Rub down the shoulderblades, knead away the tension around the neck, then down the arms.

“I think the massage is helping more than the breathing exercises,” Tony says after a few minutes of slow breathing.

“Whatever works,” Bruce says. The whole things is making him feel calm, too, almost tranquil.

“Maybe I should hire you as my masseur.”

Bruce can tell he's trying to be snarky, but his voice is far away so he doesn't bother to answer. Tony leans back, forcing Bruce to stop the massage, as Tony's shoulders are now leaning against
him and there's no comfortable way to get his hand around them. He's about to say something, but
Tony isn't complaining so he just sits there and listen to his breathing.

He's astonished to find that it is evening out, slowing down. After another minute, he risks a very
quiet: “Tony?” and receives no answer. He smiles, them he realises he's stuck here as Tony has
chosen to fall asleep with him as a backrest.

“Friday?” He says, equally quietly. “Could you get a display up for me here, so I can read?”

Friday doesn't answer, but a hologram flickers to life in front of him and slightly to the side. Bruce
pulls something off the Stark Tower servers and settles in. He's rather glad he has something to
lean against himself, or this would get exhausting very fast.

After a moment's deliberation, he rests a hand on Tony's leg, so his arm makes a headrest of sorts,
keeping Tony from sliding sideways and falling over.
Chapter 20

It takes a few more days, during which Bruce isn't sure whether Tony is sleeping at all, before Bruce decides to officially come out of hiding.

It's a bit of an open secret anyway, now that Nat knows, even if she isn't telling anyone. He figures letting the secret part of it drop might put his mind at ease. Make him stop feeling like he constantly has to cover his tracks. Even if it doesn't, he's always going to be a bit nervous so he might as well admit where he is.

In the end he sends a message to the whole team. It's only a few minutes before he gets one back. To his surprise, it's from Tony, and it's also to everyone.

It only has five words: “Party at Stark Tower tonight!”

Bruce groans. He really should have seen this coming. After all, this -is- Tony.

He really shouldn't be surprised how fast Tony can get the tower ready for full-out celebration. He is only up in the lab for a second, checking in on his watch, version four by now thanks to Tony and he's not sure whether he's grateful or annoyed about that. When he steps back down to visit the kitchen, the common area is lit up in that eye-searing way and someone's dropped off a buffet worth of food.

“How big is this party going to be?” he asks when he spots Tony in a chair, setting up playlists on his phone.

“Just the team,” says Tony, “and the new team. Some Shield people. Pepper. Rhodey's friends. Cap's friends. Not sure if Thor will be here, I guess we'll notice if he shows up.”

“None of your friends?”

Tony looks up, grins. “I think I already mentioned most of them.”

“I'll rephrase,” Bruce says, and does with the help of airquotes: “None of your 'friends’?”

“Nah, I figure we'll keep it small.” Tony looks back at his phone. “Intimate.”

“I'm already counting at least fifteen people,” says Bruce. He crosses his arms.

“Yeah, small.” Tony looks up again and frowns, as if he's noticing something for the first time. “You can't wear that, you look like you're living out of a dumpster.”

“I've done that, actually. Also, you gave me this.”

“For in the shop, sure. Not for a party.” Tony considers something, looking him over. “Friday, make sure he has some clean clothes somewhere. Something nice. I suggest that purple shirt. I think purple looks good on you.”

“You're the one who wanted a party,” Bruce gripes, but he goes to change anyway.

People start arriving around dusk and Bruce has to admit Tony was right. For his standards, at least, this is small, intimate. Bruce still feels uncomfortable in any room that has more than two people, but he also feels uncomfortable everywhere, always, so he ignores the feeling and tries to enjoy himself.
Steve comes over to give him a hug and Bruce lets him because he's Steve.

“How are you doing?” he asks.

“Fine, fine,” says Bruce. “I'm sorry I've been away. I needed time.”

“I get it,” Steve says. “Have you been staying at Tony's all this time?”

“Only the last few days,” Bruce says, and it's not a lie, it's just a little vague. He doesn't particularly want to admit he was hiding in the tower when Steve came around. It's like admitting to eavesdropping. Which he also did. “How are you? And everyone else?”

Steve gives him a radiant smile. “Training is going well,” he says, “you should see them work together.” It's sweet really, how proud Steve gets.

“Hey, big guy,” Nat says and appears from behind Steve. Bruce would like to believe he didn't see her coming because Steve is just so big, but this is Natasha. If she doesn't want you to see her coming, you won't.

“Nat, hello.” He smiles at her and she smiles back, but she's keeping her distance. He doesn't blame her, in fact glad she came at all. “Looks like we're doing awkward reintroductions today.”

“Speaking of,” she says, and hauls someone forward. “Wanda, Pietro, come say hello to Bruce. He's officially back. You can both relax now, everyone's going to be a little less high-strung from now on.”

“I'll believe that when I see it,” Pietro says, and Wanda looks mortified.

She gives him a small smile and says: “I'm glad you're found.”

Bruce nods and notices her brother hovers a little closer, a little more protective. He's not offended by that, the two have seen him in action and are right to be wary. What surprises him is that Wanda looks at him with open curiosity, and not a hint of fear.
Chapter 21

Thor doesn't show up in the end, but that's okay. Tony spends some time getting to know the new team members and before long, finds himself in a conversation with Sam about flying and the man's winged jetpack. It's not the same as flying in the suit, but it's similar enough that they hit it off and other people are starting to give them odd looks.

“Looks like we've reached the point where people start wondering what we're so exited about,” Tony says.

“Yeah, let them. It's not even as if it's that weird.” Sam sips on his cocktail. “Vision flies, and Rhodey, and so does Wanda.”

“Rhodey is the only one on that list who counts,” Tony says, “at least in this context. The other two, that's some innate semi-magical ability. It's not like they're relying on technology and their grasp of the gadgets at their disposal.”

Sam gives him a thoughtful look. “Maybe that's even better, though. They don't need a jetpack.”

“I'm not saying it's better, or worse,” Tony shakes his head. “But it's different. Flying like we do, it's not just skill and talent, it's the knowledge that we got here through human ingenuity. Nothing but us and our minds and the things we've made for ourselves.”

“I never made my wings,” Sam says.

“No, but you know you weren't born with them. They're a part of you now, but only because you made it that way.” Tony shakes his head. “Or hey, maybe I'm full of shit. Fact remains, flying is badass.”

This, at least, makes Sam laugh. “True enough,” he says, before being called away to be introduced to someone else.

Tony is left standing by himself. He looks at the party, at the people lounging around, having a drink, some snacks. Most of his friends are here. Even Pepper, who went to mingle after a friendly kiss on the cheek. He should introduce her to Sam. Then again, maybe she's had enough of dating superheroes. She seems happy with her own life, lately, though she still fusses over him.

That's one thing he has collected lately: people who fuss over him. Pepper, Bruce and Steve, even Friday, who is his AI and really should know better.

He sips his drink and leans back against the bar. People seem content to leave him be for a little, so he watches them. Before long, he catches someone watching him back. It's Steve at first, glancing in his direction to say something to Sam. Then Vision, but Vision is a little strange at the best of times. Tony figures he's only shown up because people would tease him if he didn't.

When he catches Rhodey looking his way, though, he starts feeling uncomfortable. The man gives him an odd look, a little too long, a little too critical. He feels the paranoia creep up and latch around his neck, so he puts his glass down and walks over to the window. At least that puts Rhodey out of his line of sight.

On the other hand, now his back is crawling with the imagined stares of half the party. He starts wondering why this is happening. He even tries to catch his reflection in the glass. He's been careful. He doesn't look that tired. He's not going to crack, not in full sight of everyone else.
So he ducks out, onto the deserted balcony, and ambles over as casually as he can to a quiet corner.

“I'm afraid this bit of balcony is occupied,” Bruce says when Tony comes around the corner that shields this little ledge from view from the main party. He is sitting down, legs crossed and leaning against the wall. It reminds Tony of a party ages ago. At least this time the man isn't dangling his legs off the edge.

“Tough,” says Tony and sits down next to him. “It's my tower.”

“Did you come looking for me?” Bruce asks. “Because I'm fine, I just don't like crowds for too long. I figure I'm allowed a break.” He smiles a little. “I don't think you want to argue with me on that.”

“I don't, and that's not why I'm out here,” Tony says. “I wanted a break as well, but hey, this is a nice little bonus.”

He looked up at the sky, stars mostly invisible, outshone by the city lights. There are still a few, twinkling up there. He wants to go flying. He wants to take off and see where the suit can take him. He sits, instead, hands tapping on the tiles of the balcony.

“Fair enough,” Bruce says after a moment.

“I don't suppose you'd like to go flying?” Tony asks.

“I'm sorry?”

“It's a beautiful night, good flying weather.”

“Are you implying you'd lend me a suit?” Bruce asks. The man looks shocked by the idea.

Tony winks at him. “Of course not, I'm implying I'll carry you. It'll be fun. Exciting.”

“You have a deathwish,” Bruce says. He rests his head in his hands, and Tony has to chuckle.

“It's just a bit of fun.”

Bruce looks up and shakes his head. “We're talking about me here, what if something happens in the air?”

Tony waves a hand. “Okay, okay, no flying. I get it.” He leans a little closer. “You know it's different in a suit than in a plane, right? It's much better.”

