A Star in Somebody Else’s Sky

by auntieomega

The untimely deaths of Tony’s parents hit him harder than he would have imagined. When he asks Bruce for help, the two discover they still have romantic feelings for each other…but neither seems to know what to do with them.

**WARNING: Two chapters contain DUBCON

COMPLETE!

The title is from Pearl Jam's Black.
WARNING: Dubcon!!! This dubcon comes perilously close to noncon. I chose to label it dubcon because I think, in the context of the story, that's what it is.

Thank you, KlaatuDuLak for beta reading most of the chapters and the_casual_cheesecake for suggestions and support.

See the end of the work for more notes.
They were gone. One minute, the world had existed as Tony had always known it. He was a genius, and on that particular cold winter night he had been sandwiched between an actress and a model—or maybe they had been model actresses—it didn't matter—they were hot, and he was a young heir to billions whose tedious parents stopped ignoring him only long enough to dock his allowance.

And then his parents were gone. Both of them. The car accident had claimed them together. He was the sole surviving Stark, and the world felt strangely out of balance.

He reeled a little as he climbed out of his limo. He shoved aside some dullard who tried to help him. Barney or Dudley or something that sounded British and servile despite the fact that the loser probably hailed from Queens. Tony took a swig from the bottle of scotch in his hand. He had been drinking since hearing of the accident. Three days. He had avoided sleeping, eating, being around people—especially being around people.

Somehow the bottle slipped out of his hand and shattered on the sidewalk. He glanced back at the limo and snapped his fingers at the asswipe standing beside it. “Hey, Nigel! Clean this up!”

He staggered up the steps of the cathedral. He nearly went to his knees. Some asshole took his elbow. "Fuck off, Nigel!" He sank to his butt. Numbnuts knelt beside him and slid a hand beneath his armpit.

Before Tony could tell the helper monkey where to shove it, Numbnuts, who smelled a little like the gust from a headshop's opening door, whispered, "It's okay," as he hoisted him up. "I know none of this is fair, but you're going to be okay."

Tony focused on the friendly face. His heart leapt up in his chest. Bruce! "Just like you to show up to a funeral stoned, Puff the Magic Dragon. Fuck! Show some fucking respect, asshole."

Bruce hugged him. It was a firm, solid hug. It was wonderful.

Tony pushed away. "Back off, Men’s Wearhouse. You're getting cheap suit stank all over me." He listed starboard, but Bruce’s grip kept him upright.

“Do you want to go back to the limo? Maybe go somewhere, get some air, maybe some coffee?”

“Fuck you! I’m going to my parents’ funeral. I’m going to give the eulogy. ‘Here’s my fucking family. They never fucking loved me. May they rest in pieces.’”

“Tony.” Bruce said his name as someone might say ‘sweetheart’ or ‘my love.’ “Let’s go to my car and listen to music—just chill for a little while, hmm?”

“Get your hands off me, JCPenneys!” Tony pulled away, then stopped for a second, transfixed by the hideousness of Bruce’s suit. “That truly is an ugly suit, bro. Brown is for old men, and that purple and green tie—just fuck. I can’t tell if you’re a colorblind geezer or a really sad pimp.” He looked Bruce in the face. “Are you sure you’re gay?”

Bruce’s mouth twitched up on one side. “Not so loud. You’ll get my sodomy license revoked.”
“Won’t be my fault.”

The slight amusement that had been in Bruce’s voice faded to contrition. “I’m sorry, Tony. It’s my interview suit. This is about as formal as my clothing gets.”

“Okay. I won’t have you tasered this time.” He patted Bruce’s chest. “You won’t be so lucky if you pull this shit next time my parents die, Benji.”

Bruce snickered and bit his lips together. He glanced about them apprehensively, then at their shoes. “Well, you…” He looked up at Tony with open adoration. “…you look even more handsome than your Armani suit—even in this state.”

Tony tried to focus on him. Bruce kept moving slightly and the light was hazy. “I look good in every state. God, you’re a fucking wastoid.”

“I’m not stoned, Tony.” He smiled one of his little half smiles that made Tony want to punch him. “In fact, I’m painfully sober. Speaking of which, let’s go get some coffee, huh?”

“Fucking Cheech and Chong.” He swayed a little. “In an ugly suit.”

“Yes, you’ve registered your displeasure with my wardrobe several times now.” He tugged Tony down the steps. “We’re going to my car. I have Mudhoney’s Every Good Boy Deserves Fudge in there. It’s a great album—you’re going to love it.”

Tony held his ground. “I have to do this.”

Bruce stared at him a second, then nodded. He took a deep breath. “Okay.” He patted Tony’s back. “Okay, we’ll do this.”

Tony didn’t want Bruce all fucking over him, but found leaning against his friend as they made their way up the steps helpful. They walked into a world of stained glass and gothic arches and whispering throngs. The caskets stood amongst a nest of flowers beneath the altar, side by side, as if they were getting married. The fact that one was polished ebony with platinum hardware while the other was a snowy white trimmed with platinum only added to the wedding theme.

Bruce squeezed Tony’s hand and clapped his back lightly. “You’ll get through this,” he whispered.

Tony looked around. “Where’s the fucking cake?”

Bruce gripped his shoulders. “Ton—”

He brushed Bruce off him. “Fuck you. Like you give a shit.”

“I need to get something from my car,” Bruce whispered.

Tony ignored him. Fucking Bruce. “WHERE’S THE FUCKING CAKE?” When no one answered, he addressed the mourners with his fists on his hips. “Well?? This looks like a wedding.” He looked over at Bruce to see if fucking Fruity Pebbles had an opinion, but Bruce was gone. Figures. “Doesn’t it look like a wedding? Huh? It does! It looks like a fucking wedding, and we should have cake.”

Large men in black suits—men who wore black suits even when they weren’t at funerals—strode toward him. Tony held up a hand to them. “Not one more step.” He looked to the others coming down the aisles on either side. “That goes for all of you.” One man continued toward him. “You’re FIRED!” Tony roared at him. He turned on the others. “Every one of you Lurch motherfuckers! Get out of here! Now! You’re all fucking fired!”
He stared around the room at all of the horrorstricken faces. All of the toupees and facelifts, the fake tans, fake tits, fake concern. It was sickening. “Don’t look at me like that, you oily bags of pretention! I know why you’re here. You don’t give a shit about the corpses in those shiny coffins. Not a single filthy shit. You’re here because you want to be part of the spectacle. You want your fucking picture at this fucking funeral. You want to be part of the freakshow. You’re nothing but a bunch of leeches and thieves made of plastic and greed.” He gave them two hands of fuck you. “Fuck you, leeches! Fuck all of you!”

He turned on the caskets. “And fuck them. Yeah, that’s right,” he said, answering the stunned gasps from the crowd. “What? They didn’t give a fuck about me. They didn’t give a fuck about you, either. Any of you. I don’t care how much Mom donated to your charity or if Dad banged you at the Ritz twice a month—they never fucking liked you and they never cared. They….” His face felt hot, and his eyes had begun to burn. “They didn’t know how…and….”

He backed into something solid. Bruce. “I don’t want to be here,” he told Bruce softly. “Get me out of here, Men’s Wearhouse.”

“Okay.” Bruce took his arm and began escorting him out.

“Wait. Wait, I’m not done. I have to go piss in his casket.”

Bruce tugged him toward the entrance.

“Wait! NO! I need to—” Something stung his neck. He slapped at it.

“I’m sorry,” said Bruce, tucking a hypo inside his jacket. “You’ll thank me later.”

“What. The. FUCK?? I’m a billionaire now, motherfucker! In America! I can do anything I want. I can have your ass locked up and put away for life!”

Bruce dragged him through the doors. “But you won’t, because you love me.”

“In this universe, maybe….” Everything went gray. And then it was black.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

The idea that Hulk's inner monologue is reasonably intelligent and articulate in contrast to his monosyllabic speech was inspired by an episode of Robot Chicken.

Bruce half pulled, half carried Tony down the steps. He had Tony on even ground, when his friend began to vomit on his shoulder. Bruce turned Tony’s head slightly to let his sick fall on the sidewalk instead. A photographer rushed at them and snapped a picture. Rage took Bruce before he could counter it.

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Hulk lunged at the journalist. Vultures! Snapping pictures of the bereaved at a funeral! He grabbed the camera as he shoved the man down. The camera made a beautiful crunch as he threw it to the cement. Bits and pieces scattered as he stomped on the parts that weren’t broken. “SMASH!”

In the midst of his self-righteous rage, he noticed some men in black suits—probably the elder Stark's bodyguards that had now become Tony’s—taking Tony away. Hulk didn’t care much for Tony. Tony was kind of an asshole. Hulk relieved a second photojournalist of his camera and destroyed it too. All the while, in his head, Bruce whined about Tony. Stupid Bruce loved stupid Tony. It was pathetic, really, but Bruce had always been rather pathetic. Now there were more people taking pictures. How dare they! Had they never heard of manners? “More smash! More smash! Smash! Smash! SMASH!”

Suddenly he was pulled away from reality and back into weak Bruce’s stupid head. Before he could reassert himself, a great, churning tornado caught him up and tossed him into a field of soft green grass. Hulk tumbled back to his feet, growling. How dare stupid Bruce! Hulk had been in the midst of demolishing evil cameras! If Bruce thought this would hold him—

A dozen colorful pit bull puppies gamboled toward him, their ears flopping as they bounded through the grass. Hulk cooed and dropped to the ground.

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Bruce ran to the two men as they carried Tony away. They must have been with the limo when Tony fired everyone else. “Wait! This man’s having a medical emergency!” His blood hummed. Perhaps Tony would have been safe with his new bodyguards, but Tony had given Bruce a directive, and it was all he could think about.

“This man’s Tony Stark. We’re in charge of him.”

“If you’re his bodyguards, I think that means he’s in charge of you.”

This didn’t seem to impress the bodyguards much. They glowered at him. One dropped Tony’s feet to menace Bruce. Tony’s new bodyguards had no idea who Bruce was. And, Bruce, even in his panic, wanted to keep it that way.

He and Tony had been friends for years, but they kept their friendship relatively secret. It wasn’t just
because Bruce was gay and their friendship was...unconventional. They thought Bruce’s government keepers and Tony’s parents wouldn’t like them associating with each other, but they also enjoyed sneaking around. There was something quietly thrilling about going to events and pretending to bump into each other.

“He’s in grave danger,” Bruce told them. “He—has preeclampsia! That’s—” (Something only pregnant women get—fuck!) “—widespread vascular endothelial malfunction and vasospasm. He needs immediate medical attention.”

The guard stared down at him. “We’ll take him to a hospital.”

“That’s alright. I’m a doctor.” That was true; he was some kind of doctor. "I’ll stabilize him and take him there myself.”

“You don’t look like a doctor.”

“Yeah,” said the other guard, shaking his head sadly. “That suit.”


“What’s your name?”


Fuck.

The man looked at him blankly.

Bruce cleared his throat. “I have some equipment in my car that will help him.” He stepped around the man to grab Tony. “I’ll take it from here now. You two have done a great job. I’ll tell him at the hospital when he wakes up.”

He barely saw the bodyguard’s fist in time. It crashed through the limo’s tinted glass as Bruce dodged it. He wasn’t as lucky the second time. It was his head that shattered the next window. Hulk? Little help here?

Puppies! Hulk love puppies. Hulk busy.

You selfish, fucking asshole! There will be no puppies if—

The guy had him by a fistful of shirt collar and his throat. Bruce’s feet weren’t touching the ground. The other guard had left Tony to join the fun. Frantic, Bruce tried to break the hold.

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Hulk shook off the puppies with a sigh. Weak, stupid Bruce. He threw Bruce to the puppies and took control of the body.

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Something woke Tony from his nightmares. It took him a bleary moment to realize what it was—the cessation of motion. Gasoline fumes filled the car as Bruce opened the driver’s side door. Bruce’s lower lip was split and puffy, and he had a bandage taped to the left side of his forehead. “Are you okay? Do you need anything?”

“A dirty martini?”
Bruce, hanging on the door, chuckled. His knuckles were bruised; they shone with an ointment. “How about a 7-up?”

Tony barely managed to open the passenger door in time to hurl all over the pavement. He finished heaving and found Bruce standing beside him. A gentle hand rubbed between his shoulder blades. “I’ll get you something to drink.” But he lingered there, rubbing Tony’s shoulders and up the back of his neck. “Right back,” he whispered and was gone.

Tony shut the car door and rolled over on his side. Bruce had adorned the reclined bucket seat with a fucking bower bird nest of blankets and pillows. Freak. Tony clutched the pillow stashed between him and the console and buried his nose in it. It smelled like a Grateful Dead concert.

Bruce opened the door on the other side and climbed in. He thrust a bottle in Tony’s face. Tony took it with a sigh. “This is a mixer. Nobody really drinks this shit except little kids.”

Bruce grabbed his backpack from the backseat and pulled some pill bottles out of it. He shook some out and handed them to Tony. “One’s for nausea, the other’s a sedative.”

Tony took the pills and washed them down with the soda. Bruce fluffed the pillow and flipped it over. Tony stretched. “Gee, thanks, Mrs. Cleaver.” He groaned as the music started. “No fucking Enya.”

Bruce flipped through his cd’s for a second, then switched them out. Smells Like Teen Spirit began to play. Bruce looked at him. Tony shrugged. As Bruce put the car in gear, Tony rested the side of his face against the pillow. The cold side. Tony closed his eyes.
Chapter 3

At four o’clock in the morning, traffic on the highway was light, mostly eighteen-wheelers and a scattering of passenger cars. They drove through a world of amber lights and shadows. Bruce played music he thought Tony would like. Tony slept through all of it.

As Pearl Jam’s Black groaned passionately through the speakers, Bruce glanced at his sleeping friend. At least in sleep, he didn’t seem to be in pain. Bruce pulled a blanket over Tony’s shoulder. He returned his eyes to the road in time to enjoy passing beneath a sign marked with their destination.

He mouthed along with the song, afraid singing might wake Tony. I know you’ll be a star in somebody else’s sky /But why, why /Why can’t it be, can’t it be mine? He blinked away tears and risked a quick look at Tony. Tony slept, oblivious.

Bruce took a deep breath, trying to get more oxygen to his brain. He was tired. That’s all. And it was an emotional song. People were supposed to be moved by songs like that and— It was okay. He had stopped asking ‘why not me’ years ago. But sometimes the feeling crept up on him and pierced his heart through like a long needle.

He wiped his face and rubbed his hand on his slacks. This wasn’t about him. Tony needed him. Bruce filled his chest with another deep, cleansing breath. Tony needed him. Tony needed him. And sometimes, being needed is almost as good as being loved.

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Scree!

Tony rolled over. Wind caught in the corner beside his head. It swirled around, making the fabric walls flap.

Scree!

Tony groaned as he wiped a hand over his eyes. The breeze fluttering about him tasted of salt. He blinked. Tent. He was in some kind of little tent. What the fuck?

Scree! Scree!

Seagulls. He sat up. Outside the crappy tent, Bruce, wearing a green tee shirt and some ratty-ass shorts, hunched over some kind of shitty little stove—like cub scouts or bums might use. Beyond him, teal blue waves crashed on a beach of white sand.

As Tony moved his left arm, he found himself bare-chested and connected to an I.V. “Hey, Misery! What the fuck are you doing to me?” He waved the arm at Bruce.

“You’re up! Just in time for breakfast!”

“This shit. What’s this shit?”

“You were dehydrated. I’m replenishing your fluids.”

“It puts the lotion in the basket.”

Bruce cocked his head a little. “You feel better?”
“Yeah.” Tony started to take out the I.V. and winced. Bruce was almost on top of him in an instant.

“No! Let me do it.” He grabbed gloves from a box beside Tony, whipped them on, and began removing the tape holding down the port carefully. “You see people doing that all the time in movies and things. It’s ridiculous.”

Tony watched. Bruce had the gentlest hands. He fished a tiny packet from his backpack, tore it open, and held the alcohol wipe against the I.V. wound. He folded up Tony’s arm. Tony stared at him. “Where are we?”

“Florida. Near Miami.”

“Florida? That’s like eighteen hours from New York City. What the fuck did you do? Drive all night?”

“Yeah.”

“Duuude.”

Bruce’s mouth tilted up on one side. “Yes. I got you out of there.” He smiled outright, obviously pleased with himself. As Tony rolled up the legs of his pants, however, Bruce sort of whimpered. “Your suit,” he whispered.

Tony huffed. “I have five more just like it.” He threw a light punch into the side of the tent. “What’s up with this homeless hippie squatter shit?”

“I was planning on camping my way home, so my car was full of supplies.” Bruce’s eyes shone with adoration. “I love that hatchback.”

“Yeah, I got it for you because of its great gas mileage and its roomy cargo space for stowing dead bodies and camping equipment.”

“Tony—”

“So that explains the tent and shit, but what the fuck are we doing here?”

“We’re eating breakfast. Then I’m going to take a nap.” He grinned hugely. “And then I’m taking you to the Bahamas to rest.”


“Yes. I called from a payphone and reserved a flight and a hotel room.” His face mirrored Tony’s befuddlement. “You told me you wanted to escape, and it’s the happiest place I could afford to hide you. Studies have shown sunlight to have positive effects on mood, and beaches are almost universally considered calming—”

“You paid for this?”

Bruce left him to pull something off the lame little stove. “Yeah.”

That was just stupid. “Why’d you do that? You’re poorer than shit.”

Bruce laughed a little as he fucked with his pots and crap. “No, I’m not exactly.” He looked up at Tony. “And I did it because you’re my best friend.”

Tony felt strangely overwhelmed. He had taken Bruce on trips and bought him things, but Bruce
buying them tickets and stuff—that was probably analogous to Tony giving up two thirds of his fortune. “Are you going to be okay next month?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re not going to be eating cat food and ramen dipped in peanut butter, are you?”

Bruce chuckled and handed him a plate. “No. Besides,” he shrugged, “I love peanut butter.”

Tony lifted a pancake from his plate with a fork, examining it with suspicion. “Whatever. You know I’m paying you back.”

“No. You’re not.” Bruce sat across from him. “Oh, I had to use a mix. Sorry. Best I could do at a Quicki Mart.”

Tony cut a bite carefully. “You put, like what, turmeric and elderberry in here?”

“It’s plain.” Bruce made a face. “Refined white flour. I didn’t have anything special. The syrup has no nutritional value either and probably no flavor that isn’t artificial, but I heated it. It should taste okay. Possibly.”

Tony stuffed a forkful in his mouth and chewed. “Whatd’ya know, Grapenuts—this isn’t too bad.” He waited until Bruce’s mouth was full, then added, “I’m paying for this trip. All of it.”

Bruce swallowed angrily. It was funny. “I’m paying for it.” His self-righteousness fizzled as their stare lengthened. “Let me do this for you. Please. I’m getting something out of it—I’ll get to be with you. And…I owe you.”

