The Care and Feeding of Lost Causes
by maskedfangirl

Summary

“You’re a former hermit with a history of depression and an alter ego who smashes buildings, and somehow you’ve found a person who gets you out interacting with the world. Trust me on this: hold onto him as hard as he will let you.”

Notes

A few warnings: This fic involves self-harm (the marks and tools are shown, and it's discussed openly, but the act itself is not shown on screen), some pretty deep-seated guilt and self-hatred issues, and frank discussion of a suicide attempt that's mentioned in canon. It's all headed in a healing direction, I promise, but please take care of yourself and don't read if it sounds like something that might trigger you.
Spoiler warning: Opinions are exchanged about the end of the Hunger Games series. I tried to keep it vague.

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Chapter 1

The knock on the door just about scared Bruce out of his skin. He’d been holed up in his apartment for the better part of a week, reading through the Stark scientific archives, making subpar curries in his new kitchenette, and trying (failing) not to watch news footage. The only two people with security access to the elevator to this level were Tony, who was in Malibu, and Pepper, who’d been smoothing things over in DC since the invasion. Bruce’s mind set up a worst-case scenario: military special forces at the door, the Other Guy coming out, debris and blood ground into the carpet and everything ruined, because ruining things was Bruce’s number one life skill. Dammit, why had he bothered unpacking? Idiot.

Okay, deep, full breath. Threats didn’t tend to knock. Bruce forced himself to set down Howard Stark’s notes on propulsion systems, get off the couch, and tuck in his shirt on his way to the door. It was SHIELD. Of course it was.

“Good morning, Doctor Banner,” Natasha Romanov said, smiling up at him with her head cocked slightly to one side. She was camouflaged in civilian clothes, a cotton sundress and spring jacket that would let her infiltrate any coffee shop in the US without detection. “SHIELD requires medical assessments for every affiliate involved in the invasion. We’ve come to collect you.”

It was only at the we that Bruce noticed the man leaning against the wall behind her. He hadn’t seen Agent Barton since the Avengers said good riddance to Loki, and it took a second to identify him now, because this man was just a slouched, hungover version of the one he remembered. Barton looked like he’d lost some weight, and he wore ripped jeans and a t-shirt so faded that Bruce couldn’t tell if it used to be magenta or brown. Dark sunglasses hid half his face, and his jacket didn’t mesh with the late May heat outside.

“Medical assessments?” Bruce sighed, running a hand through his hair. He hadn’t combed it since his last shift in the lab two days ago, and the idea of going out in public seemed even more grating than usual. Never mind being prodded by another SHIELD doctor. “For me or the Other Guy? ‘Cause I gotta tell you, he doesn’t like needles.”

“You’re our only concern,” Natasha said, still smiling. “SHIELD wants to make sure exposure to the Tessaract doesn’t have any ill effects on its people.”

Behind her, Barton huffed out a bitter laugh. All right, well, at least someone understood how ridiculous this was.

“We’re your protective detail for the time being,” Natasha added. “From now on, if you need to leave this building, you call us first. Wherever you need to go, we’ve got you.”

“And your bosses,” Bruce said, folding his hands in front of himself, “they think that this will, what? Keep me contained? Keep me stable?” He kept his voice low, but a hard edge crept into it anyway. The arrogance of this organization, to send a couple of fucking assassins to pick him up like dry cleaning—the Other Guy growled in his sleep, down deep in the back of Bruce’s mind.

He dared to look Natasha in the eye. She had the same pleasant smile plastered on her face, but her eyes had gone incrementally wider and a little wet, like just before everything changed, when he’d made that terrible joke and she’d pulled a gun on him. Guilt settled into his throat.

“It won’t help,” Bruce said, pulling on his coat, “but all right.”
SHIELD medical was predictably annoying in their questioning and even worse when they actually tried to examine him. Bruce’s last appointment with a doctor had been before the Other Guy’s first appearance, and the touches that had once seemed commonplace now felt so invasive he could hardly grit his teeth through them. The cold metal of the stethoscope on his exposed chest was too close in shape to the barrel of a gun, the blood pressure a restraint trapping him on a lab table, every hand on him a trigger for some memory from a decade of being hunted and cornered. It made his heart climb into his throat.

They didn’t even tell him anything he didn’t already know - all readings completely normal except for the “Why aren’t you dead yet?” blood pressure. The doctors couldn’t seem to make eye contact. Neither could Agent Barton, who slouched in the chair in the corner of the exam room, slowly tearing apart a receipt. After an hour of this shit, Bruce was claspings his hands in his lap, clenching his teeth, and plotting revenge on whichever waste of a laminated badge had deemed this humiliation necessary. Or maybe on the whole of SHIELD.

When the shaky-handed young doctor who’d been prodding Bruce grabbed his arm to take a blood sample, he lost it.

“No,” he said, jerking his arm out of her grasp. “Enough. Give that to me, I’ll do it myself.”

“We’re under orders to—”

“Piss me off?” he interrupted, glaring.

She surrendered the syringe and let him draw his own damn blood.

“How did you even get this job?” Bruce hissed through his teeth, all patience gone.

“We drew straws,” she said in a rush, and winced.

Yeah, revenge sounded good.

Natasha and Agent Barton escorted him silently back to Stark Tower in one of SHIELD’s discrete black SUVs, and Bruce spent the whole ride next to Barton, watching the archer fidget with his sleeves like he’d rather be under ten tons of rubble than here next to the freak.

“Thank you for your cooperation,” Natasha said when they dropped him off, and Bruce was too exhausted from shoving down the Other Guy to respond.

He didn’t sleep. He rarely slept normal hours, and it only got worse when there was fresh anger to process. He paced, turned the TV on and then quickly off again, studied Oppenheimer reports from the archive, and managed to choke down some soup. After the anger faded from an all-over stab to a mild ache in his stomach, the urge for revenge remained, so he decided to do something mean.

“Jarvis?”

“Yes, Doctor Banner?” the AI responded helpfully, its voice coming from the ceiling.

“Call Nick Fury,” Bruce said, smiling to himself for the first time since the knock on the door. “On his home phone. I know Tony keeps that sort of number on hand for special occasions.”

Jarvis hesitated. “Doctor, it’s not quite four in the morning—”

“I know what time it is, Jarvis. Make the call.”
After the fourth ring, Fury’s sleep-smudged voice growled, “Someone had best be dead or dying, Stark.”

Bruce put on his best bedside manner voice. “I’m sorry, Director, I was trying to call SHIELD and this number came up. Did I wake you?”

A grumble and a sigh. “Doctor Banner, good morning. What can I do for you?”

“Well, since I’m supposed to have an agent with me at all times outside the tower, I was just calling for an escort to the farmer’s market.”

“At 3:40AM.”

“Figured I ought to call ahead.”

Damn, but that long pause was satisfying. He could just about hear Fury counting to ten.

“I’ll send Barton,” the director said at last. “Next time, call him directly.”

The sharp hang-up that followed left Bruce feeling a little too satisfied with himself.

A couple hours later, Agent Barton was leaning in the doorway again, his street clothes rumpled and his hair sticking to one side like he’d rolled straight out of bed. Natasha wasn’t here this time - sleeping in, Bruce hoped. She was the only person he’d met in the past 24 hours who hadn’t treated him like a trial to be endured.

“Good morning,” Bruce said cheerfully. “How’d you sleep?”

“Peachy.” Barton sniffed, his misery readable even with the sunglasses obscuring his eyes. “Fury called me at ass o’clock in the morning to say I had to ‘take the good doctor shopping for organic goddamn kale.’”

“That’s absurd,” Bruce said, double checking his shopping list, “kale isn’t in season for at least another couple of months.”

“All right,” Barton grumbled, “let’s get this shit show on the road.”

They got this shit show on the road in another of SHIELD’s nondescript SUVs with another nondescript driver, Bruce smiling down smugly at his hemp shopping bags and Agent Barton wearing a ticket stub to bits between his fingers. It was a perfect day for being out in the city, the overcast sky keeping the temperature comfortably moored in the high 60s. The vendors in the Union Square Farmers Market were just finishing setup when they arrived, and Bruce took his time browsing the produce in the half-deserted market, enjoying each minute of precious SHIELD resources wasted. Barton trudged along behind him, silent up until the onion stand.

“Keep walking,” Barton said when the vendor’s back was turned. “There’s a stall around the corner that sells the best onions in the place. They got heirloom tomatoes, too. Makes one helluva spaghetti sauce.”

Bruce frowned back at him.

Barton was still fidgeting with that ticket stub, a pitiful scrap of fibers by now. He glanced up, raising
his eyebrows. “What, you think you’re the only one who cooks?”

I thought you were afraid of me, Bruce didn’t say. He shook his head. “Lead on.”

Agent Barton, it turned out, knew the farmer’s market so thoroughly he may as well be leading a covert operation here. He didn’t talk much, but once he had Bruce’s attention he stuck close, paying for every purchase with a SHIELD-issued credit card, motioning Bruce over whenever he spotted a notable vendor, and dropping info like “This is the penultimate butcher shop. The ultimate butcher shop’s not here this week because the owner’s paranoid about alien invasion, but penultimate will do you for most things. Their pepper bacon’s awesome in potato soup.”

It was an educational experience, Bruce had to admit. Except that even when he was standing right next to Bruce, holding the shopping bag open for him, Barton was still fidgeting. He rubbed paper to pieces between his fingertips, tossed anything he had in his hands into the air compulsively, and scratched at his own sleeve like he was trying to satisfy an impossible itch. Any time they stopped walking, suddenly Barton seemed miles away, his mouth tense and his fingers moving like he didn’t even notice them.

After watching him for the better part of an hour, Bruce concluded that Agent Barton wasn’t afraid of him - he stood too close and spoke too easily for that. This was about something else entirely. When they sat down in the outdoor section of a cafe on the way back from the farmers market, Barton just about scratched the lamination off their menu in the time it took the waitress to take their orders. The sky had darkened, dropping rain down on the canvas canopy overhead and ensuring that the other patrons mostly migrated indoors.

“Okay,” Bruce said over his too-sweet coffee. “What are you doing?”

Barton glanced his way - or at least, Bruce thought he did. It was hard to tell with the sunglasses. “Dying of starvation while waiting for a bagel sandwich,” he answered.

Bruce sighed. “A week and a half ago, you helped save the world from alien invaders. Now you’re babysitting me and wearing holes in the menu. What changed?”

Agent Barton’s fingers paused against the menu, and he drew back, flattening his palms on his thighs. Staring down at the table, he licked his lips. “They suspended me from my usual duties,” he said quietly. “Revoked my weapons access. Because of the, uh…Loki thing.”

Jesus. Bruce recognized the hollow edge to his voice, that too-familiar note of guilt, and it tied a knot in his stomach. “So Loki scrambles your brains, and they punish you for it by saddling you with me, unarmed. What backwards excuse did they find to stick Natasha on this duty?”

“She volunteered. Watching out for me - she does that. ‘Cept she’s out on assignment this morning.” Barton leaned back, crossing his arms. “And it’s not punishment, doc. I practically begged Fury to give me an assignment. Besides, I fought alongside your alter ego. He doesn’t scare me.”

The waitress came by with Barton’s bagel sandwich, and Bruce watched him eat with a strange sense of stillness. How many people could honestly say they weren’t afraid of him? Sure, Tony wasn’t, but Tony was like an eight-year-old who poked snakes with sticks just to see what they’d do. Pepper still seemed anxious around Bruce, Steve Rogers hardly looked him in the eye, even Fury was too wary of him to tell him off for calling his home line. So here was one guy with a healthy sense of self-preservation who didn’t deem Bruce the biggest threat in the room, and Bruce had written him off from word one.

He cleared his throat. “I’m sorry you got an early wake-up because of me, Agent Barton.”
“Eh, it’s all right. Couldn’t sleep anyway.” Barton shrugged. “And you’re not on the SHIELD roster, Bruce. Call me Clint.”

Bruce folded his hands in his lap. “Okay, Clint it is.”

Clint smirked. “Y’know, I see what you’re doing. Fury treats you like a potential threat that needs looking after, so you annoy him on purpose and waste SHIELD resources.”

“You planning to report me?” Bruce said, leaning back.

Clint gave him a grin warm enough to lower his defenses. “Hell no, I’m all for passive-aggressive revenge plots. But if you wanna waste SHIELD resources, you can do better than this.” Taking out his wallet, he waved his shiny black credit card in the air. “SHIELD is prepared to cover any expenses a high-level resource such as yourself might incur while under our protection, and most of the staff is afraid of you. If you felt the need to, say, get front-row seats to a Broadway show and a lobster dinner, I’m sure I couldn’t stop you.”

“Misusing funds like that won’t get you in trouble?” Bruce asked.

Shrugging, Clint crossed his arms. “Won’t matter once my suspension’s up. If they decide to kick me off the Avengers and lock me away for crimes under Loki, a little extra spending’s not even gonna register.”

“Well, that’s optimistic,” Bruce said.

“I’m often told I’m irrepressibly cheerful,” Clint deadpanned.

Bruce couldn’t help smiling into the dregs of his coffee.

The rain gusted down in a heavy wave, rattling the canopy. Clint glanced up at it. “You need an umbrella?”

A few minutes later, Bruce was stretching open a new pocket-size umbrella with the Manhattan skyline on it at a tourist shop down the street. It was a ridiculous purchase - he hadn’t owned an umbrella in years - and the inflated price point gave him a deep, vengeful sense of satisfaction. This thing would look so good languishing in his front closet. Raising it over his head, he stepped out from under the tourist shop canopy and let the rain patter on the cheap polyester as he started down the sidewalk.

“You sure you don’t want some other cheap tourist crap from that place?” Clint said, falling into step beside him with his own umbrella out. “They got sweatshirts.”

“That’s okay, I’m—” Bruce started, but a flash of lightning cut him off. He froze, waiting: one second, two, three, four, five, six—and there was the thunder clap, echoing down the street like an explosion. His whole body clenched up at that noise.

“You’re…?” Clint prompted, leaning in slightly.

Bruce swore under his breath. “I should—I’ve gotta get inside.”

“You want me to call for the car to take you home?” Clint said.

Lightning lit the street again. Bruce’s chest tightened. “No,” he bit out, “I just want to get inside. Away from windows.”
Thunder cracked, making him cringe. This time, Clint looked him up and down and said, “Okay, come on,” leading the way down the sidewalk.

They wound up slipping inside the cafe they’d eaten at. It was a tiny space with a whole wall of windows, but Clint flashed a SHIELD badge at the manager and got them access to the stock room. Sitting on the concrete floor against a pallet of coffee beans, Bruce wasn’t sure whether to feel humiliated or relieved.

Clint dropped to the floor against the wall opposite him. “Better?”

The thunder rumbled distantly, setting Bruce’s teeth on edge, but at least it wasn’t all around him like on the street. He nodded. His whole body was still on edge, like the Other Guy was waiting to join a fight. No fight here. Settle down.

Leaning his head back against the wall, Clint said, “You’re not a fan of storms, huh?”

“Also not a fan of hired goons asking me stupid questions,” Bruce snapped. Shit. He hadn’t meant to say that. Fear always lowered his filters. “Sorry,” he added, wincing.

Clint just smiled back at him, unfazed. “We’re cool so long as you’re not planning on going green in here. This place has the third best breakfast sandwiches in Manhattan. It’d be a shame to see it smashed.”

Bruce straightened up, breathing down into his core and out again slowly. His chest relaxed a little. “No,” he said. “Not today.”

The cheerful acoustic soundtrack of the cafe filtered in through the door along with the muffled sounds of the weather. Bruce breathed through the vibrations of thunder, reminding himself that it couldn’t actually hurt him. God, why did his brain have so many crossed wires?

Across the way, Clint rolled a bit of paper between his fingers. Bruce focused on the motion as a distraction. The guy’s hands were muscular and moved with the sort of precision Bruce had always envied in athletes - which he supposed technically Clint was. He looked it, too. Was Bruce the only one of the so-called Avengers who didn’t look like he could model for *GQ*?

Okay, this was stupid, he wasn’t going to sit in a goddamn stock room feeling sorry for himself.

Clint plucked his phone out of his pocket. “Hourly forecast says it shouldn’t be too long before this passes.”

“Thanks,” Bruce said. Exhaling, he decided to offer up the information he’d been asked for: “I’ve never liked storms, but since the Other Guy showed up, they kinda freak me out. I think they remind him of people trying to blow him up.”

“I wondered why he didn’t seem to like Thor much,” Clint said, chuckling.

“Yeah,” Bruce said. “Truth be told, I’m glad that guy went home. I mean, he seems nice enough, but…”

“He’s a clueless tourist with semi-phenomenal, nearly-cosmic power and family drama that levels cities,” Clint finished. “Entertaining, sure. Valuable ally, absolutely. But a bull in a fucking china shop.”

Bruce actually smiled. “Yeah, exactly.”
They spent the next half-hour talking over the details of Thor’s case file, Bruce ranting about the impossible physics of that goddamn wormhole and Clint filling him in on the details of the New Mexico incident. By the time the storm passed, Bruce realized he was actually relaxing, in spite of himself.

“Hey, big guy, what’s up?” Tony’s face blinked to life on the screen of Bruce’s borrowed StarkTech tablet, surrounded by the fluorescent glow of his workshop in Malibu, his eyes ringed in dark circles and his hair mussed. Was anyone involved in the Avengers Initiative sleeping these days?

Probably Steve Rogers was. Genetically enhanced to be the fucking perfect soldier, not like the rest of them, not a lab-grown monstrosity like—the Other Guy grumbled, and Bruce exhaled slowly, shutting him up. Steve was a nice guy. Bitterness solved nothing.

“I’ve been going through the archives,” Bruce started, keeping his voice pleasant. “Got through the 1940s and half of the 80s so far.”

“Good bedtime reading,” Tony said, fiddling with something off-screen.

“Yeah. Look, I was wondering if you’ve got any files dealing more with personnel.”

“What, like housekeeping?” Something metallic crashed off-screen, and Tony wheeled around in his seat, his tone scolding. “Dummy, in what universe does ‘Grab me a small reflective surface’ mean ‘Please take the mirror off my new car?’ Hm?”

Bruce waited until the crashing stopped. “I mean more like SHIELD personnel. They gave me the briefing on the way to the helicarrier, but it didn’t include much more than passing knowledge of the agents we’ve been working with.”