“Yes, except if you're carrying me I won't be in a suit and frankly,” Bruce shakes his head, “I'll pass.”

“Got it.” Tony looks at the city, but he's thinking of Bruce. He's noticed him and Natasha tonight, they were cautious, like wounded animals. “How is Nat taking it?” he asks.

“Okay, that is a change of subject, but I don't like this one much either.” Bruce sighs. He starts rolling his sleeves up his arms. “I think we'll be all right, but it's going to be a bit weird for a while. She hasn't told me a single joke so far.”

“She never tells me jokes,” Tony says. He looks down at Bruce's bare forearms and drops his arm across Bruce's shoulder. He shakes the man a little. “You're already on my level, then.”

Bruce gives him a look. Mostly exasperation, this time, with a little amusement. Tony adds it to the
“No, she doesn't. But she tells me jokes. You're very touchy today.”

“I'm a tactile person,” Tony says. He leaves his arm where it is. “I get handsy with everyone, and I have the lawsuits to prove it.”

“You're not though,” Bruce says. “You just pretend to be. I've, er, been watching you. You're loud, your gestures are loud, you're friendly. But you don't actually touch people that much. You don't let people touch you. You want a tactile person, that's Thor. He's always touching people.” Bruce reaches up to his face as if going for his glasses. He's not wearing them, so he just tucks a stray curl behind his ear and grins a little. “It's a good act though.”

Tony looks him in the eyes. Bruce is right, of course, that isn't the point. It's the implications. It's the fact that Bruce can look right through him, and he's not sure how to deal with it. Carefully, he removes his arm, gets up and dusts himself off. “Hey, you know what I want right now?” he says, in his most carefree voice. He flashes his winning smile. “I want to go flying. You sit tight, Friday can run the party. Be back before you know it.”

He doesn't wait for a reply, he just summons one of his lighter suits and lets it wrap around him, seal him away.
Chapter 22

In the end, he mostly hovers, as high as he can go, flying in lazy circles while looking at the stars. He doesn't come back down until Friday assures him all the guests have gone home and Bruce is asleep in his bed. He should expand Bruce's apartment, maybe give him his own lab. Then again, maybe that's weird.

As he floats, just enjoying the feeling of being off the ground, away from everyone, he realises he's been giving Bruce things. There's always plausible deniability, even to himself. Bruce is his friend, maybe his best friend. It's normal to give your friends things, especially when your name is Tony Stark and you're a billionaire. He has a lot to give.

Maybe, Tony thinks, maybe I just like giving things to people.

Then he remembers that time some Shield agent helped himself to something in the lab's fridge. He doesn't even remember what it was, just that he hacked into the helicarrier's camera surveillance and tracked the bastard down.

Mentally, he edits 'people' into 'friends'. Better.

After coming down, he spends the rest of the night in the lab, making a custom phone for Bruce. It has to have some heavy-duty stealth modes, and it needs to be able to interface with his new watch. Then there is durability, storage, security. It keeps him busy for a little while.

The living room downstairs is a mess, so when he takes a break he decides to clean up. It's not as engaging as building things or designing schematics, so he finds his mind wandering. His leg aches, but not enough to take up much of his attention. Instead, he finds himself more distracted than ever.

He still notices, immediately, when Bruce comes downstairs. The noise of the elevator makes him jump, and then he has something new to catch his attention.

"Morning," Bruce says. "Didn't think I'd catch you cleaning."

"Someone has to do it," Tony says. He's holding two kind of wobbly stacks of glasses. He's made a dare with himself to get them all to the kitchen before he breaks anything. "Did you have fun last night?"

"It was tiring," Bruce admits. "But nice. I like your smaller parties better."

"Yeah, you're an introvert with an anger management problem," Tony says. He's arrived in the kitchen. His next dare is getting all the glasses into the dishwasher. Bruce chuckles, and he nearly drops one.

He feels wired. A good part of that is the caffeine he's been using to stay awake, but there's something else. A sense of hyper-awareness. Being watched. Not just being watched, he can take that. The feeling of someone seeing the parts he doesn't want them to see. Out of his control.

He jumps again when Bruce hands him the next glass and says: "That's pretty accurate. You're an extrovert with control issues."

"Thought you weren't that kind of doctor," Tony says. He tries to fit the glasses just right, so they will all fit in one go. It's a large dishwasher but even with the limited company, there are too many
glasses. Maybe he can change the arrangement to fit more in.

“I don't need to be to see that,” Bruce says. He watches Tony for a little, head tilted to one side. “Try that big one upside-down.”

Tony tries, and managed to fit in another glass next to it. “I think that's as good as it's going to get,” he says. He stuffs in some detergent and turns on the dishwasher. The kitchen counters are still littered with dirty things.

“Are you still wearing the same suit?” Bruce asks. “You really hate sleeping.” He reaches out to touch Tony's shirtsleeve, wrinkled and smudged with something unidentifiable.

Tony nearly pulls away. He manages to keep mostly still, but he can tell Bruce noticed him flinch. “I can't help but notice you're not wearing that purple shirt you had last night. Took my advice, huh?”

“Friday did, and I wore what she selected.” Bruce reaches out again, suddenly, and this Tony does jump away. He swears Bruce did that on purpose, just to see how he'd react. “You're very jumpy,” Bruce says, unnessecarily. Honestly, everyone's noticed that by now. “All the caffeine to keep you awake?”

“You don't have to stick to her selections, you know. You have a closet, I know for a fact there are things in it.” He smooths down his sleeves, trying to mask just how edgy he is. “I'm not sure what exactly, but I remember telling someone there should be stuff in it, so there must be stuff in it.”

Bruce hums thoughtfully. “Avoiding the subject,” he says.

“It's not caffeine,” Tony blurts out. “Okay, it's partly caffeine, but that was a few hours ago. You know, you should be that kinda doctor. You're very observant, it's a little creepy.”

“Breathe,” Bruce says. “You're more nervous than me, and that...” He smiles. “That's saying something.”

“Maybe you can show me how, again,” Tony says. He's not sure something like that is actually going to help, but it was nice last time, so maybe it's worth a shot.

“Are you going to fall asleep on me like you did last time?” Bruce smiles. “Because if so, I'd like to borrow a tablet. I have reading to catch up on.”

“Maybe,” Tony says. He'll give Bruce a tablet. He likes giving him things.
They sit on the couch together, in the living room that is starting to look less like a disaster already.

“Friday,” Tony says after he's pushed a tablet into Bruce's hands, “load Dr. Banner's preferences on that one, it's his now.”

“I'm just borrowing it,” Bruce says.

“Don't be ridiculous,” Tony says. He leans back, crosses his arms. Bruce is sure this is the textbook example of 'stubborn'. “Payment for being my masseur.”

Bruce nods slowly. It's a nice tablet, and Tony can afford to do whatever he wants. “Thank you,” he says. “You wanted to do some breathing exercises?”

“Yeah, let's get this show off the road,” Tony says and Bruce notices again how his eyes keep darting all over the place. He can't keep his hands still, but that isn't too unusual. He's jumping at the slightest provocation.

“Like last time,” he suggests. “Breathe in, hold it, then out, slowly.”

“Are you going to give me a massage while I do it?”

Bruce smiles a little. “That's what it's about, is it?”

“You got me, I only love you for your hands.” Tony turns sideways on the couch, his back to Bruce. “Well, and your brain. And the giant green rage thing. Actually, there are a lot of things.”

“Lucky me,” Bruce says, faintly. He starts working on Tony's shoulders, but it's hard trying to smoothe muscles into relaxation when they won't stop moving. “You should hold still.”

Tony doesn't. He says: “Should I also take off my shirt? I can do that.” He looks over his shoulder and the smile on his face is almost evil.

“That isn't necessary,” Bruce mumbles. He tries to ignore the smile. Tony is trying to push his buttons again. He shouldn't give him the satisfaction of success. He keeps rubbing the man's shoulders, the back of his neck, rolling his thumbs over the knots. Finally, Tony stops moving so much, though he's still looking at him over his shoulder, which makes the whole process a little more complicated.

“Not everything that's fun is necessary.” Tony is looking down at him slightly, head cocked. He's still wearing eyeliner, probably from last night, and his eyes look very large. “You can still change your mind about that VIP tour.”

Bruce stops the massage. “This is a bit awkward,” he says. “I get that you like to mess with me but, er, not while I've got my hands on you, okay?”

“Who says I'm messing with you?”

“What are you saying?” Bruce says. He takes his hands away entirely, crosses his arms. “Are you drunk?”

“Nope.” Tony says, and Bruce knows it's probably true. He's too alert. “You'd think with Nat throwing herself at you for so long, you'd figure out what flirting looks like.”
Bruce actually groans and curls up on himself a little. First Nat, and now Tony. If anything, this is harder. Not just because he's living with the man or because he trusts him so much. He can't pretend to like him but hold him off until he loses interest. He can't let him too close. The guilt would be overwhelming. The reason it's so much worse is that not all of it would be pretending.

Which gives him all the more reason to make Tony stay away.

“No?” Tony says. One hand is on his shoulder, squeezing lightly. Tony, who doesn't actually touch people as often as he'd like everyone to think. “Okay, forget I said anything. Do you want a drink? There should still be orange juice somewhere.”