His sincerity was fucking heartrending. Tony’s eyes dropped to his plate. He twisted a bite of pancake around in the syrup. “Yeah, you do owe me. You’re pretty tiresome to have around.”

“Good. I go out of my way to be tiresome. I have a doctorate in it.”

“Caltech will give anybody a degree in anything.”

Bruce snorted in amusement, but didn’t say anything; his mouth was full. He must have been really hungry to let that go without a comment. Tony had fully expected a sarcastic assault on MIT. Tony waited, but when there was still nothing but an affectionate expression and chewing, he threw Bruce a friendly smirk. The pancakes were shit, the coffee was shit, and the syrup was like sugary port-a-potty goo. But being with Bruce always felt good.

Tony turned his gaze to the surf and inhaled a deep breath of the salt air. It was a beautiful day. It was like nothing bad in the world ever happened, reality hiding behind a veneer of blue sky. It looked so serene. As if people weren’t dying while he and Bruce sat there eating breakfast. As if, at that very moment, cars somewhere weren’t plummeting off cliffs, fortunes weren’t changing, and sons weren’t being forced to assume the obligations of their fathers.
Chapter 4

After eating, they fed their scraps to the gulls, had a couple of breakfast beers, and walked around for a while on the beach. Bruce looked ready to drop, so Tony reminded him that he was supposed to nap before they went to the airport. He looked grateful for the suggestion. He seemed surprised, however when Tony joined him in the tent.

“What? You look a little green. I thought you’d like a cuddle...and maybe a belly rub.”

Bruce, bared down to purple boxerbriefs, lay back with a laugh. “Come here.” Tony removed his slacks. Bruce seemed about to say something, but was rendered speechless by the sight of Tony’s ruby red thong. Tony snuggled next to him.

As he made a bored pretense of rubbing—mainly flicking Bruce’s fur the wrong way—Tony hoped Bruce would—

Bruce stroked Tony’s bare, muscular stomach, grazing the skin with his fingernails, then rubbed gently. Tony sighed in appreciation. “Psychic fuckwad. We should draw an eye on your forehead and put a sign outside the tent declaring you the Great Brucini. You could make your money back.”

Bruce snickered. “When you want something, you usually tell me that I want it.”

“I don’t do that.”

“If you say I want to snuggle, it’s because you want to snuggle. If you say my stomach hurts, it’s because your stomach hurts.” He hugged Tony’s chest to his. “It’s okay—it’s cute.”

Tony didn’t say anything. He didn’t like the idea of being so transparent—even with Bruce. Maybe especially with Bruce.

“I’m sorry.” Bruce’s fingertips returned to skate gentle circles across Tony’s flesh. “I guess instant pancakes and cheap beer aren’t a great combination.”

Tony feigned indifference. He felt self-conscious about Bruce’s fussing over him all of a sudden. “It’s not really an ache. The food’s just kind of sitting there, that’s all.”

“Mine aches,” Bruce said a little plaintively. “I was starving; I ate too quickly.”

Tony sat up. “Why did you act like I was wrong?”

“I said you accuse me of having what you have or wanting what you want. I never said it isn’t true sometimes.”

Bruce massaged Tony’s shoulder, coaxing him back down. Tony surrendered with a disgruntled sigh. They faced each other, and Bruce continued alternately rubbing and stroking Tony’s abdomen. Tony sort of wanted to punch Bruce’s aching fucking stomach; instead, he ran the backs of his fingers down it. Bruce blinked sleepily, smiling at Tony as if he were the world’s most wonderful person. (Bruce was a genius, after all.)

They lay there for a time, rubbing each other’s tummies and staring into each other’s eyes. It was great until Tony began to feel self-conscious. “This is weird, huh?”

Bruce sighed. “I was thinking it was pretty fantastic. Why is it weird?” As Tony searched for the
right words—oddly, he didn’t want to blurt out the first thing that came into his mind—Bruce answered his own question. “It feels too intimate.” He peeled Tony’s hand from his abdomen and kissed his knuckles. “That’s all right. I’ll do you for a few more minutes, then maybe you should roll over and I’ll rub your back. I bet you’re tense.”

So Tony let Bruce rub and massage him for a while. He closed his eyes as Bruce worked the knots from his muscles. Bruce’s hands seemed to weaken before Tony thought they should. “I think we’re done for now,” Bruce said in a tight voice.

“What about my lower back?”

Bruce lay down with a groan and rolled over, his back to Tony. “I’ll do it later. My stomach still hurts.”

Tony spooned Bruce and slipped his arm beneath Bruce’s. He ran his fingertips beneath Bruce’s ribs. Bruce pushed his hand lower. “Stomach cramps almost always involve the small intestine. Concentrate around the navel. And maybe use a firmer touch.”

Tony shoved the heel of his hand into Bruce’s belly button and stirred with an indignant zeal.

Bruce gripped his wrist. “I think that’s good.”

“We just started. You can’t be better that fast.”

“I am.” Tony didn’t need to see Bruce’s face to know he was grimacing. “It hurts, but I think I can sleep now. Thanks, Tony.” Tony pushed Bruce’s hand away and continued to rub him, more gently this time. Bruce sighed softly. “Thanks, Tony.”

As Tony, pressed against Bruce’s back, listened to the wind buffet the little tent and the ever-present sound of the surf crawling over the sand, his mind wandered to the cathedral and those caskets.

Those caskets. Those two fucking caskets….

He didn’t even know those people in those caskets…. And yet, tiny questions kept erupting like lightning in his brain. Had it hurt? Did they know they were dying? Did one go first while the other—even if for only a few seconds—registered the loss?

For a moment, he imagined Bruce dying beside him. He had almost lost him once. He remembered how that felt—the helplessness, the terror…. Had they been afraid?

He didn’t love them. He didn’t love them—and yet the idea that they might have been afraid—He could see his mother’s face, her horrorstricken face, as she clutched her bleeding husband and the car flipped its way down the ravine. The ice queen might have loved the ratbastard in that last desperate moment. She might have even loved her son.

A chill fell across his skin.

“Tony?” Bruce turned toward him and rubbed his arm. “Are you okay?”

Tony blinked at him. “Yeah.” His voiced sounded thick to his own ears. “Why?”

“You sniffled.”

“I thought you were asleep.”

“Close. But I’m awake if you want to talk.”
Tony kissed Bruce’s lips. Bruce didn’t protest or pull away. He welcomed Tony into his mouth. Tony closed his eyes as Bruce’s fingers feathered through his hair. They kissed with a slow, sleepy passion.

A few minutes in, Tony realized that he hadn’t brushed his teeth since yesterday morning. Drinking, eating, puking, sleeping—his breath must have smelled like dog farts, and his mouth probably didn’t taste much better. But Bruce was practically ass-deep in his mouth, sucking and chewing it as if it were made of strawberry ice cream.

Technically, they still had a prohibition against kissing on the mouth, but it had more or less turned into something where only Tony could initiate it, but Bruce could end it. Neither of them wanted to stop now. At this moment, Tony craved the intimacy he feared, and Bruce, for whatever reason, seemed only too happy to oblige.

Bruce’s movements were so deliciously slow. He was evil. Pure evil, toying with Tony like this. Tony’s cock throbbed, awake and yearning. He hoped Bruce would suck him like that—in fucking slow motion—drawing out every sensation in the hottest agony. Tony felt his cock straining to break free of his thong. It was so tight, so ready, growing longer and longer. He could feel it climbing up his stomach, smearing a trail of hot precum against his flesh.

And then Bruce wasn’t simply moving slowly…he wasn’t fucking moving at all. “Bruce.” Tony pinched Bruce’s nostrils together. “Wake up.” Bruce’s mouth hung open a crack. Tony stuck his finger in it and tapped against his teeth. “Goddamnit, Bruce. You sleepy fucktard.”

Tony slipped off his underwear and wrapped one of Bruce’s flaccid hands around his big, throbbing cock. A smile flickered across Bruce’s sleeping face. His dick twitched. That was it. He lay there like a corpse.

Tony sighed and flopped down beside his stupid friend. Bruce had driven all night. It wasn’t surprising he was sleepy. Still, to fall asleep when they were trying to have sex—when he was about to have sex with Tony Stark—who did that?

Tony felt his frustration taking physical form. Disgusted, he gripped his hard cock and beat his meat in rapid jerks. He thought about his last girlfriend, Marissa or Clarissa or something like that. She had been so hot. That long red hair—and the carpet had even matched the drapes. A thin red line had pointed the way to her wet cunt. Mmmm…yeah. Mariss—girl. Yeah, ‘girl’ worked. He rubbed her clit slowly, grinding. She pushed her hips against him. He teased her with quick, small circles and licked one creamy inner thigh; knowing she wanted his tongue, knowing she wanted him. His fingers framed her clit. She moaned. He pinched gently, then harder. Her breath caught. He treated her to a light swipe of his tongue. Her cunt bumped against his whiskery chin as she whimpered for more. And—

What the fuck? He had been so close. So close, so close—and what the fucking fuck! He tried again. She was on her hands and knees, groaning in gasps as he thrust inside her. He gave her upturned rump a light smack. A moan stuck in her throat as he opened her asshole with a pinky. He pumped her cunt harder as he played with her hot little hole. He plunged a digit inside, and laughed at her surprised cry. She might have expected a pinky; he gave her a thumb.

He gasped aloud as…nothing. Furious, he rolled over and punched the floor of the tent, leaving a dent in the fabric-covered sand. He flopped on his back and tried again with the same result. This had never happened to him before. This was wrong. This was so, so wrong.

Maybe it was all of the drinking he had done over the last several days. Maybe it was grief—no. No, that couldn’t be it. He wasn’t grieving. He didn’t even fucking care. Fuck that.
Maybe it was whatever shit Bruce had given him. That was probably it. Bruce. This was Bruce’s fault.

His balls ached as if he’d been kicked. Holding them didn’t help. They just hurt more. The pain crawled into his guts. It pressed against his navel. It bled into his lower back. He curled up on his side with a groan.

A thin hatred snaked its way through his body. He almost never got blue balls—maybe a few times when he had been too young to understand exactly what he was doing or how his body worked. But he was Tony Stark—Tony Fucking Stark—and this shit simply didn’t happen to him.

He sat up with effort. Bruce lay, crashed, on his back, sleeping soundly. If Tony punched Bruce like he wanted, it probably wouldn’t be Bruce who woke up. It would probably be Hulk. Tony had seen him before—Bruce’s alternate personality—basically just Bruce, even stupider than usual with a Neanderthal-like grasp of language and a violence at odds with the scientist’s scrawny body. Despite Bruce’s physical failings, he fought like a tiger when Hulk took over.

But Tony could still take him. Time to wake up Hulk. Fair was fair, after all. He gave Bruce a good, hard dickpunch.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

**WARNING: DUBCON. DUBCON. DUBCON. There is dubcon in various forms for the next two chapters.

**If you're scared of DUBCON...don't read a fic rated explicit with dubcon warnings and tags all over it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tony watched with scientific curiosity as Bruce woke with a sharp groan. Bruce folded up and writhed in agony, moaning through clenched teeth. After a few seconds, he struggled up on his elbows and knees with his head bowed, gagging hoarsely. Had Tony not been in so much pain himself, he might have felt sorry for him.

The next instant, Bruce lunged at him. Tony fell backward with Bruce on top of him. He barely had time to register the first blow before Bruce’s fist was in his face again.

Tony’s head rang as he grabbed Bruce’s wrists and grinned up at him. “Hello, Hulk.” Tony tried to head butt him, but he caught a shoulder in his nose instead. “Motherfucker.” Instinctively, his hands went to his face. He gasped as Hulk’s hands closed around his throat.

Bruce/Hulk throttled him angrily. Every cell in Tony’s body hardened like a cock. He hadn’t expected Hulk to choke him. His aching balls begged for release, and he had loved breath play ever since Bruce had choked him while fucking him doggy style that first time. Tony saw stars; he gripped Hulk’s arms weakly…and lifted his pelvis to brush his hard cock against Hulk’s.

Bruce/Hulk’s expression shifted strangely. His genitals were, undoubtedly, still throbbing from that evil punch, but Bruce seemed able to take a lot of damage when Hulk was in charge…and sometimes pain like that felt a little good. Tony shuddered. Sometimes…it felt…really good.

Without exactly meaning to, Tony moaned. Having Bruce—Hulk—whatever—drowning over him while choking him made him feel almost crazy with sexual frustration. His bare glans scraped against the fabric of Hulk’s green boxers. He could feel Hulk’s thick cock hardening. Tony shifted his hips from side to side, rolling his own big, throbbing cock over Hulk’s.

A soft, surprised moan rumbled through Hulk’s lean body. His hands were still wrapped around Tony’s throat, but his pressure had lightened. Tony put his hands over Hulk’s and pressed. Everything faded to gray. Tiny beads of color flickered before his eyes like a school of fish flashing back and forth. He was nothing but needy flesh and flashing lights. He thrust against Hulk, smearing precum across the glans beating above Hulk’s navel. His own glans felt as if it were a pulsing point of light—the head of a spear, his body nothing but shaft. Tony moaned softly.

But Hulk’s fucking hands let go. Tony gasped a breath, then pressed his hands against Hulk’s hands again.

Hulk squeezed Tony’s throat. Tony fought for air. Using his feet and thighs, he shoved Hulk’s underwear down. Hulk’s cock thumped against Tony’s stomach. Tony’s body struggled for air, but
his mind craved more. Every sensation was elongated and trippy; every second, like riding a roller coaster on acid. His cock and his head felt ready to burst. The deep ache of his swollen balls transformed into something uniquely pleasurable. His mind clawed at the dark, not simply for sexual release, but for something else, something.... As he was about to fall into the dark, the pressure on his throat relaxed.

A rush of air filled him—an abrupt and unwelcome surge of life. He opened his eyes as a drop of saliva hit his face. Bruce/Hulk stared down at him with mesmerized eyes. He pet Tony’s hair. Tony tried to put Hulk’s hands around his throat again, but Hulk held them still. He stared at Tony strangely. “No choke Tony.”

“Yes choke.” He pulled at Hulk’s hands.

Hulk drew his hands into fists and planted each one on the ground beside Tony’s head. “No. No choke.” He stared at Tony with an intense, crazy expression. And then his tongue swiped up Tony’s face from chin to hair. He licked in long slimy strokes, his tongue rasping as it dragged across Tony’s facial hair.

Tony changed tactics. He reached up and tweaked Hulk’s nipples. That didn’t go well. Hulk banged Tony’s head against the ground. That wasn’t the reaction Tony had been looking for.

He tried again. Perhaps he had gone too fast. Maybe Hulk was ticklish. Bruce was insanely ticklish. He massaged Hulk’s nipples gently with his thumbs, rolling them around. He continued their sword fight as Hulk’s nipples puckered beneath his touch. “Choke me,” he whispered to the alternate personality, and stretched his neck out invitingly.

Hulk grunted and wrapped his hands around Tony’s neck. Tony rewarded him with a pelvic thrust and a gentle nipple tug. Precum, his own and Hulk’s, glazed Tony’s skin. Hulk’s hands squeezed Tony’s throat in a tantalizing rhythm that mimicked the rocking of their bodies, but he squeezed too lightly.

Tony pinched Hulk’s engorged nipples. They were so swollen; he was sure they ached with yearning. Hulk moaned and pushed against Tony’s touch, obviously wanting more, but the alter’s hold remained light. Tony pinched harder. Hulk’s cock ground against Tony’s. Tony tugged Hulk’s nipples—hard. More writhing. More moans. He squeezed each tender little knob between his thumb and middle finger and pulled them harder and harder, wiggling his index finger over their tips. Hulk shook all over with pleasure and desire. He stopped choking Tony altogether.

So Tony slapped him across the face. Hulk sat back in surprise.

This sucked. Apparently, Hulk was really slow. It was sad that someone as intelligent as Bruce would have an alternate personality this thick. Tony punched him in the gut. His knuckles plowed through the scientist’s unprepared, underdeveloped abdominal muscles to brutalize the small intestine struggling to digest Bruce’s big meal.

Hulk caught his stomach and dipped forward with a pained ‘oof.’ He hunched over for a second, then, holding his midsection, looked at Tony in bewilderment. Tony slapped him above his clasped hand, eliciting a deep groan. The next only resulted in a soft grunt. A low punch made Bruce-Hulk’s eyes squeeze shut in pain. He hadn’t anticipated that initial blow, and it had rendered him unable to tighten his muscles or breathe correctly to endure the others. Tony hit him in the mouth, reopening his split lip.

“Choke me you, fucking moron!” Finally, the idiot reacted. Tony sank into a welcome oblivion as Hulk’s angry hands squeezed him into total darkness…
…but it was over too soon. The world swam a bit as he opened his eyes. His head ached from breathlessness. He saw Bruce outside, arched over, near the door of the tent. He seemed to be retching.

Tony felt like a dick. He hoped he hadn’t hurt Bruce too badly. He pulled up to see, when he realized he couldn’t move. His hands were bound with silver duct tape and lashed tightly to his waist.

Bruce scooted next to him. His lower lip was bleeding. One hand clutched his stomach, the other held a jar of peanut butter.

“Hey, Bruce? You okay, bro?”

“No Bruce. Bruce gone. Hulk smash.” He dipped a hand in the jar and globbed a fistful of peanut butter over Tony’s mouth. As Tony tried to protest around the mouthful of peanut butter, Hulk rolled him over and smeared peanut butter up and down his ass crack and all over his hole.

“Smash,” Hulk muttered, wedging Tony’s hole apart with his fingers.

“Waim.” Tony had trouble talking around the mouthful of peanut butter. He had to pause to swallow a lump of it. It had nuts. “Wait, wait. There’s been a misunderstanding. Bruce? Come on, Bruce. You know this was all in fun. You had fun, didn’t you?”

“Tony bad. Hulk never like Tony.”

“I like you, Hulk. Roll me over and give me a kiss.” He was sure that if he could kiss Hulk, he could bring Bruce back.

But Hulk did not roll him over and did not give him a kiss. Instead, a rigid cock invaded Tony’s sticky, greasy hole—carrying an army of nut pieces along with it.

Chapter End Notes

**Don't try this at home.
Tony fought against his bonds but couldn’t break them. Cock and nuts ground against his prostate. It shouldn’t have felt good, but it did. He moaned with uninhibited pleasure. It was painfully, weirdly good.

Bruce—Hulk—whatever—plunged so fucking deep. Each thrust punched into Tony’s body deeper than before, birthing jagged groans from his chest. Tony bowed his ass up to maximize the intensity. He could feel peanut butter-gooey pubes knocking against his stretched rim. His body sucked after the cock each time it rushed out, strained for it when it dove back, opened and surrendered to it as it plunged his depths.