“They are sneaky bastards,” Tony said, shrugging. “Fortunately, so is Jarvis. Hey, Jarvis? Give Bruce access to my SHIELD folder.”

An alert pops up on the tablet: You have been granted permission to access StarkMobileDrive\astark\private\porn\kinky_shit\suits.

Bruce tried not to make a face. “Your filing system…”

“Is great, isn’t it?” Tony twirled a screwdriver between his fingers, looking far too pleased with himself. “The best part is, that’s my actual porn folder, so it’s buried under roughly thirty years of accumulated tits and money shots. Even Coulson won’t—wouldn’t touch it.” Tony paused a second, shaking his head as if to clear it. “There might be some actual suit porn in there, but you’re fine, I have excellent taste. Anyone in particular you’re looking for?”

“For suit porn?”

“SHIELD files, Bruce. Get your mind out of the gutter.”

Bruce sighed. How did he end up attached to Tony Stark? It was like trying to be friends with a cattle prod. “Agents Barton and Romanov. I’ve been informed that I’m not supposed to leave the tower without one or both of them at my side, per SHIELD orders. I’d like to know who I’m dealing with.”
Especially Barton. Natasha he sort of understood already. Clint, on the other hand, didn’t make any sense. Normal people didn’t nonchalantly sit around chatting with Bruce in a stock room while he was freaking out - they evacuated.

Tony leaned back in his chair, laughing. “Fury issued you an armed guard? Was he absent from English class the day ‘futility’ was on the vocab list?”

“Unarmed,” Bruce corrected, but he stopped himself before sharing why. That seemed like the sort of personal detail that he hadn’t been meant to share - although, admittedly, he was about to go through the guy’s file digging for insight.

“Are they high?” Tony was actually giggling, because the idea of an unarmed agent facing the Other Guy was apparently hilarious. “What are they supposed to do if you Hulk out, alert SHIELD ten seconds before the internet does?”

Bruce didn’t argue that ten seconds could save a life or twenty, depending on the Other Guy’s mood. Pushing down the guilt that rose in his throat, he said, “Anyway, I’d just like to know who I’m dealing with. Nothing invasive.”

“Yeah, no, there’s nothing in there that some low-level SHIELD desk jockey doesn’t have access to—shit, sorry, one of my bots has a crowbar, I’ve gotta go.” Tony disappeared in a pixelated blur, and his voice echoed back from the workshop - “We do not hit the ’32 Flathead Roadster with blunt objects! Jesus, what is this, kindergarten?” - for a second before the screen went blank.

It took Bruce the better part of an hour to figure out Tony’s filing system. He’d replaced the names of all the prominent SHIELD agents and affiliates with his own strange associative code, so Fury’s files were under a folder called Leather Daddies, Natasha’s under Lawyers, and Clint’s under Orlando Bloom. The rest was a confusingly labeled minefield of unfamiliar SHIELD personnel and women in various states of unbuttoned menswear, except for one folder called David Bowie, which was actually exactly what it said on the tin. Of course. Regardless of orientation, everyone had a crush on Bowie - or so he’d told himself as a teenager, when he was trying to convince himself he only liked women.

He spent the evening reading up on Clint Barton’s career: best marksman at SHIELD, sniper training with firearms but preferred the bow, a top choice agent for critical missions in spite of his mouth earning him disciplinary action a few times a year. Rarely took vacation time. Never had his weapons access interrupted before the Loki incident. Handler: Agent Phil Coulson, since June 2004.

Bruce’s stomach dropped. Waking up to find a list of casualties under your name was bad enough - Bruce knew that all too well - but to be robbed of your workaholic stability and lose your longtime supervisor at the same time? No wonder the guy was a mess.

If they were stuck together, at least maybe Bruce could help.

He called up Clint the next day and arranged to waste some SHIELD resources. Natasha joined them for lunch at a restaurant on the edge of Central Park, and Bruce watched the two of them bicker over the wine list, Natasha perfectly coiffed and authoritative and Clint slouching so far he was just about disappearing into his jacket. They sounded like an old married couple, half the argument shorthand references that no one but them understood.
After lunch came clothes shopping, because Clint decided Bruce needed a new shirt after he dripped red sauce on the one he was wearing. Then there was a trip to an independent bookstore in Lower Manhattan, where Bruce immersed himself in the non-fiction section, Clint trailed behind him reading something off the Bestsellers display, and Natasha disappeared for an hour and came back with a short stack of young adult novels. They hit a couple of stores for housewares to fill out Bruce’s bare bones apartment, and at the end of each purchase, Clint would hand his SHIELD-issued credit card to the person behind the counter and tell Bruce, straight-faced, “Thank you for your cooperation.” Natasha rolled her eyes, but she didn’t exactly put a halt to the spending.

Bruce did, after the cookware shop. Being out in the open, surrounded by crowds, was starting to make him edgy. That was funny, wasn’t it - Clint fraying the cuffs of his jacket fidgeting, but Bruce was the one getting edgy? At least the agents knew better than to push it when he said he’d like to go home.

“I’d like a couple of days to myself, but this was good,” he said once they were in the shelter of the car. “We should do it again.”

“I’m sure we can arrange that,” Natasha said beside him.

The driver took them back to Stark Tower via the maze of construction work around Park Avenue. Half the streets were closed off, and those that had been cleared of debris and deemed fit for life were choked with traffic, moving slowly enough that Bruce could probably have walked the rest of the way and beaten the car. At this speed, there was no ignoring the clusters of flowers and photos that made pops of color along the otherwise gray dusted sidewalks. The memorials were everywhere, along Park Ave especially. Bruce kept his breathing steady and reminded himself that the Other Guy had racked up his death toll trying to help, for once.

Natasha stared straight ahead, but Clint seemed fixated on what was outside the windows, his eyes not moving from the sidewalk. After half a mile, Bruce caught a flicker of motion and realized that Natasha had snaked an arm covertly between the seat and the door to take Clint’s hand. Huh. That was new information.

And Jesus, why did that elicit a stab of jealousy in Bruce’s gut? He didn’t need any hand-holding to get him through the post-destruction phase. He’d held himself together just fine for years now, with a few exceptions, so why—oh. Dammit. It wasn’t the general contact he was jealous of. Some foolhardy part of him was cultivating a thing for Clint.

Bruce slouched low in his seat, drumming out a rhythm on the car door. He’d have to have a talk with his brain about the inappropriateness of crushes again. Romantic involvement with another man had been off the menu since that tryst with his doctoral advisor’s son had gone catastrophically south, and the menu at large had been torched once the Other Guy showed up anyway. Even setting aside the destructive potential of his greener half, the probably-bisexual closet Bruce had happily made a home in for the past fifteen years, and the fact that those strong hands and expressive lips were attached to a guy with a SHIELD spending account, Bruce just wasn’t the sort of person who did physical relationships. A firm handshake with a colleague? Sure. Pokes and prods in a scientific manner? Fine. Getting fired on by an army? Of course. But affection, sex, and all that business? Not safe, not worth it, not interested.

And not going to be stuck in the car with this line of thought much longer. The door to Stark Tower’s parking garage rose for them, and the SHIELD SUV pulled inside.

“Meet you back here in twenty,” Natasha said to Clint, tapping him on the back of the head as she started for the elevator bank. “Help Bruce with his bags.”
Wait, what?

“Where are you going?” Bruce called after her.

“I promised Pepper I’d check in on the construction while she’s out,” Natasha called over her shoulder.

Great. Bruce was going to have quality time alone in the elevator with a crush he needed to extinguish. He sighed. “Those two know each other?”

Clint grabbed the cookware bags out of the back of the SUV. “Tasha did an undercover stint in Stark Industries after Iron Man went public. They still do dinner and drinks a couple times a month.”

The ride in the elevator was silent except for the crinkle of shopping bags, but at least it didn’t take long. Bruce’s apartment was at the back of what might have generously been termed the “garden level,” a floor mostly taken up by storage with windows that looked out on the street or - in Bruce’s case - the retaining wall that hid the dumpsters.

“You can just put those over there,” he told Clint, gesturing to the table in the kitchenette area.

Clint dropped the bags soundlessly on the tile, then did a full 360-degree turn, taking in the small one bedroom, its stark modern furnishings, and the blanket of research notes and papers that covered most surfaces. He squinted out the window. “Man, Tony stuck you in the most depressing room in the tower, didn’t he?”

“Actually, I, uh, chose it myself,” Bruce said, his hands locking together in front of his chest. “Tony tried to sell me on a two bedroom with a view of Midtown, but this was more my speed. I can pass a window in here without being reminded of all the potential casualties outside these walls.”

“Yeah, I’m not a big fan of neighbors, either,” Clint said, walking his fingers across a stack of manilla folders on the table.

Bruce actually found himself smiling a little. Scuffing his toes against the floor, he said, “I’m really more of a country person. If I ever retire, it’ll be to a cabin somewhere in the mountains.”

Clint nodded. “I hear that. Wide open spaces, no neighbors, outta sniper range. Wouldn’t mind doing that myself, ‘cept Natasha’d be miserable so far from people.”

There was that twinge of jealousy again. Bruce swore internally. Normally, his brain seemed to understand the whole “no entanglements” thing. He was clearly spending too much time talking to Tony.

Better to kill an inkling of a crush while it was young. He cleared his throat. “How long have you and Natasha been seeing each other?”

“We’re not,” Clint said, waving a hand. “I’m gay, and Tasha—honestly, I don’t know if she’s interested in anyone. But we’re a set, her and me. If I get to grow old, I’m doing it with her.”

Dammit, that really didn’t help.


Clint chuckled. “Boy, you must be really bored if you’re letting me ramble. Don’t you have a TV in this place?”
“In the bedroom. It mostly gathers dust, though. Same as the laptop, outside of lab work.”

“Not a big fan of mindless consumerist entertainment?”

“Not a big fan of things that get my blood pressure up.”

“Even Gordon Ramsay?”

Bruce frowned. “You mean that weird looking guy who’s always yelling at people about their cooking?”

For the first time since the battle’s end, Clint’s back snapped straight and he took off the sunglasses, peering back at him with bright, intent eyes. “Gordon Ramsay is a goddamn work of art, Bruce.”

“I’m…sorry?” Bruce offered.

“You should be,” Clint said, leaning toward him and pointing the sunglasses at his chest. “Have you even seen *Kitchen Nightmares*?”

“No.”

“You’d love it. It’s catharsis wrapped in reality TV.” A smile Bruce could only interpret as scheming spread across Clint’s face. “Hey, you know what? I’ll introduce you sometime. I’ll cook, you and Natasha’ll watch Chef Ramsey bring his righteous fury on the restaurant industry, it’ll be great. Call me whenever, we’ll make it happen.”

Bruce nodded. “Yeah, okay.”

“Great.” Clint slipped his sunglasses back on and clapped a hand on Bruce’s shoulder on his way to the door. Once there, he turned, tipped his head politely, and said, “Thank you for your cooperation.”
He did not call Clint for dinner and *Kitchen Nightmares*. It seemed too intimate in an odd, unsettling way that made Bruce pretty sure he was crazy. People sharing leisure time together in a private residence? He hadn’t done that since before he’d fled the States - well, unless you counted joining Tony in the tower, but that was different. Tony Stark had the sort of omnivorous sensibility toward personal property that only cats and charismatic billionaires could pull off: anything within his reach may as well belong to him, from senate chambers to your own personal bubble, and objections were futile. (Bruce was just grateful that Tony had the good sense to keep his hands to himself.) But being invited into someone’s home, their sole place of respite, to be cooked for and taken care of? No, that was too much. That was something normal people did.

Still, Bruce began to get into the habit of calling for a SHIELD protective detail two or three times a week. It was a good way to guarantee he’d get some fresh air, and—Jesus, he couldn’t believe he was admitting it, even to himself—he kind of liked it. He hadn’t been interested in anyone in a long time, and regardless of the zero percent likelihood of this actually going somewhere, traversing the city with a piece of walking, snarking eye candy wasn’t a bad way to live. Natasha was nice to look at, too, though she didn’t inspire the same sort of nervous enjoyment in him that Clint did. Natasha made him feel welcome, but Clint made him feel like he could loosen up, which was rarer - and he was starting to wish he could return the favor.

After two weeks of being around the guy, Bruce had assembled a mental page of observations that hadn’t been in his SHIELD file.

**Observation #1: Clint Barton was exceptionally bright.**

Bruce wondered why SHIELD didn’t note that in his file - was it because he wasn’t as cunning as Natasha and didn’t have a PhD behind his name like their research division, or simply because he was hired to be a weapon instead of a strategist? Clint used his phone’s calculator to figure out 20% tips, but give him a target - a stranger on the street, anyone - and with a glance he could construct a narrative of their life, what their day had been like, how best to intercept them. He didn’t go people watching, he went people deconstructing.

“That guy in the gray shirt’s gonna try to rob the gas station up the street,” Clint said once, while the three of them were sitting at the outdoor tables of a cafe.

Bruce peered at the young man who was walking along the other side of the street. He looked a little nervous, but Bruce didn’t see the connection. “Why do you say that?”

Clint tipped his head and peered through his sunglasses at the guy. “He’s got a .38 in the back of his jeans, but he’s walking like he’s trying to hide it, so he’s carrying for a purpose. His shoes have holes in them, his glasses are cracked, and he’s got a spit-up stain over one shoulder, so he’s broke, has a baby at home, needs the money. The gas station on the corner is the only one in a mile radius that doesn’t have bulletproof glass, so that’s gotta be his target.”

“Okay,” Bruce said. “Well, are we gonna do something about it?”

“We’re not supposed to intervene unless it’s a matter of global security,” Natasha said, stealing a bite of Clint’s bagel.

“He could hurt someone,” Bruce pointed out.
“He won’t,” Clint said.

He didn’t. The three of them watched as the guy disappeared into the gas station and reappeared a few minutes later, sprinting down the block. Not a single shot fired. Police sirens encroached, and Natasha pulled her purse over her shoulder, motioning for them to go.

“Huh,” Bruce said as they got back into the car. “Can you analyze me like that?”

Clint made a so-so gesture with one hand. “I could, but it wouldn’t be nearly as accurate. Proximity confuses things.”

Observation #2: Clint Barton knew all the best restaurants and grocers in New York City. If you were in the mood for pie, he’d bring you to a hole in the wall diner in the Bronx that got its pies straight from the owner’s mother, a retired pastry chef. If you wanted to feast like a god on traditional Italian pasta, he knew an amazing place that had just moved to Midtown. If you wanted the freshest Atlantic cod for twenty miles, Clint knew the grocer to get a hookup from. When Bruce bet him he couldn’t find the most authentic Bengali cuisine in New York, Clint took him and Natasha to Queens for lunch at a place whose fish curry reminded Bruce so much of a place he’d eaten at in Kolkata that he owed Clint the price of the meal.

When asked why he put so much effort into finding good food around the city, Clint shrugged and said, “My work life is full of burned coffee, SHIELD cafeteria food, and blood. Gotta wash the bad taste out somehow.”

Observation #3: When Natasha Romanov was off on assignments and he was stuck in town, Clint Barton went a little stir crazy.

Bruce understood now what Clint meant about the two of them being a matched set. When Clint was being silent and sullen, Natasha would take over the speaking portion of the activities; when Natasha returned from an exhausting mission, Clint took on responsibilities for her and made sure they went out for comfort food. From what Bruce could gather, Clint cooked while Natasha cleaned, and she had her own place in SHIELD-sanctioned housing but slept over at his apartment most nights. They had personal protocols in place for dealing with everything from street harassment to haggling with market vendors to choosing desserts. When Natasha rolled her eyes at love songs on the radio, Clint leaned in close and sang along.

So when Natasha wasn’t around, it was like Clint needed something - anything - to fill the space she left behind. He’d send Bruce poorly punctuated text messages several times a day if Bruce was being a hermit in his own apartment, and if Bruce requested an escort somewhere, he’d get a Clint who was even more fidgety than usual and couldn’t order dessert to save his life.

Observation #4: Clint Barton wasn’t sleeping.

He wore those damn sunglasses almost everywhere, but when he finally folded them up and stuck them in his pocket, the dark rings around his eyes were so pronounced he looked ill. Bruce caught him nodding off a few times on car rides, the sort of micro-nap that Bruce associated with the stretch of grad school where he’d had the worst insomnia of his life and that awful stretch after the Other Guy showed up when he’d kept himself awake to avoid the nightmares.

Clint was either chasing sleep or getting chased by something in his sleep, and Bruce had no idea what he could say to help.

Observation #5: Clint Barton used self-injury as a coping mechanism.
Bruce wondered if his therapist at SHIELD knew. Clint was pretty decent at hiding it. He’d wear jackets whenever the weather let him get away with it and only made marks that could be explained away as cooking or weapons handling accidents - fresh and healing burns and nicks, a line of older scar tissue that would’ve been hidden by an arm guard. But Bruce had watched Clint’s hands and studied his file enough to know that he didn’t make the kinds of mistakes that would lead to those injuries. Clint’s hands didn’t slip or stumble - if they did, he’d be out of a job.

Self-injury had never been one of Bruce’s vices, but he understood the urge to destroy some part of yourself. He also understood the need for catharsis, whether induced by endorphins or the symbolism of watching something less damaging heal - though, admittedly, he’d always been better at the self-destruction end of things.

Bruce also understood that it wasn’t the sort of thing you confronted a guy about over the floral centerpiece of a bistro on the Upper East Side while his platonic lifemate read emails on her phone fifteen inches to your left. So he quietly filed the information away as none of his business unless proven otherwise.

Three weeks into the SHIELD chaperone arrangement, the memorial news segments started running. It was a month since the invasion, and almost every channel had its own retrospective agenda, some of them focusing on the victims’ lives and families, some analyzing footage of the carnage, most just replaying information that had been forced down the public’s throat already with slightly more somber-faced reporters and “one month later” graphics. The crowd of paparazzi that had made the front entryway of the tower impassable for the first week after Bruce moved in were back in full force and then some now that Park Avenue was open to thru traffic, and the official StarkIndustries email account that Tony had set him up with was flooded with inquiries - who even knew how these people had gotten ahold of that address.