“No thanks,” Bruce mumbles and unfolds himself. He looks at Tony and the man doesn't even have the decency to look disappointed. “Was that serious?” he asks.

“Don't worry about it,” Tony says quickly.

It's a little too quickly, Bruce thinks, so he says the first thing that comes into his mind: “I saw you and Pepper last night. Did you two talk a lot?” He remembers when Tony was with Pepper. Tony was very loyal. He hates himself a little for being so manipulative, but he presses on anyway: “You and Pepper were pretty good together, maybe you should give it another shot.”

Tony looks down and Bruce knows he's made a mistake. “Me and Pepper are better not together,” he says after a moment. “We were always walking on eggshells around each other. She deserves better.”

“Better than you?” Bruce says in an attempt to lighten the mood. “What happened to your ego?”

“Less complicated,” Tony corrects himself. “Her and me, we need a little distance for optimal configuration.” He gets up, snaps his fingers and says: “I'm going back to the workshop.”

Bruce watches him go, regretting everything he's said. He hates himself, but that's nothing new.
Instead of following Tony up to the lab, Bruce turns to the borrowed tablet. It promptly informs him it's in fact his, and would he like to configure the security settings. He looks in the direction of the elevators. Maybe he should go after Tony. Not because he wants to take him up on his offer, because part of him wants to but he can't, but to try and make things right. He knows he's hurt the man, and he thinks Tony suspects he did it on purpose.

Bruce sighs and rubs his face. He presses his hands to his eyes until he sees stars. Something stirs in the back of his mind and he thinks no, this is just me. It doesn't calm the other guy down, and he doesn't blame him. Sometimes 'just Bruce' puts a gun in his mouth and tries to end it all, so it's only natural the other guy doesn't trust him to look after himself.

He lets his hands fall away and takes a few deep breaths. He's not really in any sort of danger and he knows it. The other guy knows it too. He's just upset.

As much as he wants to go and apologise, he decides can't go up there right now. Not because of the other guy, but because he doesn't particularly want to burst out in tears in front of his best friend. So he walks through the steps and picks up the one thing he can do with just a tablet: looking for parts of Ultron.

He wades through pages of junk before he starts getting somewhere. Literally, junk. It's astonishing, the things people try to pass off as something more than it is. Thankfully, Bruce can tell the difference. Working with Tony as much as he has probably helps.

He narrows things down by the text of the listing, the type of information given, the parts left out. He's hoping for something he can place as Canada, because of his previous two finds. Two is not technically enough for a pattern, but he suspects the pattern anyway and is not proven wrong when he finds a third listing.

It fits into the developing pattern neatly, the area, the text. Even the photo is very similar, though this one has no sign of landscape in the frame. That's fine, he has more ways of tracking it down. There is no location given in the listing, of course, but he does a little tracking to see who posted it, from where.

It actually takes him less time to have a rough idea for this one, which is enough to make him suspicious. If these were his listings, and two of them got destroyed already he would get more careful, not less.

He sends his information to Tony anyway, with the message: “I would be careful if I were you. I know I’m paranoid, but I don't trust this. There's no increased security, and they should know by now that someone's looking.”

“Relax,” he gets in reply. “It's been a few days. They probably think I've lost interest.”

“Try to be careful anyway,” Bruce types.

He really should have seen it coming, because the next thing Tony says is: “Have you met me? Being careful is overrated.”

Bruce is still shaking his head when Tony lands on the balcony outside, in his suit, faceplate flipped up.
He opens the door and says: “Catch!”

Bruce nearly drops the phone tossed at him. He shoots Tony a glance. “Being careful may not be your thing, but you still shouldn't throw fragile electronics around like that.”

Tony laughs. He looks more relaxed in his suit, smiling generously. “That thing isn't fragile,” he says. “I built it especially for you and the other guy. Has all the bells and whistles, I think you'll like it. Now,” He closes the visor and his voice turns slightly tinny, “I'll be right back.”
The roar of repulsors is back, the slight tremble of air rushing past. Tony puts on some musical accompaniment. There is heavy cloud cover, so he tests the suit's navigational skills when visually compromised. He makes mental notes for improvements.

He slows down for a little to wave his hands around in the clouds. He can't help himself. It's the kind of thing a kid would do, but he figures it's alright to be a little childlike when it comes to feeling awe and wonder. He's flying around in a suit he build by himself, for fuck's sake, he's allowed to stop and smell the roses.

He banishes Bruce from his mind entirely. Pepper, too. Well, he tries, but his mind keeps going back to that conversation. Sure, he's been flirting with Bruce. He flirts with a lot of people. He's a flirt. Despite his charm and charisma, he can also be pretty socially inept, so he'll be the first to back off when a friend tells him it's not wanted. No harm done.

Bruce never actually told him off, though, and that confuses Tony a little bit. The man can stand up to Nat and tell her he doesn't like her that way and Nat, Tony is not ashamed to admit, is a lot more scary than he is.

On the other hand, Bruce hadn't managed to do that after an awkwardly long peroid of trying to get her to move on while sparing her feelings. Maybe he's doing the same thing to Tony. Tony hopes not, he rather hopes the man trusts him more than that. He hopes he means more to Bruce than Nat does. Well, there's a thing he's never telling Natasha. Even if it probably wouldn't surprise her that Tony is a greedy man.

From above, the border is less obvious than the water that dictates it at this point. It shines in the midday sun. It's not far from here, so he starts reviewing the information. Precise location was harder to pinpoint this time, but there's still a rough area. It's sparsely populated, and he's probably looking for another shed so that's doable. He can bust through a dozen sheds in record time. Maybe he shouldn't, considering only one of those sheds will deserve to be demolished.

He'll just have to tone down the explosions.

In the end, he barely has to break anything. Most of the places that match the profile turn out to be unlocked, so he cracks open the doors and takes a peek inside.

When he finds a place with boarded up windows and a very new padlock on the door he shrugs to himself and blasts the lock away. It takes half the door with it and he really hopes this shed is the one or he'll have to feel guilty for breaking and entering. Tony Stark, cat burgler. Except with more explosions.

He finds his mind wandering again when he steps through the door. He doesn't like that. This might not be a high-risk mission, but he can't get distracted this easily. There were guys with knives last time, he can't expect not to run into anything.

He definitely can't start combing over the behaviour of his best friend, trying to figure out what is happening. Teasing the man, flirting with him even, it's not new. Something must have changed to make Bruce react in a way other than the usual exhasperated dismissal.

Maybe he's never considered Tony might not just be teasing until now.

Tony finds himself standing in the shed, staring at a thing under a sheet, thinking of something
miles away. That is not good. He refocuses, turns around and checks his surroundings. Lovely day, bit overcast. Some trees outside, a farmhouse. The shed shares one wall with a half-built brick thing. He does a thermal scan and finds nothing but ambient and a few blips that might be rodents.

Fine. Okay. He's got this. He steps forward and yanks the sheet off of whatever it is, and the whatever does turn out to be metal debris. It's warped with heat and impact, but there's no mistaking the delicate grooves and workings of the faceplate.

It's another drone, but this part is bigger. It really shouldn't have escaped whatever battle it fell in like this. The head is almost intact, and that is dangerous.

Tony reached out and grabs it, and that is when the brick wall to his right explodes.

He isn't expecting a booby trap or an ambush, not really, and that's why he isn't prepared. The shockwave actually sends him sprawling and he's showered with broken masonry. The noise is deafening, but his suit takes most of the physical impact and takes it well. All systems online, not a scratch.

He gets up, turns to the broken wall, gets hit in the face with the second missile. This one manages to scratch the metal. The failsafes in his suit keep his neck straight when it should have snapped, but the kinetic energy needs to go somewhere so he flies head over heels and lands in the field a distance away. He's angry now, but more alert than a minute ago. Nothing like a missile to the face for a wake-up call.

There are shapes in the brick dust and rubble, and he starts firing repulsor blasts. He doesn't bother trying to spare the shed. He figures he's free to ignore common decency now the assholes are shooting at him.

Something comes at him through the cloud of dust at high speed. He rockets up and out of the way and the thing smashes into the dirt under him. The dust is so thick now, he can barely see so he turns on the thermal overlay.

Again, there is nothing. That isn't right. He should see whatever fired those missiles at least, a smoking barrel, an exit point heated by the velocity of the projectile. There's nothing.

He's still staring when several smaller missiles erupt from the cloud. He ducks and weaves, plowing into the cloud himself but the things are following him. At least they have a visible heat signature, or he would have started questioning his sanity. He lands and ducks around a corner of the unfinished house. He can't see very well so he slows down, moving quickly when he spots something warm moving in.

Two of them impact with more bricks, lowering the visibility again. Another detonates right near his shoulder, but he's already on the move. He needs a shockwave, some wind, maybe a little rain. Anything to clear up this cloud of choking dust. He starts considering options when he spots something solid in front of him. A wall, maybe, a stack of wood.

There is a brief flare in the thermal spectrum and the thing resolves itself into the shape of a person, glowing with heat. Tony is close enough to see the grin on his face and the gun, the very large gun he's holding.