His heavy, swollen balls ached as his friend’s bounced against them. It was a good sort of ache. He wondered if Hulk’s balls ached too. He wondered if he also enjoyed it. Tony hoped he did. He spread his thighs wider so their balls could swing more.

Hulk grunted and pounded Tony harder. Tony felt Hulk’s glans tremble inside him, then cum shot against his walls. Hulk held there for a second, his breaths soft moans as he came more. When he pulled out, a wave of creamy, nutty love juice splurted from Tony’s hole and dribbled down Tony’s balls and thighs. Hulk sighed.

Tony waited for Hulk to finish him. Nothing happened. Hulk just sort of basked for a while. “Hey.” Tony writhed about, moving as much as his tape would let him. “We’re not finished.”

Hulk sat up next to him and scooped up some more peanut butter. He didn’t grab Tony’s cock, however. He spackled Tony’s hole with it instead. “Right. Smash.” And then a wedge of fingers plowed into Tony’s hole. Tony had been loosened by the fucking, but he widened further as the knuckles slid inside him. He had never been fisted before. He sort of wished Bruce had smaller hands.

He had the entire thing inside him suddenly. There was so much pressure. It hurt. It really fucking hurt. He bit the inside of his cheek and tried to relax. That helped. He opened himself—mind and body, and he relaxed more. And then the fist pulled out. That hadn’t been so bad. It had felt kinda great, actually, once he had adjusted to it. His breath caught as Hulk’s fist, not the finger-wedge snowplow but the balled up fist, hit his rim full force and punched into his hole. He hiccuped tiny ‘fuck’s as Hulk smashed his prostate. Each punch made his bowels leap inside him.

Every thought Tony had dissolved, melting away to reveal only primal instinct. He wasn’t an orphan; he wasn’t a billionaire; he wasn’t a playboy; he wasn’t a genius. He wasn’t worried about running Stark Industries. He wasn’t worried about freaking out at his parents’ funeral. He wasn’t even worried that he might still be in love with his best friend. It all disappeared and nothing was left but raw, physical feeling.

“Bruce,” he murmured. “Oh, oh, oh fuck. Bruce, Bruce.”
A rather small, puzzled voice answered behind him. “Tony?”

“Bruce?”

“Uh…yeah. What…uh…. What’s up with the peanut butter?”

“Dude, it’s the peanut butter you’re worried about? You’re in me up to your elbow.”

“I can see that.”

“I haven’t come yet.”

“Oh,” said Bruce thoughtfully, as if discovering a small error ruining an equation. “We’ll have to correct that.” He pulled Tony’s stiff cock between his thighs and started working it. He continued the fisting, although his movements were less forceful than Hulk’s. Instead of rapidly plunging a toilet, Bruce seemed to be playing a violin.

Tony shut his eyes and gave himself over to the world of sensation. When his orgasm roared through him, he came more than he ever had in his life. He sighed as Bruce pulled carefully out of him. Warm, watery peanut butter ran down his perineum to his balls. He shut his eyes as Bruce bathed his rim with gentle licks.

Tony turned over and smiled up at Bruce. “Fuck. Fisting rocks. I could have done without the nuts, though.”

Bruce laughed, shaking his head, and began removing the tape.

Once Tony was free, they cleaned each other, then snuggled. Bruce held Tony’s head against his chest and massaged beneath Tony’s navel, soothing the soreness caused by the fisting. Tony felt wonderfully content.

Bruce curled up suddenly, an arm tucked against his stomach. Tony shoved Bruce aside. “Don’t ralph here, man.”

“Fucking Hulk. He acts like we’re different people, but we share the same body. I always pay for his rampages. It takes…” He paused as his eyes squeezed shut. “It takes a while for the pain to move in…but…it catches up.”

“Huh. Now that you mention it, I think I’ve seen that before. I thought it was just how you came down from adrenaline. And that you were kind of a pussy.”

“It’s sort of like coming down—dick.” Bruce relaxed, but kept his eyes closed. “Fuck, I hurt all over.”

“Wouldn’t it be cool,” said Tony, “if when you were Hulk it was like he had his own body and he had some kind of healing ability so when you turned back into you, you were okay?”

“Yeah,” said Bruce, voice full of pain and sarcasm, “and it’d be really cool if you had a suit of armor and could fly.”

“Only in your dorkish deams.”

“This is real for me. He does brainless things and I have to live with the consequences. You don’t—” He interrupted himself with a small groan. “Fucking hell…. His activities certainly didn’t help my digestion. These spasms are killing me. It almost feels like—” He looked down and examined the
ruddy bruises on his abdomen. His fingertips dusted the one near his belly button, which was already darkening to a grayish hue. "You hit me exactly where I told you my stomach hurt."

Tony caressed Bruce’s face. “I punched you other places.”

“You knew I had a stomachache. That’s fucked up.” A spasm took Bruce away from the conversation; he closed his eyes and clenched his teeth.

Tony slunk to the cooler and stuck some ice in a couple of baggies. He put one against Bruce’s stomach and another against his mouth. “It’s not like I wanted to hurt you. You woke up all Hulk-face and I had to take you down.”

Bruce deflated. ‘I’m sorry.” He sounded as ashamed as if he’d been told he’d shit himself.

“It’s okay. I know you can’t help it.”

“I’ve been a lot better. I usually take a sedative before sleeping now, but I was so tired…I didn’t think I’d need it.” Bruce tried to take control of the ice bags. Tony wouldn’t let him.

Tony kept the ice bag against Bruce’s lip while rubbing his stomach gently with the other. The scars from the stab wounds caught his attention. He stroked one with his pinky. “It’s okay, bro. You’re allowed to make a mistake once in a while.”

“Thanks.” Bruce sighed with relief. “I’m always afraid he’ll hurt someone.” His tender expression turned into a bemused frown. “Why was Hulk fistig you? With peanut butter?”

Tony answered briskly. “After I subdued him, I felt kinda bad for the guy, so we made some PB and J’s, but things sorta got out of hand.”

“That’s the story you’re going with? Really?”

“Yep.”

“That was chunky peanut butter.”

“I know. Believe me.”

Bruce giggled. “Yeah, my cock feels like I fucked a meat grinder.”

“If we ever do this again, we’re using creamy, fuckwad.”

“If we do, I’d like to be present for most of it.”

Although Tony suspected that was Bruce’s very lame attempt at a joke, it aroused a question. “That first time we fucked and you offered to let me hit you to make up for it, I would have been beating Hulk, right?”

“No. I can hold him back. And sometimes he enjoys letting me get hurt if he thinks I’ve done something to deserve it.”

“That was you? All of it?”

“I wasn’t hurt or scared. I had never been happier—” He tensed all over. “I didn’t mean—that came out wrong. I had never been with anyone I liked so much—”

As Bruce backpedaled, Tony abandoned the ice bag on Bruce’s lip. He kept holding the one on his
friend’s abdomen as he bent to lick Bruce’s balls. Bruce flinched, whether because they were sore or because he was ticklish, Tony couldn’t tell. Either way, he relaxed after a few long, gentle strokes. Tony moved to Bruce’s shaft. Bruce’s breath caught. A shiver ran through him.

Proud of himself, Tony continued to Bruce’s glans. He worked his tongue around the flared head. When he sucked nothing but the sensitive underside of the glans, Bruce moaned softly. Tony licked a finger and slid it into Bruce’s hole. He continued to ice Bruce’s stomach as he worked his prostate and sucked his cock.


Tony removed his finger and dropped low to tongue Bruce’s rim. He didn’t care to suck or nibble the way Bruce did—although he liked that when it was done to him—but he tried to mimic his friend’s aggressive, petting-zoo-cow style of rim-licking. Judging by his hitching gasps, Bruce seemed to approve.

“Do you have anything in here to use as lube besides chunky peanut butter?”

Bruce sat up on his elbows, a wary look on his face. “I have lube in the console of my car. Why?”

“I mean in the tent. The car’s too far away.”

“The car’s right outside.”

“It was too far away for Hulk.”

“Don’t fuck me, Tony,” Bruce said in a small voice, drawing his legs up. “I don’t do it, and you know why.”

“I wasn’t planning on it.” Tony handed him the ice bag he had been holding and rubbed Bruce’s thigh. “I’m going to fist you.” A terrible thought raced through him. “Your shithead father didn’t do that, did he? I mean, you were like eight or something, right? If you say he did that, I’m going to puke.”

“No.” Bruce’s face was very still. “Objects, yes. Fists, no.”

“Okay.” Tony withheld a shudder. “I don’t need to know any more about that. But—have you ever been fisted before?”

“No, but—”

“I should fist you. You gave me my first fisting, so I’ll give you yours.”

“Technically, that was Hulk. I should try to turn so you can punish him.”

Tony wondered if he looked as hurt as he felt. Really, Hulk had punished him. Wanting to fist Bruce had nothing to do with any of that. “It’s not a punishment. The whole thing’s intense, but the orgasm is like—I don’t even know what to compare it to. It’s fucking great and it feels like it lasts forever. And I—” –want to see your face when you come that hard— “just think you’d like it.”

Despite Tony’s testimony, Bruce looked shaken. “I guess…that’s nice of you.”

“It is. I’m an altruist, really.” He crawled around the tent, looking through Bruce’s bags for something to use.

“Did I mention I have lube in my car?”
Triumphant, Tony held up a can. “This is perfect!”

“Cooking spray? Tony—”

Tony sprayed some on the back of his hand, then coated himself from his fingernails to his elbow. He rubbed his thumb and index finger together. “That’s pretty slick. Better than chunky fucking peanut butter.”

Bruce, his face ashen, nodded. “I guess…. Where do you want me? Hands and knees?”

“Where you are is fine.” Tony grinned. “Missionary fisting.” He shook the can and sprayed Bruce’s cock and hole.

“Fuck,” Bruce puffed, his knees up. “That’s cold.”

Tony grinned and tugged on Bruce’s cock. He fingered Bruce’s hole, jabbing Bruce’s prostate as he coaxed the hole wider. He tried to be gentle; he honestly didn’t want to hurt Bruce. He formed his fingers into a wedge, as Hulk had done, and plowed into Bruce’s hole.

Bruce clenched his teeth. “I think you need to widen me more.”

“You need to relax,” Tony told him. He chuckled. “I always knew you were a tight ass.” He forced his way deeper.

Bruce squirmed. “I’m sooo glad we’re not intimate.”

Tony looked up from his work to frown at Bruce. Bruce lay with his face turned to the side, his expression something between pained and vacant, and his hands clutching the bottom of the tent like claws. His cock was limp despite Tony’s hand jerking it. He wasn’t enjoying this. He wasn’t enjoying any part of it.

Tony sprayed a bit more around Bruce’s rim, then pulled his fingers out. He had only made it to his knuckles, that’s how much of a pussy Bruce was. Nevertheless, he rimmed Bruce a little, then sucked his wilted cock into full bloom. He grazed Bruce’s stomach with his nails, and gave him a thorough blow job that had the scientist bucking as he came. When Bruce was done, Tony slid up beside him, locked an arm around his head, and planted his nose in his hair.

“Thank you,” Bruce murmured into the fold of Tony’s arm.

Tony released him and lay with his face so close to Bruce’s that their noses almost touched. He breathed against Bruce’s mouth, then kissed him very softly. Bruce kissed him back, but made a small noise when pressure hit his injured lower lip.

“Open,” Tony whispered. Bruce blinked at him with damp eyes. They kissed open-mouthed, a delicate dance of tongues. Tony avoided touching Bruce’s lower lip, but he caressed his jaw and chin.

Finally, Tony pulled back, gazing into Bruce’s Bambi eyes and feeling a strange sense of peace. Love was all over Bruce’s face. You love me, Bruce. You love me. Say it. He stroked Bruce’s cheek as he put the ice back on his lip.

Bruce stared at him…and said—
So, this chapter's kind of weird (like the peanut butter chapters were normal?), so if you have any questions, please feel free to ask.

—nothing.

Tony turned his back to Bruce, feeling angry and wounded. That was just fucking wrong. He shouldn’t have felt anything. He was Tony Stark, not some little bitch.

He loved Bruce. He knew Bruce loved him, but they had decided they worked best as friends. And at the canyon house, Tony had professed his love, and Bruce had refused it. Bruce had been scared; Tony understood that, but understanding had been too small a bandage for his wounded ego. He continued to love Bruce, but he had no intention of ever putting his heart out there again. If Bruce wanted this to turn into anything else, he could damn well say it himself.

As Tony lay there stewing, something Bruce had said began to haunt him. “Objects, huh?” Bruce shouldn’t have known about that. If he knew about that….

After a small silence, Bruce answered behind him. “Wooden spoons, broom handles. Other things.”

“That was Hulk, so how do you know what happened?”

“I used to…um…I would bleed and—it frightened me, because I didn’t know what was wrong. So he told me.”

Tony scrubbed a hand over his mouth. He only wanted to know how much access Bruce had to Hulk’s memories. Bruce always told him way, way too much. Tony knew as long as Bruce didn’t actually share memories with Hulk, then he could always say the alternate personality lied if Hulk told Bruce that Tony had provoked him. For now, he just wanted Bruce to shut the fuck up and go to sleep. “Wow. No wonder you’re so fucked up.”

***

Bruce looked at Tony’s back and wanted to disappear. Too intimate. Too everything. Too nothing. Too fucked up—that was the truth of it all. He was so fucked up—he should have been grateful Tony wanted to be around him at all. Even if Tony had been gay and actually wanted to be serious, he wouldn’t have wanted to be serious with Bruce. All of this weird shit with Hulk—no one would willingly sign up for that.

Hulk. Fucking Hulk. Bruce searched for the giant in his head. He found him on top of a snow-capped mountain. Hulk sat, staring down at the small village below, with snow piled on his head and shoulders. Bruce didn’t feel like trying to pacify him by turning into the four-year-old Hulk loved. Hulk could deal with his twenty-three—no. Twenty-four. He had been twenty-four for four days now.

He felt lost suddenly. The cold seeped through him. He had been alive for nearly a quarter of a century. How had he gotten so old?
And I'm alone. Thanks in large part to you, you big green asshole.


I'm not weak. I'm not stupid. I'm more intelligent than most people and—


Bruce rolled his eyes. He remembered his original reason for seeking his monster. What was with the peanut butter? You know I keep lube in the console.

Hulk rumbled. Waim! He laughed more.

You answer my questions with nonsense. Great.

Hulk chuckled to himself and rolled a snowball.

Bitterness overcame Bruce. How could you fuck Tony? You know how I feel about him. What were you thinking?

Hulk hit Bruce in the face with a snowball.

Bruce wiped the snow away. You are never to touch him again. NEVER. Understand?

Hulk ignored him and created a set of enormous birdlike tracks in the snow with his big green hands. He whistled Puff the Magic Dragon as he started on another set of tracks.

Look at me when I’m talking to you, you fucking monster!

Hulk shook the snow off his shoulders and shoved Bruce against the mountainside. Hard. Hard enough to make Bruce’s real body flinch. In the mindscape, stones and powder slid down between Bruce and the giant. Hulk was getting stronger. The efforts to integrate their personalities had met with little success. If anything, Hulk was the one who seemed to benefit from them most. Bruce, in contrast, felt as if he were being pushed to the side. The whole process had become unnerving, so Bruce had abandoned it. They rarely talked now. When they did, it was only to argue.

Fine. Bruce surrounded Hulk with a wall of rock and ice and buried him in snow. Hope you’re in the mood for digging.

Bruce was in the lavender field suddenly. He sank to the ground and buried his face in his knees. A yellow cat appeared and wove around him. Bruce ran a hand over its sinuous body. Hello, friendship cat. The cat purred.

Bruce scratched beneath the cat’s chin. I know I should be happy that Tony and I are friends, but I still want more. I can’t help it. Whenever I’m around him, all I can think about is how much I want us to be together. It hurts—it hurts in the deepest—

Oh, boo hoo. The cat sat and challenged him with jade eyes. You didn’t bring Tony out here to fuck him. You brought him here to help him, remember? Stop being a baby and do what you’re supposed to do.

Thanks, friendship cat.

Yeah, yeah. Just get me some pot. You’re head’s the batshit cave. It’s hard to take sober.
Bruce wiped his eyes and wished sleep would carry him out of his head and its Wonderland cruelty.

And then he was on the beach with Tony. They lay in the wet sand, side by side, naked, beneath a hot, white sun. Tony’s back was to Bruce. Waves snuck onto the shore and frothed around their legs, dragging sand from beneath their bodies before washing away. Tony turned to face him. He caressed Bruce’s jaw. “You feel okay?”

“Yeah.”

“You know how much you want to take care of me?” Tony continued when Bruce, embarrassed, didn’t answer. “I want to take care of you just like that.” He drew Bruce into a gentle kiss. The surf frothed around them. “You’re my true love, Bruce.” Tony stared into his eyes as their wet bodies pressed against each other. Tony’s dark eyes were sharp and clear; he was completely sober. “All of those girls, Bruce, they never meant anything. You’re always the one I’ve wanted. The only one.”

Bruce closed his eyes as Tony’s lips brushed his. “I love how you’re so fucking intelligent,” Tony whispered. “You’re the smartest person I’ve ever met. You’re even smarter than I am.” He rubbed a hand lovingly down Bruce’s side as a herd of unicorns loped past them, kicking up clods of wet sand. “You’re much smarter than I am. And you’re so hot, so strong, so incredible and brave.” He kissed Bruce softly between sentences. The bruises from Hulk’s fight with Tony, the stab wounds from Seth, the cigarette burns hidden by his chest and pubic hair—all erased by the inventor’s caresses. “And you’re so, so fucking normal. There’s nothing about you that’s disturbing or strange. You’re so easy to love. Nothing’s wrong with you. Nothing at all.”

***

Tony stared out the passenger window as Bruce drove. He watched the cutaway mountain face blur past. This Mortal Coil’s cover of You’re a Holocaust filled the car with despair. Everybody goes/ Leaving those who fall behind. He wasn’t talking to Bruce. He couldn’t remember why.

The car swerved suddenly. It crashed through the railing. Tony’s seatbelt snapped as the car flipped over. He slammed against Bruce amid a hail of cd cases and soda. Neither of them said anything as the car tumbled down. The song continued to play until—

Why was Bruce driving? They weren’t in his car.

Tony drove as Bruce stared out the passenger window. Big Star’s You’re a Holocaust filled the cabin with despair. Everybody goes/ Leaving those who fall behind. The road curved through the mountains. The windshield wipers could barely compete with the falling snow. They kept trying to stick to the windshield. Everything would have been dark had it not been for the brightness of the snow.

Tony turned to tell Bruce something, but he couldn’t remember what it was. They had stopped talking. He couldn’t remember why. The car swerved. Tony turned into the skid, but he had lost control. They smashed into the railing. The windshield shattered.

For a split second, they were airborne. Tony turned to Bruce. Blood spewed around the large shard of glass sticking out of Bruce’s throat.