On the plus side, Tony was back in town, so every TV in the building was currently tuned to Cartoon Network on boss’s orders. Bruce actually kind of liked having it playing on the TV in the corner of the lab while he worked.

It must be set as an option in the elevator TVs as well, because when Clint came to pick Bruce up for their next farmer’s market run, the first words out of his mouth were: “They should bring back Courage the Cowardly Dog.”

“The what?” Bruce said, grabbing his hemp grocery bags.

That launched Clint into a ten-minute explanation something that sounded like a simple children’s show to Bruce but that Clint insisted was a brilliant allegory for the afterlife and the duality of man. Bruce was completely lost but decided to nod along while Clint ranted. Natasha had been on assignment for two days and had at least four more to go, and Clint was always at his most tangential when he missed her.

The rant somehow segued into cartoons they’d grown up with, which led to the discovery that, between the two of them, they’d probably seen most of Scooby-Doo’s various TV and movie incarnations. They argued favorite characters while Bruce picked through batches of asparagus and best villains over the tomatoes. Clint had opinions about Scrappy-Doo.

After the farmers market, they went to a gastropub Clint wanted to try out. While they waited for their lunch, Clint gave Bruce an overview of Matthew Lillard’s understated genius in the live-action movies and Bruce tried to figure out what exactly a gastropub was. Neither of them had finished their drinks yet when the sports show on the TV over the bar ended and the memorial footage started up.

Clint’s attention shifted to the TV, and just like that, his enthusiasm for bad movies flickered out. It
only took about five seconds for him to go from animated and smiling to hollow-eyed, his hands flat against the tabletop and his shoulders pulling in tight.

Bruce wished he had the guts to fill Natasha’s shoes and take his hand. He cleared his throat. “You were saying something about the challenge of having chemistry with a CGI dog?”

Clint dragged his gaze away from the TV, and by the look on his face, Bruce knew that conversation was over. Clint failed to find the tail end of his sentence and tore the shit out of a napkin instead.

Bruce raised a hand and summoned their waitress. “Excuse me, can that TV be turned off?”

She shook her head before he even finished the question, like it was one she’d gotten a lot. “I’m sorry, our bartender has veto power over the TV today.” Lowering her voice to a whisper, she added, “His brother’s segment is supposed to be featured this time.”

Dammit. “I’m sorry to hear that,” Bruce said, nodding.

“Condolences,” Clint said between his teeth. The waitress gave him a side-eye as she went back to the kitchen.

“We could pay and get out of here,” Bruce suggested tentatively.

“No,” Clint said, all but huddled on his side of the booth. “I need to try their shepherd’s pie. Been looking for a good one for three years.”

“Okay,” Bruce said, wishing he had some engrossing subject to distract them both. Not that it would help anyway if he did, though - Clint’s gaze was fixed back on the TV. Back at the bar, their waitress was talking to the bartender and shooting glances toward their both.

After a few minutes of silence, Clint said quietly, “They’ve got the death toll wrong.”

Bruce leaned in to make sure he heard right. “What do you mean it’s wrong?”

“They’re all wrong,” Clint said, sniffing. “SHIELD isn’t releasing our internal death toll. Morgue’s been stuffed since it happened. They’ve never had an incident on this level before.”

Bruce’s stomach sank just in time for the entrees to arrive. He followed Clint’s example and started eating anyway. A question nagged at him, and Clint seemed more open to the topic than he’d ever seen before, so he asked.

“How are they still processing bodies?”

“Yep.” Clint took a swig of his drink. “At least half of ‘em were identified and released to their families in the first week, but there were a lot of burning deaths on the Helicarrier, and they’re still fishing bodies out of the Atlantic.” He tapped the side of his cheek. “Thank God for standard issue dental implant trackers, right?”

Jesus. Bruce remembered the ambivalence and fear of the people in SHIELD medical when he’d been there three weeks ago. How much of that was normal operations and how much was just people trying to perform their jobs while knowing so many of their coworkers’ bodies were being stored in an adjacent department?

“Yeah,” Bruce said, “thank God.”

“Heard yesterday they found Sharon from HR.” The tone of Clint’s voice got increasingly more
casual as he spoke, but his fork moved less and less. “She always brought homemade baked goods to work on Fridays. If I had to meet with her, I tried to schedule it on a Friday. She made damn good brownies. Don’t know yet if it was the explosion or the fall that killed her.”

“Hope they figure it out soon,” Bruce said, because what else was there to say to that?

“Mm,” Clint said, picking at the edge of his shepherd’s pie.

The TV in the corner was interspersing stories of the victims with smartphone footage of the Avengers.

“I, uh,” Bruce started, and winced. Any way he put it would sound like scraping up tragedy, but if there was ever a time to say it… “I heard Coulson was your handler. I’m sorry for your loss. He was a good man.”

“I didn’t lose him,” Clint said, staring at the TV. “I took him.”

Trying to catch Clint’s attention, Bruce corrected, “Loki did that.”

Clint didn’t even blink. “Loki might’ve been holding the spear at the time, but I’m the reason he’s dead.”

The words were delivered with such matter-of-fact clarity that it took Bruce a few seconds to deconstruct them. Leaning forward, he hissed, “Clint, that’s bullshit and you know it. Loki used you as a weapon.”

“I am a weapon,” Clint hissed back, his expression going stern. “That’s why SHIELD hired me, Bruce - because I’m a weapon, and I’m fucking good at it. The hell do you think you know about it?”

Bruce swallowed down a surge of anger at SHIELD. Leaning back in his seat, he said calmly, “I know you’re not sleeping. I know you’re faking those little kitchen accidents all over your wrists. And I know a thing or two about waking up to a death toll you don’t entirely remember racking up, so if you decide you want to talk about it, you know where to find me.”

Clint stared hard at him for a minute, his expression stony, before glancing up at the bar and cringing. “Shit, we’ve been recognized.”

The bartender strode over to their booth and laid his hands flat on the tabletop. “Gentlemen, I’m gonna have to ask you to leave.”

“Why?” Bruce asked.

The bartender barely concealed a glare. “Because I don’t feel like being hospitable to two of the guys who turned my city into a battle ground. Lunch is on the house - now get out.”

Bruce was prepared to argue, but Clint raised both hands in surrender and shook his head. As they left the restaurant, he muttered, “I’m giving this place a 2-star on Yelp. Service was sub-par, but the shepherd’s pie wasn’t half bad.”

“Guess not everyone’s a fan,” Bruce said.

“Least he didn’t get abusive about it,” Clint said, shrugging. “My landlord likes to accost me in the hallway about how the Avengers are part of some conspiracy.”
He was silent for the rest of the trip back to the tower.

Bruce laid low for a couple of days, tinkering with cell cultures in the lab, catching up on the plots of Cartoon Network’s morning block, and emphatically not checking his phone every ten minutes. He’d made his offer to talk, and if Clint didn’t want to take it, that was fine. The guy’s life was his own business, and Bruce was—what? A bystander? Sort of a friend? Didn’t matter. No texts.

Of course, with Tony around, laying low was a lot louder than usual. Tony would drown out Tom and Jerry with Back in Black, make Bruce help him test highly questionable propulsion elements from his new suit design, and—Tony’s apparent favorite—challenge him to Mario Kart in the shared lounge between research levels.

Mario Kart was the most infuriating and cathartic game Bruce had ever played. He vaguely remembered it being enjoyable on the Super Nintendo decades ago, but on the Wii, it was a combination of aggressively cheerful graphics and slightly unpredictable controls that made him irritated beyond reason and thus hellbent on beating it. It also made him vocal in a way that few things did, and 90% of what came out of his mouth during the game was trash talk and half-comprehensible cursing, which was weirdly good. It was like releasing a pressure valve.

While Bruce swore at the game, Tony laughed so hard he nearly fell off the couch. Then, of course, he challenged the R&D interns to a Mario Kart tournament.

Bruce spent four hours on the couch in the lounge, a Wiimote clenched between his fists, surrounded by a group of increasingly nervous interns who didn't seem to want to come within three feet of him. Every time he yelled something like “You worthless motherfucker, get back on the fucking track!” or “I will tear that smug face off your goddamn head and use it as my fucking hood ornament!” or just “Are you fucking kidding me?” at increasingly loud intervals, whichever interns were holding the other controllers would lose their focus. By the end of the tournament, he’d exhausted his vocabulary on the Rainbow Road and cleared most of the room.

He came in third. The two interns who’d beaten him stuck around for a congratulatory handshake from Tony, and one - a young woman in a hijab who didn’t look older than fifteen - made sure to shake Bruce’s hand as well.

“Jarvis, pull that girl’s CV for me,” Tony said after they’d left. “Find a position in R&D that fits her skills and have someone in HR tell her she’s hired for it.”

“Right away, sir,” the AI said from the PA system.

Bruce stretched out across the couch, exhausted. “You’re gonna hire someone based on her Mario Kart score?”

Tony gave him the sort of cocky grin he usually reserved for talk show hosts. “My internship program takes only the brightest young innovators in the English-speaking world, Bruce - all them are hirable. Going toe-to-toe with a part-time giant green ragemonster while he puts on that performance and facing him to say ‘Good game’ after? That’s someone I want on my payroll.”

Bruce folded his arms behind his head. “I wasn’t that bad, was I?”
“You’re not quite as bad as Pepper in *Call of Duty*, but I haven’t heard language like that since my freshman Chem lab.”

Bruce laughed, covering his face with his hands. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be, it was educational. ‘Monkey-fucking cockgobbler’ was a new one for me.”

“Excuse me?” someone said from the doorway.

Bruce glanced up to see Pepper walking in, with Natasha behind her. Natasha looked his way, and he sat up straight, swallowing down a question instead of a hello. Dammit, why was his first urge to ask after Clint?

“Linguistics discussion,” Tony said, offering Pepper a peck on the cheek. “Hi, honey.”

“Thought we’d check in on you two,” Pepper said, showing him the picnic basket she’d brought. “We’re going up to the rooftop deck for drinks.”

“You’re not invited,” Natasha added just as Tony opened his mouth. “We’re just here to make sure you didn’t set the place on fire.”

Tony raised both hands. “Does this look like the face of a man who’d set his own R&D department on fire?”

Pepper crossed her arms. “Yes,” she and Natasha said in unison.

“You did start a fire today,” Bruce pointed out. “You got bored and started playing with potassium in the sink, remember?”

“I can’t believe you’d sell me out like that,” Tony said, holding a hand to his heart. “My own best friend—”

“You’ve only known me for a month,” Bruce said.

“Rhodey called me earlier,” Pepper interjected.

“Rhodey!” Tony perked up. “I miss Rhodey! Where is he? Tell me what he wanted, tell me everything.”

Bruce laughed under his breath, watching Tony get completely distracted by news from his actual best friend. While Pepper filled him in, Natasha drifted over toward Bruce, hands in the pockets of her spring jacket.

“Hey,” he said. “How are you?”

She nodded. “I’m good.”

He leaned in, lowering his voice. “I’ve been meaning to ask you - how is Clint doing, really? He said some things the other day…”

Natasha pursed her lips. “He can tell you down to the hour how long it’s been since he shot his bow but can’t tell you how much sleep he’s gotten. That’s how he’s doing.”

“Have you seen him in the last couple of days?”

“Yes. Why?”
Bruce didn’t like the way his shoulders hunched at that question. “Nothing, he just hasn’t texted me since the last time we had lunch. He, uh, usually texts me on days when I don’t see him.”

From the other end of the couch, Tony piped up, “You’ve been texting with Clint?” Grinning, the asshole turned to a sing-song voice. “Someone’s got a crush on the babysitter!”

Bruce ran a hand through his hair and tried to think up a good, innocent comeback. God, his ears were going red. Stop, stop, stop. “No, I don’t,” he shot back, a second too late.

Tony’s eyes widened. “Wait, I was just being twelve. Do you actually have a crush on Clint?” Shooting Pepper an odd look, he said, “Bruce has a crush on Clint.”

Pepper smiled, turning his way. “Bruce, are you gay? I didn’t know that about you.”

Bruce folded his hands tightly in front of his mouth for a second. Shit. This wasn’t supposed to come up. But he couldn’t just lie to them. It would be okay to say it, wouldn’t it? In front of these three people, now?

“I’m not gay,” he said. “I’m—I guess I’m bisexual. That term’s still PC, right?”

“It is,” Natasha said.

Tony leaned toward him, resting his elbows on his knees. “Hold on, you ‘guess?’ Bruce, is this your first time coming out? That’s kind of amazing, at your age. Jarvis, do we have cake? It feels like this calls for cake.”

“We do not have cake at present, sir,” Jarvis said overhead. “Would you like me to order a cake for you?”

“That’s not necessary,” Bruce said, hunching further.

“Of course it is,” Tony said. “Maybe ice cream cake? I don’t know what the protocol is here, no one ever comes out to me.”

“For obvious reasons,” Natasha said, raising an eyebrow.

Tony leaned back against the arm of the couch to shoot her a wounded look. “Why must you antagonize me when I’m trying to be helpful?”

Pepper stooped to give Tony a kiss. “We’re going up to the roof now. You boys have a good night.”

Natasha passed Bruce an amused little smile on her way out the door. Pepper followed, leaving Bruce alone with Tony in the empty lounge. The *Mario Kart* Start screen music filled the silence for a few bars.

Tony spoke first. “Too enthusiastic?”

“A little.” Bruce folded his hands in his lap, considering. “I’d actually really like some cake, though.”

“Give me fifteen minutes,” Tony said, springing up from his seat and calling for Jarvis.

Fifteen minutes later, Bruce was sitting on a barstool at the island in Tony’s painfully modern kitchen, leaning over a box that Tony’d just had delivered.
“Now, the only place open this time of night on a Sunday had a limited selection of ice cream cake,” Tony said, “The other options were ‘It’s a boy!’ and ‘It’s a girl!’ cakes, and picking just one of them seemed thematically inappropriate, so I got you this.” He lifted the lid.

It was a round cake coated in black, red, and blue, with plastic characters from *Cars* all over it. The cake was garish, and Bruce hadn’t actually seen that movie, but at least Tony hadn’t asked to have anything written on it.

“Huh,” Bruce said, staring at the cake.

“What?” Tony said.

“I just realized my drivers license expired while I was on the lam.”

“Which might be a good thing, given the road rage you inflicted on poor Toad today.” Tony pulled out a knife and started slicing into the cake. “Anyway, that’s okay, because these cars don’t need drivers. They’re autonomous beings with obnoxious voices.” He struggled with the knife halfway into the cake. “There’s a layer of frozen fudge or concrete here that doesn’t want to—eh, fuck it.” He set the knife aside and brandished two forks instead. “We saved the world, we can eat straight off the platter.”

They sat opposite each other at the kitchen island, dragging forks through the layers of ice cream and fighting with the fudge and cookie crumb layer until it started to thaw. Bruce realized far too late that he hadn’t eaten a proper dinner. He usually had leftovers from the restaurants Clint took him to for dinner, so he hadn’t thought to make himself something.

God, he’d gotten so used to the guy’s presence in such a short time, the protective detail had become something to build his days around instead of an annoyance. That was weird, right? That should worry him?

“If you don’t mind my asking,” Tony said after a while, “why wait until now to come out to someone?”

Bruce shrugged. “I actually came out once before, but it was to a guy I was interested in while I was in grad school, and that went spectacularly badly.”

“He wasn’t interested?”

“Oh, no, he was. We dated for four months, and it ended with a coffee pot thrown at my head and his dad threatening to get my research funding pulled. After that disaster, dating men seemed…a lot more intimidating.”

“Understandable,” Tony said, scraping a line of crayon red frosting onto his fork.

“Then the AIDS epidemic was all over the news, and I guess I let myself get completely scared off it. I got back together with Betty—uh, this woman I’d been serious with on and off since undergrad—and things were serious again, so I didn’t need to think about it anyway. I didn’t tell her about it. It was just a failed experiment, right?” Bruce scraped the tines of his fork over a patch of melted chocolate ice cream on the platter. It felt weirdly good to talk about this, sort of in the same that way yelling at *Mario Kart* felt good - a pressure valve releasing. And for the first time in ages, bringing up Betty Ross didn’t feel like a kick in the stomach.

He still wondered about Betty sometimes. He’d tracked down her Facebook page a couple years ago and found her tenured and married, with a baby on the way. It hadn’t stopped him from spending the first week after the invasion bracing for her to contact him. Apparently she wasn’t going to. Well,
good for her. She deserved to hold onto whatever normalcy she could get her hands on.

Bruce sighed, a knot untwisting inside him. “Anyway, it was a long time before I started thinking maybe it was worth mentioning, like who I was interested in might be important regardless of who I was with at the time, and then the Other Guy happened and that whole part of me sort of became irrelevant.”

Tony pointed a forkful of frosting at him. “It’s been my experience that your identity is never irrelevant, especially when your back’s against the wall - then it’s the most relevant thing there is.” He ate the whole pile of frosting in one attempt, leaving smudges of primary colors on his lips. “So, you wanna talk about this little crush of yours?”

“Nope,” Bruce said, shaking his head.

“You wanna attach repulsors to these obnoxious toy cars and see what happens?”

Bruce considered it. “Yeah, okay.”

“Bring the cake,” Tony said. “There’s dry ice in the lab.”

It was actually one of the nicest nights Bruce had had in a long time.

The knock on the door didn’t surprise him. It was 2 AM, so it was probably just Tony looking for company to help him work off nervous energy with some ill-advised experiment. Bruce managed to get the door halfway open before he realized he recognized the tone of that knock.

Clint was on his doorstep - well, near his doorstep, leaning heavily against the wall and frowning at him under those goddamn sunglasses. His t-shirt was all but drenched from the rain, and he smelled like whiskey.

“Hey,” he said. “Can I come in?”

“Yeah, of course.” Bruce opened the door for him. “It’s pouring out. Did you walk here?”

“Forgot Grand Central’s still closed. Had to walk from Fifth,” Clint said, stepping inside. “D’you mind if I—I’m just gonna—” He collapsed onto the couch facing the kitchenette like a puppet with its strings cut.

Okay, drunk Clint Barton in his living room. That was new and uncomfortable. Bruce closed the door. “Can I get you a towel? Maybe some water?”