The bastards. They knew he was coming. They were prepared, and they're hiding. Well, he'll blow up this whole fucking scrap-heap. There will be nothing left but a cloud of dust and some very tiny bits.
Unfortunately, that's when the rocket launcher goes off, and it actually hits him with a distressing amount of force. A warning flashes in his face and he checks it only to see if there is any catastrophic failure. There isn't, the suit is a bit dented but fully operational.

Why does a random black market dealer have access to this much heavy weaponry?
Tony rockets up and out of what is now a ruin of a house that was never finished. More missiles come streaking up from the whole mess and he picks them off one by one, darting around the last one before a punch sends it back into the rubble.

The dust still isn’t dissipating, and Tony starts to suspect this is intentional. Where are Cap and Thor when you need them to make a few shockwaves and clear the field.

He scans the place again, running it through every filter he can think of. Nothing jumps out at him, until he realises they are shielding themselves thermally, somehow. Most ways of doing that, Tony knows, end up with a person-shaped cold spot.

He focuses on the thermal readouts again and takes a closer look. He has to dodge another round of missiles but at this point, his focus is so sharp nothing even gets close.

The ruin is a mess of cold bricks and hot residu from all the explosions. Half-built and half-broken walls make jagged geometrical shapes which he can dismiss as part of the house. The impact signatures are more organic, but large, circular and too warm for someone trying to hide.

He spots the figure when it moves. Once he sees it, he's locked onto it. It's only vaguely human, so Tony figures he's using a blanket or heavy coat, not something form-fitting. Now that he sees it, it's like a cutout in the surrounding mess, a spot of uniform blue where there should be slight variations in temperature.

He takes aim and shoots at the bastard.

The explosion is huge, larger than it really should be. Whatever the man was carrying has exploded in the impact and the house, as far as he can see it, is really little more than a crater now.

Tony descends slowly, trying to identify other shapes. He sees nothing but remains cautious as he descends to the center of the crater.

A little creativity with the suit's exhausts makes a pocket of visibility around him in which he can inspect the body.

It's not much of a body anymore. Most of the blood is mingling with the dust into a gritty paste. There are bits all over the place. Part of a jacket is surprisingly untouched and Tony spots a patch on what used to be the shoulder; a windmill.

That explains the weapons at least. He knows a guy – not personally, there are conventions he used to attend – with a sketchy reputation and a windmill related name. Arms dealer and black market expert. This looks right up his alley. He leaves the badge and trudges over to the shed.

There's really not much left of it. Some of the wood is on fire. The sheet is stained brown and smoking ominously. When Tony blasts the piece of Ultron drone into oblivion, the sheet catches fire as well.

With a sigh, Tony lifts off. He feels a little stuffy in the suit, something about all the dust, so he lands in a copse of trees. There's enough distance between him and the ruined house that he's pretty sure there's no ambush waiting for him here. He scans the area around him anyway. He knows better than to get out of the suit just anywhere. He has the damage to prove it's a bad idea.
He triggers the faceplate and prepares for a nice clean breath of dust-free air.

An error pops up.

“Friday, what is this bullshit?” he asks.

“Part of the suit is jammed from impact,” she says. “Notably the head and chest plates. No immediate danger.”

Tony swallows and resists the urge to start clawing at his face. It's fine, there isn't even that much damage. Everything is still operational, he's just a little bit stuck. He doesn't feel better. His back is sweating and he wishes he'd implemented that improved air conditioning thing.

It's not too far back to the tower and once he's there, he can get himself out easily. Friday can even do it, or Bruce.

He can totally do that, or. He can get out of his armour and take a nice, long breather, and call for someone to come pick him up. He reaches for the emergency manual release on the inside of his left arm. It does nothing.

He starts breathing hard, to the point where Friday chimes up to say: “Sir, you should return to the tower for maintenance.”

Tony leans against a tree and says: “Yes, that would be the reasonable thing to do.” Even to himself, his voice sounds trapped, stuck.

It's not the suit, it really isn't. He trusts his suits with his life, and more. But when he wants it to come off, it needs to come off. He doesn't like not having the option. He needs to be in control and he's not, he's trapped.

“Hey, Friday? Get Bruce on the line.”
“Dr. Banner,” Friday chimes into the living room, “Mr. Stark is asking to speak to you. Shall I reroute to your phone?”

Bruce looks up from said phone. Perhaps Friday has noticed he's not quite comfortable talking at a holographic projection. “Yes, please,” he says and holds the phone to his ear.

“Heeey, Bruce,” Tony says. There's an edge of something in his voice. “How are you liking the phone? Let me know if it needs improvements.”

“Hello Tony.” Bruce frowns. “Are you in trouble? Why are you calling me?”

“You know, social call. Wanted to chat. Oh boy.” Tony is talking very quickly, and Bruce is sure that the edge he is hearing is panic.


Tony takes a breath. “Well, there were people, or a person, there was a person with a lot of explosives. But it's fine, I took care of it. Nothing left but a lot of dust.”

“Okay,” Bruce says. “So you're calling me, because?”

“You need to talk me down,” Tony says, and he sounds miserable. “The suit isn't opening and it's fine, I can fix it when I get back, it's easy, but I can't. I can't breathe.” He pauses, and Bruce can hear his breathing. It's too fast. “Please,” Tony adds.

“Where are you?” Bruce asks. “Look around you, describe what you're seeing.” Friday helpfully brings up a map with a glowing dot, but that's not why Bruce is asking.

“Uh, trees, I see trees.” There is another pause. “Yes, I'm definitely between a bunch of trees. There's a river over there, I think I'm still – you know you can just ask Friday, right?”

“That's not why I'm asking.” Bruce looks at the map anyway, notes the location. “Focus on your surroundings. It's a grounding exercise.”

“I'm grounded alright,” Tony says with a hint of a smile, “I just need to get up and get back there and I'll be fine. I'll be fine if I get this thing open. It's so hot in here, I was going to upgrade the ventilation and I think that just went right to the top of my list.”

“No, Tony,” Bruce says, cutting through the nervous chatter. “You are already fine. Take a deep breath, look around you. Try to breathe from your stomach, not your chest. You're fine.”

“I can't breathe!” Tony snaps. “That's kind of the problem here! I'm sorry. I'm sorry I yelled at you. I just.”

The silence stretches long enough that Bruce is starting to worry, but he can still hear the breathing, fast and shallow. Finally, he says: “Can I borrow your jet?”

“I'm sorry?”

“I know you have a jet. I'm assuming Friday can fly it. If I can borrow it I'll come get you out of the suit.”
“God yes,” Tony blurts out. “I'm officially giving you, just, all the permissions. Come get me.”

Thankfully, it's not far. Bruce spends most of the flight looking over the schematics of Tony's suit, updated to reflect current damage. He's surprised Tony doesn't just fly home himself, but then again, things like these aren't always logical.

He finds Tony slumped against a tree, methodically breaking twigs between his armoured fingers.

“Bruce,” he says, “I hope you brought a screwdriver because I'm drowning in here.”

Bruce has brought a screwdriver and he leans in, starting with the faceplate. He can see the damage now. It's nothing more than dents, but some of it is blocking the armour's releases. “I didn't know you were claustrophobic;” he says when the faceplate finally hisses and he can wrench it off.

Tony sits for a moment, his eyes closed, his face damp with sweat. “I'm not,” he says. “It's. I need to be in control.”

“Control issues,” Bruce mumbles. “You really should see a doctor if it's this bad. The kind of doctor I am not.” He's fiddling with the armour over Tony's chest now, arc reactor at eye level.

“I don't know, doc, you're doing a good job so far.” Tony smiles, but Bruce can see his fingers twitching, grasping for something.

“I mean that,” Bruce says, softly.

“You get me out of here and I will,” Tony says.

Bruce shakes his head. “No, you won't. That would be giving up control. Admitting you need help.”

“I called you, didn't I?” Tony sounds like he could start crying any moment now, and Bruce isn't sure what to do about that.

He just shakes his head again and grabs a different screwdriver. He picks a flathead with a thin end, just so he can jam it between two plates and try to force the edges apart enough to clear the block. It doesn't work, of course, he'd need the other guy's strength to make that work. He can hear Tony whimper a little as the man realises the same thing so Bruce places his hand on his stomach. The armour is in the way but it will have to do.

“Through your stomach,” he says. He checks the schematics on his phone and, at Friday's recommendation, sets to loosening something along the side of the armour. He ignores the tears on Tony's face. It's only polite.

“Try to open it now,” he says after a few minutes of fiddling.

Something hisses and in jerky movements, the armour opens up, letting Tony tumble forward in a sweaty heap. Bruce can feel it, because he's piled against him. He can feel him shake.

“You're good at that,” Tony says, “getting into my suit. I'm starting to wonder if there's something you're not telling me.”

Bruce holds his shoulders and says: “That's just your ego talking,” because he can tell Tony is trying to cover his panic with the usual banter. He starts massaging Tony's arms.
Tony barely remembers anything between landing in the copse of trees and getting back home. It's probably not a good sign, but nothing so far has gone the way he wants it to. He tries to blame it on his sleeping problems. If anything, they're not making it better.

He's already redesigning the suit in his head. It's intact enough to fly itself to maintenance but he doesn't want it fixed just yet, he wants to know exactly what happened and how to fix it. He sends it to the lab instead. It might be easier to build a new one than upgrade this one. That way, he gets to install the upgraded ventilation in one go. Maybe those massagers. He finds he likes massages more than he thought he did.