No. Car windshields didn’t shatter that way.

Tony drove as Bruce stared out the passenger window. Black Sabbath’s War Pigs rocked from the speakers. In the field the bodies burning,/ As the war machine keeps turning. He liked this song, but
it bothered him for some reason. The icy road curved through the snowy mountains. Tony listened to the music and didn’t care that he and Bruce weren’t talking. They just had to get through the mountains. The car hit a patch of ice and Tony lost control. They crashed through the railing. The windshield exploded in a hail of dime-sized crystals.

For a split second, they were airborne. It was the longest second imaginable. He turned to Bruce and wanted to tell him something, but Bruce had hit his head on the side window and was held upright only by his seatbelt. Tony grabbed at him, but his own seatbelt prevented him from helping Bruce. The car plunged into darkness.

Fuck. No! Just…fuck!

Tony sat in the backseat playing with a robot he had built. His parents sat in the front, silent. His dad drove. His mother looked out the passenger side window. Ray Charles crooned *You Don’t Know Me* from the speakers. *Oh I am just a friend/That’s all I’ve ever been.* Snow flurries blew past the dark windows. A sad-looking little boy, maybe eight or nine, sat in the backseat too. Tony had never seen a picture of Bruce as a boy, but he knew it was Bruce. Tony became eight suddenly. He smiled at Bruce. They were wearing matching school uniforms, but Tony didn’t recognize them. He showed Bruce his robot. Bruce took it and made a totally unnecessary adjustment…now it shot lasers. Okay, maybe that was cool.

The car swerved. Tony’s father cursed. His mother gasped. The car crashed through the railing. The world paused as the car became airborne. Tony could feel gravity pulling him down into the ravine—just like his parents—just like his parents. Terror seized him.

He turned to Bruce. Everything froze. They looked at each other through a storm of time-suspended broken glass. Tony couldn’t say anything—he couldn’t even scream. Bruce took his hand.

Time snapped back like an elastic band. Hundreds of pieces of glass rushed by them, a swarm of crystal bees. The car flipped down into the darkness.

No. Wait. Tony drove…. He drove…. The car….

Tony couldn’t change it anymore. He had woken up too much at the end that time, and the dream was lost. Like a ghost, it would haunt his waking thoughts for a few hours, maybe longer, then it would disappear into the ether.

For now, it clung to him with filmy hands and lapped at his nerves with a slimy tongue. He cared nothing for dream interpretation or such nonsense, but he couldn’t deny the feelings the dream had stirred. He heaved a breath of salt air, then rolled over and kissed the back of Bruce’s neck. “I love you,” he whispered.
Tony, bored, pillaged Bruce’s bags of neatly folded clothes and carefully ordered supplies. As Tony tossed things around, Bruce’s alarm buzzed. Looking even more disheveled than usual, Bruce lifted himself from his pillow and propped his head on one arm. He smiled at Tony. “We have just enough time to change your look.”

“Your look is the one that needs changing. You’re a fucking mess. You look like a Goodwill puked you up.”

“It’s not that bad—”

“And then a Salvation Army took a dump on you.”

Bruce sat up with a slight wince. “Someone’s feeling bright and shiny.” He ground the heels of his hands into his eyes and yawned. “I wish I did. I need another seven hours of sleep.” He yawned, then laughed a little. “C’mon. Disguises are fun. It’ll be like we’re on the lam or something.”

“It would be all kinds of fun if we were thirteen-year-old girls. Oh, now I see why you think this would be fun.”

“That deft switch of genders is so amusing. Even after the billionth time, it’s still so fresh. So brilliant.”

“Almost as brilliant as you. Bruce Banner—the style of a gutter bum, the brain of a total nerd, and the sarcasm of an old fart. It’s really surprising you’re not with anyone right now.”

Bruce had been barely suppressing a grin until the last sentence. His jaw flexed. “You have everything and you’re not with anyone either. Not for more than a night or two anyway.”

“Yeah, but that’s by choice, not by fate.”

Bruce held still for a second, looking hurt. But then he rolled his eyes. “I almost forgot what an asshole you are. Thanks for reminding me.”

“You’re welcome.” He snapped his fingers at Bruce suddenly. “Hey! I was with what’s her name for nearly two months. That model—the redhead—Clarice something.”

“Elise Manteu. She’s an actress.”

“No.” Tony sorted through Bruce’s duffle bag, looking for a toothbrush. He whipped a checkbook and some mangy socks. “That’s not right.”

“She’s in indie films, remember? Galapagos A-go-go, Monday’s Artichoke…. She was nominated for an Oscar for her performance in A Lantern on the Bridge.”
“Stalk much?”

“I admire her work. And we went to the awards ceremony.”

“Huh.” He quickly discarded some of Bruce’s dayglo underwear.

“You spent most of the evening working on your holographic watch.”

“Oh, yeah. That Oscars.” Tony found Bruce’s toothbrush and picked something out from under his thumbnail with it. “How do you remember it so well?”

“You sat me next to her three hundred pound brother, Mikey.”

“Mikey…Mikey. Lazy eye? Kinda slow?”

“Right. And he smelled like salami.”

“Trying to throw you a bone there, Benji.”

“You’re a real matchmaker, Tony.” Bruce glowered at him. “And he wasn’t even gay.”

Tony had to smile. “Was that the deal breaker?”

“Not really. I fucked the shit out of him. He could barely walk when I shoved him out of my car the next day.”

Tony frowned up at Bruce. “Really?”

“No!” Bruce looked horrified. “No! Fuck no! Are you kidding me?”

“See. This is why it’s hard to set you up with people. You say you want one thing, then you get all buttsore—”

“Stop,” Bruce said quietly. “Please stop. These things come out of your mouth and—”

Tony picked up his thong and smelled it, grabbed some clean briefs from Bruce’s duffle, then tossed his dirty thong into the jumble of clothes inside. “I’m borrowing some underwear.”

“Kinda like ‘take a penny, leave a penny’?”

“If I knew what that was, maybe so. I don’t go to your bars, Bruce.”

Bruce left the tent and rummaged around in the hatchback, which, like the Tardis, seemed to be bigger on the inside. He returned with a plastic bag marked Quicki Mart. “So, I think if we bleached your hair and you wore these sunglasses and some of my clothes, nobody would recognize you.”

Tony tried on the cheap sunglasses. They were gold wire rims with red lenses. They were pretty scary, but he approved of the colors. “These suck.”

Bruce tilted his head to one side. “No. Not really. You know, not many people can pull off big round lenses like that.” He shook his head. “You suck.”

“I do. Very well, from what I’ve been told.”

That won him a faint half smile. “What if we shave your goatee?”

“It’s a vandyke. And no fucking way.”
“What if you didn’t shave around it? You know, get kind of scruffy?”

“Like you?”

Bruce felt his face. “Maybe I should grow a beard.”

“Yeah, you do that, Chewy.”

“What if you shave most of it, but keep a soul patch?”

“Are you looking to get hurt?”

Shrugging, Bruce produced a small box with an obnoxiously happy-looking blonde woman on it. He showed it to Tony. “Blondes have more fun.”

“Not with you.”

Bruce sighed.

Tony opened the box. Bruce watched him for a second, then gathered supplies—jugs of water, a basin, towels. Together, they mixed the chemicals. Tony held still while Bruce applied the stinking shit to his hair.

While they waited for the chemicals to work, Tony picked through Bruce’s clothes, half of which were fashionably packaged in a trash bag, and tried to find something that wasn’t completely hideous. “Dude,” he said finally, “even all of your music shirts are fucked. There’s nothing here I would wear.”

“That’s the point. You’re trying not to look like you. Hey!” He swung a mustard yellow tee shirt at Tony excitedly. “This is perfect!”

Tony examined it. In splattery red letters, it read, ‘eat the rich.’ “You must be so stoned right now.”

“We should rinse out your hair before you put it on.”

“Fuck, man.” Tony groaned. “I’ve been trying to let you live out your Maury Povich makeover fantasy here, but this shit isn’t necessary.”

“Do you want to be hounded by reporters while you’re trying to relax and get your head together?”

“My head’s together.”

“Where’s the wedding cake?!” It was an annoyingly good imitation of him.

“Whatever. I’m only doing this because you’re pitiful and I think of you as my charity case.”

Bruce said nothing for a moment; he simply stared at Tony with bleary eyes. “Lash out all you want—I’m still going to help you,” he said in a quiet voice. He filled a basin with water. “Come here. It’s time to rinse your hair.”

Tony lay on the floor and let Bruce bend his neck back over the bowl just to humor the stupid scientist. He closed his eyes. Bruce massaged Tony’s scalp and neck and made the whole experience feel like some ancient religious rite instead of Ranger Rick’s barbershop.

When they were done, Tony dried his hair with a cheap towel that might as well have been sandpaper, while Bruce picked some cards out of a pocket in his backpack and flipped through them. He held one up to Tony. “That works.” He handed Tony the plastic card. “Now you’re Snyder
Goodall from Peoria.” He looked thoroughly pleased with himself.

Tony scowled at the fake I.D. “You’re kidding.” He snatched the rest of the cards from Bruce. “What the fuck are you doing with these?”

Bruce scowled back. “You never know when you’re going to need a fake I.D.”

Tony flashed one at Bruce. “Dude, this one’s Korean.”

Bruce shrugged. “Yeah.”

“What the fuck are you doing with this shit? Really.”

Bruce rubbed behind his neck. “They’re for my James Bond movie reenactment dinner club.” He glared when Tony laughed. “It’s fun.”

“Fuuuck. You really have no life, do you?”

“Here. You’ll need this passport.”

Tony took it with a smirk. “Fuck. Why stop at the Bahamas? Let’s just run away.”

Bruce’s eyes widened; he looked like a cat on the verge of pouncing. “Do you want to?”

“Run away?” Tony laughed. “What are we—eight?”

“We could just keep going. Disappear. You wouldn’t have to take over Stark Industries. I wouldn’t have to go to Los Alamos. Neither of us would have to be enslaved by the military industrial complex. We could just disappear.”

“Like the Invisible Man?”

Bruce didn’t even react to the joke. “There are places we could go. Borneo, the Andes, the Australian outback…New Zealand’s pretty.”

“You’ve been hitting the bong too hard.”

“There are plenty of remote places where we could go—and cities, maybe. I imagine one could get lost in some urban areas.”

Tony snorted. “I’d rather be a war profiteer than have to wipe my ass with leaves or live in a slum.” He ran a hand through his damp hair. “Besides, you still have a couple of doctorates to go before you become part of the machine. You’ll be in school forever.” He smirked. “Because all nuclear scientists should have degrees in Braille and interpretive dance.” He grinned until he noticed Bruce wasn’t joining him. “They figured it out.”

Bruce had grown pale. He began packing up the equipment. “I’ve completed the doctorates they deemed necessary. They won’t let me finish med school, and I failed to convince them of the importance of becoming proficient in Farsi, Dari, and Mandarin.”

“We taught ourselves Farsi and Dari a couple of summers ago—and Mandarin this past year.”

Bruce looked up from rolling the blankets with a scowl. “They don’t know that.” He sighed. “I’ve lied to myself for so long. I thought when I wouldn’t be able to hold them off anymore; I would use my stunning intellect to sabotage their efforts, but…”
“But….”

Bruce’s mouth lifted at one corner. “You’re supposed to make fun of ‘my stunning intellect.’”

Tony wanted to hug Bruce and give him the sort of soft little kisses that made his eyes puddle. He also wanted to punch him in the face. “It’s not funny. It’s true. I don’t know about the sabotage part. You’re not a criminal. Just a dweeb.”

“I love you, Tony,” Bruce whispered, looking genuinely touched.

“That’s great, dude, but you can’t go sabotaging shit, okay? You’ll get caught. I love you, and you’re fucking brilliant, but you’ll get caught. Your candy-ass won’t last a day in prison. Not a single fucking day. You won’t just be someone’s bitch, man—you’ll be someone’s toilet.” He continued when Bruce only stared at him. “Our numbers came up. We knew this would happen. Now it’s here.”

“So, run away with me.”

“Look, Bruce, I know this sucks, but you can’t always run from things.” Tony pulled up one of the tent pegs.

“We need to go,” Bruce said softly, helping him with the tent. “We’re going to be late.”

***

Bruce hated airports. He hated planes. Everything about them set him on edge. He marched to their terminal with his jaw clenched. Beside him, Tony strolled happily, taking in the sights. He usually flew private jets. This must have been a whole new experience for him. Bruce knew his friend occasionally enjoyed slumming it. This, apparently, was one of those occasions.

They had almost reached their gate when a small boy—maybe two years old—blundered into their path. His red face was tear-streaked and a sheet of yellow snot ran from his nose and over his lips. The distraught child clutched a dirty stuffed dolphin. Bruce stopped in his tracks.

“Don’t,” Tony warned him. “He’s not your problem.”

“I think he’s lost.”

“I’m sure his mom’s around here somewhere.”

Bruce knelt. “Hi. What’s your name?”

The boy picked his goopy nose, blinking his long, tear-soaked lashes thoughtfully. “Li-ah.”

“His name’s Liar,” said Tony. “Great parenting.”

Bruce hissed up at him. “I’m sure that’s not his name. He’s just mispronouncing it.” To the boy, he said, “Do you have a last name? A name that comes after your first name?”

After some deliberation, the boy answered in a shaky voice, “Baby.”


Bruce groaned. “Five minutes, okay? Can you make it five minutes without being an asshole?” He turned his friendliest smile to the boy. “Where’s your mom?”
The boy’s lip quivered. He rubbed a bleary eye with his knuckles. “Mommy.”

“What color is Mommy wearing?”

“Mommy!” The boy began to bawl.

Bruce stroked the boy’s forehead. “Shhh. It’s okay. You’re going to be okay.” He patted the boy’s back. The boy lurched against Bruce’s chest, pasting his shirt with snot.

“You look like a pedophile.”

Bruce flashed an irritated glance at Tony. To his surprise, Tony looked genuinely worried. Bruce caught a dolphin in the face.

The boy made a smacking sound. “Kiss!”

“Yeah.” Bruce tried to fend off the stuffed animal as it attacked him again. “Kiss, kiss.” He spat as the dolphin’s chewed, wet nose dove into his mouth. The boy laughed, burbling blubber. Tony joined him. Bruce picked the boy up. “Let’s go see if this nice woman can help.”

He carried the boy to the counter and asked the gate agent to make an announcement about a lost child while being pelted in the face by the giggling boy’s drippy dolphin.

“I can’t do that,” said the agent. “That’s an unauthorized announcement.”

“It’ll only take a second—”

“I can’t.”

“All you have to do is say—” The dolphin’s nose stuffed his mouth. The boy squealed with delight.

“I’m sorry, but this intercom is to be used for airline business only.”

“Isn’t the welfare of your passengers airline business?” Bruce was indignant despite the dolphin surfing through his hair and the squeeing boy wriggling in his arms.

He felt Tony’s hand on his back. “I got this.”

Tony took up the cause and, after a few smiles and titters, an announcement asking the parents of a lost child to come to inquire at that gate echoed through the terminal. Bruce carried the boy to the nearby sitting area to wait for his parents. Tony followed, but remained standing—safely out of dolphin range.

“You’re amazing.” Bruce couldn’t hold the resentment from his voice. “She had no idea you were rich, and she still turned into your blowup doll in under two minutes.”

“Yeah, it’s a gift.”

“It’s fucked up, is what it is,” Bruce snapped. The boy, not content with sitting in the chair next to Bruce, climbed over onto him and stood on his lap.

Tony frowned at Bruce. “What bug crawled up your ass?”

“It’s just fucked up, that’s all.”

Tony sighed happily and turned his gaze to the large windows. “It’s good to be me. That’s all.”
“I make a logical argument and nothing happens. You smile and the world drops at your feet.”

The boy coughed in Bruce’s face. “I have feet.” He held up a little Velcro-fastened sandal. “See?”

“Uh-huh. Nice.”

“Correction. I smile and the world drops its pants.”

“Pants!” said the boy, excitedly stomping Bruce’s thighs. “I have pants too!”

“Yay!” said Tony. “We all have pants!”

“Yay! Pants!” The boy hopped up and down as Bruce tried to keep his balls out of harm’s way. “Pants! Pants! Pants!”

Bruce held the boy still. “That’s enough. You’re hurting me.”

Tony smirked. “Pussy.”

“PUSSY!” The boy threw his hands in the air and arched backward quickly. Bruce just caught him in time to keep him from flipping headfirst onto the floor. The boy cackled. “Pusssssssssssssssssy!!!”

“Good going, Snyder.”

“He wouldn’t be here to copy me if you hadn’t needed to play Mrs. Doubtfire.”

“That reference isn’t even thinly applicable here.”

“No, but it’s funny.” Tony held his elbows. “Speaking of which, you didn’t know I was rich when you fell for me like an anvil from Acme.”

“I liked you, but it wasn’t because of your charm nor your looks. And I really only liked you after I got to know you. In a meaningful way.”

“You tried to save me from a pack of skinheads after knowing me all of three minutes. What’s that?”

“I’m nice. I’m a nice person.” Bruce gave the boy a little shake. “Q.E.D.”

“Even nice people are shallow. Get over it—you’re no better than anyone else.”

“You think I’m the same as those idiots who fawn all over you at a flash of teeth?” Bruce knew he sounded hurt; he couldn’t help it.

Tony pretended to muse, stroking his chin and staring at the ceiling. “Eh…hmm… Yeah.”

The boy clobbered Bruce with the dolphin. Bruce stayed his arm. “Stop. You’re not cute anymore.” He flashed a bitter look at Tony. “That goes for you as well.”

“Ryan!” came a woman’s voice from the gate counter.

“Mommy!!!” Ryan scrambled off Bruce, and ran, flailing his dolphin, into his mother’s outstretched arms. She smiled at Tony as she snuggled the boy to her bosom. “Thank you so much for finding him and keeping him safe for me.”

“It was nothing.” Tony smiled. “I believe the children are our future.” A line from a Whitney Houston song—delivered as if Tony truly felt that way; Bruce kind of hated him.
Over the intercom, the gate agent called for boarders, and the mother walked away with her son. Bruce looked at Tony without a trace of amusement. “I’m covered in mucus and bruises, but you’re the one she thanked.”

Tony shrugged.

Bruce pulled himself to his feet. “You really don’t see how that’s fucked up?”

“You took care of that kid because you wanted to be thanked?”

“No, of course n—”

“Then quit bitching. C’mon, we’re boarding.”

Bruce sighed and fell in beside Tony. He continued to sulk as they waited in line. He stared at the floor until Tony shoved a shoulder into him and knocked him a little off balance.

“Duuuuude,” Tony whispered against his neck. “We’re standing in line.”

Bruce frowned suspiciously at the huge smile on Tony’s face. “Right….”