“Yeah, okay.” Clint picked up a page of the Stark archives that Bruce had left lying on the couch, took off his sunglasses, and scowled at the schematic with bloodshot eyes. “Is this what you’re doing holed up in here? Building bombs?”

“Just some light reading,” Bruce answered, grabbing a towel from the linen closet.

“On paper,” Clint said, looking vaguely confused by the idea.

“I like paper better than screens. Paper works anywhere, and it’s cheaper to replace.” Bruce plucked the schematic out of his hands and replaced it with the towel. Leaving a glass of water on the end table next to Clint’s elbow, he tidied up the pile of folders from the Stark archives and moved them to
the safety of the desk by the window. When turned around, Clint was peeling his wet shirt off. Okay, correction: half-naked drunk Clint Barton in his living room. That was much worse.

Bruce sat in the armchair opposite the couch and folded his hands between his knees, trying not to look directly at the guy. Clint toweled himself off half-assedly, draped his t-shirt over the back of the couch to dry, and dropped his head back against the cushion, sighing miserably.

“So,” Bruce said, “how’s your day been?”

Clint actually laughed a little.

Bruce glanced up and immediately wished he hadn’t. Spread out the way he was, the new marks on his right wrist were in plain sight - along with an impressive collection of scars that Bruce hoped were work-related. He’d been shot, stabbed, burned, and opened up for surgery, on top of various nicks and dents that spelled out a hell of a lot of falls. Bruce averted his eyes from the line of small cuts on one hip that was definitely not a product of work.

“My day was great,” Clint said, in a decidedly not great tone. “Fury called me in for a meeting. Said the higher-ups weighed my case and absolved me of all responsibility for what I did under Loki’s control. They’ll have a bow back in my hand as soon as I pass a psych eval.”

“That’s good,” Bruce said. “Isn’t it?”

Clint pulled his knees up to his chest and crossed his arms over them. He nodded, his eyes glazing wet. Then, blinking fast, he shook his head.

Bruce leaned back. “You don’t think they should let you off.”

“Everyone talks like it’s about what was done to me, doc, but it’s not,” Clint said, drawing his hands slowly back over the ruff of his hair. “And I tried that, I tried blaming Loki for everything, but it didn’t hold up. ‘Cause you can’t fire a weapon at someone if it’s not already loaded. There’s a part of me that killed innocent people - my people - and was okay with it. There’s a part of me that was a perfect soldier for him. And I—I can’t go home tonight ‘cause Tasha’s there ready to talk about how it’s not my fault, and she’s wrong. It’s not about what was done to me. It’s about what I did. All I ever think about is the things I did, all I see when I try to sleep is the things I did, things I knew I was doing while I did ‘em.” He dropped his hands and looked Bruce right in the eyes. “All those memorials on Park Avenue, all the bodies in the SHIELD morgue, all the shit on the news, it’s my fault.”

Bruce had had this conversation with himself about what the Other Guy did too many times. He pushed himself out of his chair, needing to pace, needing to do something to keep from getting sucked into that circular logic in his own head. “It’s not that simple,” he said.

“Maybe I didn’t fire on those people myself,” Clint said, “but I sure as shit gave Loki the tools he needed, which means every person who died because of him died because of me, too.” The last syllable came out like it was being strangled. Clint pressed his mouth closed and stared so hard at the floor that Bruce could just about see the words welling behind his eyes.

Bruce waited, hands on his hips. Whatever the guy needed to get out had to come out. No matter how much you wanted it to, this kind of shit never stayed buried. Better for Clint to be here when it broke through than on the subway home or a crowded sidewalk in Kolkata.

A minute later, Clint’s fingers curled in toward his chest and his expression clamped down tight. “My handler’s body is locked up in fucking cold storage right now because he got run through on an
alien artifact and SHIELD doesn’t have the fucking resources to deal with its own fucking morgue, and I don’t even know if I’m allowed to miss him, with what I’ve done. To him. To SHIELD. To my city. You can’t turn on a screen or step outside without hearing about all the lives I destroyed.”

The Other Guy grumbled in the back of Bruce’s mind, and his throat got narrow. “Do you know how many people I’ve killed, Agent Barton?” he said, the words coming out low. “That’s an honest question. Does SHIELD have that information on file? Because I have no idea.”

Clint looked up at him, finally, his eyes wet and pitiful. He opened his mouth like he was going to fire back some retort, then let it hinge closed.

Bruce pulled off his glasses and started cleaning them, focusing on the meticulous swipe of cloth against glass to steady himself. “It hurts,” he said. “You were turned into someone you didn’t recognize, and no matter how many people tell you those deaths aren’t your fault, nothing’s gonna change the fact that you woke up to a world you tried to destroy. You grieve for the people who died, and you grieve for the part of yourself that died with them, and you do your best to move on. Do good works if you can, try to balance things out. Eventually you’ll surprise yourself with a day where you don’t think about it at all.”

“Then what?” Clint asked, his voice small.

“Then you’ll feel like shit for temporarily forgetting, like not beating yourself up for 24 hours means you don’t care, and to punish yourself you’ll probably crawl into a bottle or find some way to hurt yourself that almost looks like an accident or, I don’t know, you’re creative and self-destructive, I’m sure you’ll wow us all.”

Bruce’s glasses were clean, and the Other Guy was sleeping again. He took a deep breath and said, “Anyway, the infuriating short answer is you are responsible, but it’s not your fault, and if you can learn to reconcile the two, you might be able to live with yourself.” He put his glasses back on and gave Clint a stern look. “And you’re allowed to miss whoever you want. Anyone who says otherwise is an asshole.”

Clint’s shoulders drooped all at once, and his eyes closed. “Fuck,” he breathed. “Thank you.”

“Anytime,” Bruce said, and paused. “You know, if you want to talk about Coulson, I’d listen.”

Clint smirked - and there, finally, was a flicker of the guy Bruce saw on good days. “Coulson was the only person at SHIELD who got me and Natasha,” he started, and from there it was a solid hour of his voice in Bruce’s apartment, filling in the gaps in Bruce’s understanding of the dead man, explaining his passion for his nerdy hobbies, the way no one else could stand up to Fury or take Clint down a notch quite so efficiently, and how once he was on your side, there wasn’t a goddamn thing you could do to make him turn his back on you.

As Clint’s voice started getting hoarse, Bruce fetched them both a bit of leftover cake and Clint made fun of him for having an eight-year-old’s birthday cake in his freezer.

“Tony has awesome taste in coming out cakes,” he said, laughing.

Bruce froze, heat prickling at his cheeks. “Natasha told you.”

Clint’s smile dropped. “Oh. Shit, I wasn’t gonna say anything.”

“Oh, Jesus.” Bruce set down his plate and massaged his forehead.

Clint leaned toward him. His breath smelled like whiskey and chocolate ice cream. “Hey, look, it’s
okay. Some people are late bloomers. It took me until my late 20s to figure myself out.”

Bruce forced himself to look up. “Is that all she told you?”

“No,” Clint said, making Bruce’s stomach plunge through the floor. “But the other thing’s okay, too. More than okay, actually.”

And then he was crossing the space between them, one hand pressing hot on Bruce’s shoulder and the other at the back of his neck, his breath welcome on Bruce’s lips—

Bruce’s whole brain went on red alert, his lungs freezing up and his pulse hammering in his throat so hard it felt like the whole tower should hear it. He wanted to lean in, but his body was lighting up like it did right before the Other Guy took over, this proximity wasn’t normal, he was being shoved against a wall in Sao Paolo, his head forced toward a curb in Rome, and he needed to get out, get out.

He jerked his head away and stood up fast enough to knock Clint to the floor. “Sorry,” he said, backing toward his bedroom. “I have to—I can’t—”

He locked the bedroom door after himself and sank against it, taking full breaths and trying to figure out what the hell was happening. Clint offered an apology through the door, but it wasn’t that, he hadn’t done anything Bruce didn’t want him to do, Bruce was just—Jesus, what was wrong with him? This wasn’t how people reacted to things.

“Bruce?” Clint called from the other side of the door, sounding worried. “Bruce, I’m sorry. Are you okay?”

Okay. Bruce would’ve laughed if his head weren’t swimming. There was nothing okay about him. “Have Jarvis call you a cab,” he called back, his voice tight.

The other side of the door went silent. Bruce listened. After a minute, he heard feet shuffling around and a voice speaking quietly. Jarvis responded, “Right away, Agent Barton.”

The front door closed. Alone in his basement apartment, Bruce wished he could sink through the floor and disappear.
Bruce buried himself in his reading, blazing through three decades of StarkIndustries associates’ notes on radiation effects in a day and letting his phone go to voicemail at least a dozen times. When he couldn’t sleep, he downloaded obnoxiously pastel puzzle games on his underutilized tablet and played until his eyes hurt and nausea crept up his throat. Anything was better than letting himself think.

He woke to muted morning light streaming in through the window and a yell from the front door.

“Bruce, you in there?”

Tony. What did he want, to show off a new project? It could wait. Bruce yanked the comforter up over his head and tried to go back to sleep.

The front door opened. “Welfare check, big guy! Doesn’t matter if you’re decent because we’ve already seen your naked de-transformation sequence!”

Goddammit. Bruce scowled into his pillow. Wait. Who was “we?”

Footsteps rounded into the bedroom, and he heard a woman’s voice curse softly in Russian. Oh, no. He raised his head just far enough off the pillow to see the doorway, where Natasha stood in front of Tony, biting down an expression of naked relief. She walked to the other side of the bed and sat down on the edge of it, leaning on one hand to put herself in his line of sight.

“Get out,” he grumbled.

“See, he’s not dead,” Tony said behind her. “And now we’ve made him angry. Good call.”

Natasha smoothed down the comforter between Bruce and herself. “You can leave now,” she said over her shoulder.

To his credit, Tony actually listened, muttering the whole way out the door.

“You, too,” Bruce said, closing his eyes. “Get out.”

“You didn’t answer your phone for over 24 hours,” Natasha answered, keeping her voice lullabye-soft. He tried to read anger into it and couldn’t. “Right after freaking out and locking yourself in your room. I needed to make sure you weren’t in any danger.”

“Sure, gotta make sure SHIELD’s resources are intact.”

“I had to make sure my friend was all right.”

That shouldn’t be so disarming. Bruce pushed the comforter off his face and frowned up at her. “Do you and Clint tell each other absolutely everything, or do you sometimes leave out what you had for breakfast?”

Natasha actually smiled. “If either of us were ever put on trial for conspiracy, we’d have to get married to keep the other from testifying.”
He honestly couldn’t tell if she was joking. He sighed. “What do you want?”

“I need you to talk to him about what happened the other night,” she said, the smile vanishing.

Bruce groaned, turning his face back to the pillow.

Natasha laid a hand flat on his shoulder blade, starting to say his name. The alarms kicked up in his head, dredging up the touch of a mugger who’d nearly set off the Other Guy in Bangladesh, a bounty hunter who hadn’t realized what he was dealing with in Greece. Bruce flipped himself over and grabbed her wrist, holding her hand away.

Pulse slightly elevated. Okay, deep breath. Giving her an apologetic look, he let go of her hand and said, “I’d appreciate if you didn’t do that.”

Natasha’s brows pinched, and she tipped her head to the side. For a second he felt like she was assessing him. Then she dropped her hand to her knee and said, “I know interpersonal relationships aren’t exactly your wheelhouse, Bruce, but I’m asking this as a favor - if not to Clint, then to me. I’ve been watching him self-destruct in slow motion for weeks, and I don’t know how much longer I can do this.”

Bruce pushed himself up to sit against the headboard. “That must really suck. I don’t see what that has to do with me, though.”

She curled her legs up under herself and sat facing him. “The only time it seems easy for him to hold himself together is when he’s around you. I don’t know what happened on your end the other night, but he seems to think he’s ruined everything between you two. I haven’t see him this shut down since the week after the invasion.”

Bruce took a deep breath and rubbed his hands over his face to wake himself up. “Does SHIELD give its spies seminars in guilt-tripping? Because you’re really good at it.”

“Emotional manipulation is a frequent topic of study,” she replied, shrugging. “But I try not to use that skill set outside of work and tech support calls.”

Bruce didn’t envy the poor tech support worker who had to deal with Natasha Romanov when her internet went out. He slouched, staring at his hands. “Clint didn’t do anything wrong. He didn’t have to - I screwed it up on my own. I’m not sure I can even explain it.”

Natasha grabbed his phone from the nightstand and handed it to him. “Try.”

Bruce took the phone and scrolled through the list of texts from Clint. All apologies. He swallowed, opening a new message. “Guess I oughtta get some fresh air today, anyway.”

An hour later, Bruce walked out into the parking garage with Natasha at his side. The SHIELD SUV was parked in its usual spot with Clint in the passenger seat.

Bruce passed a note with the address on it to the driver. He’d looked it up on a whim twenty minutes before pick-up, and now that he knew how close it was, he wished he’d thought of it sooner.

The drive to Ozone Park was one of the most uncomfortable trips of Bruce’s life, right below the plane trip from Kolkata to the helicarrier - although at least it was shorter by several hours. Clint kept himself slouched and silent in the passenger seat, not responding to any conversation Natasha tried to start, and after five minutes, it was just the sound of the road and some pop radio station the driver had tuned in on low volume. In the rearview mirror, Clint stared straight ahead, his jaw clenched and his eyes unreadable under those goddamn sunglasses.
Humiliation pooled in Bruce’s gut watching him. He’d mostly avoided thinking about it for the past day, but now that he was barreling toward a conversation about it, the thoughts were flooding him, curling him in on himself. There was something wrong with him, and the words were slow to form, but he knew exactly where the blame rested.

When they pulled into the parking lot for the archery range, Clint’s arms loosened and he muttered “What the fuck” under his breath.

Inside, the archery range was thoroughly unimpressive: a dozen lanes facing down plywood targets, florescent lights buzzing in the ceiling, and rental bows arranged haphazardly around the front desk. It was the middle of a workday, and the place was dead, just one guy with a hunting bow shooting at the far lane.

“This is insulting.” Clint muttered.

“Don’t be a snob,” Natasha said, passing the SHIELD credit card to Bruce. “You’ll get your 500 yard lane and explosive tips back when you pass your psych eval.”

The middle-aged white woman at the front desk eyed them curiously. “How can I help you?”

Bruce approached her and pushed the card the counter. “Hi. Nancy, right? I called earlier - reservation for Banner?”

Nancy pasted on a customer service smile. “Mr. Banner, yes, it’s so nice to meet you.” Turning toward the lanes, she yelled, “Time’s up, Gary!”

The guy in the last lane lowered his bow, looking annoyed. While he packed up his things and got out, Nancy locked the front door to the outside and put up a CLOSED sign.

Clint pushed up his sunglasses, peering at that sign. “Did you bribe them to rent out the whole place?” It was the first thing he’d said directly to Bruce since they’d been on opposite sides of the bedroom door.

“For an hour, on SHIELD’s dime,” Bruce said. His chest felt tight. “I figured we could write it off as protecting the privacy of SHIELD assets.”

Clint stared down the lanes, his lips just barely curling up at the corners. “Nice waste of resources.”

“Can I help you folks pick out your equipment?” Nancy asked.

“No, we’ve got this,” Natasha said, flashing her SHIELD ID. “Why don’t you go grab yourself some lunch?”

Nancy gathered up her purse and left, and then it was just the three of them alone in the archery range.

Natasha sat down in Nancy’s chair, putting her feet up on the desk and opening a book. “Have at, boys.”

Clint was already examining rental bows, taking them down off the wall and testing their draw. Bruce had never seen him so focused. He assessed the entire stock and bypassed the heavy duty hunting bows for an elegantly curved gray bow with a sleek veneer. Picking up a handful of arrows, he strode to a lane in the middle, tossed his jacket and sunglasses aside, and fired all of them into the exact center of the target in a few seconds.
Bruce watched shards of fiberglass rain to the floor, his mouth open. “Wow.”

Clint took a deep breath and let it out. His whole posture shifted, shoulders going slack, weight shifting to one hip, left hand studying the bow’s frame as if committing its shape to memory.

Natasha was watching Clint over the cover of her book, biting her lip. Glancing over at Bruce, she nodded toward the middle lane.

Bruce grabbed the nearest bow and walked forward, wishing his stomach would stop doing flips. He stopped at the lane just beside Clint’s. “Hey.”

Running his thumb along the curve of the bow, Clint said, “This your idea or hers?”

“Taking you out to talk was her idea,” Bruce said, shifting his bow uncomfortably between his hands. “The location was mine. Thought it might help you relax. Is it?”

“It was right up until you mentioned talking.”

“Yeah. About that.” Might as well rip the Bandaid off.

“Look, I’m sorry about the other night,” Clint said, beating him to it. “I’ll understand if you want to just pretend none of that happened or silently hold a grudge, whatever, I just…I want you to know.” He didn’t look at Bruce. “I’m sorry I tried to kiss you, and I’m sorry I took your rumored interest in me as fact, and I’m sorry I showed up drunk at your place and made you deal with my shit when it’s not your responsibility.” He blew out hard through his nose. “And if there’s something I’ve missed, some unspoken button I managed to hit that made you react like that, let me know, because regardless of whether you decide to leave this strictly professional, I never want to risk freaking you out like that again.”

Bruce set his bow down on the floor, which made Clint finally look over at him. Straightening up, he said, “It wasn’t you. I’m glad you trusted me with your shit. And that rumor is fact. I can’t say I hadn’t imagined kissing you.” He shrugged. “Asking permission before you tried would’ve been the polite thing, but I get it, romantic gestures are supposed to be spontaneous. Look, anything you think you did wrong, it’s forgiven, I promise.”

“You sure?”

“This is all on me.”

Clint licked his lips and nodded, still looking nervous. “Is this at all related to the storm thing?”

“Kind of.”

“Okay, so mind telling me what the hell happened?”

Bruce’s throat went tight again. He dropped his arms open. “I’m a mess. You have no idea. I’m not relationship material - hell, I’m not even casual make outs on the couch material. I’m a disaster area.”

“Well, that makes two of us,” Clint said.