Before he can make his way to the lab, however, Friday says: “Sir, Miss Potts is at the door.”

“No, you're right. Hi, Pepper.” He leans in and kisses her on the cheek. “Do you mind if Bruce joins us?”

“No, but,” she looks at the bag of takeout, “I don't know if there's enough. Bruce, what would you like for lunch? We'll send someone for extras.”

“Please, don't.” Bruce is fidgeting with his sleeves again, but he comes and joins them anyway. The man is so nervous. “I'm not very hungry.”

“If you say so,” Pepper gives the bag another worried glance.

It turns out she's worried about nothing, because once they gets the plates out and the bag
unpacked, there are enough sandwiches to last them a week.

“How much do you think I eat?” Tony says. “We can feed a dozen more Bruces with all this.”

“Not enough,” Pepper says with a sharp glance, “and not regularly enough.”

“Not you, too,” says Tony. He glares at her over a sandwich.

Pepper picks one up for herself, places it on her plate. She looks immaculate, as always, and is taking care not to drop anything on her white skirt. “Maybe, Tony, that means we're right.”

Tony wants to give a witty response, tell her he's an adult now, that he doesn't need people looking over his shoulder all the time, but his mouth his full so he just grumbles into his food.

Unfortunately, Pepper takes this opportunity to interrogate Bruce. “You've been living here, Bruce. What do you think?”

Bruce blinks a little, eyes darting from her to Tony. “Uh,” he says. “I'm not an expert.”

“You said you had a PhD on Tony Stark's evasion techniques,” Tony says, to Pepper's amusement. She is chuckling behind her sandwich. “Are you claiming credentials you don't have? That's fraud, and I'll have to report you. Could seriously harm your academic reputation.”

“I lost my reputation when I acquired the enormous green rage monster,” Bruce says. The words sting a little, but he's smiling his cynical smile so Tony thinks it's probably okay. He turns to Pepper. “This is one of the techniques. Tryin to, to taunt people so they'll get distracted.”

“I recognise that one,” Pepper says. “Is he sleeping at all?”

“Whoa, personal!” Tony says.

Bruce ignores him and gives a kind of half shrug. “I don't make a habit of spying on him but I think, not much.”

Pepper sighs. “Drinking a lot?”

“Only after the memorial,” Bruce says quietly, “as far as I know.”

Tony looks from one to the other. “I'm still in the room,” he says. “And I'm very offended.”

“Okay, that's not too bad,” Pepper says, ignoring him entirely. “Hitting on anything with legs?”

Bruce actually chuckles at this. He shakes his head and says: “Just me.”

“Well, you can handle it,” Pepper says, nodding to herself.

Tony gives Bruce a hurt look and is rewarded with a glance of utter, weary despair, and something else. He can't help but notice a faint blush creeping up his neck as he pointedly stuffs food into his mouth and says nothing. Pepper doesn't seem to have noticed, or maybe she thinks he's just embarrassed by admitting Tony's been hitting on him. That's not it, though.

The something else, to Tony, looks a lot like hope.
Once Pepper is satisfied no one is going to self-destruct in the next five minutes, they have Friday put something on. Pepper vetoes the romantic drama and Bruce doesn't want to watch the news, so they turn to documentaries. There's a thing about birds and even if they might not spend a lot of time actually watching it, the shots are very pretty. Tony is actually interested in watching, too, maybe think up some ideas for ways to improve Sam's wings, but annoyingly enough, Bruce and Pepper insist on talking through it.

“I was going to talk to you at the party,” Pepper says, “but you left at some point.”

Bruce fidgets a little with his empty plate. He gestures at the balcony. “I was just out there, next time you're welcome to come talk to me.”

“Are you sure? I don't want to intrude.”

“No, I'm sure. It's the crowds that get to me.” Bruce smiles briefly. “Tony came to find me, at one point.”

“Was that before he left?” Pepper asks, and gives Tony a look. “You realise the host has an obligation to actually be at the party, right?”

Ah, there it is. He knew she noticed that, and he knew she was going to bring it up. She has a fair point, of course, but Tony can't bring himself to act remorseful. He's glad this is just him skipping out on a party, and not forgetting another date. He's glad her expectations of him are only of the friend kind, these days. He feels more comfortable around her like this, and he think he loves her even more. Just not in a romantic way.

Tony waves a hand. “I was there. Most of the time. If anyone really needed me at any point, Friday would have gotten me.”

“Hm,” Pepper says. She turns to Bruce and Tony feels very dismissed.

In revenge, he decides to concentrate on the documentary, which only lasts until Bruce is in the kitchen, getting a drink.

“How are you, really?” Pepper asks him. She's scooted over, is now sitting next to him on the couch.

“I'm fine,” Tony says. He sighs. Lying to Pepper in unfairly hard.

“I can,” she hesitates. “I can send you that list again, of doctors. I know you don't like the idea but you need to look after yourself.”

“You know, Bruce keeps saying the same thing. Speaking of Bruce, I've acquired a doctor. Biochemistry, as he keeps telling me.”

Pepper slaps his on the side of the head, very lightly. “At least I'm not the only one telling you, then.” She sighs. “I'm glad he's back, you were a nightmare when he disappeared.”

“You know me,” Tony says. He puts an arm around her shoulders, just the shoulders, and it's proof of how far they've come that she doesn't push him away or try to lean into it. He doesn't want her to have any false hope. “I'm always a nightmare.”
“Can't argue with that,” Pepper says. “You haven't even looked at your schedule for next month. I can tell, you know, when you don't look at things.”

“Next month, that's practically a lifetime away.” Tony taps his fingers on his knee. He hesitates a little and asks: “How are you doing lately?”

This nets him a high-voltage smile from Pepper. “Tony,” she says, “showing interest in other people? You really are doing better.”

“Was I that bad?” he asks, and she makes a face. “I guess I was, wasn't I. Well, I'm asking now.”

She squirms a little, so he takes his arm away. “I'm good,” she says, which is very vague. “Running most of your company for you, but that's nothing new.”

“And personally?” He cocks his head. “Meet anyone nice? Anyone new?”

She blushes a bright red, which is almost funny with her ginger hair. “No,” she lies, blatantly. She's a terrible liar. “I meet lots of people, all the time. I don't really have time for that sort of thing, dating. And it's not anyone new, really.”

“Friends turned lovers?” Tony says. “I like it. It's a classic story. Who is it? Tell me it isn't Happy. Please say it's someone else.”

“Not Happy,” she says.

“Do I know him?”

She coughs a little, turns her head and says: “Her.”

“Pepper,” he says softly, and shakes his head. “Oh, Pepper. Tell me I can watch. I know that's weird but I still want to watch.”

She actually grabs a decorative pillow of the couch and hits him in the face with it. She's laughing though, so that's good. He dodges her next attack and is on his feet, scrambling for a pillow of his own. She swipes at him from the couch and he sidesteps it easily.

“No fair,” he says, “I'm unarmed!”

“Uh huh, I'm not falling for that,” and she lurches forward, grabbing the pillow from behind his back, where he was hiding it. Now she has two and he has nothing, which is even more unfair.

They're still standing that way, Pepper with two pillows and Tony with his hands out, when Bruce walks in and says: “What on earth?”

Tony turns to see him standing there, incredulous expression on his face, holding a glass of water. He looks so confused that Tony has to laugh, which makes Bruce laugh, just for a moment.

That's when Pepper smacks him with both pillows.
Chapter 30

The rest of the day is quiet. There are so many leftovers from lunch, Bruce has to move things around in the fridge to fit it all in. He takes some up to Tony's workshop to stow them there. He figures that increases the chances of them getting eaten.

He sits in the workshop by the window, with his new tablet and his new phone, and feels a little lost for a moment. Tony is doing something to the damaged suit and humming along with the music. Bruce realises the volume has been turned down at some point. He appreciates that, and he didn't even have to ask for it.

He takes off his glasses and rubs his face.

It's strange, having a moment of peace like this. He takes quick inventory of himself, and finds he is still nervous, still angry, still all the fragmented parts of what make him him, but right now, he's okay. He thumbs the tablet on and pulls up a few articles to read.

From where he's sitting, he has a clear view of the windows, the exits, Tony on his knees and doing something with a handheld scanning thing. It's a good view. If that has something to do with the fact that it includes Tony, it's only because Tony is his friend, and he likes seeing him happy and in his element.

The man also has really beautiful shoulders. He is wearing a light blue shirt and Bruce can't not notice. This isn't news, he's noticed Tony's shoulders before, especially after all the massages, but he still looks.

It's like the eyeliner all over again. Bruce rubs his eyes, physically breaking the line of sight. He is aware Tony is a handsome man. He still has articles to read.

He's only two paragraphs in when Tony's phone does a weird little jingle and Tony lets out a snort of laughter.

“What is it?” Bruce asks.

Tony waves a hand, puts the phone away and crouches back down with his armour. “Just Pepper, sending me annoying texts.”

Bruce nods, and returns to his articles.

He makes it a few pages this time before the phone goes off again. Twice in a row this time. When he looks up, Tony is looking at him with a kind of smirk.

“Still Pepper?” Bruce says.