Tony cracked his knuckles. “We stand in lines all the time in Peoria. Illinois is just one huge line.”

The realization that Tony was having fun thawed Bruce’s heart completely. He wanted to wrap both arms around the inventor and apologize for being envious and grouchy; instead, he smirked a little. “Yeah?”

“Oh, hell yeah. Like there’s a line to pay your cable bill and…a line to see…that local sports team, and at…uh…K-Mart…to pick up bologna and cool cannibal shirts.”

“Yes,” Bruce agreed, feigning seriousness, “that’s how common people live.”

Tony nodded slightly. “Aren’t you glad I decided to take some time off from warming buns at Weiner Hut to go on vacation with you?”

Bruce giggled. “That’s your current occupation? Bun warmer?”

“Yep. Chief bun warmer.”

“What do you do for fun?”

“I write my name in the snow with my piss.”

“Okaaay. What about when there’s no snow?”

Very casually, Tony said, “I’m a jello-farter.”

Bruce cleared his throat. “That sounds interesting.” He lost his fight to stay serious and laughed. When he regained his composure, he whispered, “What exactly does a jello-farter do?”

“I go to restaurants that serve jello and I fart in it.”

“That’s uh. That’s—”

“It’s a sport.”

“Uh-huh.”
“I’m the Midwestern jello-farting champion.”

They boarded laughing, and Bruce felt so pleased by Tony’s enjoyment of it all that he almost didn’t notice when Tony began talking to the flight attendant and two middle-aged female passengers. “What’s going on?” he asked as Tony drove him into one of the seats vacated by the women.

Tony sat beside him. “Nothing.” He shrugged and fastened his seatbelt. “The seats near the wing have a smoother ride. You don’t fly well and there will probably be turbulence.”

Bruce flushed with love. He was so moved, he almost couldn’t speak. “Thank you,” he managed.

“I just wanted to reduce the odds of your freaking out on me.” Tony gave Bruce a little wink through his sunglasses. “We don’t have any peanut butter here.”
Nassau, Bahamas

They checked into the hotel and had a few drinks. Tony wanted to go exploring right away, but Bruce’s clothes were rather disgusting after playing with Ryan, so he took a shower. Tony joined him.

Bruce laughed at him, but the inventor was oddly somber. He drew close and held Bruce’s face, kissing his neck and behind his ear. Tony’s lightly-calloused fingers caressed Bruce’s wet skin with a reverence Bruce was certain he didn’t deserve. He pulled away. “This isn’t why I brought you here.” Bruce smiled despite the stab of guilt that went through him. That hadn’t been the reason, true. But he had hoped—with a faint, sick little hope—that Tony, needy and grieving, would seek to pacify himself in exactly this manner.

Tony stepped close. His chest touched Bruce’s as he put two wet fingers across Bruce’s lips. “Stop talking.”

“I think we should probably examine—” He huffed as Tony shoved him against the cold shower wall.

Tony’s dark eyes stared into his own. They were as serious as Bruce had ever seen them. Tony’s fingers slid down Bruce’s sides, and then found his swelling cock. “Stop. Talking.”

Bruce’s breath feathered in his throat as Tony’s lips, nearly as warm as the hot water pouring over them, kissed down his body to join the inventor’s busy hands. For a minute he could only close his eyes and hang upon the cold wall, his whole being spiraling around the gulf of Tony’s throat.

“Oh. Tony. Oh….” His legs trembled. He forced himself to mentally step back from his pleasure. “Tony, wait.”

Tony looked up at him with something between disgust and fury. He popped the head of Bruce’s cock out of his mouth. “You’ve got to be kidding me. I’m giving you a blow job, and you want to fucking talk. Girls aren’t even that stupid. Everyone shuts the fuck up when they’re getting oral.”

“It’s my mouth. Tony—I can’t reciprocate. It’s never going to heal if—”

“Shhh.” Tony kissed his thigh. “No one asked you to.” He caressed Bruce’s bruise-splotched stomach. “Relax. Let yourself enjoy it.”

“Tony—”

Tony sighed. “Do you really want to be the first person ever to refuse oral from me?”

He must have looked horrified, because Tony sat back on his heels and laughed. “I’m sorry,” Bruce offered in a small voice when Tony sobered.

Tony caught one of Bruce’s hands and held it against his face. Droplets from the shower fell around them. “Me too.” He looked up at Bruce with an unfathomable tenderness.

Bruce gasped as Tony took him back into his warm mouth. He stroked Tony’s forehead and ran his fingers through the bleached hair. Every movement was star-strewn bliss. Bruce’s breath husked in the back of his throat, and he came with Tony’s short hair wound around his fingers.
They turned off the shower and dripped their way out of the bathtub. After dressing, they bought some beachy clothing, sampled a few bars and ate fresh fruit and fried things, then they walked along the beach for a while. They watched the stars, then went back to the hotel room and drank some more. They ended up naked on the bed, rubbing each other’s asses and kissing each other’s chests. “You should reciprocate now,” Tony told Bruce, his hands behind Bruce’s head.

“I told you I can’t. My mouth—”

“I know.” He placed a delicate kiss atop Bruce’s upper lip. “I don’t want to hurt your beautiful mouth.” He nuzzled against Bruce’s cheek. “But your dick’s not broken.” He lurched away with a giggle and fell onto the mattress on his elbows and knees, his handsome, well-defined ass in the air.

“No, it’s definitely working.” Bruce grabbed some suntan oil from the bedside table and lubed Tony’s hole. He massaged Tony’s thighs and ass as he worked. Tony groaned happily.

Bruce kissed the small of his back. Tony sort of collapsed forward onto his chest. “Let’s spoon-fuck, maybe.”

“Okay.” Bruce spooned Tony and rubbed the inventor’s big cock. He teased Tony’s hole with sideways tastes of his heavy shaft. His cock had been throbbing for some time. Tony’s seemed just as eager. It pulsed in his hand and wept thin, sticky precum on his fingers. He brought Tony close to climax, then pinched above the inventor’s glans.

Tony whimpered. Bruce brushed kisses across Tony’s bare shoulders as he guided the head of his cock inside him. With a low groan, Tony shoved back against Bruce, taking Bruce’s cock deep. They rocked slowly. Bruce thrust as deep inside Tony as possible, held still for a second, then swiveled gently as he massaged Tony’s stomach and teethed the back of his neck.

When Bruce tugged on Tony’s cock again, Tony moaned Bruce’s name. Although the position lent itself better to depth than speed, Bruce fucked him a bit faster. Tony shuddered and cried out to a god neither of them believed in and came and came. Bruce came seconds later in an explosion of light and emotion.

He stayed inside Tony for a few minutes, holding him. Then, dizzy, he lifted himself from the bed. He stopped when Tony growled. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m going to clean up.”

Tony sat up huffily and pulled the sheets over him. “No. You’re getting your ass back in bed. A fuck like that needs a long snuggle afterward. Don’t you know anything?”

Bruce climbed into bed and pulled Tony’s head onto his chest. Tony sighed and hugged Bruce’s body as if he were a teddy bear. He was asleep almost as soon as his skin made contact with Bruce’s. Bruce smiled, tears gathering in his eyes, as he stroked Tony’s face. “It’s almost like you’re mine,” he said softly.

Shame flooded him. This wasn’t simply what he had wanted—this was exactly what he had wanted. An artificial romance with Tony. Something as imaginary and ridiculous as one of his role playing games because he could never have the real thing. There had been a moment, once, when Tony had said he wanted to be more than friends, and the dream had seemed possible. But Bruce had been a coward, too afraid of getting hurt.

Although his decision seemed to have been vindicated when Tony, only a few hours after declaring
his love for Bruce, fucked two—not one, but two—girls in the middle of the living room. Sex was as meaningful to Tony as a game of badminton. It was an activity to relieve stress or boredom. It was just something to do.

“And I can’t share you,” Bruce whispered. “I would hulk out every time some skank lost her panties around you. Every time you winked at someone.” He rubbed between Tony’s shoulders, pausing and kneading harder when they seemed tight. He wasn’t there to play house or whatever. He wasn’t there to mope. He was there to take care of his friend, and that was what he would do. Nothing would get between him and helping Tony.

***

The next morning

Tony frowned at Bruce. Something was wrong with him. It was a beautiful, sunny morning. They were eating breakfast outdoors under a palm tree—which is one of the best ways in the world to eat breakfast. The food was great too. They both had bloody marys; Tony had a feta omelet with bacon and sausage, and Bruce was apparently trying to prove the adage ‘you are what you eat’ by having nuts and fruit.

Bruce had hardly touched his nuts, which wasn’t like Bruce at all. He simply picked at his fruit. Tony pointed at a piece of something on Bruce’s plate with his fork. “What the fuck is that?”

“Breadfruit.” Bruce winced as he sipped his drink.

“Huh. You don’t like it?”

“I like it.”

“That’s mango, right?” He indicated another piece with his fork.

“Right.” Another grimacing sip.

“I’m gonna eat it.”

Bruce parried his fork. “I don’t think you should eat after me. I’m not sure you should even be around me. I think I’m sick. My throat hurts, and I’ve had a headache since we woke up this morning.”

“Liar Baby?”

Bruce’s gaze dropped as he hunched over his plate. “Don’t. I’m not up to it.”

Tony sat back in surprise. Bruce loved their asinine banter. Even when he didn’t like it, he fucking liked it. As the word, ‘pussy’ fell onto Tony’s tongue like a bullet settling in a chamber, he resisted the urge to use it. “No one else was paying attention to that kid. You reunited him with his mom. That’s kind of great. So, maybe he got you sick. So what? You did something good.”

Bruce stared at him, looking dazed. “I thought you would say something like ‘no good deed goes unpunished.’ Something like that.”

“Nah. I was gonna call you a pussy.” Tony took a bite of sausage. “You know, because you’re a pussy.”

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After breakfast, they went back to the room so could Bruce could nap. Tony tried to sleep as well, but couldn’t. He felt restless, but he wanted to hang out with Bruce. Bored, he turned on the television. Unfortunately, there was nothing even remotely soothing about that. An American news show greeted him, flashing images of the wreckage mingled with footage of his parents in some macabre commercial. It ended with a photo of him grinning with a cigar in his mouth while and hanging off the shoulders of two lingerie models. The camera zoomed in on his drunken face as red pigment poured down and covered everything. A tympanic boom finished the stirring music. The words, “A Stark Tragedy,” floated up from the red pool.

The studio appeared on the screen then with a stern-faced, carefully-coifed female newscaster staring into the camera. In a somber voice, she said, “The nation still mourns the untimely deaths of legendary patriot and captain of industry, Howard Stark, and his beautiful wife, Marie. This tragedy has been compounded by the fiasco made of their funerals by their only son, the young heir to the Stark fortune and the new face of Stark Industries, Anthony Stark. His antics at his parents’ double funeral have been described variously as crass, hateful, and borderline psychotic.”

Tony groaned. Behind him, Bruce groaned too, but probably because he had been woken up. “What are you watching?”

Tony didn’t answer. Bruce was a fucking genius. He could figure this out on his own. Fuckwad.

“Joining me now are Congressman Butch Conrad and supermodel Vapor Wax, both of whom attended this controversial event. Ms. Wax, I understand you used to date Anthony Stark, is that true?”

Bruce stirred up from the blankets. “You dated that?”

“We were very close,” said the model, holding up two crossed fingers for the camera.

“No,” said Tony. “I fucked her two or three times. Her twat smelled like an eraser and I’ve stuck my dick in condoms that moved more. She’s nothing but hot air and heroin. She’s like an empty hashpipe with blonde hair.”

The pundit shuffled some papers. “Did he seem deranged or impulsive when you were with him?”

“Once he rearranged some furniture in our hotel room, and he was really into autorobotic fixation.”

Bruce pulled his pillow over his head and died. Tony punched him in the ribs, but Bruce continued to laugh. “Even the auto part’s wrong,” he gasped from beneath the blankets, balled up on his side. “Autorobotic—she probably thinks it has something to do with cars!” He dissolved into laughter.

“Shut up!” Tony shoved the stupid scientist’s ass hard enough to plow him through the pillows and knock his skull against the headboard. “I need to hear this.”

“Ow.” Bruce’s voice was muffled by pillows. “Don’t worry, I’m okay.”

Tony focused only on the television. “That dumb fucking bitch.”

While the newscaster shuffled her papers and looked uncomfortable, Vapor took the opportunity to promote her forthcoming book, A Stark Shadow: My Life with a Troubled Billionaire Playboy.

Tony felt the mattress move as Bruce crawled to the edge of the bed to sit beside him. Bruce rubbed the top of his head as he stared at the screen. “Obviously, from the multisyllabic words in the title, this work of fiction was ghostwritten.”
Eyes still glued to the TV, Tony pulled Bruce’s head into his lap and rubbed it for him. Bruce caressed Tony’s shin. The light touch diverted Tony’s attention from the smear job momentarily. He outlined Bruce’s ear with a fingertip; Bruce’s skin felt warm. Tony felt his friend’s throat. “Your glands are swollen.”

“You only went out with her a few times?” Bruce spoke over the congressman, who was gesticulating as if he were making an important point. “How could you stand to even touch her? She’s so beneath you.”

Tony, watching TV, shrugged as he massaged Bruce’s throat. “She’s hot.”

“She’s an idiot. Don’t you think people’s minds makes them hot?”

“I wonder if we contributed to that dickhead’s campaign.”

“He’s rich. His friends are rich. It won’t take much to turn the tide in your favor. It’ll be okay.”

“Yeah.” Tony strained not to sound as concerned as he felt. “It’s no big deal.”

“No big deal,” Bruce echoed sleepily from Tony’s lap.

“Witnesses,” said the newscaster, “report Stark fled the scene with the aid of a nondescript man in his twenties, suspected, from his behavior to be mentally disabled.”

“Also that suit,” said Vapor.

The congressman nodded. “Only someone mentally challenged would wear that to a funeral.”

“Fuck! It’s not that bad!”

“No.” Tony took hold of Bruce’s shoulder, “it is. It really is, bro. And that tie was like five inches wide.”

“It’s vintage.”

“You can’t just buy anything at Goodwill and call it cool.”

“I got it at Salvation Army.” Bruce’s tone had shifted from defensive to irritable.

“Dude, clowns have too much self-respect to wear an artifact like that.”

Bruce sighed. “Now you’re just being mean.”

Tony made his index finger dance in tight circles past Bruce’s jaw and up beneath his ear. He enjoyed the way his motions made Bruce’s eye blinks lengthen.

“One has to wonder,” said the congressman, “given his outrageous behavior and his choice in friends, if this Stark is stable enough to fill his father’s shoes.”

The newscaster nodded her head with a grave expression. “They’re big shoes.”
“Tony’s shoes are kinda small for a dude,” Vapor put in helpfully. “But his pene is really big.” She grinned. “Almost as big as his dad’s.”

Tony gagged. Bruce sighed in disgust. “She isn’t hot.”

***

*Later that afternoon*

Bruce shivered beneath the sheets and bedspread. He had hoped to sleep his way clear of the illness, but he only felt worse. Tony ambled in from doing Tony things. He flopped on the end of the bed and rubbed sand from his toes. “Fuck, you look like shit. You *are* sick, huh?”

“Yeah.” His voice sounded gravelly and strange to his own ears. Talking hurt. Everything hurt.

“I guess jet skiing’s out, but this place has a swim-up bar. You could do that, huh? Just wade around and get bombed?”

“No.” Bruce tried to keep his teeth from chattering. “That sounds cold.”

Tony brooded for a moment. “What about just sitting on the beach? Maybe get a tan?”

“Tony, I’m sorry—”

“Hey, don’t worry about it.” He stood, raining sand, and stretched. “It’s not like I need you around to have fun.”

Bruce tried to act nonchalant, as if that hadn’t knifed through his heart. “Right.”

Tony bit his lips together, cracked his knuckles, then said, “I could spoon you.”

“No,” Bruce said, turning down the offer with difficulty, “you shouldn’t touch me. You probably shouldn’t even be here.” He reached for the phone on the nightstand. “Don’t worry.” Tony didn’t look worried. “I’ll get another room.”

A few minutes later he dropped his head to the pillow in defeat. “They’re full. You’ll have to go somewhere else, because this didn’t suck enough already.”

Tony stretched his pecs. “It’s okay, bro. I got this.”

“No, you’re always buying everything. It’s on me. It’ll just suck that you’re not even in the same hotel.”

“I won’t need money.”

“Maybe it’s the fever, but I don’t know what that means.”

Tony laughed. “It means shut up and get your sick on.”
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Here's an extra chapter for the week.

Bruce lost track of time. Days. It had been days. He knew that much. He kept the curtains drawn, but he could see a sliver of blue sky and palm fronds through a narrow slit. He ordered toast, juices, and vodka from room service. Once a day, a maid came and emptied his trash cans and wiped down his bathroom. Sometimes she hummed to herself, but, aside from a quiet acknowledgement of each other's presence, they didn't speak.

Sometimes Tony, tanned and often dripping, dropped in to change clothes. He would tromp around the room, looking like a lusty sun god—completely at odds with the gloom that closed in on the room like a shroud whenever he wasn’t there. They never exchanged more than a few words.

At all hours, Bruce could hear music and intermittent laughter from somewhere beneath his window. People were having fun all around him, just beyond his reach. It was like being in prison…in paradise. It was like—it was like high school.

Christmas came and went without much notice, like the maid cleaning the room. Tony didn’t drop by. Bruce wasn’t sure if Tony had been aware of it at all, or if he had simply avoided contact because Bruce was sick.

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Saturday, Dec. 28

The maid entered. She emptied the trash cans as usual, but then she stood at the foot of the bed and pulled off the bedspread. Bruce looked at her in surprise. “What are you doing?”

“I’m changing the bed linens. Go take a shower now.” She didn’t say it in a rude way as much as a familial way. It was the tone an aunt might use with a young nephew.

“But—I’m sick.”

“I know it. But your fever broke this morning, boy. Go shower.”

Bruce had been content to cocoon pathetically in his sweaty blankets. He was too baffled to feel embarrassed. “How did you know my fever broke? How did you even know I was sick?”

“Anybody could tell you were sick. And you’re all wet this morning. Your fever broke. Those sheets need changing—been long overdue for changing.” Her tone softened. “Poor t’ing. On vacation and sick. You need a shower and some more sleep. You’ll be better tomorrow.”

“I still don’t understand how—we barely talked.”

She grinned. “My oldest son’s about your age. Just because you didn’t notice me, doesn’t mean I didn’t notice you.”
He felt very small and ashamed. She had been invisible to him. A functionary. Not a human being, but a job. Even if he hadn’t been sick, he probably wouldn’t have noticed her. “I’m sorry,” he said, consciously making eye contact, hoping she understood his sincerity.

She threw a towel at him. “More like Stinky.” She smiled. “Take a shower now.”