“You don’t understand,” Bruce said. There was a tide of anxiety rising in his chest, pushing out words he still didn’t know how to say properly. “I spend every minute of my life working to keep my body under my control, and somewhere in the last few years, I think I forgot how to do anything else. You try to touch me like you wanna get close, and my brain thinks I’m under attack.
“It has been years, okay, years since I got more than a handshake, and the vast majority of the physical contact I’ve gotten since the Other Guy showed up has been people trying to take me down, trap me, or experiment on me, so I’m sorry, but you kind of scared the shit out of me. I know how to cope with needles and fists and gunfire, but kissing’s way out of my comfort zone.”

He was shaking by the time he finished. Taking off his glasses, he wiped them clean, forcing his hands to go steady. “Y’know,” he said, trying to laugh, “I used to think maybe someday I’d figure out a way to undo what I did and get rid of the Other Guy, and then I’d get to walk right back into the world. But, uh…he’s not the only part of me I ruined.”

When he put his glasses back on, Clint was staring at him, his eyebrows making a morose little peak in the middle of his forehead.

“That’s about the saddest fucking thing I’ve ever heard.” Clint fiddled with the loose tip of an arrow. “I’d hug you right now if I didn’t think it’d freak you out.”

Bruce crossed his arms tightly and nodded at the floor. “I appreciate the sentiment.” He focused on his breathing, forcing it to slow. “I like you, Clint. Enough that I don’t want to subject you to me. Can we be friends?”

“Yeah, we can be friends.” Clint smiled down at the floor. “But I kinda think you’re full of shit.”

That startled a laugh out of Bruce. “Really?”

“Yeah, you give me this great lecture about coming back from everything I did, and then you write yourself off as unsalvageable? Come on, doc.” He grinned.

“What? I’m just being realistic.”

“Please. Ten bucks says you figure out this is worth trying and ask me out inside a month.”

Bruce shook his head, but he couldn’t help the smile that was creeping across his face. “All right, you’re on. Now, are we going to shoot or what?”

Clint gave him an assessing look, then nodded down at the bow on the floor. “You’ve never shot one of these before, have you?”

“Is it that obvious?” Bruce said, picking up the bow.

Clint grinned. “You chose a 15-pound bow with a 32-inch draw length. That’s Andre the Giant’s bow. Take it back and get that purple camo one behind the desk.”

He did.

Standing a few feet away, Clint demonstrated where to grip, how to stand, and how to load and draw. “Now, that’s a compound, so the bow will take on some of the weight for you once it’s fully drawn, give you more control so you can focus on aiming. You feel that?”

“Yeah,” Bruce said, testing the bowstring.

Clint loaded his bow for real. “All right, now try it for real.”

He was a pretty good teacher, completely in his element and clearly happy to share it. Every so often he’d offer tips like “Elbow up a little more” or “Scoot your right foot back,” but he didn’t hover or try to physically correct Bruce’s posture, maintaining a generous bubble of space between them. By
the end of the hour, Bruce’s shoulders and right fingers ached, he’d managed to give himself a couple of welts along the spot where he probably should’ve worn a wrist guard, and Clint hadn’t touched him once.

When their hour was up and they returned the bows, Clint turned to him and said quietly, “Thank you for bringing me here.”

“Thank you for your cooperation,” Bruce replied, smiling.

They fell back into the routine of protective detail three or four times a week, and Bruce brought doggy bags from different restaurants with him to the lab every other night. The only difference between now and before was that now, it felt less like giving the finger to SHIELD’s protective detail and more like meeting up with friends. Going out to eat with friends, browsing surplus stores for lab equipment with friends, and on one occasion, inviting friends up to the R&D lounge to play Mario Kart. Clint just about ran off the course giggling every time Bruce started swearing. He came in last, behind several NPCs and an autonomous Iron Man suit prototype that Tony had planted on the couch.

Clint seemed to be doing better, and Bruce wasn’t sure if it was because of their talks or because he needed his SHIELD therapist to declare him fit for duty again. Whatever the case, he laughed easier, fidgeted less, left the goddamn sunglasses at home on overcast days, and occasionally showed up at Bruce’s door in the mornings looking like he’d gotten actual sleep. At least, until Natasha was sent out on a week-long assignment and he showed up first thing in the morning looking like he’d slept in his clothes in the bed of a truck.

"You okay?" Bruce said as they headed to the SUV.

Clint made a noncommittal noise, rubbing a hand over his face. "Tasha's slept over every night for the last couple of weeks. Guess I got too used to it."

"You sleep better with her around?"

"Yeah. I get these nightmares a lot, and it's, uh." He laughed, self-deprecating. "It's stupid, but having someone around after helps me get back to sleep. Just knowing she's there in case shit goes down."

"Makes sense," Bruce said. "It sounds nice, actually."

Clint shrugged.

"I don't know if it'd help," Bruce offered, "but you could crash on my couch while she's away, if you want."

Clint blew out a breath against the back of his hand, looking like he was weighing a rock against a hard place. "I might take you up on that," he said. By the end of their day out running errands around the city, he was looking so ragged that Bruce wasn’t surprised when that answer was amended to "I'll be by around 11."

It was less awkward than he expected, having Clint stay overnight. The guy made a concerted effort to not be a nuisance, keeping to himself while Bruce read and using headphones when he wanted to watch something on his tablet. He even changed clothes in the bathroom. Bruce wasn’t sure if that
was to prevent teasing a guy with a crush or if Sober Clint was just a lot more modest than Drunk Clint.

Bruce still found himself staring at the ceiling as he tried to fall asleep, imagining what it would be like to have the guy pressed up against him, skin flushed and hands firm on his waist. And dammit, that was so unbelievably unhelpful he considered poisoning his brain with YouTube comments. But when he heard swearing at 4 AM and wandered out of the bedroom to find Clint slouched over the kitchen table with his head in his hands, it stopped mattering.

“Hey,” Bruce said. “You all right?”

"M'fine."

"Nightmare?" Bruce asked, approaching the kitchenette.

Clint nodded.

Getting out the electric kettle, Bruce started water for tea. "What about?"

"The fuck do you think it was about?" Clint hissed, dropping his hands to the tabletop and shooting Bruce a glare over his shoulder. His face softened, and he winced. "Sorry. I'm not good at this."

Bruce took out a couple of mugs and fished the herbal tea out of his stash. "Does Natasha do anything in particular to help with this sort of thing?"

"She spoons me sometimes. Don't think you'd be up for that."

Bruce smiled. "Not exactly my area." He waited for the water to boil, poured, and let the tea steep for a minute before bringing it to the table and pulling out a chair for himself.

Clint took the mug he was offered and closed his hands around it. “It was Stuttgart this time. Carrying out the mission I’d helped Loki plan. I kept catching my reflection in windows, and my face was disappearing. First my mouth, then my chin, then my eyes and—” He gestured to his face, huffing out a laugh. “Another cheerful entry for the dream journal.”

Bruce swallowed. “I sometimes dream about being him.”

“Do you?”

“Yeah. I don’t usually remember the stuff he does, but it filters through in dreams sometimes, especially right after. His perspective’s hard to follow, like a director’s cut of the worst action movie you’ve ever seen.”

Clint actually smiled at that. “Sounds suitably terrible.”

Bruce scratched the back of his head. “Mostly. Except when it’s upsettingly satisfying.” He’d never said that part aloud before, and he held his breath, waiting for the backlash.

“I get that,” Clint said, real quiet, and Bruce could breathe again.

When the apartment was filled with the scent of jasmine tea and both their mugs sat empty on the table, Clint camped out on the couch again and gave sleep another go. Bruce followed suit in his own room, ignoring the part of his treacherous brain that wanted to think about spooning. Sitting up with a friend until his head was clear enough to try sleeping again was something Bruce could do, unlike the pictures his brain painted. It was even easy, because on top of his own long courtship with
insomnia, years of avoiding the US military and sleeping in abandoned buildings had trained him to sleep light and wake up fast.

Clint repaid him by cooking French toast in the morning, and Bruce felt they were more than even. He stayed over most nights that week, and when Natasha came back and learned about the arrangement, she looked so grateful that Bruce briefly worried she might kiss him. She didn’t, but the next morning there was a package on his doorstep containing an autographed Neil deGrasse Tyson book and a package of his favorite tea.

“Have you seen this?” Tony said, spinning his tablet so the screen faced Bruce’s lab station. It was playing some kind of news show.

Bruce turned back to his slides. “The only thing I’ve caught on TV lately is that Adventure Time show.” Which, he didn’t say aloud, he was starting to think was a little bit genius.

“Someone at FOX News decided to do an exposé on us: ‘The Avengers: Our Next Global Threat.’ Apparently we only saved the world so we could bring it down ourselves.” He snickered at the screen. “It’s so over the top it goes right past insulting and lands in hilarious. Y’know, this is nice. I’ve missed my name being dragged through the mud.”

“Good for you,” Bruce said distractedly.

“Hey, look who they caught up with.” Tony said, turning up the volume on his tablet.

Bruce glanced over just in time to see a camera crew catching up with Clint as he approached the front door of a pre-war apartment building. The caption at the bottom of the screen read “Hawkeye: secretly working for the war criminal Loki?”

“Hawkeye,” the reporter called, shoving the microphone into his face. “My sources tell me you were Loki’s right-hand man during his attacks. What do you have to say for yourself?”

Clint stopped with his key in the door, and Bruce found his hands turning to fists on the counter. On the screen, Clint turned around to face the reporter, his mouth a hard line. Leaning in close to the microphone, he enunciated: “Han shot first.” While the reporter struggled to formulate a response, Clint yanked the microphone away, threw it into the street, and retreated inside. The program cut to a still shot of Hawkeye in uniform.

Tony turned the volume back down while the voiceover asked more insulting questions. “I approve of that young man, Bruce. You should have him over for dinner.”

Bruce hunched over his slides, cringing. “I’m not—Tony, we’re not dating.”

“Well, I don’t see why not. You spend almost every day with him, and he slept over for most of last week.” Tony crossed his arms and tipped his head in that obnoxious know-it-all way. “Plus, he clearly thinks your Mario Kart road rage is adorable.”

“Look, it’s personal.”

“And I’m a personal friend. Who thinks you should ask him out.”

Bruce slapped his work down onto the counter and turned to face him. “Why are you being so
“Because he’s good for you,” Tony said, raising a hand toward him. “You’re a former hermit with a history of depression and an alter ego who smashes buildings, and somehow you’ve found a person who gets you out interacting with the world. Trust me on this: hold onto him as hard as he will let you.”

Bruce didn’t know what to say to that, so he pretended to be really interested in his notes. Tony would have to get distracted by something else eventually, and so would his own stupid, overly optimistic brain.

When Bruce brought up the *Kitchen Nightmares* invite, he expected Clint to have forgotten about it. That had been, what, a month and a half ago? Instead, Clint's eyes lit up and he said immediately, "Yes. Introduction to the glory of Gordon Ramsay and a home-cooked meal. When?"

And that was why, on Friday night, Bruce found himself standing at the door to the parking garage wearing his new two-piece suit and holding a bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon that Tony had insisted he take from the wine cellar. Never mind that it wasn't a date. Never mind that Natasha would be there, too. Never mind basic fucking logic, because apparently Tony Stark was hellbent on being his lunatic billionaire fairy godmother. He'd be building tiny mechanical birds to dress Bruce next. Jesus, that was a disturbing mental image.

Of course, Clint showed up looking like himself. The only thing special about his outfit was a beat-up baseball cap with Captain America's shield embroidered on the front. "You look nice," he said as he took the wine.

"Blame Tony," Bruce said, and cleared his throat. "Nice hat."

Clint ran his thumb along the hat's brim as he studied the label on the bottle. "It was Coulson's. They released his possessions this morning. I called dibs on this."

That hat looked like it had been run over by a truck - or maybe just worn on every vacation, camping trip, and afternoon working under a classic car chassis for the past thirty years. Bruce smiled. It suited him. "Good choice," he said.

Natasha was waiting for them at Clint's apartment, which turned out to be that pre-war brownstone from the FOX News exposé. An entryway window had been smashed out since that short "interview," replaced by cardboard and duct tape. A brick stood by to prop open the inner security door.

"This doesn't exactly seem up to SHIELD security codes," Bruce said.

"Fuck SHIELD security codes," Clint said, picking up a package from the end table in the entryway. "I've lived here since before they recruited me. I like the building, my neighbors play good music, and I'm right around the corner from the best Ethiopian food in the state. Landlord's kind of a dick, but aren't they all?"

"Mine's all right," Bruce said. “Aside from that one time he let an assassin into my apartment without my permission.”

Clint's apartment was on the top floor, just opposite the elevator. The neighbors were playing The
Clash’s “Know Your Rights” loud enough to vibrate the floor in the hallway, but he didn’t seem to mind, just bobbing his head along to the beat as he reached for his keys. When they stepped inside, Bruce saw right away why he liked the place: it was small but open, with corner windows facing out onto the rooftops of neighboring buildings and a surprisingly non-closet sized galley kitchen with a pass-through wall into the living room. A large TV hung on the one spare bit of living room wall, opposite a couch and armchair that looked comfortable, if obviously worn. Natasha had already claimed the armchair, her nose in a book.

“Stark dressed you, didn’t he?” she said.

Bruce took off the suit coat and tossed it on the coatrack without answering.

"Make yourself at home," Clint said with a hand wave, heading straight for the kitchen. "There’s only two rules in this apartment: chef eats first, and no feet on the coffee table."

"He’s really proud of the coffee table," Natasha said, not looking up. "It’s the only piece of furniture he’s bought new."

“It’s mahogany, it’ll outlast us all,” Clint said from the kitchen. “Tasha, put on Kitchen Nightmares.”

Natasha set down her book and pulled up Netflix on the TV. “Which episode?”

“Dillons, US season one.”

Bruce sank into the couch as the episode started. It was jarring at first, the music aiming for apocalyptic stakes and the format unfamiliar, but the minute Gordon Ramsay prayed for his gastronomic safety over the appetizers, Bruce started smiling. The more the man swore and criticized the food and got up in the managers’ faces while addressing the waitress as “darling,” the more Bruce found him charming. Gordon Ramsay wasn’t merely angry; he was offended on behalf of food itself and wielding criticism like a flaming sword to purge reality television of subpar cuisine.

“What do you think?” Clint called while Gordon Ramsay was examining the kitchen.

“I like him,” Bruce said. “And I want to punch that manager in the face.”

“Yeah, that doesn’t go away,” Natasha said.

As the visuals on the show slid toward stomach-turning, a delicious smell wafted through the apartment. Bruce got up and followed his nose to the kitchen, as much to satisfy his curiosity as to flee the cockroaches on the screen. He’d shared a bed with cockroaches too many times.

“What are you making?” he said, leaning against the pass-through wall where he could still see the TV in his peripheral vision.

“Chicken tikka masala,” Clint said, adding crushed tomatoes to the curry sauce. “It’s not gonna be as authentic as what you’re used to - sorta my own spin on it.”

Bruce nodded, glancing back at the TV just in time to watch Gordon Ramsay pick apart a rotten tomato. “You eat during this?”

“Nah, you cook during the first part,” Clint said, stirring the skillet. “Have your back turned for half of the really gross stuff. You eat later on, once Chef Ramsay’s turning everything around and you’re jealous of everyone in the restaurant.”

From the recliner, Natasha piped up, “But never crab cakes.”
“Crab cakes?” Bruce said.

“Half these places serve crab cakes regardless of the rest of the menu, and Chef will always order crab cakes if they’re available,” Clint explained. “It’s almost never a good idea.”

Bruce leaned against the counter, crossing his arms. “You guys watch a lot of this show, huh?”

“UK and US versions,” Clint said.

“I like the ones where he fires the staff,” Natasha said, sounding almost wistful.

“And Gordon’s Great Escape,” Clint added. “And all his other shit, really. Chef’s sorta my hero.”

“I thought I was your hero,” Natasha said over her shoulder, smiling.

Clint shrugged. “You’re all right.”

Bruce flinched as a coaster hurtled across the apartment and rebounded off the side of Clint’s head. Clint dropped his spoon, swearing. From the living room came the unmistakable thunk thunk of bare feet landing on the coffee table.

Holding back a laugh, Bruce stepped toward the stove. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” Clint said through his teeth, fishing the spoon out with a careful hand.

Bruce reached over and turned the guy’s head gently so he could get a look at the spot where the coaster hit. Clint froze up all at once, and Bruce’s chest constricted. Right. The whole…disaster area thing. It wasn’t every touch, though - he’d offered a comforting hand to patients plenty of times. This sort of touch was okay. Why? Because he was used to it? Because he was the one doing the touching, not the other way around?

He exhaled, letting the short hairs brush along his thumb as he ran it across the site of impact. “That’s going to bruise. You might want to put a bag of frozen peas on it.”

Clint’s shoulders relaxed slightly, and he slipped right back into the patter of the conversation, saying, “You think I cook from frozen? I’m offended, Bruce.”

Bruce raised both hands in front of himself. “I wouldn’t want to offend the chef.”

“Damn right you wouldn’t, because then you’d miss out on this magnificence.” Clint lifted a spoonful of curry sauce toward Bruce’s face and blew on it gently. “Taste.”

It actually was pretty magnificent - rich and savory, with just the right amount of heat. Bruce nodded. “That’s good.”

“Yeah?”

“Really good.”

And God, Clint beamed at that. His face alone was worth the trip over here.

By the end of the episode, Gordon Ramsay had turned the roach-infested restaurant into a spotless Indian diner, three empty dishes clustered on the coffee table, and Bruce was starting to think he’d like to make a habit of nights like this. The air conditioner in the window grumbled as it struggled to combat the lingering heat from the oven, but between the satisfaction of the meal and the reality TV overhaul, Bruce had no complaints.
“There’s mango ice cream in the freezer,” Clint offered casually.

“Too full for ice cream,” Natasha said.

“We could wait a little while,” Clint said. He’d positioned himself on the opposite end of the couch with his feet up on Natasha’s chair and one arm up along the back of the couch, just out of reach of Bruce. Flicking the couch cushion behind Bruce’s head so it tapped him behind the ear, he said, “What do you think, you up for another episode?”

“Sure,” Bruce said.

Four episodes later, they called it a night. Natasha retreated into the bedroom, and Clint called SHIELD for a car. He talked about Gordon Ramsay the whole ride back to Stark Tower, lovingly detailing the man’s television career and the restaurants he’d started.

“There’s one in The London Hotel,” he said as they walked to the elevator. “Always wanted to go there, but it’s way outta my price range.”