“No,” says Tony, “I mean yes.” He shakes his head, taps something out in response. “I can turn off the sound if it bothers you.”

“It's a little distracting,” Bruce has to admit.

“Okay, I'll,” Tony starts, but the sentence ends in a sort of spluttering. His eyes dart between his phone and Bruce. “Uh,” he tries again, “I'll turn the sound off now.”

“Are you sure?” Bruce says. “I can go to the living room or something.”
“No, no,” Tony says, back at work with the armour. “No need to do that. Stick around, enjoy the music.”

Bruce nods, and dives back into his reading. He's gotten good at refocusing quickly. It's a handy skill, useful for overworked professors and people on the run. Cuts down a little on having to start back at the beginning, or that thing where you keep reading the same line without absorbing it.

He still doesn't manage to keep his concentration intact the next time Tony receives a text. The lack of ringtone isn't helping all that much, Tony is too emotive. Bruce can tell the exact moment he reads the thing, because he lets out a sort of amused snort.

By this point, Bruce isn't sure if it's worth it to even try and keep reading. The texts keep coming in and Tony doesn't seem to be able to keep quiet about them.

He watches the man carefully, one eye still on his tablet. Tony is acting like a teenager who's been caught looking at porn, stealing furtive glances over his shoulder that are so full of glee and mortification. At one point, Bruce swears the man is laughing silently, shoulders shaking.

The next time he looks over at Bruce, after he's calmed down a little, Tony looks more mortified than gleeful. When he notices Bruce looking, he says: “You know, on second thought maybe you should go downstairs, I can tell I'm distracting you.”

“Maybe I will,” Bruce says. He puts his tablet down and walks over “Is it that funny?”

Tony smiles, skin around his eyes creasing into laugh lines. “God, yes.” Tony is sitting on his knees, one arm slung over a chair, the other hand still holding the phone.

“What's she saying?”

“Oh, no, I'm not repeating it.” Tony pushes himself to his feet. His phone ends up on the workbench and he raises a hand, shaking his head a little. “That woman has a filthy mind, Bruce.”

“And here I thought you would be the one making dirty jokes,” Bruce says.

“Yeah, sure,” Tony answers, “but she does it too.”

“Well, I'm hardly innocent, you can tell me what it's about.”

“You really don't want to know,” Tony is saying. He grabs Bruce's shoulder and continues: “Really, you'll regret it, I promise you.”

“The more you say that, the more curious I get.” Bruce crosses his arms. He smiles a little. “But if you don't want me to know, alright.”

Tony opens his mouth. He seems to struggle for a moment then says, rushed out in one breath: “The jokes were mostly about you. And a little about me. More like innuendos than jokes, really.”

Bruce blinks. That does explain all the glances.

“Also,” Tony adds, “Pepper says hi.”
“I had to tell him what I was laughing about,” Tony says out loud as he types. “I hope you're happy now. Also he says hi back. There, sent it.”

“Dirty jokes about me,” Bruce mumbles. “What's wrong with you.”

“And about doctors. Hey, now that you know, I could tell you some.” Tony stares at the phone a little longer. “As for what's wrong with me, I mean apart from the obvious, why should anything be wrong with me?” Bruce doesn't answer, he's too busy covering his face and wondering when the inevitable headache is going to kick in.

To his horror, Tony takes the opportunity to continue: “Unless you think this is weird and creepy, in which case I'm going to stop. I've already stopped. It was Pepper, and I'll tell her to stop. But if that isn't it and it's the part where the jokes are about you, in specific, hey, Bruce.” He nudges him lightly. “Bruce, look at me.”

Bruce looks up. He tries his best long-suffering look, but Tony looks so honest, so open. He's looking at him, arms wide, eyes large and beautiful. He knows Tony will stop if he tells him to. He know he will back off and give him all the space he wants, and that's why he tells him the truth. “It's not the creepy thing,” he says.

“Great,” says Tony, “because as I was saying. In that case, there is nothing wrong with me for thinking you're worth, well, making dirty jokes about. You know what, now -I- think it's weird. I'm going to stop.”

“It must be weird if even you think it is,” Bruce says, but he has to laugh a little. He rubs his eyes, glasses in his hands. He should get new ones, at some point. Something cheap, so he won't feel bad when they break, because they will.

Tony crosses his arms, looks at him. Bruce finds it hard to guess what he's thinking, and part of that is the fact that he finds it hard to look him straight in the eyes. “So, not weird?” he asks.

“A little weird,” Bruce says. He rubs the lenses of his glasses against his sleeve, still looking down.

Tony takes a step towards him. Bruce is now staring at his bare forearms. “More weird?” Tony says, “Less weird? Doable levels of weird?”

Bruce looks up, into Tony's face. He's a little confused, but he has his suspicions on where Tony is going with this. He knows it's a bad idea but he wants to look the man in the face, see if he's right. That's his mistake.

He gets stuck again, looking at Tony's face. The big brown eyes, catching his attention even without eyeliner. The long lashes. The lips, curving into a slow smile. The impeccably sculpted facial hair which, Bruce thinks, is a little over the top but Tony somehow manages to pull it off. He can hardly imagine him without. The best he can do is unkempt Tony, with some stubble where the clean lines should be and somehow that's worse, because it would be an unguarded moment.

He opens his mouth to answer, but it's been too long, it's weird now and he stumbles over whatever he was going to say, doesn't even know what to say.

Tony unfolds his arms and rests his hands, long, precise fingers, on Bruce's shoulders, very lightly. In some weird mirror of those massages Bruce gave him, Tony's thumbs make small circles. “Still
“Okay?” he asks.

“I don't know if okay applies to any of this,” Bruce manages.

“Bad?” Tony asks.

“You're going to kiss me,” Bruce says. “Is, is that what's happening?”

“Only if you want to,” says Tony. He's a little taller than Bruce, but not that much, and he's looking at him, just waiting. Who knew Tony Stark could be patient.

Bruce doesn't manage an answer. He is making a horrible mistake, but he has always had a tendency to stick his fingers where he might get burnt, at least once. He drops his glasses when reaches over to brush a thumb across Tony's goatee and it really is too late then, because Tony is leaning down, closing the distance.

He doesn't know what to do with his other hand so he drops it. Tony is holding his shoulders, gaze hot on his skin. Bruce can barely see the brown in his eyes, and then they're closing and Tony's lips are pressing, very delicately, against his own.

Without consulting his brain at any point, his hand comes up and slides its way onto Tony's back, mapping out the muscles between there and here, following the line of his trousers under the shirt. Tony pulls away but then Bruce is pulling him back, his hand in Tony's neck and pressing against him like a drowning man, struggling to breathe but only in the good way.

There is nothing in his head but a pleasant haze and the desire for this to never stop. He can feel his heart beat, he can feel Tony's breath warm against his cheek as they break apart.

He wants to hold him tight, kiss him again, but the moment is ending and he mentally shakes himself. His hand drops from Tony's back and he looks away, down. He tries to remember where he left his glasses, his hands need something to do, but he dropped them on the floor. This was a mistake, his heartbeat tells him, surely it's too fast, surely something will go wrong any moment now but there is nothing in the back of his head that sees a threat, just his own fears and anxieties.

“Well,” Tony says. His hands are still on Bruce's shoulders. “I am kicking myself for not doing that sooner.” He even sounds smug, the bastard.

“This is dangerous,” Bruce says, eyes on the ground and ignoring the part of him that says it's not, not really, not more dangerous than doing anything else, than being friends. He's sure it will be dangerous in the end, it always is. “You know what I'm like, sooner or later, something always breaks.”

“Does it?” Tony says. “Because I know you've been in control lately. Do you know for certain when things will go wrong? Have you ever tested the exact parameters? We should test it, I'm volunteering. Make an experiment of it.”

“Are you going to write a paper about it too?” Bruce says. He has to smile, because of course he wants to test it. Of course he wants to get all science about it, even when Bruce has already burnt himself on this one and is content to let it be.
Chapter 32

Tony is still feeling the buzz when he kneels down to grab Bruce's glasses. Maybe Pepper was right, and all this time Bruce just didn't realise quite how serious he was. Who's he kidding, Pepper is always right. He makes a mental note to text her later to let her know. She knows she's always right, of course, but she still likes hearing it.

Bruce is fidgeting with his sleeves now, rolling them up, so Tony reaches out and puts a hand on his forearm. Yep, fuzzy. He strokes it a little, distracts Bruce by offering his glasses.

“Maybe I will write a paper, and I'll give it some horrible name,” he says. “Something innuendo. Optimal conditions for making Bruce Banner explode. You should get new glasses, these are pretty scratched.”

“You could, at the very least, not put my name in the title,” Bruce mumbles. He takes the glasses, and doesn't comment on Tony's hands, on his arms. Tony has seen him without a shirt, knows for a fact his chest is fuzzy, too. His hands are itching.

“You can keep your pants on: observations on an enormous green rage monster,” he says.

Bruce gives him an exhausted look. “No,” he says.

“Okay, no paper. I still want to do the experiments.”

Bruce tucks the glasses into his breast pocket, looks away. “What if I say no?” he says. “Maybe I don't want to do that.”