Thankful he had on underwear, he slunk out of the bed and into the bathroom. He did as instructed. When he had finished, he actually felt much better. He found the window open and filling the room with sweet air. And on his pillow he found a joint of beautiful, woodsy-smelling herb. He sprawled on the clean bed and smiled for the first time in days.

***

The next night

Tony slipped into his and Bruce’s hotel room for a shower. His latest conquest, an older divorcee, turned out to be too needy. He had to get out of there before she stuffed him in her luggage or something. He hadn’t even wanted to stay long enough to get clean. After braving his and Bruce’s petri dish for a shower, he would have to find another woman’s bed to sleep in tonight. This was easily done, of course, but he couldn’t help hating a little Bruce for taking up their room with his fever and snot and ruining their trip.

To his surprise, their room smelled like salt air instead of sickness. That was a good sign. Bruce, in bed, looked up from his book and smiled. “Hey! I was beginning to think you’d left.”

Tony sat on the bed and squeezed one of Bruce’s blanketed feet. “You don’t sound like a toad anymore. Are you done being sick?”

“I’m kind of weak, but I think I’m no longer contagious.”

For some reason, every muscle in Tony’s body seemed to relax. All he could think of was sleep. He shed his clothes. “Scoot over.” Bruce did, beaming. Tony, in his underwear, slipped beneath the blankets. He left the light on, wanting to see his friend’s stupid face. He had missed Bruce; he had missed him terribly. He hadn’t realized just how much until now. They lay on their sides, grinning at each other.

“God, I missed you,” Bruce said softly.

“Moron.”

Bruce chuckled. “Whatever, man. It’s good to see you.”

Tony had to break Bruce’s balls a little. “You’re such a drippy twat. You saw me almost every day.”

“You moved in and out of here like a ghost. And I was pretty out of it.”

“Yeah. You suck. You brought me here and ditched me. What kind of bro is that?” Tony expected Bruce to defend himself, or at least to point out that Tony had sort of ditched him too.

Instead, Bruce only said, “I’m sorry,” in a sweet, whispery voice that raised the hair on Tony’s arms.

Tony couldn’t pretend any longer. He swung an arm around the scientist and drew him to his chest. With a heavy sigh, he buried his nose in Bruce’s hair. He loved Bruce so much. He loved him and loved him and loved him.
“Chanel No. 19,” Bruce said, swallowing.

Tony opened his eyes. “What?”

“That perfume. Clinging to your chest and…. It’s Chanel No. 19.”

They pulled apart. Tony wished he had taken a shower before getting in bed. “I don’t know.”

“I do.” Bruce’s expression was odd. “It’s an older scent. I’ve never seen you with a woman over twenty-five.”

“This one said she was thirty, but, you know.” He didn’t like discussing this with Bruce. Something about it felt wrong.

“Oh.” His gaze fixed over Tony’s shoulder. He looked so hurt. Beyond hurt—like he wanted to cry but his body knew that tears were inadequate for this sort of pain.

Tony clapped his shoulder. “Sorry, dude. I’ll go take a shower. You’re allergic to this, huh?” As Tony tried to escape, Bruce gripped his elbow.

“Wait. Please.” He rubbed Tony’s arm. “It was my mother’s favorite perfume.” The hint of a smile lurked somewhere beneath his stricken expression. “Would you—I know this is weird—but would you stroke my hair—around my face and ears? She used to do that to help me sleep when I was hurt.”

Tony lay down wordlessly and caressed his friend’s face. Bruce didn’t look at him. He looked down instead, then his eyes closed. Tony was too mesmerized to use any of his usual defenses. He couldn’t even imagine his mother doing something like this. “Your mom loved you.”

“She did.”

“That must have been nice,” he said, meaning it. “I know your dad was shit, but at least your mom—that was some kind of deep love. All of that shit with the two of you trying to save each other from beatings and everything.”

“I don’t know. Maybe. It’s kind of a mindfuck, really. It’s like spending one day on a warm beach and living the rest of your life in Antarctica.”

“Still,” Tony said softly, “You know what it feels like to be warm. If you always lived in the cold, warmth might be difficult to recognize. You might not be able to feel it at all.” He outlined Bruce’s ear, his fingernail brushing the hair around it.

“I don’t know which one is worse. At least if you grew up in Antarctica, you would never miss being warm. You would never know the pain of wanting.”

“Yeah, but you’d know what you wanted. If you’d never known warmth, what the fuck would you even know what to look for?”

Bruce sighed heavily. “If you never felt it, it probably wouldn’t mean anything to you. You wouldn’t look for it, because you wouldn’t care.”

“Don’t be an asshole,” Tony whispered. “You don’t know what those Antarctica people care about. You don’t know what’s important to them. You’re not omniscient.”

Bruce didn’t say anything for a minute. Then he said, very quietly, “Maybe those people should say
what’s important to them.”

“Maybe they already have.”

“They don’t act like they want to be warm. They don’t act like they even know what they want.”

Tony, stroking Bruce’s fucking face with Bruce cuddled to his chest, wanted to dump the sulky scientist onto the carpet and kick him a few times. Instead, he said, “Maybe they don’t know what they want exactly. Maybe they want a lot of things, and it’s hard to settle on one no matter how much that one means.”

“I know,” Bruce said softly.

“And what if was like the sun kept avoiding the people who grew up in Antarctica? If they can’t get any sunlight, they’d have to light fires.”

“I know. I don’t begrudge those people their fires.”

“And, fuck, man. Look around. You’re at the beach right now.”

“Feels more like Antarctica with a heat lamp.”

Tony bristled. “Are you calling me a heat lamp?”

“No.” Bruce opened his eyes to look at him. “No, of course not. The world’s the heat lamp. You’re my best friend, and I love you.”

Tony settled closer. “Okay. That’s good. That conversation kinda got lost in the weeds.”

“Yeah.” Bruce’s voice was barely a breath.

A long silence ensued. Tony enjoyed tracing Bruce’s hairline, varying the pressure of his touch and playing with how delicate he could make his movements. As he smelled the perfume on his skin and stroked Bruce’s face, he felt an odd connection to a woman he had never met. It was strange to think of her fingers tracing this same pattern, doing this whenever Bruce was hurt. From what Bruce had said, his father beat him constantly. “I guess your mom did this a lot?”

“It helped when I was hurt.”

Tony employed his gentlest touch. Something small and persistent gnawed through his chest. “Bruce,” he whispered, “are you hurt?”

Bruce, his eyes shut, didn’t answer. Tony kissed his forehead and continued caressing him until he, himself, fell asleep.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Here's another bonus update!

The next morning

Tony woke up to sunlight in his face. He rolled over and found Bruce’s spot vacant, but he could hear the shower running. Stretching, he yawned and took up Bruce’s side. He helped himself to the roach on the bedside table.

The water stopped, and Bruce emerged shortly thereafter wearing some really awful lime green Road Runner and Coyote boxers. “Damn,” said Tony. “Those are hideous. They look like they were made for a huge five year old—and even he refused to wear them.”

Bruce shrugged. He had on that wincing expression Tony hated—like someone killed his dog, but he had to be in a funny play or something and had to pretend he wasn’t sad, but he was a shitty actor. “I like them. They’re comfy and…whimsical.”

“Whimsical doesn’t mean idiotic.” He slid out of Bruce’s spot so the scientist could lie down and enjoy a sleepy morning snuggle, but Bruce began pulling on his clothes. “Where are we going for breakfast?”

“I’m just grabbing some orange juice. I’m going to meet Iris. It’s her day off, and she invited me to have lunch with her family…. I didn’t think to ask if I could invite you, since I wasn’t sure when I’d see you again.”

“Who the fuck is Iris?”

“My friend.” He slipped on his touristy lavender shirt. It said Bahamas in purple cursive. Apparently, the shop had been out of ones with rainbows and unicorns. “She works here. Cleaning.”

“You mean the maid? You’re friends with the maid?”

“I’m friends with a lovely woman who works as a maid,” Bruce said flatly.

Tony rolled his eyes. “Okay.” He lay back on the bed. “Pedantic asswipe.”

Ignoring him, Bruce buckled his watch. “She’s where I’ve been getting my weed. There’s a quarter in the drawer, by the way. Help yourself.” He paused, a genuine smile on his face suddenly. “The buzz is super mellow—not even a trace a of paranoia. Just smooth and hypnotic. It turns a nature special into a transcendental experience. You can feel the world breathe and everything—”

“So, you’re going to hang out with your pot connection.”

“No. I’m going to see a friend. Iris helped me when I was sick; she’s my friend.” He looked at the carpet for a moment. “She had to work on Christmas and through the weekend, so it’s sort of a belated Christmas dinner.” He looked up at Tony apprehensively. “Were you okay with Christmas?”
“Christmas was a blast.” Tony grinned. “I partied all night with this group of Japanese business women—you wouldn’t believe the amount of alcohol they could put away—and there wasn’t an ugly one in the five of them. You know how usually there’s at least one dog in a group.”

“Oh. Well...uh...good. That’s good. I was afraid you might have been lonely. I mean, first Christmas without your parents...that can be hard.”

“I rarely spent Christmas with my parents.” He shrugged. “So, no. It was kind of a typical Christmas for me, actually. What did you do?”

“I coughed up various colors of mucus and watched a documentary on African termites.” Something close to a smile fluttered around his features. “I guess it was like most of my Christmases too.”

“Good you had fun.”

“Yeah.” Bruce hesitated. “Did you see that New York Times op ed about you?”

“No.”

“It basically shamed everyone for being so hard on you—reminded people that you’re young and lost both of your parents right before Christmas and encouraged everyone to cut you some slack. It included a photo of you looking very dashing.”

Tony shrugged. “I look ‘very dashing’ in all of my photos. ‘Very dashing.’ Who says that anyway? Are you like allergic to getting laid?”

Bruce looked down at his shoes. “I guess you saw that Senator Yahiya, whose son has autism, praised you for mentoring a mentally disabled man?”

“Nah, I didn’t see that.”

“Yeah. And Congressman Conrad, who was bashing you the other day, was caught with an underage male prostitute.”

“Cool.”

“The timing’s kind of interesting, don’t you think?”

Tony yawned and stretched. “I guess Shitstain’s been hard at work even if I haven’t spoken to him.”

“Everything always breaks your way, doesn’t it?” Something resentful lurked in Bruce’s tone.

Tony didn’t give a fuck. “Usually. When will you be done having fake Christmas with the help?”

“I’m not sure. Later. Maybe we can play chess on the beach or something.” Without waiting for a reply, Bruce left.

Tony rolled over on his stomach. “You play volleyball on the beach. Not chess, you nerdy fuck,” he muttered, lifting onto his forearms. A whiff of perfume from his chest greeted him.

***

Bruce found the hotel room empty when he returned from Iris’s house. He sat on the foot of the bed with his back to the sunny window and felt as empty as the room. He had spent most of the trip here, alone. He hadn’t come here to have fun; he had come to help Tony. That was true, but Tony didn’t need his help. He never had. If Bruce had ever imagined otherwise, he had simply deluded himself.
He wanted to be alone, but he made himself leave the room and walked to the nearest beachside bar. He would have a drink. He would be around people. He would enjoy it. Damn it, he would fucking enjoy it.

***

Tony closed his eyes. The afternoon sunlight warmed his bare skin. He was soaked in rum, slathered in suntan oil, and surrounded by banana daiquiris and dick mittens. Uno, Dos, Tres. Or maybe the Three Wise Women. That would be ironic—there was maybe one brain cell between them. But they all had extremely different breast shapes, which was kind of great. Kinda like a tit exhibit.

It was just as well that Bruce was off playing Oliver Twist. Tony was fucking tired of Bruce’s shit. It was always the same old song. ‘Love me, love me, love me. Please, please love me. Neew! Don’t! I’m scared!’

And that wounded bit last night. What the fuck? They weren’t dating. Get over it. Maybe that look on his face had just been about his mom. But it seemed like something else. Like he had beaten Bruce with a couple of lemons in a sock, so Bruce had made lemonade by getting Tony to pet him.

He turned down the little voice that wondered if Bruce was okay. He didn’t miss Bruce, and he didn’t give a fuck about the fucktard’s delicate widdle feelings. He had the sun, the sky, spiced rum and Pointy, Teardrop, and Honeydew. The rest of the world could go fuck itself.

***

The bar and the people—even the sunlight—made Bruce feel lonelier. He kept thinking, not so much of Tony, directly, but of Iris and her family. Iris’s family had been so unlike his. He wanted that—a home. Somewhere safe filled with laughter and love. And acceptance.

When he tried to visualize something like that for himself, he could populate it with siamese cats, maybe an iguana—but there was a void where a human companion should be. A variable. He tried to keep it open, keep it an unknown, but he kept coloring Tony into that space.

He hoped a walk on the beach might clear his head. And then he saw Tony. The inventor reclined on a lounge chair surrounded by three beautiful women. He had his arms around two of them and his feet propped in the lap of the third. For a heartbeat, Bruce thought he should pretend he hadn’t seen them and go back to the bar. In that slight hesitation, Tony saw him and waved. Bruce joined them. As he walked up, Tony said to the blonde on his right, “Watch, he’s going to want me to play chess with him.”

The blonde woman buried her face in Tony’s shoulder, laughing. The redhead on his other arm cackled over her drink. The honey-blonde woman massaging Tony’s feet looked around at Bruce. “My cousin’s gay.”

“You told them I’m gay?”

Tony shrugged. “It’s not a state secret, is it?” He patted the chaise next to him, inviting Bruce to sit.

“No, but—”

“I have a gay cousin,” insisted the honey-blonde.

“That’s…ah…great.” Bruce decided to remain standing. He hoped that the woman wasn’t trying to set him up with some random relative of hers simply because they were both gay. But what came out
of his mouth was, “Is he cute?”

The two women on Tony’s shoulder giggled. Tony whispered something to the redhead. She nearly spilled her drink. The honey-blonde foot massager said, “Kinda. But he’s in Jersey.” Tony’s human shoulder pads died with laughter.

“Okay. Thank you for sharing that completely irrelevant fact.”

The foot massager nodded slowly, then leaned toward Tony and hissed, “He’s kinda weird.”

Tony grinned at Bruce. “Yeah, he’s always been like that.” All three women tittered.

Bruce sighed. So this was going to be a night out with Tony and his impromptu harem. He tried to tell himself it would be a chance to exercise his social skills rather than a night watching the man he loved grope women who had the I.Q. of mayflies. Hulk laughed at him somewhere in his head. Bruce punished him by making two of Hulk’s puppies disappear. He turned down the bellowing giant’s volume and smiled.

“He’s not coming with us, right?” said the redhead.

“Naah.” Tony smirked. “Of course not. He’s just saying ‘hi.’ He’s like herpes—always popping up when you least want him around.”

Amid the feminine laughter, Bruce stared into Tony’s eyes. “Coyote.”

Tony scowled at him. “This isn’t about you. Don’t try to make this about you.” He fumbled in his shorts and pulled out his money clip. He threw a few hundred dollar bills in Bruce’s direction. “Go turn that frown upside down, cumbreath.”

The money fell to the sand. “I was never interested in your money,” Bruce said quietly. The foot massager strained to collect the bills before the wind could take them. Bruce watched her. Tony said nothing. The women on either side of him laughed.

Bruce left them to their fun.

***

Tony felt triumphant as he watched Bruce walk away. Had that hurt? Good!

But some small part of him objected. What had he won? He would rather have done something stupid with Bruce than spend another mind-numbing second with any of his latest playmates. (Except maybe Teardrop—she had a great little ass.)

But Bruce meant more to him than all three of the snatches combined. More than anyone he had fucked on this vacation…. Why did Bruce have to be such an asshole?
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Another bonus update!

Bruce walked to the bar and leaned his forearms against it. The bartender was busy with a clot of customers at the other side of the bar. Bruce bowed his head.

Hulk rampaged inside him. The giant wasn’t happy about losing his puppies. He was not appeased when Bruce gave them back. Bruce didn’t entirely understand Hulk’s anger, and yet—

*Weak, stupid Bruce!* Hulk bellowed when Bruce tried to meet him in the middle of a green field. *Weak, weak Bruce!* He threatened Bruce with a hockey stick.

Hulk couldn’t create things in their mindscape. Only Bruce could. As the hockey stick swung through the air to collide with Bruce’s head, he realized that he must have given the stick to Hulk. He dropped in the grass. He couldn’t die in his head, but he could hurt.

Hulk struck him several times, then stood over him. *Hulk SMASH!* Radiating disgust, Hulk roared and disappeared to some dark corner.

“Hey, sugar-bear. You all right?”

Bruce pulled his head off the bar and looked into the face of a tall, glamorous woman. She wore a white dress that contrasted beautifully with her dark skin and seemed to be nothing but a few scarves flowing from an elaborate gold collar around her throat. The collar matched the coiled snakes holding up her high ponytail. Her exotic eye makeup and hairstyle made Bruce think of an Egyptian goddess. He smiled at her. “I’m fine.”

The woman lifted one perfectly shaped brow at him. “Ummhmm. Fine always looks like a face plant on a bar.” She backed against the bar and sidled next to him. “Okay, boyfriend. Which one of these little bitches broke your heart? I’m gonna go smack his ass.”

“No.” Bruce laughed, impressed that she had sized him up emotionally and sexually so quickly. “That’s okay. Thanks, though.”

She shoved a shoulder into him. “C’mon, sugar-booger. Spill it. Who is he?”

“I liked sugar-bear better.”

She batted a heavy fringe of lashes at him. “You did, huh? Yeah, well I might start calling you booger-bear in a minute.”

He chuckled and turned his back to the bar as well. He sighed as soon as he did, for the sight of Tony drew him in like a gravitational well. One of his new companion’s huge gold hoop earrings bounced against his cheek as she pressed against him. “That one? No, child. Not that one.” She drew back and gazed at him with deep concern.

He had to lower his eyes. “Yeah.”
“The himbo with the three Muffkateers?”

“He’s not a himbo. He’s extremely intelligent. He’s a genius, actually.”

She drew herself up a little. “Sweet potato, you know he’s straight right?”

“He’s not exactly straight.”

Long, blood-red nails clacked against her gold collar. She looked at Tony then back at Bruce. She gave him a pitying smile. “Look, sugar-britches, he’s more straight than gay, okay. Trust me. I can smell straight from five miles away. You need to get some gaydar going, baby.”

“I met him before mine was fully developed.” He couldn’t stop watching them.

She sighed. Her pretension fell away like a dropped veil, and the pitch of her voice lowered slightly. “Mine’s dead accurate. You get beaten up enough times by straight boys who feel they’ve been had, you start to hone your instincts.”

Bruce stared at her for a heartbeat, caught entirely off guard. “I couldn’t tell. You’re so feminine—and gorgeous.”

She smiled and rolled her eyes. “Stop it.”