“Could be a job for the SHIELD credit card,” Bruce suggested.

Clint laughed, scratching the back of his head. “Yeah, about that.”

Bruce frowned, getting into the elevator, and held the door for Clint to follow. “What?”

“I’m not sure we’d have time to make a reservation, on account of your protective detail might be up soon,” Clint said, sounding almost sheepish. “On account of, uh…I passed my psych eval this morning, and they don’t have a replacement lined up. I get my shooting range access back first thing tomorrow, could be back in the field inside a week.”

“That’s great!” Bruce said, ignoring the small part of him that sank at the idea of his protective detail ending.

“Yeah, and it’s partly your fault.” Clint crossed his arms as they got out on Bruce’s floor. “You sorta gave me something to look forward to. It wasn’t until talking to you that I saw there was someplace better I could get to. My therapist says you’re a good influence.”

Bruce laughed. “I’ve been called a lot of things, but that’s a first.”

“Yeah, well, it oughtta be said more often. I mean—” Clint shook his head, uncurling his right arm. There was only one new mark on his skin, a little pink burn at the base of his thumb. “I’ve been trying. Don’t know how much it counts for, I’m still a hot fucking mess, but…I’ve been trying. That’s more than I was doing before you. So thanks.”

Pride swelled in Bruce’s chest, and words made a traffic jam in his throat. Part of him wanted so badly to reach out right now with a hand or a hug or—he didn’t know. Something. He fumbled with his key card, nodding ineffectively.

“So,” Clint said, “have a good night. We’ll talk about your protective detail after I discuss it with Director Fury.”

“Wait.”

Clint paused. “Yeah?”

Bruce turned to face him, letting his key card hang between his fingers. Maybe— “Can I try
“What?”

“Sure,” Clint said. “What?”

Jesus, what was he doing? “Promise not to move without permission?”

“Okay?” Clint said, half smiling.

Bruce stepped closer to him, assessing his body’s reactions. Two feet? Normal. One foot? Heart rate rising but otherwise fine. He flattened a palm on Clint’s shoulder, and the guy’s smile went uncertain. Still fine.

Taking a deep breath, Bruce wrapped his arms around Clint’s shoulders and held on - first gently, then tightly, his fingers gripping the fabric of Clint’s t-shirt. His heart was in his throat, but the sirens in his brain that went off under attack were quieter than usual. No specific memories, just a duck and cover urge at an ignorable volume. Okay, so setting the parameters himself and initiating contact actually helped. He laughed, dropping his chin to Clint’s shoulder.

Clint laughed in response. His voice was close enough to feel, and God, he smelled good, like curry and detergent and sweat from an evening over the stovetop.

There was that tightening in his throat. Bruce breathed slowly for a second, willing it to settle. It didn’t. Time to cut his losses. Pulling away, he said, “Congratulations.”

Clint nodded, looking amused. “Good night, Bruce.”

“Good night,” Bruce said, watching him walk back to the elevator. He let himself into his apartment, locked the door, and sank against it. Disaster area, he reminded himself. Mutual emotional wreckage. Freaking out and hiding in the bedroom over a kiss that didn’t even happen.

Some deluded part of his brain volleyed back Clint’s smell and the gentle, teasing pressure of the couch cushion tapping the back of his head and that smirk that made him feel like for once it was okay to say what was on his mind.

Goddammit.

Bruce pulled out his phone and sent off a text. I owe you $10.

He sat on the floor with the phone pressed to his forehead until it beeped. come on dr banner you can do better than that. romance me a little.

Bruce laughed. This little shit. Care to go to dinner and a movie with me Sunday night?

Ten seconds later, his phone beeped again.

your on. you pick the movie i pick the restaurant.

Bruce rested his chin on his hand and tried to tamp down a nervous grin, typing out Okay.
On Saturday, Bruce woke up to a text alert from his phone at 7 AM: a photo of a target with a dense cluster of holes at the bullseye and the caption 250yds in hi winds not even trying. you should bring me roses.

Bruce rolled onto his side to type out a response. Why?

because roses are how you show someone they're a total catch and look at this shit im a total catch.

Bruce smiled. Do it from 300yds, then we’ll talk.

That gave him a few minutes to roll out of bed, use the bathroom, and put on a pot of coffee before Clint fired back a photo of his next target. While Bruce puttered around the apartment fixing himself breakfast and sorting out his to-do list for the day, he and Clint debated which archery tricks might earn a person roses. It was a good start to the day, he had to admit - blowing off steam with lazy, hyperbolic arguments via text. He didn’t really object to the idea of roses, although he was fairly certain that if he asked Jarvis about ordering flowers, Tony would be at his door within minutes to do some sort of victory dance, possibly in the suit, almost definitely with his own heavy metal soundtrack, and yeah, that was worth putting off as long as possible.

Clint texted him around noon to ask if he needed to run any errands, but Bruce was content to have a quiet, lazy Saturday inside and declined.

all right see you tomorrow night, came the response.

Dammit, he should not be smiling this much.

Around 8 PM, he was curled up at the kitchen table with the Neil deGrasse Tyson book Natasha had left for him, and someone knocked at the door.

“Come on, buddy, open up,” Tony called.

Bruce sighed, leaving his book open on the table, and got up. “Tony, whether or not I was pricing roses on the internet is none of your business, and the fact that you’d have Jarvis monitoring that is frankly weird and violating.” He yanked the door open.

Tony was standing there in a beat up Led Zeppelin t-shirt with car keys in hand. A few steps behind him was Pepper, her head down and her brows pinched.

“That’s great,” Tony said, summoning up half a smile. “We’ll talk about your search history later.”

Bruce looked from Pepper’s face to Tony’s and took a step back, his stomach dropping. “What happened?”

Tony opened his mouth and shook his head. “Agent Barton was attacked in his apartment about an hour ago.”

Bruce braced his arm on the door frame. “Is he okay? Who—was it Loki? One of his contacts?”

“We don’t know,” Tony said, looking for once like he was at a loss for words.

“He’s in surgery,” Pepper cut in, her tone calm and even. “SHIELD employs some of the best trauma surgeons in the world. We’re going to SHIELD medical now to meet Natasha and Steve. Are you okay to come in the car with us?”

Bruce nodded, taking off his glasses and cleaning them on his shirt. Don’t panic. Just push it down,
save it to feed the Other Guy later. “Yeah. Yeah, let’s go.”

They were already on the road when Bruce realized this was his first time leaving the tower without a protective detail in almost two months.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry, that was mean.
Bruce stuck behind Pepper once they got into SHIELD medical. This place was a knot of bureaucracy wrapped in hospital smell, and Pepper was comfortably efficient at dismissing red tape. She got the three of them past the front desk in under three minutes, even with Bruce having left his ID in his apartment, and Bruce suddenly understood why Tony looked at her like she was something rare and precious.

Natasha and Steve were in the waiting room - or, what SHIELD seemed to think passed for a waiting room, all minimalist chairs and steel-plated walls. Natasha was sitting in the chair nearest the "Authorized Personnel Only" door, her face blank and her eyes on the floor. Her blouse was smudged with dried blood. Steve Rogers was up and pacing in sweats and a t-shirt that was tight enough to make Bruce hate him a little. What kind of narcissist spent Saturday night at the gym?

He approached as they came in with a "Thanks for coming," then turned to Pepper and offered her a handshake. "Captain Steve Rogers. Good to meet you."

"I know who you are, Steve," she said, shaking his hand regardless. "Pepper Potts. If you don't mind--" Pushing past him gently, she crossed the room and sat down next to Natasha, putting an arm around her shoulders. "Oh, honey, I'm sorry. Are you okay?"

Natasha nodded very slightly. "I'm fine." She wasn’t. Bruce could tell - and that her veneer was slipping scared him more than anything else about this.

“How is he?” Bruce asked, swallowing. “Any updates?”

“There’s some internal bleeding they’re taking care of now,” Steve said, folding his hands in front of his chest. “They said they could do it lap—uh—”


“Right,” Steve said, nodding. “So he should be out within the hour. He’s got a couple broken bones - ribs and fingers - plenty of bruising, and a possible concussion. They went after him with a baseball bat.”

Bruce exchanged a confused look with Tony, who put it into words: “What the hell kind of assassin or supervillain’s mook uses a baseball bat?”

“They were civilians,” Steve said.

“A couple who lost their kid in the invasion,” Natasha said. Her voice was low and completely even. “They tracked Clint down after seeing him on the news. Didn’t even have to break in the door because he left it unlocked for me. Tased him. Went after him with the bat until he wasn’t moving anymore. I passed them at the elevator on my way in, found him on the floor, called it in, and chased them down.”

Tony pointed toward the floor. “So they’re in custody here?”

“They’re in medical, too,” Steve clarified.

The idea of physical vengeance made the Other Guy growl in approval. Bruce caught Natasha’s eye and offered her a nod, which she returned.
It wasn’t enough. His skin was burning, and all the words he couldn’t say to anyone here were choking him.

Tony turned to Natasha. “Have I mentioned lately that you terrify me?”

“We have a problem here,” Steve said, pulling a tone like he was trying way too hard to be a leader. “The backlash is bad enough that we’ve got civilians targeting members of our team? We need to address this.”

“How?” Tony countered, going sarcastic all at once. “Have a bake sale for the haters? Ask them to pull their heads out of their asses nicely?”

“I don’t know,” Steve said. “There must be something we can do. Some kind of outreach, publicity —”

“We saved the world!” Tony said, throwing his arms out. “If that doesn’t count as public outreach, I don’t know what does. You can’t fix this by trying to play nice, Cap. You armor up and you lay down the law.”

“Tony, sit down,” Pepper said gently.

Steve rounded on him, his voice finally rising. “They’re confused and afraid. This is aliens and gods and wormholes, and they don’t understand!”

“Do you?” Tony said, too loud, like he was using the volume to distract from the fact that his hands were shaking. “Because I don’t.”

Bruce couldn’t take this right now. Swallowing, he muttered, “I’ll be back” and ducked back out the door while Pepper tried to dispel the argument.

Back out in the lobby, Bruce took a deep breath and tried to tamp down the heat in his chest.

“Can I help you, Doctor Banner?” the junior agent at the front desk asked, looking a little apprehensive at the idea.

“I need to talk to someone.”

Director Fury’s office was down a rabbit warren of hallways and elevators, a modest sized white room with modern furniture and - of all fucking things - a landscape painting on the wall behind the desk.

Fury was in, his black leather jacket draped across a corner of his desk and the sleeves of his turtleneck rolled up. As Bruce came in, he said, “Good evening, Doctor Banner. I expect you’re here to talk to me about Agent Barton.” Raising an eyebrow, he added, “Unless, of course, you’re looking for an escort to the honey festival this time.”

Bruce debated sitting, but his legs wouldn’t have it, pacing between the desk and chairs. “This shouldn’t have happened.”

Fury nodded. “I agree.”

“How can you be so placid about this? This—” Bruce stabbed a finger at him. “This is on you. You
know that, right? You’ve got eyes and ears on every street between here and Canada, don’t you? You probably knew this was gonna happen.”

Folding his hands on his desk, Fury said, “I assure you, I didn’t.”

“Well, you should have!” Bruce burst out, his voice echoing around the minimalist office. “You should have been able to intercept this! This whole time you had an eye on me, but who was watching him? Huh? He’s out there in the world, no high-tech security system, no SHIELD-protected living space, just a couple of flimsy locks standing between him and anyone on the street, and his face is all over the news. Where’s his protective detail?”

“Doctor Banner, you’re a special case. We assigned you a protective detail for the safety of those around you as much as for your own safety.”

“Bullshit. If I’d gone green, your guys couldn’t have done a damn thing, and you know it.”

“We could have tracked you--”

“You could’ve done that from Twitter algorithms. But you didn’t!” Bruce slammed his palms down on the director’s desk. His skin felt flushed and too tight, but he didn’t care. “Instead, you wasted resources on me and ignored the most vulnerable member of your team! What kind of leader are you?”

“Bruce,” Director Fury said slowly. “You wanna calm down?”

“Why the fuck would I want to do that?” Bruce barked, his throat echoing with a voice that wasn’t his.

Fury leveled him with with an authoritative look. “Because you’re starting to look a little green around the edges, and there’s a panic button under my desk that turns this room into an airless, titanium-reinforced coffin for both of us. I’d rather not have to push it.”

Bruce’s fingers curled into fists, and he dropped them off the edge of the desk, leaving them to dangle hopelessly at his sides. Letting out a deep breath, he forced the Other Guy back down into the dark. He dragged the back of one hand across his nose, backing off.

“Thank you,” Fury said, leaning back. Then he did something Bruce had never seen him do: he slumped slightly, almost defeatedly. “This organization has made mistakes, Bruce, and as director, I take the blame for those mistakes. We’re facing an unprecedented situation - we’re dealing with superheroes and gods and aliens, all of it in an extremely public setting - and so we’re pulling new protocols out of our asses as fast as we can. In this case, it wasn’t fast enough. What happened to Agent Barton was unacceptable, and I will do everything in my power to prevent it from happening again. You understand?”

Bruce nodded, running a hand through his hair.

There was a long pause, Fury looking him up and down as if assessing the likelihood of the airless titanium-reinforced coffin option - or maybe giving him space to cool himself down.

“I plan on apologizing to Barton in person once he’s in recovery,” Fury said after a while. “Any suggestion for a ‘get well’ gift?”

Bruce thought a moment, then huffed out a laugh. “Roses. Bring him roses. He’ll get a kick out of that.”
“Roses,” Fury repeated.

“Don’t ask.”

When Bruce got back to the waiting room, it was quiet. Natasha and Pepper were sitting together, Pepper typing one-handed on her tablet with her other arm draped across the back of Natasha’s chair. Tony was off in the corner by himself, both feet up on the wall and his phone out. Steve rose as Bruce entered, but either he didn’t have anything to say or it got canceled out looking at him. Bruce found a chair opposite Natasha and collapsed into it, locking his hands over his stomach.

The wait wasn’t as long as it could’ve been, but it was still much longer than he’d have liked, especially since the only reading material in the room was SHIELD procedural manuals. Natasha was the first out of her seat when the door opened.

“Agent Barton did very well,” the surgeon told her, with the sort of warm smile that indicated either exceptional bedside manner or a preexisting relationship built on a lot of medical visits. “We’ll be keeping a close eye on him for a few days, and he’ll need a bit of physical therapy for the hand down the line, but I expect him to make a full recovery.”

Hand? Right, Steve had mentioned broken fingers. Bruce felt a little sick.

“He’s waking up from the anesthesia now if you’d like to visit for a few minutes,” the surgeon added, and glanced at the lot of them. “We should keep it to just one of you, though.”

“Two,” Natasha said, and leaving no room for debate, added, “Come on, Bruce.”

No one dared object.

They were keeping Clint in a small windowless room of his own whose only redeeming feature was a decent sized TV set on the wall opposite the bed. Clint lay with one leg askew, looking too pale and oddly sunken against the bleached white sheets. He had gauze taped to the left side of his forehead, bruises purpling along his jaw and arms, and three fingers splinted on his right hand. Jesus. At least it wasn’t his dominant hand. Maybe he could hold a bow anyway, if he was careful?

Clint was grumping at the nurse adjusting his IV. That seemed like a good sign. “No fire ants this time, Tara. Just morphine.”

“You got it, sweetheart,” she said, smiling patiently.

Natasha all but jogged to the side of the bed while Bruce hung back a few feet. Leaning over the rail, she brushed a hand along Clint’s hair and kissed him on the uninjured side of his forehead. It was the most affection Bruce had ever seen from her, but Clint didn’t even seem to notice, his glare fixed on the nurse as she left the room.

“She’s gonna kill me,” he muttered.

“No one’s going to kill you,” Natasha said against his cheek, smiling. “You’re impervious.”

He turned his head, finally noticing her. “Hey, Tasha.”

“Hey, you.”
“I don’t feel good.”

“I know, lastochka, it’s just the anesthesia wearing off. You’re going to be fine.”

“I don’t like it. Feels like free will going out, but grosser.” He itched at the IV catheter site on his arm, and Natasha gently moved his hand away.

“That’s never happening again,” she said firmly, and glanced up to Bruce. “Hey, look who came with me.”

Bruce stepped up to the side of the bed, crossing his arms and forcing a smile. “Hi.”

A smile spread across Clint’s face, then rapidly faded. “This looks bad.”

“Yeah, a little,” Bruce said.

“We had a date. Were supposed to. This isn’t—” Clint paused, taking the time to enunciate, “This is not me trying to get out of it.”

“I didn’t think it was.”

“It wasn’t, I swear.” Clint sighed, looking a little sick. “I was gonna kiss you tomorrow, if you were game. Knew exactly what I was gonna say. Smooth as shit.”

Bruce ducked his head, half hiding a smile. “You were right, you’re a total catch.”

“I told you,” Clint said. Then he cringed and threw up over the side of the bed, right onto Bruce’s shirt.

Natasha went back to Clint’s after medical to do some damage control on the place, and Bruce followed. He really needed to throw out this shirt, because no amount of scrubbing was going to get chicken tikka masala vomit out, but he also wasn’t going to let her clean up the scene of the crime alone.

News vans clustered near the front doors of Clint’s building, reporters circling around a man on the front steps.

Natasha swore viciously under her breath. “Of course his landlord called the news.”

The SHIELD driver circled the block and dropped them off in the back alley, where they just barely made it into the building before a man filming video on his cell phone could accost them.

At least the door to Clint’s apartment was locked now. Natasha let them in and flipped on the hall light, bathing the place in flickering yellow. Bruce’s throat caught. The kitchen was a wreck, potato soup spattered across the counter and pooling around the pot on the floor, the oven door dented and its window shattered, and a bright arc of coppery blood congealed on the linoleum. Detritus of the attack was everywhere: a soup spoon in the hallway, a bloodied baseball cap under the kitchen sink, a food processor hanging off the countertop by its cord.

“There should be spare towels and something that’ll fit you in the bedroom closet,” Natasha said. “Get yourself cleaned up. I’ll start here.”
Clint’s bedroom just barely fit a bed and a dresser, and it was decorated sparsely, more like one of Bruce’s hideaways than the home of someone who’d been in one place for several years. Bruce grabbed a towel from the neatly organized closet - shirts arranged by sleeve length on the left, pants hung in the middle, a small collection of Natasha’s things on the far right - and found a t-shirt that looked big enough. Cleaning himself off in the bathroom, he changed into the shirt.