“Well, two things happen,” Tony says. “First, the experiments don't happen. Second, I get very sad and a little grumpy because I don't like it when I don't get what I want, and then you get to be the one to buy me ice cream because it will be your fault.” He pauses. “But instead of ice cream, you can do explosives, or some rare metals or something. I'm not picky. Same goes for the other stuff, by the way. You don't want it, I stop.”

Bruce seems to be digesting this information, so Tony reaches out again and sticks a hand into his unruly mop of curls. It's shot through with little bits of silver, and Tony has always wanted to rub his hands in it and see what happens. He finds it's surprisingly soft, and also that Bruce likes a little attention, especially down the neck.

The view is nice, Bruce with his arms crossed but his body language slowly relaxing into something a little less guarded, looking away but leaning into the petting. There isn't quite a smile on his face, but it's getting there. Tony desperately wants it to be there.

“Hm, stop that,” Bruce says eventually, and waves a hand, as if shooing away an annoying fly. “I'm trying to think.”

“What about?” Tony asks. “Maybe I can help. Is it about how I don't care that you get big and green when you're angry, or about how obviously far you are from doing that when I do this?” He takes another step in, presses his nose into Bruce's hair. He's a little taller, and he likes that. Also, Bruce uses shampoo with lemon or lime, or something similar. It's nice.

Bruce swats at him again, but Tony doesn't move. “I thought you said you'd stop if I didn't want it,” Bruce says.
“Okay,” says Tony, “Tell me you don't want it.”

Tony waits. It's manipulative of him to phrase it this way, and he knows it. He's trying to get the answer he wants, and he did mention how much he hates it when he doesn't get what he wants.

Then there is the fact that he suspects, very strongly suspects, that the reason Bruce is so hesitant is that he's trying to punish himself. The man is terrible at letting people in. He's always worrying what will happen, when he'll make a mistake or get someone in trouble. The first thing he asks when he comes back to himself after spending time as the Hulk, every time, is: did I hurt anyone.

Okay, sometimes it's: where am I, or: what just happened, but the next question after that, then. He's worried he'll go properly berserk and hurt innocent people, despite the fact that the other guy has shown, time and again, that it's not likely to happen. He might he an enormous green rage monster, but he doesn't rage indiscriminately.

So yes, Tony wants to get the answer he personally prefers. He also thinks it would make Bruce happy, that he should let himself be happy, that he can have something and not be afraid of breaking it all the time.

When Bruce looks back, there's a hint of something in his eyes. Tony reaches up and brushes the stubble on his chin. It catches at his fingertips. He wants to touch it again, all of it.

“I'm not saying yes,” Bruce starts, and Tony starts gearing up the sad eyes, “but I'm not saying no.”

“It was the kiss, wasn't it?” Tony says. “I've been told I'm a good kisser.”

Bruce rubs his face. “You're an asshole,” he groans.

“Yeah, but you know me, right.” Tony wraps an arm around Bruce's shoulders. That feels pretty nice. “This can't be a surprise to you. Hey, I'm trying to figure out another detection mode for the suit, for seeing things that are indistinguishable in both in infrared and the visible light spectrum. I hear you're good at radiation, want to give me a hand?”
It's around two in the morning when Tony goes to bed, and he only goes because Bruce is insisting that he won't go until Tony goes and Tony can't bring himself to keep the man up any longer. It's emotional blackmail, that's what it is. It works.

He heads up to his penthouse suite and busies himself getting ready for bed. He feels pretty good, if a bit awake to be going to sleep. He briefly considers a cold shower before bed, but he's not that desperate. In any case, Bruce might not be up for anything (yet), but Tony has hands, he can take care of himself.

Afterward, when he's lying in his bed and feeling pleasantly fuzzy, he feels confident that this is going to be a good night. He can feel himself relax into the mattress. He fills his mind with thoughts of Bruce, in the hope he can somehow influence his dreams. He throws some flying in for good measure, a guy can hope.

Bruce, nervous but relaxing bit by bit until he's smiling. Still cynical, but about as unconcerned as he'll ever get. His arms bare, his shirt open. His fingers are always moving, his hands are busy, nervous, fidgeting. They still against Tony, turn silent.

The smell of lemons or maybe limes, and under that the smell of Bruce. Clean sweat and something like grass and blood. His hands are very still. Wait, what?

Tony looks closer and it's not just the shirt, his entire chest is lying open and bloody, insides spilling out and he's cold, very cold. His hands aren't moving, his eyes are closed. He backs away but he stumbles against something and it's Pepper, what's left of Pepper, a burnt out husk but he can see the long ginger hair and he knows it's her, he just knows.

He looks away and there is Bruce again. His eyes aren't closed but this is worse, they are open and cloudy and there is no life left in them. There is no life left in any of the man, not his hands, not his face.

It's his fault.

He's done something, or maybe not done something else.

He closes his eyes and tries to walk away but he keeps tripping and he doesn't want to look but he knows there are bodies under his feet. He doesn't want to know who they are. All he can smell is blood and burning and the bodies are up to his neck now and he can't breathe.

Tony gasps and scrambles away, landing on the wooden floor of his bedroom. His heart is thundering in his throat. Pain shoots through his leg. His chest is burning and he's sweating hard, his face is wet. He trembles on the floor, lying on his side.

“Friday,” he tries to say, but there is no sound. He tries again and this time there is nothing but a sob.
Friday responds all the same, with: “Sir, you seem to be in distress. Shall I call Miss Potts?”

“No,” Tony moans. He forces a breath into his body and tries to ask: “Is Bruce all right?” because he just wants to hear it, he knows it was all a dream but he needs something beyond his own thoughts to anchor him. All that comes out is: “Bruce.”

“I will alert Dr. Banner,” Friday says.

“That's not,” Tony says. “No wait.” He doesn't know if it's his panic that makes it feel so long, or if Friday waits deliberately before acknowledging him.

“Would you like to cancel that order?” she asks but Tony doesn't even know anymore. One of his pillows has fallen to the ground with him and he sobs into it, trying desperately to breathe.
Bruce is a pretty light sleeper. He always has been, and that has since been combined with years of practising waking up suddenly and having to move. Not every sound is a threat, but he's gotten used to assuming it is and reacting accordingly just in case. So when he wakes up at four thirty in the morning, he is alert and instantly aware of what is happening. He also has no problem identifying the reason he is awake.

“Yes, Friday?” he says.

“I'm sorry for interrupting your rest,” she says, and she does sound sorry. “Mr. Stark could use your assistance.”

Bruce rolls his eyes. “Did he go back to the lab?” he asks. “I know I can't keep him away if he really wants to be in there, but he could at least let me sleep.”

“No, sir.” Friday says. “Mr. Stark is in his bedroom, in some distress.”

“I'm sorry?” Bruce says. If he wasn't awake already, this would do it.

“I believe he meant to ask after your whereabouts, and is about to tell me not to notify you,” Friday says serenely.

“But you think I should go.” Bruce is sitting up, looking for a shirt. He's not terribly surprised that Tony's AI is making her own decisions.

“I couldn't say, sir,” she says, “but if you decide to visit, I would be glad to open the doors for you. Mr. Stark did give you full permissions, after all.”

Bruce has to think about that one. He gets out of bed and gets dressed. Eventually, he says: “Wasn't he talking about the jet when he said that?”

“I believe that is called plausible deniability, sir,” she says, and Bruce has to admit, he's impressed.

He makes his way out of his apartment and down the corridor to the elevator. His rooms share the floor with a few other apartments. He knows one of them is Rhodey's, and he's seen Steve up here as well. He doesn't doubt Tony sets aside a few rooms for all of his friends.

The elevator starts moving without him saying anything. It takes him up and past the private workshop. Bruce has never seen a proper floorplan of the tower, or even a list of floor numbers with descriptions. He's sure it exists for the lower part of the tower, the corporate part, but he's not sure if even Tony has a list like this for the upper floors.

He knows the communal areas, which take up several floors. The helipad, the jet, the labs. Storage, manufacture and maintenance for the Iron Man suits. The apartments and guests rooms. He knows there are some rooftop areas, though he's never been there. Now, though, he's going to Tony's private floors.

The only things he knows is that there is more than one floor, and that apart from the roof it's the very highest point of the tower. Both of those things, knowing Tony, are exactly as expected.

When he steps out of the elevator and into a dark corridor, he's at a loss. There is a seating area to his left, with floor to ceiling windows, and it's the only reason he can see anything at all when the
doors of the elevator slide shut.

“Third door on the right, sir,” Friday says helpfully.

He hears her voice from inside the room when he comes close enough, but he can't make out what she's saying. There's another noise too. He wonders if he's doing the right thing. He desperately wants to help, but he feels like an intruder. Unwanted, uninvited. It makes his hands itchy, makes him want to turn and leave. The floor, the tower. Be on the run again, for a while. He knocks on the door.

He doesn't expect an answer, so he waits a respectable amount of time and opens the door.

Inside, it's just as dark as the corridor. There are windows again, and there are no curtains which helps a little bit but he is still left peering into a dark bedroom. There is a bed, and the sheets are torn off and to the side. Nightstands, doors in one wall, Bruce can even see a book on the bedside table. He knows he's crossing a line when he steps into the room and around the bed.

Tony is huddled in a pile, lying on his side and curled in on himself. Bruce kneels and he can see a faint glimmer on his face, tears or sweat, he can't tell.