“They beat you?” He felt overcome as he digested the rest of her statement. “That’s appalling—that’s always appalling, but you’re so delicate—how could anyone treat you like that?”

Her dark eyes softened. “Delicate?” she repeated softly, one hand against her chest.

Bruce cleared his throat. “I abhor violence against women—all women. But someone so caring and so beautiful—it seems even more sinister somehow.”

Her eyes bored through him. She caressed his hand. The sensation of her long nails trailing behind her fingertips raised a pleasant chill along his spine. She sighed and drew away, pulling her red clutch off the bar. “I have to go now. I have a big night ahead of me.”

Bruce stepped back. “Oh.”

“Umhm. A hot guy’s taking me dancing. I’m gonna dance all night.” She grinned like a Cheshire cat.

“That sounds great,” said Bruce, trying to sound like he meant it. He felt an undertow of loneliness dragging him down. “Nice meeting you.”

“Yeah, he’s a sexy boy. Got this kind of broody thing goin’ and he seems real sweet.” Her smile evolved into a slight smirk. “He’s kinda dim, though. Poor baby.” She put a hand on her hip. “I don’t know his name, but I think I’ll call him sugar-britches. Might be booger-bear if he keeps looking at me like he rode the short bus.”

“Me?” Bruce felt flustered. “I—no. I mean—I’m flattered—overwhelmed, really, but…I…I’m gay.”

“Says the man in love with some straight guy. Labels only matter on food, baby. On people they’re just limitations.”

“But…you’re a woman, right?”

She pressed against him and whispered into his ear. “I’m a woman with a ten inch tootsie roll taped
between my legs. I like men. If you’re a man, I think we’ll get along just fine. And it’s just dancing, booger. I didn’t commit to anything else.” She drew back, studying his face. “Or maybe you’d prefer to stay here and watch the big bad wolf play with the three little pigs some more?”

“I don’t dance, exactly. I just sort of have flail about.”

She grinned. “I can work with that.”

“You’ve been very kind, but I don’t need charity. I’ll be okay.”

“Sweetie, do I look like a social worker? I felt bad for you taking a dive on the bar, but I wouldn’t have talked to you this long unless I wanted to.”

Bruce couldn’t help casting another quick glance at Tony. He hoped the woman hadn’t noticed, but he knew she had. She drew close to him.

“Sweetheart,” she said very softly, “you’re much too good to keep chasing something you’ll never catch.” She breathed a butterfly-light kiss across his lips.

He forgot about Tony. He forgot about everything. “Let’s go dancing.”

“More like it.” She laughed, hooking her arm around his. “I’m Betty, by the way. Betty Ross.”

***

Later

Bruce walked along the beach beside Betty, the night waves licking their feet. Bruce carried his shoes and hers as well. They were finally getting to talk a little. Everything so far had been fun, but physical and loud. They had closed down the nightclub and kissed through the streets. In public. He had never kissed anyone in public before. Men couldn’t do that. But with Betty….

Getting to the beach was a blur of coconut-scented skin, warm lips, and a number of ‘sugar-britches’ and its variations. Everything had a strange, dreamlike quality. He wondered at times if he were still in the room, running a high fever.

“Maybe I’ll have to take a trip to California.” Her nearest hand flickered around his arm as they walked, fingers lighting on his forearm and pausing momentarily before fluttering up his inner arm like a butterfly in a field of flowers.

“I won’t be there much longer. I’m moving to New Mexico.” His angst about that move weighed on his voice. He realized it and tried to brighten a little. “Maybe you could visit New Mexico?”

She clutched his arm and stood still. “I’m moving to New Mexico in March! I’m a programmer with—the government. I’ve been called in to work on a special project.”

“You work for the government?”

She pulled back slightly. “If you start yapping about black helicopters and talking smack about the U.N., I’m gonna hurt you.”

“No. I just meant…shouldn’t you be some sweaty fat guy with a comb over and a pocket protector?”

“I know, right?” She laughed. “I used to think I’d be working for some innovative, cool little tech company trying to create the next big thing instead of working alongside a lot of drab zombies trying to fuck shit up.” She licked her lips and looked at the ocean. “When I was seventeen, I hacked into
U.S. Naval Intelligence to see if they knew their sonar was harming cetaceans.” She glanced at him. “Dolphins, whales, things like that.”

Betty continued, but Bruce had trouble focusing because he was too amused that she had defined ‘cetaceans’ for him—and had done so with a touch of both impatience and defensiveness. She was used to being the smartest person in the room. And catching shit for it.

“—so, really, if it hadn’t been for Daddy’s influence, I probably wouldn’t be working anywhere.” Her ponytail swung slightly. “This new gig in Los Alamos is far from perfect, but it should be interesting. I can’t say I really like some of the things they’re doing, but maybe something good will come of it.”

“I’m moving to Los Alamos.” The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. “To work on a government project.”

They backed away from each other. Betty looked ready to slap him. “Don’t try to play me, boy. That shit’s not cute.”

“No, it isn’t. I can’t do this again.”

“I’m not some low level tech monkey, britches. I have clearance coming out of my ass and I’ll know if you’re trying something.” Her hands went to her hips. “And my daddy’s four stars can fuck you up good and proper.”

“I have ways of verifying who you are too.”

“Verify away. I’m who I say I am. Although I was born Benedict. Sometimes nature makes mistakes.” She frowned. “I know why I’m paranoid, but what’s up with you? You been reading too many Robert Ludlum books?”

“My last real boyfriend was a corporate spy who tried to kill me. I have the scars to prove it.”

In a rather small voice, she said, “My last boyfriend slept with my roommate.”

“Um…that sucks too.”

“Can I see your scars?” When he hesitated, she added, “I like scars.”

“Yeah…” He hated his scars—the ones from Seth, the ones from his father. It wasn’t like they were badges of heroism or anything to be proud of—they were reminders of pain, symbols of being unlovable. “Uh, I don’t know if they’ll show up in this light.”

“Can I touch them?”

He wanted her to touch him—but not like that. Trying to decide whether he felt more weirded out then turned on, he lifted his shirt. He trembled when her fingertips skimmed his bare skin as if she were reading Braille. Her lips looked so soft in the moonlight, her eyes dark as the black waves.

“You seem far too sweet for anything so cruel,” she said softly, continuing to caress his scars while beginning to explore the lines of his light musculature. “You’ve got some bad taste in men, sugar-britches.”

He almost closed his eyes. Every touch triggered a flutter of golden, sunlit warmth within his flesh. “Yes,” he said in a hoarse whisper, “but I seem to have exquisite taste in women.”

She touched her lips to his. They wrapped around each other and kissed, but it was different from the
many flirty, lustful things that had passed between them all night. This was something heavy and sweet, like the incense in a Buddhist temple.

***

Even later

Tony and Bruce’s hotel room

The passed out girls were taking up too much of the bed. Tony shoved one onto the floor. The stupid cunt took half the sheet with her. Tony tried to tug it away, but she was wrapped up in it. With a sigh, he grabbed the remote off the nightstand and clicked on the television. Honedew grumbled. Without looking at her, Tony covered her head with a pillow. She shut up.

Pointy crawled toward him and, because she was classy, began mouthing his cock. He scratched the back of her head gently, her hair draping over his hand. Pointy must have been fat as a little girl. She tried so hard.

It was a shitty blowjob, though, in so far as blowjobs could be called shitty. She was too drunk to be very effective, but ‘A’ for effort. He pushed her head down. “You’re so close to being my favorite, Pointy. So close.”

He flipped around the TV stations around until he found a news channel. A few days ago, the Soviet Union had dissolved; President Gorbachev had resigned. It was the subject of every news story. An age had ended, overshadowing a rich boy’s tantrum.
Chapter 13

Betty’s hotel room

Bruce untied the knotted pantyhose from Betty’s wrists, then held her as she came down from subspace. He kneaded the back of her neck, head to shoulders. She snuggled against him, rubbing the entire length of his naked body with her own.

He stroked around the tattoo on the trans woman’s hip. Two orcas, one black and red, the other red and black, created a sort of yin yang design. “It’s a shame people call these killer whales. Even their scientific name is wrong. *Orcinus Orca*. *Orca* is Latin for ‘a different kind of whale,’ when they’re actually dolphins. And *orcinus* means ‘bringer of death’—a name that fixates on one quality of a complex, intelligent creature. We oversimplify so much and get everything so wrong.” He kissed the tattoo. “You’re right, labels are for food.”

She whisked out of bed and turned on him suddenly. “What’s wrong with you?!”

“What?”

“Tell me. Now!” She grabbed a hairbrush off the nightstand and pointed it at him. “Nobody’s this perfect. Something’s wrong. It’s something big. Don’t think you can hide it from me, booger-bear. I can tear through your past and expose every detail. Don’t make me do that.”

After a brief moment of consideration, he told her his greatest secret, “I have dissociative identity disorder.” He felt too ashamed to look at her anymore.

She lowered her hairbrush. “I saw something about that on Oprah. It’s caused by a severe trauma—like—”

“Child abuse, in my case. My father was abusive.”

“—like horrible, life-threatening abuse, usually starting at a very young age,” she finished her previous thought in a quiet voice.

“My alternate personality typically manifests when I’m angry, injured, or scared.” He pulled a pillow over his nakedness and set his elbows on it. “It’s—it’s not as bad as it sounds. His stomach clenched. It was every bit as bad as it sounded. Maybe more so. Being honest with her meant telling her everything. “Sometimes I have nightmares about things that happened and I turn—but if I take sedatives, I’m okay.”

Bruce couldn’t help raising his head to look at her. Her face was frozen in horror. That momentary bliss fluttering in his skull sank to the soles of his feet. This was where he lost her. This was where everything fell apart. Fucking Hulk.

She dropped the brush and held his face between her hands. “Thank God,” she whispered, eyes filling with tears. “Thank God you were able to save yourself with that incredible brain.”

Any words he could have uttered stuck in his throat. She set the pillow aside and climbed onto his lap, hooking her long legs behind him, and covered his face in slow, soft kisses. He drew his head back slightly. “I never knew being a victim was sexy.”

She nuzzled his ear. “You’re not a victim, you beautiful man. You’re a survivor.” Her fingers knitted
through his hair. “And you’re sexy as fuck.”

***

Bruce stood aside as the three women, looking somewhat worse for wear, trailed out of his and Tony’s room. Tony stood at the door, money clip in hand. “Uno, Dos, Tres—go get your hair done or something. On me.” He gave one a little pat on the bottom as she took her cash. “That Jane Fonda’s been good to you, Pointy. Keep it up.”

Tony closed the door after Bruce. “Bitches, man.” He snorted and took a long pull on a bottle of spiced rum. He offered it to Bruce.

Bruce shrugged it away and opened the drawer of his nightstand. “I had the most amazi—” He frowned at the empty sandwich bag. “You smoked all my weed?”

“There were four of us.” Tony offered Bruce the bottle again.

“No. Thanks. I’m going to take a shower.” On his way, he stepped in a puddle of cold vomit. “Fucking fuck! Seriously?!”

“Housekeeping will take care of it.”

Bruce glared at him.

“What? That’s their job.”

“Whatever. You fucking suck, Tony Stark.”

Tony shadowed him as he got some toilet paper from the bathroom. Tony stood over him and watched as he knelt and mopped up the vomit. Once the carpet had been restored to semi-cleanliness, Bruce opened a window and lay back on the bed. His thoughts returned to Betty. He smiled.

Tony stretched and lay down beside him. He rubbed Bruce’s chest and stomach, his hand atop Bruce’s shirt. Bruce sighed happily and snuggled against him.

“I think it’s over,” said Tony. “The shit storm seems to have died down. I can go back to being me again.”

Bruce brushed his fingers through the inventor’s bleached hair. “That’s good. I like this, but your natural color looks so much better with your skin tone.”

“Yeah, and I can get real women again instead of the B squad.”

“That shouldn’t be funny.” Bruce giggled. “You’re fucking awful.”

“You hungry?”

“I’m tired.”

“Your stomach growled. I think you’re hungry.”

Bruce rolled his eyes and lifted himself from the bed. “Fine. I’ll pretend I’m hungry because you’re hungry. But you’re going to have to carry me up the stairs.”

“We’ll take the elevator. Let’s take it down too.”
Without bothering to clean themselves up much, they left their room and flipflopped into the elevator. As they descended, Bruce’s thoughts turned, once again, to Betty. He had already had breakfast with Betty. This would just be drinking coffee while watching Tony eat.

He wished he were with Betty right now. He had only been apart from her an hour, but he wanted to see her again. He wanted to hear her laugh, wanted to smell her, wanted to touch her….

He felt something tug him away from reality.

***

NO. Betty girl. Girls so yucky. Betty yucky. In the midst of an all-too-familiar living room, Hulk sat on a brown shag carpet. The formaldehyde stench of cheap cigarettes hung in the air. Hulk loomed over a scraggly Christmas tree draped in gold tinsel. His big green hands were full of his favorite puppies, Pompom and Toot. A pack of puppies of various colors and breeds capered around him.

At the moment, Bruce had little patience for the giant. And he hated Hulk for dragging him to this place. No one asked your opinion.

But Tony—

You don’t even like Tony!

Hulk shrugged. Maybe Hulk like Tony. Hulk like nuts; Tony like nuts. Weak, stupid Bruce like Tony. Tony like weak, stupid Bruce….

Bruce likes Betty. More than that. Bruce loves Betty.

Hulk shook his head. One night. Stupid Bruce.

One life-changing night. And—fuck that. I don’t have to justify my feelings to you.

Hulk hate Betty! Bruce stupid! Hulk smash!

Listen to me, you fucking monster! You will NOT hurt her! You will not even touch her!

Bruce SO stupid! Bruce make Hulk angry!

I don’t care how you feel. He glanced at the living room with disgust. I don’t live here anymore. I haven’t in a long time. He took a step closer to Hulk and glared up at his ugly, green face. And I don’t need you anymore.

Hulk, oddly, didn’t say anything. He only scowled.

You protected me once, but now you do nothing but embarrass me.

Hulk snorted. Weak, stupid Bruce need Hulk.

Need you? You threaten or hurt the people I love! The tent—if Tony hadn’t been stronger than you, who knows what would have happened!

More stupid Bruce talk. No. Tony started it. Hulk—

You’re blaming Tony? Seriously??? You’re unfuckingbelievable, Hulk.

NO! Hulk clutched his puppies to his chest and scowled down at Bruce, indignant. Hulk smash for
weak, stu—

Fuck this, monster. I don’t need you. I don’t want to merge with you. I don’t want anything to do with you. You’re something rotten that grew where it shouldn’t have. You’re nothing. You’re useless —

Stupid Bruce! Hulk not monster! Hulk smash!

You’re a fucking MONSTER! Bruce turned over the Christmas tree, littering the floor with tinsel and shiny balls.

NO! HULK NOT MONSTER! Bruce will hear Hulk! Bruce will hear NOW!

You’re dangerous. And you don’t get to tell me what to do. Filled with a quiet, cold rage, Bruce made all of the puppies vanish; Pompom and Toot disappeared out of Hulk’s hands.

The giant roared at the scientist. Bruce—with a sudden power fueled by years of resentment—encapsulated Hulk in the Christmas memory. He sealed the entire thing in a cask—as one would nuclear waste, then wrapped it in layer upon layer of concrete and steel.

Gong-like sounds rattled through the mindscape as Hulk beat the walls. Hulk not monster! Bruce monster! Hulk hate Bruce! HATE!!!

Bruce turned down Hulk’s volume and sank the prison deep beneath the ground. We’re done. Smash your way out of that, and I’ll wall you up again, weak stupid Hulk.

***

Bruce found Tony in front of him, holding him up by his shoulder. “Hey.” Bruce pulled away in embarrassment. Some of the things he had said to Hulk—they had sounded like his father. And walling him up in that house—in that abusive farce of a Christmas—

But he didn’t feel like he could take it back. There had been a finality to it. He closed his eyes, fighting a wave of nausea.

Tony gave him a little shake. “You back home, Dorothy?”

Bruce laughed feebly. “Yeah. I’m okay.” That was an absolute lie. He thought he should have felt empowered. But he felt as if he had started a war.
Chapter 14

To Tony’s dismay, Bruce deviated from the path to the café and wandered to the beach. “Hey, numbnuts! What the fuck?” If Bruce answered, the wind swept it away.

Tony considered leaving him, but only a few seconds later, he followed him instead. Tony drew up beside Bruce. “You’re going the wrong way.”

“I need to sit for a while and be still.”

“They have chairs at the café.”

Bruce dropped to the sand. He stared at the waves with a vacant expression. Tony sat down in the sand, joining Bruce. He shouldn’t have been worried about the scientist, but Bruce looked sort of grey. Maybe he was upset because of the girls? Maybe that was just sinking in?

Tony didn’t even know why he’d fucked them. He hadn’t even liked them. He rarely liked anyone he fucked anymore. “Dude, you’re not gonna hurl, right? I’m kinda hungover; I don’t need to see that shit.”

Bruce lay down on his side, continuing to watch the waves in silence. Tony sighed. “You’re getting sand in your hair.”

Nothing. Tony wondered if he should stroke along Bruce’s hairline. He wanted to run his fingers through the non-sandy bits of Bruce’s unruly curls. He particularly liked that obnoxious hair. It and those puppy-dog eyes were among his favorite of the scientist’s features.

But he left Bruce alone and doodled a diagram of an engine he had been thinking about building instead, enjoying the way the soft Bahamian sand felt as his finger parted it. He looked over when Bruce sat up, propping his wrists on his knees. Bruce didn’t bother dusting himself off and just sat there with sand pasted on one side of his face.

Tony leaned back and dug his heels in the sand, waiting for Bruce to say something. He waited and waited. He groaned a little. He had some munchies from hell. Bruce really needed to get his shit together so they could have breakfast. In exasperation, Tony said, “You’d probably feel better if you ate something.”

Bruce looked over with a strange expression. “Tony.”

“Yeah?”

“I feel like I’m always playing games with my life. Hiding from the truth. Avoiding it.”

Tony had to add something to his diagram. He felt the same way. Sometimes he felt so sick of everything and everyone. It was all so phony. There was only one thing in his life that he truly cared about aside from inventing. One person. One incredibly brilliant scientist with hazelnut eyes and messy, espresso-brown hair. God, he needed some fucking coffee. “Fuck, man. Can’t you have your existential meltdown with croissants?”

“This is important to me. Please.”

“Okay.” Tony wanted to say he felt the same way, to tell Bruce he thought he was ready for something real. But he wanted Bruce to say it. He held his tongue.
“I….” Bruce took a deep breath and exhaled it slowly. “You know I told you a long time ago that I could be friends without wanting to fuck you. I promised you.” Bruce’s eyes glassed over, and his gaze fixed on his fingers dangling in front of him. He picked at a hangnail. “But I’ve broken that promise over and over. I say it, and I mean it—I want to mean it. I’m okay until I see you, and then everything changes. It’s not even that I want to fuck you, it’s that I want us to be together.”