When he stepped out into the hallway, the bloody floor was half cleaned up and Natasha was standing over the kitchen sink, scrubbing a baseball cap with a dishrag - Coulson’s Captain America hat, Bruce realized belatedly. Well, shit.

“You want me to, uh, start with the stovetop?” he ventured.

Natasha ran a hand under her nose. “Uh-huh.” Her voice was thin, her shoulders hunched so far he couldn’t see her expression.

He took a step into the kitchen. “Natasha?”

She looked away, hair obscuring her face and her hands fervently working at the stain on the brim of the hat. “It’s not coming out,” she said, her voice tight. “I should have gotten to this earlier. I checked his vitals, called SHIELD, and gave pursuit. I should’ve stayed with him, washed this out before it dried. It won’t come out now.”

Bruce stepped up to the sink beside her. “This isn’t your fault.”

She ran the hat under the tap again and went after the stain with her fingernails. “I know that. I just can’t—” Her thumbnail scratched at the fabric audibly, but the stain stayed put, the fabric fraying slightly. She dropped her elbows to the edge of the sink and slouched, staring at the backsplash. “He didn’t fight back. He had at least four seconds and twelve potential weapons within easy reach and didn’t use them. Why didn’t he fight back?”

“I don’t know,” Bruce said, feeling useless.

“I’ve been fighting for him every day for weeks,” Natasha said. Her voice choked on the last word, and she pressed one wet hand to her mouth and clenched her eyes shut.

Bruce set a hand on her shoulder. It was the easy kind of touch, bedside manner just ingrained enough that it didn’t set off any alarms inside him. Giving her shoulder a gentle squeeze, he said, “You’ve done an amazing job.”

She nodded, leaning into the touch slightly.

He steeled himself. “Do you need a hug?”

“No,” she said, dropping her hand and looking up at him with exasperated, teary eyes. “You’re kind of out of your depth here, aren’t you?”

“In many different ways,” Bruce answered, deflating.

Natasha wiped a thumb along her eyes, looking cross. “I’m usually good in these situations. It’s hard to compartmentalize when it happens outside work.”

“What can I do to help you?” he asked.

She turned off the faucet and set Coulson’s baseball cap carefully on the counter to dry, stain intact. “Clean and dry the dishes and appliances in here so they’re fit to be packed. There’s no way Director
Fury’s going to let him keep living here after this, and Tony said he’s got an apartment free in Stark Tower. Convince Clint it’s a good idea, and when he’s out of medical, bring him home.”

“I can do that,” Bruce said. “I can take care of him until he’s on his feet again, too, especially if we’re living in the same building. You could go—I dunno, take a vacation, read a stack of novels in the bath? You’ve earned a break.”

“He’s not your problem.”

“What if I kind of want him to be my problem?”

She rolled her eyes to the ceiling and laughed under her breath. “You’re both out of your minds.”

“That is, admittedly, part of the draw,” Bruce said, smiling a little.

Natasha picked up a paper towel and got back to work on the counters while Bruce started on the floor. After a few minutes of steady work, she said, “Pepper has been trying to get me to do a girls’ weekend at some super-exclusive spa in Hawaii for months now.”

“Go,” he said.

They spent most of the night cleaning. There was potato soup in every nook of the small kitchen, along with a fine coat of plaster dust from the spots in the wall the baseball bat had struck. The work wasn’t difficult, and the company was good: they were both comfortable with silence, so it felt like a security blanket, just the rhythm of scrubbing and the scrape of objects being moved. By the time Bruce finished fixing the cord of the food processor, it was late enough that it was just easier to sleep there. He fell into the lesser-used side of Clint’s bed and tried to get some sleep.

When he woke in the morning, Natasha was curled up on the other side of the bed, a couple feet away, watching him placidly. “You should be aware that he snores,” she said. “He also steals blankets in his sleep, but he’ll keep his limbs to himself, so you don’t need to worry about that. If you need to wake him from a nightmare, he’ll come out of a dead sleep at the sound of his codename. You’ll need to keep a close eye on how he’s following the doctor’s instructions - he’ll say he’s fine and he’s not. Make sure he doesn’t sneak off to the shooting range. He’ll fight you on it, but he’s re-injured fingers pushing himself too hard before.”

Bruce pushed himself up onto one elbow and wiped his eyes. “Okay.”

She looked down. “And don’t go easy on him. He gets uneasy when people are too nice to him.”

“Fortunately, I’m not very good at being nice.”

“You’re better than you think,” she said.

They split up the day’s visiting hours, had some exceptionally strong coffee, and called for a car from SHIELD. The news teams outside had grown another van and half a dozen scouts at the back door. Natasha slipped on Clint’s sunglasses, took a deep breath, and led the way out the front door. The reporters swarmed immediately, hurling questions and shoving cameras in their faces. Natasha kept her head down and her mouth shut.

By the first couple of steps, Bruce wished he could turn the volume down on the whole thing. At the sidewalk, his pulse all but drowned out the voices of the reporters. When they hit the street, someone tried to block him in between the crowd and a news van to push a microphone under his nose and ask him about the attack. No. This was over right now.
Bruce stopped trying to shove his way through the crowd and stood up to his full height. “Do you know who I am?” he said, letting a growl in at the edges of his voice.

The questions stopped all at once. The reporter holding the microphone in front of his face said, “You’re Doctor Banner, the Avengers’ Hulk.”

He leveled her with a scowl. “I spend the night cleaning my friend’s blood off the floor, and on my way to go see him you stop me and shove a microphone in my face, knowing exactly who I am?”

“I—” the reporter started.

Bruce slammed his fist down on the hood of the news van and let the pressure valve in his chest open just enough to bellow, “How did that seem like a good idea to you?”

The reporter in front of him made a sound like a yelp and jumped back, along with the rest of the crowd. A couple of guys took off sprinting down the sidewalk. In just a few seconds, the street was practically vacant, aside from him, Natasha, and the driver of the SHIELD SUV parked across the street.

Bruce folded his hands in front of his chest and cracked his neck. Not bad.

“That was mean,” Natasha said as they got into the SUV.

“Good,” he said. “I’m not sorry.”

She smiled.

Natasha took the first shift at medical, leaving Bruce alone with the driver of the SUV for the trip from SHIELD to Stark Tower. He went back to his apartment and went about getting things done for the day: laundry, shower, breakfast, checking in with Tony.

“How’re you doing, big guy?” were the first words out of Tony’s mouth when Bruce called him.

“Peachy,” Bruce fired back, not sure when that word had wormed its way into his vocabulary. “Hey, can you give me some details on the apartment you offered for Clint? I’m supposed to sell it to him.”

“It’s the first one I showed you. I’ll email you the specs. Hey, I’ve got a meeting with Steve and my publicist in an hour to talk Avengers PR - you wanna come be a fly on the wall for Overly Earnest Boy Scout Vs. Marketing Shark?”

“You’re actually going to go with him on the PR angle?”

“It can’t hurt. And my publicist is the most terrifyingly competent person I’ve ever met who doesn’t fight aliens or call me ‘honey,’ so who knows? Maybe she’ll pull some gold out of her ass.”

“Well, that’s…great, but I won’t be joining you. Gotta go keep Clint company.”

“Right.” His pause sent an ominous chill down Bruce’s spine. “So, how’s that going? You mentioned shopping for flowers.”

Goddammit. Bruce leaned over the kitchen table, rubbing his forehead.

“Bruce,” Tony called, elongating the syllable. “Did you ask that nice young man to prom? Are you going to bring him a corsage and slow dance to that new Bon Jovi song you kids like? I hope you’re planning on bringing him up to the house for pictures beforehand, I need a new photo to hang in the stairwell.” He paused again, waiting. “It’s in your best interest to answer. I can do this all day.”
“Unfortunately, he’s not exaggerating,” Jarvis interjected.

“You know, Bruce,” Tony went on, “just because the other kids are renting hotel rooms on prom night doesn’t mean you have to do it, too. Once that cherry’s popped—”

“Tony,” Bruce said, slumped with his nose on the kitchen table.

“Yes, dear?” Tony said.


“Yes!” Tony hissed.

“We were supposed to do dinner and a movie tonight.”

“What are you gonna wear?”

“What am I—” Bruce sat up straight, throwing a frustrated gesture at his empty apartment. “You do realize he’s stuck in a hospital room tonight?”

“So? You could do worse for a first date. You could take him bowling.”

“What’s wrong with bowling? I’ve taken a date bowling.”

“Oh, Bruce.” He could practically hear Tony’s pitying head shake. “Rental shoes? Sticking your fingers into the holes of a plastic ball that smells like grease and other people’s hand sweat? That’s not where fingers should go on a first date.”

“I’m hanging up now,” Bruce said.

“Don’t forget the corsage,” the phone said, just before he ended the call.

Bruce showed up at SHIELD medical in the early evening carrying dinner in one of his hemp grocery bags, feeling strangely jittery, and - against his better judgement - wearing a tie. Tara, the middle-aged evening nurse who’d dealt with Clint on morphine, passed him a private little smile in the hallway. Oh, Jesus, this was going to be all over SHIELD’s rumor mill by the end of the day, wasn’t it?

Clint’s room was a lot brighter now than it had been the night before - in large part due to the rainbow of cards and flowers arranged on the counter at the far wall. Natasha was sitting on the edge of Clint’s bed, and Bruce was relieved to hear her laughing.

She turned her head the instant his hand touched the door and welcomed him with a smile. “Hey, Bruce.”

He nodded, standing awkwardly in the doorway. “Hi. I, uh…”

“Yeah, of course,” she said, hopping off the bed. Giving Clint a kiss on the forehead, she told him, “I’ll be back in the morning.”

“I’ll pine for you,” Clint replied, putting his uninjured hand over his heart.
On her way out the door, Natasha brushed a hand along Bruce’s and said, “Behave, boys.”

The first words Clint said to him when they were alone in the room were: “Holy shit, are you wearing a tie? I didn’t know you owned one of those.”

Bruce patted down the end of his tie, which was a deep violet silk that Tony had sworn would bring out his eyes. “I usually don’t. This was supposed to be in case of press conferences.”

“And you wore it here because—” Clint started, confused. “Wait. Is this a date? I thought I called for a rain check.”

“You told me you had plans to kiss me, and then you threw up on my shirt,” Bruce corrected. “There wasn’t technically a rain check in there.”

“Oh, God,” Clint groaned. “I threw up on you? I’m sorry. We can’t do this, this is already the worst date ever.”

Bruce set his bag down on the overbed table at the foot of the bed. “I brought a link-up to Tony’s entire video library and pastrami sandwiches from that place on 33rd.”

Clint went silent for a second. Then he gave Bruce a look of utmost seriousness and said, “I changed my mind, this is a brilliant idea.”

Taking a seat in the stiff guest chair next to the bed, Bruce handed him one of the sandwiches and a wad of napkins. “I didn’t get you roses.”

“I think you did,” Clint said, grinning, and hitched a thumb toward the counter, where a large bouquet of purple roses was sitting among the cards. “Director Fury brought those this morning when he came by to apologize. The way he was holding ‘em, I’m pretty sure they were really not his idea.”

Bruce unwrapped his sandwich innocently. “Maybe he just thinks you’re a total catch and doesn’t know how to tell you.”

Clint laughed, then cringed and curled his legs up, one arm clutching his right side.

“You all right?” Bruce said, ready to jump out of his chair if needed.

“Yeah,” Clint said, wincing as he took a long, shallow breath. “Just stitches and ribs.”

Right. Bruce remembered that from his chart. Three fractured ribs. Dislocations of the first knuckle of three fingers on the right hand, two of them fractured. Forehead laceration and mild concussion. Abdominal bleed (fixed). Bruising damn near everywhere on the side that had been exposed during attack. Clint looked about as good as his chart implied, stitches zig-zagging across his forehead near his hairline and deep red-purple bruises trailing up his right arm and disappearing under the sleeve. At least from this angle he looked a little better - his left side was largely fine, since it had been the one against the floor.

Bruce pulled up the app on his Starkphone that projected video onto nearby screens, and the TV across from the bed flickered to life. He waited for Clint’s legs to uncurl, then passed the phone over.

“I figure since I picked the food, you can pick the movie this time.”

“You’re probably gonna regret that.” Clint tapped away at the phone screen for a minute, then frowned. “Billionaire with unlimited access to media doesn’t have a single SyFy Channel original movie in his library? Come on, Stark.” He scrolled a bit. “Have you seen anything by Edgar
“Wright?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Awesome.” He picked a movie and handed the phone back.

They ate while watching some British buddy cop thing called *Hot Fuzz*, which Clint insisted was one of the great unsung romances of the 2000s. It was, apparently, both a love letter to the action hero genre and a masterpiece of homoerotic subtext. Bruce wasn’t really into action movies, but it was certainly engaging. By the middle of the movie, he was leaning an arm on the bed and whispering questions about the parts that were clearly referential, with Clint happily firing back relevant action movie trivia. By the final shootout sequence, Bruce was sucked into the movie entirely, but he kept asking questions anyway because it gave him an excuse to lean in closer, his arm touching Clint’s in a light, accidental way that didn’t set off any alarms in his head.

Finally, Clint turned to him and said, “Just watch.” But he reached his left arm to the edge of the mattress, fingers open, and smiled.

Bruce stared at that hand, shoved down the nervous fluttering in his chest, and took it. Clint’s fingers laced with his without locking them in, and his forearm was just long enough for Bruce’s to fit against it without his elbow getting in the way. This contact was okay. It was just like shaking hands, but from a slightly different angle. Bruce could do that. Settling back in his chair, he ran his thumb along the knuckle beneath it, tracing a path across warm skin and scars. Damn, but that was weirdly relaxing.

When the movie ended, neither of them moved, letting the credits roll. They only separated when a nurse came into the room to check on Clint’s IV dosage and help him to the bathroom. When he got back into bed, Bruce was slouched in his chair with his hands folded between his knees, thinking.

“Why so quiet?” Clint said, adjusting his pillow. “Could you hear me in there? Did my piss shatter the romantic hospital atmosphere?”

Bruce sat up straight and looked him in the eyes. “Why didn’t you fight back?”

Clint’s mouth hinged open and closed again. “They tased me,” he said, unconvincingly.

“You had time to react before that, though, and you didn’t. Why?” Heat was roiling in Bruce’s chest thinking about it - strike after strike landing and Clint balled up on the floor, ignoring the blade of the broken food processor, the cast-iron pan he could swing, the chopping knife that had been knocked to the ground nearby. “Did you want them to kill you?”

“No.” Clint dropped his head back against the pillow. “They didn’t have it in them to kill me. I knew that the moment they stepped inside. They were just… I don’t know how to explain it.”

“Try,” Bruce urged.

Clint looked over at him, and his brow pinched. “Look, there are plenty of bad guys who want to bring the Avengers down right now: terrorist cells, war mongerers, One Million Moms. These were just two people who lost their kid. They blamed me, and they thought hurting me would help somehow - push the world back into an order that made a little more sense. Who’m I to deny them that?”

“You’re the one getting rib fractures, broken fingers, and surgery,” Bruce said, resenting the iciness in his own voice. “You told me you were trying.”
“I am trying!” Clint said, too loudly. Wincing, he leaned back and breathed in slowly through his nose. “I don’t always get it right. Fucking sue me,” he whispered. “Y’know, when I was lying on the floor, I almost started laughing, because I had this very clear thought that said, ‘I don’t deserve this,’ and of course right then was the first time I really believed it, when I was getting hit with a bat.” He gave a high, abridged laugh. “I told my therapist this morning. She was thrilled.”

Bruce’s fingers latched together hard. Dammit. He understood that. There had been times when it took a physical kick in the ass to knock him out of his own self-destructive spirals. But he was used to being the person at the center of that. Seeing it happen to someone else from the outside, someone he cared about - that was new. Unsettling.

“Bruce?” Clint said, tentatively.

“Tony’s offered an apartment for you in the tower,” Bruce said. “It’s rent-free, with a view of midtown and a nicer kitchen than you’ve got now, and it’s one of the most secure buildings in the city.” Picking up his phone, he projected Tony’s email onto the TV to display the photos and floor plan. “Please take it.”

“You want me in your building?” Clint said.

Taking his hand again, Bruce said, “I want you safe.”

Clint exhaled, studying the images on the screen. “All right. When do I move?”

“Tomorrow,” Bruce said, relief flooding him. “Tony’s got movers lined up. All you’ll have to worry about is unpacking, and I can help you with that if you need it.”

“I might take you up on that,” Clint said, tapping his splinted fingers on his chest. “I wanna keep you around, too, y’know.”

“Yeah,” Bruce said quietly. “I got that.”

Clint licked his lips and frowned. “I’d really like to try kissing you again sometime, when you’re up for it and I don’t have hospital mouth.”

Bruce chuckled. “I think that can be arranged.”

“You up for another movie?”

“Sure.”

Clint took the phone from him and went searching. “Let’s stick with the Edgar Wright collection. *Scott Pilgrim* isn’t quite as romantic as *Hot Fuzz*, but it’s up there.”

They watched movies and talked until visiting hours ended, and by the time the nurse came to shoo Bruce out of the room, he’d had his hand in Clint’s for so long he couldn’t actually remember when he’d stopped noticing it.
Bruce came by around dinnertime with food to share on both remaining days that Clint was in medical. They joked around, dissected the SHIELD rumor mill’s latest offerings, and played cards, trying to out-cheat each other at 31. It was easily the most fun Bruce had ever had in a hospital room. Natasha hung around late for the last evening, splitting Chinese food with them.

“What time’s your flight leave?” Clint asked her.

“Nine,” she said into the carton of garlic chicken. “When’s the last time they checked your stitches?”

“I’ll be fine,” Clint said, stealing a piece of broccoli from her. “I’ll be protected by the world’s most irritable AI security system and a sexy scientist who is literally invincible. Do you need me to sing ‘500 Miles’ into your voicemail every three hours to keep you from missing me?”

“No,” she said.

“Because I’ll do it. I’ll take that bullet for you, Tasha.”

“I know you would. You did the entire first week I was at StarkIndustries.”

“And did you miss me?” he said.