“Tony?” he says. He puts a hand on Tony's arm, carefully. He doesn't put any pressure on him, it's just a touch to let him know he's there.

“Oh, shit,” Tony manages. “What. What are you doing here?” Bruce can tell he's terrified, he's not even trying to act nonchalant. He sounds out of breath, like he's been running all night.

“Funny thing, actually,” Bruce says. “Friday woke me up and she seemed very annoyed with you.” He apologises to Friday in his mind. “Do all your AI develop minds of their own?”

Tony starts laughing, but somewhere, it turns into something else. Bruce scoots a little closer and starts rubbing Tony's back.

After a moment, once Tony's uncurled enough to reach out and hold on to Bruce's arm, Bruce says: “Do you want to get back on the bed? It's just, er, the floor isn't the most comfortable place to be.”

It says something that he's glad to hear Tony say, though his voice is still shaky: “Trying to get into my bed, Bruce?”
Chapter 35

Bruce helps Tony to his feet. The sheet he was wrapped up in is damp, so he leaves that on the floor. There's more on the bed, anyway. Tony is still shaking, and he won't let go of Bruce, so Bruce crawls onto the bed with him.

They sit together and Bruce tells him to breathe. Bruce has his hands on Tony's shoulders and squeezes them a little, Tony is holding his wrist, eyes closed. Under his hands, Bruce can feel Tony's breathing slowly return to a more normal rhythm, his shoulders sag a little. He figures it's going to be okay when Tony is slumped so far forward that his head is resting on Bruce's shoulder, his breath tickling down his neck.

"Better?" he asks.

Tony pushes away a little, rubs his eyes. "Good as new," he says. He sounds exhausted.

"Do you want to lie down, try to sleep?" Bruce says. "I know I wouldn't mind some more sleep."

"I'm sorry I woke you up," Tony says. "There was a miscommunication between me and Friday."

Bruce kicks his legs back and lies down in the pillows. It's a nice bed. He's feeling sleepy already. "That's all right," he says. His eyes are used to the gloom now and he can see Tony's silhouette. He can tell the man is breathing evenly and he must be tired, but he's just sitting there.

"Do you want to go back to sleep?" Bruce asks. Tony grumbles something but doesn't move, sits still, leaned towards him, one hand on Bruce's arm. His eyes are dark, turned to the windows, reflecting some of the light from the city outside. His hair is in disarray, making odd shapes in the dark room. Bruce pushes himself to his elbows and reaches out to smoothe it down.

Tony lets go now, to mess with his hair himself. He's still not looking at Bruce when he says: "Thought you knew me better than that."

"Okay," Bruce says. "I still think you should go back to sleep. I know I'm still tired, and I'm the one who's actually been sleeping regularly lately." He rubs the side of his face. "I'm just going to lie down here. You're welcome to join me."

"So you were trying to get into my bed," Tony says. He shakes his head. "Knew it."

"Only because you woke me up," Bruce says.

"You don't have to stay," says Tony, but Bruce can hear the dread in his voice. He doesn't have to stay, but there is no one here who wants him to leave.

"That's all right," he repeats. "And besides, if I don't you'll go back to the shop and you won't sleep again for days."

Tony chuckles a little. "You do- know me."

"Come on, then," Bruce says, softly. His hand finds Tony's on the mattress and he pulls it a little.

Tony lies down, moves a little awkwardly when Bruce's arm is in the way but Bruce pulls again. "You don't have to stay," he says again, a little calmer.

Bruce pulls him closer, into a kind of embrace. Tony turns around, making him the little spoon. For
some reason, Bruce thinks this is pretty funny. “Maybe I want to stay,” he says, and: “You're the little spoon.”

Tony huffs out a breath of air. He twist around, leaning on one elbow, looks at him, shrugs and lies back down. “Yeah, I'm okay with that,” he says.

“Good,” says Bruce. He yawns, pulls Tony closer. One of his arms is pinned, but that's okay. The other is free to roam, so he rubs Tony's arm a little. Up and down, squeezing the shoulder.

“Can you never keep your hands still?” Tony says. He grabs his wrist again and holds it. After a moment, he pushes his fingers inbetween Bruce's. “There,” he says.

“Good night, Tony,” Bruce says.

Bruce hears Tony say: “Night,” and not long after that, he falls asleep.
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Morning comes slowly, with no alerts or emergencies. According to their pre-progammed cycle, the windows have dimmed as the sun rose and the light creeping in is pleasantly soft despite it being nearly midday. Tony isn't even sure if he's still allowed to call this morning.

Whether or not it is, it's a good one. Nothing at all is happening so he has all the time he wants to wake up, stretch his legs, cuddle up a little. Most of the sheets have come off his bed but that's okay. There's a warm breath against his shoulder and he knows who it is but he still turns and looks.

Bruce is asleep before he turns, he's sure of it, and he catches a glimpse of his face like that, relaxed, eyes closed, most of the nervous energy smoothed away but nothing like a deathly stillness, thank god. Still moving, but slower, on standby.

It doesn't last long, because Tony can see he's already woken Bruce up. Frown lines reappear around his eyes before they open, his hands move as some of that nervousness seeps back in. That's a shame, Tony would've liked to watch him sleep for a little. Next time he'll have to try to fall asleep facing him, so he doesn't have to move and wake him up. He smiles. Yes, next time. He's making that happen.

“Good morning, sunshine,” he says.

Bruce gives him a look but there's only a little of the usual annoyance in it. The accompanying smile is soft and Tony reaches out. He has to touch him.

The fact that Bruce is still here is enough to melt him a little. It's nice, waking up next to someone else. It's especially nice when that comes after a bit of sleep that is actually good and doesn't leave him wailing on the floor. Oh god, that happened.

“Good morning to you too,” Bruce says. One of his hands is pulling away from Tony and Tony lets him because the other is stuck under him so he knows he gets to keep one, at least. “Did you sleep well?” he says, rubbing at his eyes.

“We should do this more often,” Tony says. He moves his attention to Bruce's hair and that is pretty nice too.

“I take it that means yes.” Bruce turns, pushes himself to his elbows, takes in the room. “What time is it?”

“No idea. Does it matter?”

“I guess not,” Bruce says. “I'm glad you had a good night. At least after, you know.”

“Want to make my morning a little better?” Tony says. He smiles, lips apart a little. He knows how to do seductive looks, and he's been doing them on Bruce for a while now so he's surprised when Bruce actually, finally, goes for it.

Bruce leans down, rests a hand on the pillows next to Tony's face and kisses him on the lips. He's a little off-center, so Tony turns his head, tangles a hand in the curls at the nape of Bruce's neck.
He also takes the opportunity to slip a hand under Bruce's shirt. It's the same one he wore yesterday and he's been sleeping in it, so it's not exactly tucked in anywhere. Tony just ducks a hand under the hem and there he is, stroking the hair on Bruce's stomach. It's everything he's hoped for, down to the muffled little chuckle it gets him from Bruce.

“Stop that,” Bruce says, “it tickles.”

Tony doesn't remove his hand, but he stops moving and that seems to help. He smiles and he knows he must look annoyingly smug but he can't help it. He feels smug. He feels calm and warm and, well. Kind of glad there is still some cloth between him and Bruce because he figures it's a little early in the relationship to bring up morning wood.

“I don't mean to press you for an answer, Bruce,” he says, pausing to pull him down and land a small kiss on the stubble on his chin. “But we are making out in my bed and I think I should ask. Does this mean you're giving me a yes on the whole,” he cocks his head, “science boyfriends thing?”

Bruce looks horrified and for a moment Tony worries he's got this all wrong. Maybe all Bruce wanted was a bit of sex, friends with benefits. Then, he says: “Tony, that's worse than science bros.”

“Worse,” Tony says and purses his lips, “or better?”

“No, definitely worse.” Bruce shakes his head, runs a hand through his hair.

He's smiling, but not very convincingly so Tony wiggles his fingers on Bruce's stomach. It doesn't exactly have the desired effect. Bruce squirms a little and pulls Tony's hand away, pins it to the mattress. This is maybe better than what he had in mind, because it's pretty hot, all in all. When Bruce looks Tony in the eyes, he can tell what Tony's thinking because there's a moment of silence before he leans down and presses another kiss to his lips.

“You still haven't answered,” Tony says after. “I'm good at spotting redirections, too.”

“Hmm,” Bruce says. He is stil leaning over Tony, his head leaning down and his forehead pressing against Tony's cheek. “Yes.”

“Awesome,” Tony says. “That's great, the greatest. I should text Pepper.”

He wants to brag, wants to put on some loud music and scream along. He's content lying here, his arms around Bruce, but he still feels it needs something extra. Fireworks, maybe.

Bruce is laughing a little, and then he drops to the mattress, hands covering his face and he's still laughing. Tony doesn't think he's ever seen the man laugh this hard, or this long. Yeah, okay. That will do.

Chapter End Notes

There are some extras in the next work in this series.

Edit: I am not sure whether to rewrite this or write a sequel (for which I have a rough plot). I'm afraid that circumstances mean neither will be coming very soon, sorry! I'm a bit burnt out on this pairing/fandom (if by burnt out you mean too many feels I just
can't) and I just can't re-read my own work right now.

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