Tony felt as if a hand were gripping his throat. This was it. It was happening. It was fucking happening.

Bruce sucked a small breath. “So there’s always this tension whenever we’re around each other. I’m so sorry for that. I’m so fucking sorry.”

Tony smiled a little. Bruce was cute when he was contrite. “It’s okay. I know you want me. Everyone does.”

Bruce nodded and looked down. “I’ve been so alone, you know? Just—I’m sorry. I know I’ve been tedious—and you’re a real asshole—but you’re kind of wonderful for being my friend in spite of everything.” Bruce blinked at the ocean.

“I’m a great guy. What do you expect?” He grinned, waiting.

Bruce smiled faintly back. “I think the fever has finally broken. I think I can just be friends. For real this time.”

Tony laughed. He couldn’t help it. “You say that same shit every few years.”

“I mean it this time.”

Tony gripped a fistful of the soft, pink sand beside him. He couldn’t look at Bruce directly. Something in his friend’s tone sounded so genuine. Tony let the sand slide through his fist, falling out the bottom. He could have told Bruce he loved him. He could have said a hundred other things. The grains of sand fell as he watched. “Finally. Your love’s harder to kill than Freddy Krueger. It’s like fucking genital warts.”

Bruce laughed. He didn’t look bruised or appalled—he fucking laughed. “Yeah, I know. I’m sorry.”

Tony wiped his hands and stood. He squinted at the ocean. “We should go eat something. You look hungry.”

“Actually, I already ate breakfast, but—”

Tony turned to him with an expression that must have been sour.

“An irish coffee sounds good.”

***

Bruce sat outside, sipping his drink and smiled at Tony, amused by his friend. He couldn’t imagine anyone but Tony eating an omelet and coffee while tossing back double shots of rum. Everything seemed brighter somehow. He had put the foulness with Hulk behind him, and letting Tony know that he could truly be a real friend had lifted a weight from his shoulders.

He had told Tony all about meeting Betty and almost everything they had done. A horrible thought struck him suddenly. “You didn’t arrange this, did you?”
Tony, holding a forkful of bacon, looked at him. “No. If I were going to set you up with someone, it would be with a man—not a chick with a dick.”

“Don’t say things like that.” He didn’t laugh. It wasn’t funny.

Tony chewed, staring at him.

Bruce stroked the side of his cup, warm thoughts of Betty swirling his head. “I’ve been through years of therapy with little progress. One night with her completely changed the way I see myself.” He grinned up at Tony. “I’m not a victim; I’m a survivor.” He laced his fingers around his cup, sighing happily. “The fact that I told her any of that at all—fuck! And the way she reacted—it was incredible. She’s so incredible.”

“It’s weird hearing you say ‘she.’ I don’t get this, really. She has a dick, so I get that, but tits and looking like a girl—”

“It’s all sort of strange to me too,” Bruce confessed. “But I’ve never felt this way about anyone. And, I know she feels like a woman, but…I don’t know. It’s complicated.”

Tony emptied his glass. “Yeah, it’s all chocolates and roses this week, but what happens when she gets a vagina?”

“We haven’t talked about that…” Bruce flicked his stir nervously and stilled the shudder the word ‘vagina’ inevitably provoked. “But not all transgender people choose to make that change.”

“If she’s as good as you say she is, she’s had other operations. She’ll probably keep going. That cock you’re sucking will turn into a clit when the clock strikes midnight, Cinderella.”

“That won’t change anything.” Bruce realized as he said it that he meant it. “I’ll still love her.”

Tony ate a bite of egg and signaled to the waiter for more rum. “Don’t say the ‘I’ word so fast. You just met her.”

“Don’t worry. I’m not going to tell her yet. I’ll be cool.”

“You can try.”

Bruce snickered. “I’ll try.”

“Okay, so you’ll accept her because you’re fucking Jesus or whatever. Fine. But what if it’s the other way around?”

“I’m not getting a vagina.”

Tony gave him a withering look. “You know what I mean, Sybil.”

“What do you mean?”

“What if you change? What if you, I don’t know, blow a gasket with your DID or something?”

“I have it under control.”

“For now. You know you can go all batshit. It happens.” He poked his fork at Bruce. “What if you hurt her?”

“I won’t.” Bruce realized he sounded like a petulant child, but he didn’t know what else to say.
When the waiter arrived with Tony’s rum, Bruce asked for a glass as well.

Tony drank a shot from his glass. “All of this is bullshit anyway. You know you want to be with me. You love me, and you think I’m your true love.”

Bruce stared at him without saying anything. The waiter returned and handed Bruce a double shot of rum. In a daze, Bruce thanked him, and took a swig before facing Tony. Tony’s face was unreadable, his mouth twisted in his ever-present smirk. He could have just been teasing. That’s what this was—a verbal gnad shot, just for grins. But sometimes Tony said Bruce wanted something that Tony wanted himself.

A shiver shot through Bruce. For a single, exquisite instant, he let himself run with that idea like a child with a kite. Betty was wonderful. She wanted so many of the same things he did. And she accepted him in a way no one ever had before.

But he had loved Tony for so long. The idea of finally—finally—being with him on every level—

But then reality kicked him in the head. Women. There were always so many women. Packs of them. Never a commitment, no loyalty. Just fun. Bruce wanted something exclusive. That word didn’t exist in Tony’s vocabulary.

And he had been foolish to even imagine Tony would have wanted him like that anyway. They were just friends. Friends who cuddled and sometimes fucked when they needed support. Tony had never really loved him. Not like that.

Bruce had never quite let himself accept that before. The feeling thudded through him like a fist. He drained his glass and rubbed his forehead, veiling his eyes. He forced a small laugh. “You’re hilarious, bro.” He laid both hands on the table, but had to lift one to wipe an eye with the side of his finger. “Sand,” he said softly, blinking. “I need a shower. I’m going back to the room. But…um…what do you want to do today?”

“I’m going to head to that fancy resort and score some proper ass now that I can be me again.”

“You don’t want to hang out?”

“Nope.”

“Okay, but it’s New Year’s Eve. What do you want to do tonight?”

Tony’s expression was intense and sincere. “No offense, bro, but I’m trying to relax here. You’re kind of a bummer. I don’t need that around me right now.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, it was kinda great when you were sick, because I didn’t have to scrape you off of me.”

“Oh,” said Bruce, a little softer than before.

“You’ve always been kind of Eeyore, but this Hulk shit’s fucking dreary. Your tranny girlfriend’s cool with it because she hasn’t had to deal with it yet. Give her a chance to watch you hulk out a few times or hear you prattle on about it like some old man bitching about his hemorrhoids. She won’t want to hang out with you either.”

Bruce stared at him for a few seconds, trying to absorb the blows. He wanted to retaliate, to wound Tony with a lash of sarcasm. “I need to take a shower,” was the only thing he could manage to say.
“Go for it.” Tony indicated the pastry bar with a tip of his chin. “I’m gonna try one of those danish.”

***

Tony found Bruce on the bed, curled on his side with his legs tucked close. The scientist looked as rumpled as before. He obviously hadn’t showered. He had probably just been up here crying. Tony felt guilty for being so harsh with him. He was about to ask if Bruce wanted to have a cuddle and then go diving, when Bruce giggled.

“Okay, but you need to let me go so I can shower.” He laughed outright. “No. You absolutely can *not* lick the stink off me. Maybe after we’ve been seeing each other a few months.” Bruce sighed a blissful sigh—like he did when Tony held him. “Me too. I’m actually looking forward to Los Alamos now.” He adopted a stern tone. “I have to shower, I mean it…. You’re such a bad girl—I’m going to have to spank you.”

Tony cleared his throat loudly.

“Hey,” Bruce said into the phone, “I need to go now. See you in ten minutes.”

“You’re the one who’s going to get spanked,” Tony told him as he hung up the phone. “This whole thing’s doomed. You’re just going to get hurt.”

Bruce shrugged. “Maybe, but love’s worth the risk.” He brushed past Tony on his way to the bathroom. Tony sat on the bed and listened to the shower.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

AFTER YOU READ THIS CHAPTER, please see the end note.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

New Year’s Day

Tony staggered into the room and collapsed on the bed without removing his sandals. He had spent New Year’s Eve entertaining a veritable harem of sun-kissed beauties. Six? He was reasonably certain there had been six of them. No, seven counting the dwarf. Umm…that dwarf…. Talk about a go-getter. Her rimjobs were on par with Bruce’s.

 Fucking Bruce. He stretched to the nightstand drawer. A quick search revealed nothing to smoke. Loser. He left the drawer open and flopped onto his back.

***

Tony sat in the back of a limo across from his parents. The white leather interior contrasted sharply with their black clothes. They were dressed as if for a funeral. None of them were speaking to each other. The driver was silent as well. Tony didn’t know his name.

The cutaway mountain blurred past. Snowflakes stuck to the windows. Everything was white. Old Man, by Neil Young, played in his head. Old man, look at my life,/I’m a lot like you were. He stared out the window, unable to look at his parents any longer. He wished they were dead.

Bob Dylan’s Masters of War blared from the speakers, criticizing the billionaires who amassed their fortunes by creating military equipment while common people died in their wars. A folk song. Fuck. Bruce had to be around here somewhere. You that never done nothin’/But build to destroy… The lyrics raised chills on Tony’s skin.

He found Bruce beside him suddenly, dressed in butt-ugly slacks and a lab coat. Tony thought the song would unnerve Bruce too, but Bruce was wearing headphones and looked utterly oblivious. Annoyed, Tony plucked up one side to listen. Modern English. (We should know better) Dream of better lives the kind which never hate….

Tony’s father opened a large black metal lunch kit—like the kind a construction worker might have—sitting on his lap. He displayed its contents to Tony’s mother. She grabbed a piece of something fried and chewed it vehemently. He leaned over and offered some to Bruce. Bruce hesitated, then took a piece as well. Bloody juices dripped onto his lab coat. He didn’t seem to notice.

“Hey, dumbass. You’re a vegetarian.”

Bruce smiled bloodily at him. With Broadway musical enthusiasm Bruce sang, “There’s nothing you and I won’t do.” Then he turned back to the window and chewed his meat as if nothing had happened.

Tony tried to get Bruce’s attention. "Fuck, dude! Don’t do that. That’s not who you are."
Tony’s father threw the lunchbox at him, hitting him in the chest. Tony grunted. His father rolled his eyes. Tony sat with the closed lunchbox. He didn’t want to open it. He looked around at his parents, at Bruce. They were all gnawing their meat like wolves, blood running down their chins and covering their fingers. None of them were paying attention to him.

On its own, the lunchbox opened. Hands. It was full of scorched, bleeding hands. Some of them bore rings, others were so small. Tony shoved the box away. But when he sat back, he held a partially burnt hand. He bit into it. Blood poured down his white dress shirt. “Tastes like chicken.” But the hand was his, chewed down to a bloody stump.

“You’re all chicken,” said the driver. He turned around and grinned at Tony. Blood ran down the sides of Tony’s mouth as he stared, recognizing without comprehending. The driver wore his face.

The car went into a skid. It smashed through the railing and toppled down the ravine as Tony’s mother shrieked and bloody hands whirled through the air. Old man, look at my life,/ I’m a lot like you were.

Tony gasped awake with the impact. He continued to heave breaths for a few seconds. It had felt so real. It was all fucking nonsense, but it had felt real. A hand gripped his shoulder. He swung around and punched.

Bruce fell on his butt beside the bed. He held a hand over his cheek. “Ow.” Pitch perfect deadpan.

“What are you doing here?”

Bruce climbed onto the bed. “Betty flew home this morning, and I booked the two of us on the redeye back to Miami. I came here to crash.”

“You didn’t hulk out when I hit you.”

Bruce hesitated. “I saw it coming. Just not in enough time to do anything about it.” He sprawled on the bed and rubbed Tony’s arm. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” He lay back, aligned with Bruce, and stared at the ceiling.

Bruce rubbed Tony’s chest. “It seemed like you were having a nightmare.”

Tony grunted, closing his eyes. “I’m hungover.”

Bruce sat up and massaged Tony’s temples. “This is awkward,” he whispered. “Put your head in my lap so I can get to you better.”

Tony felt like punching Bruce again. Instead, he scooted down and settled his head in the nest made by Bruce’s crossed legs. Tony closed his eyes and felt a wave of bliss wash over him as Bruce’s gentle hands massaged his scalp and sinuses, his neck, the tops of his shoulders. There was love in Bruce’s touch. So much fucking love. It practically poured out of Bruce’s fingertips and palms.

“I was kind of a dick yesterday.”

“Yeah, you hurt my feelings.” Bruce didn’t sound upset. “You’re trying to push me away. I’ve decided I’m not going to let you.”

Tony looked up at him. “I can push really hard.”

Bruce smiled. “I bet I can push back harder.”
“We’ll see about that.”

“You’re hurting. You mask it by being a heartless bastard.” Bruce rolled his knuckles behind Tony’s neck. “I’m either arrogant enough or foolish enough to think I can help you.”

“Probably both. You’re kind of an idiotic prick.”

Bruce chuckled and slid his fingers up the back of Tony’s head. “What happened in your nightmare?”

A chill raised goose bumps over Tony’s skin. “I’ve been having variations of the same dream for the past couple of weeks.”

“What things are the same in them?”

“It’s always winter. I’m in a car—sometimes a passenger, sometimes the driver—one time I was both. Every time, no matter what, the car crashes and falls over the side of a cliff.”

“Oh, god.” Bruce hunched over and hugged Tony’s head and neck. Tony let him be for a minute, then reached up and fondled his hair. “This has been going on for weeks?” Bruce asked, choked up.

“Don’t be like that.”

But Bruce set Tony’s head aside and slid down, drawing Tony into a full hug. “Oh, Tony,” he said softly.

“It’s nothing.” But his voice wobbled. He shut up. He felt too fragile to talk suddenly.

Bruce, his face against Tony’s chest, cleared his throat. “I believe I can help you with this. When you have one of these nightmares, write down everything you can remember. Then write a version that changes the outcome. Think about that version before you go to sleep. It sounds cheesy, but it helps.”

Tony squeezed Bruce tight. “That sounds super cheesy.”

Bruce gave an amused snort. “It helps.” He paused. “I know I still have nightmares sometimes, but I used to have terrible ones. Constantly.”

Tony kissed his head and lay with him in silence for a while. They just held each other. Eventually, Tony sighed and said, “You think this has something to do with my parents, don’t you?”

“You might not be mourning them as much as the absence of the relationship you never had with them. And now, because they’re gone, it’s final. You know, for certain, that you’ll never have it. It’s a permanent void now—a wound that can never completely heal.”

Tony buried his face in his hands. Bruce began to rub his back. Tony’s eyes were dry, but he couldn’t lift his head. Bruce’s thumbs dug into the knots between Tony’s shoulder blades and rolled them around in the most wonderful, painful way.
Tony snorted. “You think you know so much. You’ve never been through this.”

“No, not this exactly. But I’ve grown up with grief. I understand loss. And I know what it’s like to want something you’ll never have.” His hands froze for an instant, then resumed their motions. “When my father died—”

“When you killed him—”

“When he died, I still felt the loss. I hated him. I wasn’t mourning him, but the death of what should have been. I always wanted him to value me, to love me….” His voice descended to a whisper. “Fuck, if he had just acknowledged me, maybe it wouldn’t have been as bad when he beat the shit out of me, you know? As it was, the abuse was the only thing that made me different from the furniture.”

Tony reached behind him to stroke Bruce’s thigh.

Bruce exhaled softly and kneaded up Tony’s neck. “Anyway, it’s tough losing parents. Losing my mom—my age, the circumstances—it was so hard. I missed her—I still miss her. But I have no doubt that she loved me. I know she did the best she could. We loved each other, and there’s a cold comfort in that. A finality.” He cleared his throat. “It’s different with my father. It’s like an open wound that festers instead of healing. It’s always painful.”

“It’s so fucked,” said Tony. “I didn’t love them. I don’t miss them. I don’t want to be like them.” He almost couldn’t continue, but he felt compelled to. “But in these dreams I identify with them; I want their acceptance, and I turn into them whether I want to or not.”

“I wish I had the all the answers. I’m still dealing with a lot of that stuff myself.” Bruce rubbed Tony’s shoulder. “But I’m here, okay? I’m here and I love you. Nothing will ever change that. Nothing will ever come between us.”

Tony swung around and hugged Bruce hard enough to make him grunt. “I love you,” he whispered in Bruce’s ear. *More than you’ll ever know.*

***

Tony drove a red Lamborghini with gold trim. A dry southern California wind whipped through his hair. *Iron Man* blasted from the speakers. Bruce sat in the seat beside him. He wore a moth-eaten gray hoodie and lavender corduroys like a fucking bum. He also wore a huge smile.

As they blew by the cutaway mountainside, Bruce said, “I love you, and I’m always here for you. Nothing will ever change that.”

“Dude.” Tony grinned. “I need tortilla chips to go with that much cheese.”

Bruce laughed. He placed his hand lightly atop Tony’s, which rested on the gearshift. He didn’t say ‘I love you,’ again, but Tony could feel it through his skin—like sunlight on a winter day.

As they rounded a sharp curve, Tony realized he had taken it too fast. The car went into a skid. Tony handled the car expertly because he was Tony Fucking Stark. He grinned over at Bruce.

“That was kind of great,” said Bruce. “Let’s not do it again.”

Tony glanced out at the vast and beautiful ocean down below. “We have the whole world before us,” he told Bruce softly. “Why don’t we go get stoned on the beach?”
The next instant, he sat on the beach, watching the waves with a big red bong. Beside him, Bruce, dripping wet and smelling like the ocean, molded wet sand into a sort of hill. “What are you making?”

“A peace sign.”

“You need some help.”

It hadn’t been a question, but Bruce nodded.

Tony set the bong and lighter down on his towel, and they worked on the symbol with careful hands. It was a great fucking day.

***

Tony woke with a smile on his face. The plane engines droned loudly around him; Bruce had insisted on taking the flight he had paid for to get back to the U.S., so Tony had taken it with him. It was a short flight, but Tony was tired and had fallen asleep.

Despite the slowly bumping turbulence, the other passengers looked peaceful. Bruce, however, positively green, was pressed against the window as if he wanted to climb out of it, his body like a single contracted muscle. Amused, Tony reached for his hand and squeezed it. Bruce looked around at him and smiled. It was a great fucking day.

The End

Chapter End Notes

Do Not Despair! If you hate me right now, please read the rest of this note.

Although I started this series as a prequel to my "A Marvelish Romance" series, it has taken on a life of its own. So, the next and final fic will feature a way for Tony and Bruce to get together. It won't be easy--that would be boring--but I think it will make you happy.

End Notes

**There will be one more fic in this series.

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