Natasha smacked him in an unbruised part of his arm with a chopstick, but she was smiling.

Bruce enjoyed their banter. It felt like a strange sort of honor to be let into this private social sphere where Clint referenced cheesy love songs and Natasha’s strikes were affectionately non-lethal. They were effortless together in a way that Bruce couldn’t personally imagine, routines and permissions established so long ago that their everyday interactions sometimes looked like mind-reading. Part of him wanted Natasha to stay, afraid that the moment he was properly alone with Clint, the guy would realize just how inferior this thing they were doing was to what he already had.

“When I wake up,” Clint sang, “well, I know I’m gonna be, I’m gonna be the man who wakes up next to you…”

“I will shoot you,” Natasha said.

Clint grinned at her. “Y’know, you’ve been saying that for years, but you never follow through.”

Natasha’s phone buzzed. She checked it and set down her carton. “I have to go, my car’s here.” Slipping off the edge of the hospital bed, she pressed a kiss to Clint’s forehead, just below the gauze. “Don’t touch my voicemail.”

“I won’t,” Clint said, unconvincingly.

On her way out the door, she caught Bruce’s eye and added, “Call me if he does something stupid.”

“You really want to be on your phone with me for your whole vacation?” Bruce said. “I’m flattered, but—”

A piece of szechwan beef bounced off his left glasses lens. He turned toward Clint, who was
clutching his ribs as he held down a laugh. When he looked back at the doorway, Natasha was gone.

“Maybe I’ll cut it back to three voicemails a day,” Clint said.

SHIELD kept Clint late on his release day, running scans and making him talk to a physical therapist about his right hand. They shooed Bruce out of the room for those parts, so he hung around the waiting area into the afternoon, catching up on emails on his phone. The sound of swearing occasionally drifted from down the hall, and Bruce would lay money on who that was.

A little after one, Director Fury strode into the waiting room and took a seat in the chair across from Bruce. His black leather coat went well with the uncomfortable steel chairs, and Bruce caught himself frowning, wondering if all the interior decorating at SHIELD was built around what best suited the Director’s wardrobe.

“Here to see Agent Barton off?” Bruce said, not looking up from his phone.

“That,” Fury said, “and to have a few words with you.”

Bruce set his phone down on his knee.

“I’ve decided to end your protective detail,” Fury said, looking him in the eye. “As of now, we will no longer insist that you have a SHIELD agent present when you leave Stark Tower, and you will not have access to SHIELD drivers or their vehicles. You will remain a valued resource of this organization, but your comings and goings are your own business. We ask only that you inform us if you have plans to leave the state.”

“I think I’ll be staying in New York for the foreseeable future,” Bruce said.

“I assumed,” Fury replied, raising an eyebrow at him.

Bruce crossed his arms, fighting down an urge to defend himself - against what, he wasn’t sure.

Fury leaned forward, folding his hands between his knees. “Doctor Banner, it’s not my job to police your personal life, but do not insult me by thinking I won’t notice when two members of the Avengers team begin dating.”

Okay. No overt threat. “So, what? You want me to fill out some paperwork?”

“Bruce, we don’t even have paperwork for this situation yet. And we have paperwork for everything.” Fury didn’t crack a smile. “I would prefer it if my people were happy. If this makes you both happy, I won’t interfere - hell, I might even send you a fruit basket. But if it starts to negatively affect your performance in the capacity we need you, I will bury this thing in bureaucratic red tape so deep you’ll think this was Mr. Rogers’ trip to the paper factory. Do you understand me?”

“Everything except the Mr. Rogers part,” Bruce said, nodding.

“Good.” Fury tapped his fingers together and leaned back. “By the way, I saw your performance for the cameras the other day. Nice move.”

“Thank you.”
After a little while, the door opened, and the afternoon nurse pushed a surly looking Clint out in a wheelchair. Bruce rose to help him, and Fury rose, well, probably to be the tallest person in the room.

“Thank you for your cooperation, Agent Barton,” he said, shaking Clint’s left hand. “Please let me know if there’s anything I can do to help you out.”

“Yes, sir,” Clint said, taking Bruce’s hand to pull himself to a standing position.

Fury looked them both up and down and shook his head. “Good luck, gentlemen,” he said, and strode out of medical.

Clint’s new apartment was just below Tony’s floor and the research levels, a spacious two bedroom with whole walls of windows facing west. All his things were already there when they arrived, few enough boxes that they didn’t seem like enough to fill the space. Clint made a slow circuit of the place, running his hands along the black marble countertops in the open kitchen, trying out the leather sectional that had come built-in, venturing down the hallway to the bedrooms, all completely silent.

Bruce found a chipped vase in one of the kitchen boxes and put Fury’s roses in some water. They were already starting to wilt, but Clint had insisted on keeping them, possibly even pressing them to keep around as emotional blackmail material against his boss. Bruce couldn’t argue with that. Setting the flowers out on the middle of the kitchen island, he had to admit, they did lend a lived-in charm to the place.

Clint wandered out into the living room and stood at the windows, his eyes flitting across the landscape of rooftops. He’d found Coulson’s hat somewhere along his route, and he flexed the brim between his hands absentmindedly.

Bruce wandered up beside him and gave the windows a glance. What must it be like to look out at that expanse of humanity and see a view instead of a map of potential casualties? “What do you think?” he asked.

“It’ll do,” Clint said, nodding slightly. He glanced back at the rest of the apartment. “My coffee table looks good here. The refrigerator doesn’t grumble, the bathroom’s got heated tile instead of 70’s linoleum, and there’s an overly helpful British guy in the sound system, but I guess I’ll get used to it.”

“I can be a constant companion or unobtrusive observer depending on your settings, Agent Barton,” Jarvis said.

“How about you call me Clint?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And knock off the ‘sir’ crap.” Clint actually winced while he said it, like he was embarrassed to have a piece of software giving him authority, and Jesus, Bruce wanted to kiss him.

Wanting to kiss him wasn’t new. Bruce had wanted to kiss him for weeks to one degree or another. But now, instead of idly thinking about it or examining the logistics of the eventual possibility, he got that excited, knotted up feeling in his stomach like he was about to jump off a diving board. That was
Digging through his mental catalogue of violence, he tried to recall any traumatic memories that might be set off by a kiss. A punch in the mouth? The curb in Rome? The sensation of having his face covered in canvas as that unfortunate idiot in Manila tried to abduct him into the back of a truck? That had been fun.

“I’m sorry about your hat,” Bruce said, because it was better than saying nothing and letting this feeling wreak havoc on his stomach.

Clint flipped the hat in the air and caught it by the back. “See this?” He pointed to a dark stain along the closure. “Coulson sliced his hand open on a carving knife at Thanksgiving. Gave himself stitches at the dinner table while I laughed at him and bogarted the mashed potatoes. Now we’ve both put our kitchen mistakes on it. Gives it character.”

“I wouldn’t wave that in Natasha’s face anytime soon,” Bruce said. “She tried really hard to save it. Minor breakdown over the sink hard.” Which probably qualified as significantly more than minor on the Natasha Romanov rating scale.

Clint ran a thumb across the new stain on the front of the hat, frowning. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

The hat got relegated to a coat hook in the front closet, along with Clint’s favorite jacket. Bruce helped him track down and unpack the box of toiletries and towels, which was predictably hidden under two boxes of cookware in the kitchen. Fucking movers.

“I gotta get myself cleaned up,” Clint said, scratching at the four-day scruff on his cheek. “No surprises in the shower, all right, Jarvis?”

“You won’t hear a word from me,” the AI assured him.

Clint disappeared into the bathroom, leaving Bruce with vague instructions to make himself at home. Bruce took a seat on the end of the sectional that was farthest from the windows and pulled a book out of box on the coffee table. It looked like one of Natasha’s paperbacks, and the title The Hunger Games grabbed his attention enough to crack it open. Down the hall in the bathroom, a cardboard box tore open, a toothbrush buzzed, and the shower turned on. Bruce sank back in the couch and turned pages.

He was two chapters in when the bathroom door opened and Clint called, “Hey, Bruce? Could you give me a hand?”

Bruce left the book propped open on the coffee table and walked down the hallway. “What do you need?”

Clint was standing in the bathroom doorway, one towel wrapped firmly around his waist and the other draped over his shoulders. The bruises dappling his skin were just starting to turn yellow in the middle, except for the spot along his ribcage, which was still an angry plum color. “This is embarrassing. I try to dry my hair off, and my ribs light up like I was playing Whack-A-Mole on ’em. Would you, uh—?”

“Yeah, of course.” Bruce stepped closer, facing him, brought the towel up over his head, and rubbed it over his hair in circles. The sheepish look on Clint’s face faded after a second, relaxing.

Bruce drew the corner of the towel across a wet spot on Clint’s forehead, just under the line of stitches, then rested his hands on either side of the guy’s head, feeling the outlines of his ears through the beat-up terry cloth. God, his stomach was all knots and nerves.
Come on, words. “Can I—” he started.

“Yes,” Clint said, breaking into a grin.

Bruce leaned in, catching the tail end of that smile with his lips. Closing his eyes, he ignored the pounding of his heart and focused on how good the contact felt. Clint’s lips were firm and tasted faintly of mint toothpaste, and the scruff at his chin brushed at Bruce’s - nothing like knuckles or concrete or canvas. His breath skimmed Bruce’s cheek with a high, happy sound. Bruce’s body responded with a thrill down his spine and a claustrophobic feeling in his lungs. Shit. Okay. Abduction in Manila won.

Pulling out of the kiss, Bruce went back to toweling off. “You really need to shave.”

“Look who’s talking,” Clint said. Grinning again, he ducked his head and allowed his hair to be dried. “You can kiss me whenever you want, you know. I’ll ask you, but you don’t need to ask me, ‘cause my answer’s always gonna be yes.”

“All right,” Bruce said, letting go of the towel. Running a hand along Clint’s hair, he kissed him quickly, just to challenge himself. Heart rate: pounding. Breathing: on a steady climb toward hyperventilation. Alarms: a little quieter than last time.

“Now go chill out,” Clint said, giving his hand a light smack. “I’ve gotta shave and get dressed.” He shut the door between them, and Bruce found himself grateful for the barrier as his breathing got easier.

Sinking back into the farthest end of the sectional, he picked the book back up and let his body settle.

They spent most of the day unpacking - or, rather, Bruce spent most of the day unpacking while Clint directed and made frustrated noises about not being able to reach the upper cabinets in the kitchen without hurting himself. He made up for his limited unpacking abilities by cooking them dinner, and by keeping a careful distance around Bruce’s overreactive personal bubble even though he’d already been allowed in.

The ability to discern between one-time permission and blanket permission seemed a rare thing these days, and Bruce appreciated it more than he could say. Clint directed him with pointing and sniper-precise descriptions instead of trying to move his arm. If he had to squeeze past Bruce, he’d call, “Behind you,” and keep his limbs to himself. When the two of them were sharing the couch for dinner and the first episode of Ramsay’s Best Restaurant, he kept his left arm propped up along the back of the couch, fingers just shy of Bruce’s shoulder. The gesture was clear: come in closer if you’re up for it. Bruce wasn’t, but that didn’t make it any less nice to be offered.

He wanted to be up for it. Now that he’d started having something approaching intimate physical contact, the absence of it over the past several years felt like a genuine lack. He wanted to lean into Clint and feel the weight of another person against him. He wanted hands holding his - hands holding onto him, anywhere. He wanted to learn the texture of Clint’s skin, the dips and freckles and paths of hair, the scars, like memorizing a body with his fingertips would give him the most direct route to knowing the person inside it. He wanted—well. He just wanted, and it was infuriating.

He hadn’t felt like this in years, and the last time he had, he’d been able to act on it like it wasn’t a
big deal. Now, here he was, alone with a handsome smartass who called him a “sexy scientist” and cooked him quiche, and he couldn’t even get himself to move six inches closer because he was afraid a hand on the back of his neck might trigger some kind of ill-placed sensation of being under attack. He wasn’t sure which was worse: the nerves that came with thinking about it or the idea that he might push Clint away with a bad reaction.

Hands were easy, at least. Even at his most isolated, Bruce had never lost the knack for a firm handshake, and that seemed to translate well to other types of touch in the same area. When Clint left a hand open, Bruce took it, gladly running the pad of his thumb over the scar tissue on Clint’s knuckles and relaxing because this, at least, was something he could do.

He could kiss and run away, and he could hold hands. He might as well be a goddamn teenager.

“Would you stay over?” Clint asked as the city outside the windows turned into small clusters of light in the dark. “It’d be good to have a familiar face to wake up to. Been having nightmares pretty bad lately, and being in a new place…”

Bruce considered the wide windows and the wrung-out feeling in his chest from the past few days. Then he looked at Clint, whose thumb was roaming over his own in a small, comforting arc. Maybe he could do this, too. “Yeah,” he said, “just let me get a few things from downstairs.”

It felt exceptionally weird riding the elevator back up from the basement wearing his pajamas, with his toothbrush and a spare set of clothes in hand. Too bad it only stopped at the residential levels - he’d have paid good money to be stuck in an elevator with one of the easily spooked R&D interns right now. Would he be more or less terrifying to them in a henley and Hulk pajama bottoms? (Tony had given them to him as a gag gift, but they were fleece, and the tower’s air conditioning tended to be overzealous at night.)

“Excellent,” was all Clint said when he saw him.

The master bedroom came with a built-in king-size bed, and Clint spent most of his bedtime routine complaining under his breath about missing his own bed. Then he laid down on his side in the new bed, and his breath came out in a soft huff. “I forgive this bed,” he said. “This bed is a good bed.”

Bruce got in on the other side. It was the same type as his own bed downstairs, like being cradled by a cloud with an obscene thread count. He rested his head on the pillow. “I think Tony picked out the furniture in the apartments himself.”

Clint snickered. “Tony Stark knows his way around a mattress.”

“True.” The city lights flickered in his peripheral vision. “Would you mind having the curtains drawn overnight?”

“No problem,” Clint said. “Jarvis, close the curtains and give us some kind of atmospheric lighting so we don’t trip and die at 3 AM?”

“As you wish,” the AI answered, drawing the curtains closed and turning on a track of low lights around the door. It left the room with a pleasant faint gray light, like pre-dawn.

“Thanks, buddy.” Clint curled his legs up and got comfortable, a good foot and a half away across the mattress. Tucking both hands under the pillow, he asked Bruce, “Is this okay?”

Dark enough to sleep, if not the all-encompassing blackness of his basement bedroom. Nerves blocked out with the curtains. “Yeah,” Bruce said.
“Good.” Clint stifled a yawn into the pillow. “And all this, you and me - is this okay?”

Bruce bit down a smile. “Yeah, it’s okay.”

Truth was, it was more than okay. He was emotionally exhausted and a bit sore in the shoulders from all the reaching of unpacking, and part of him was nervous in a way he couldn’t quite put into words, but his body was humming with the oddest sense of wholeness. Endorphins, probably - whether from anxiety or physical affection, he wasn’t sure. Endorphins were sneaky biological double agents.

“You don’t seem like a guy who does casual dating very well,” Clint said. “And I think I’ve made my intentions pretty clear: I want to be with you. Is it fair to say we’re on the same page?”

Bruce inched his hand out onto the mattress between them and flexed his fingers, inviting a hand into his. “That’s fair,” he said.

“So, what’s that look like, you in a relationship?”

Bruce stared at the shape of his thumb running along the outside of Clint’s hand. “Honestly, I don’t know. It’s been too long.”

Clint said, “Well, how ‘bout I give you mine, and if anything comes to you, shout it out?”

“Okay.”

“In a relationship with me, you gotta be okay with my job. I disappear for weeks sometimes, shoot people for a living, and wind up in medical on a regular basis.” He shrugged. “And I guess every once in a while, I help save the world. That workable for you?”

“Yeah,” Bruce said. “I spend a lot of time holed up doing research or puzzling things out. Some days all I want is to be left alone to work, and some days I get so fed up that staying in bed seems like the only safe option. And…same on the world-saving, I guess.”

“Fine by me.” Clint took a deep breath. “Natasha’s the closest thing I got to a soulmate. You gotta understand: nothing touches that.”

Bruce nodded. That one was easy, too. “I wouldn’t want to get in the way of that. I’m glad you’ve got each other.” Wracking his brain for something to add, he came up with “I’m sort of a morning person.”

“There are only three and a half things that get me out of bed before 9 AM when I’m sleeping well,” Clint countered, counting off on his fingers. “Fresh croissants, work, and the shooting range.”

“And the half?”

“Sex. Only counts as half ’cause I don’t always leave the bed.”

Ah. Okay. That was something to address. “So, sex.”

“Yeah, I was wondering about that. Is that something you wanna work toward? I get the impression you’re interested, but I bet the touch thing gets in the way.”

“Yeah, I, uh.” Bruce shifted awkwardly. “I’d like to get there eventually, I think. Except I don’t—I find it hard to get comfortable with the idea of it, you know? Spending so much time clawing at control, then surrendering it to another person like that, I just— I mean, I hardly even jerk off.” It felt
really fucking weird admitting that, especially while holding hands with a guy who was giving him a
decidedly flirty look across the pillows.

“No wonder you’re always angry.”

Bruce tried to laugh, but it wouldn’t quite come out. His brain dredged up teasing memories of how
good it had felt once upon a time to spend a day in bed with someone - and then reminded him how
fucked he truly was by making him want to shut down and hide in a closet. Pulling his hand away,
he crossed his arms. God, his brain was a bastard.

“Hey. I can see you putting up chain link fences and warning signs in there. Knock it off.” Clint
propped himself up awkwardly on one elbow and leaned in closer. “Can I kiss you?”

Bruce exhaled. “Yes.”

Clint bumped their noses together and gave him a sweet, slightly open-mouthed kiss that was over
just quickly enough to leave Bruce leaning toward him at the end of it.

“That wasn’t on the table a couple weeks ago,” Clint reminded him. “It’s fine. You just keep me in
the loop on what’s okay and what isn’t. Wherever your comfort zone ends up, I’m sure we’ll have
some fun.”

Bruce nodded, unconvinced.

“Hey,” Clint said, and waited to catch his gaze. His expression was too earnest, like he was drunk or
singing love songs to Natasha. “You matter to me, all right? I’m real glad you’re here.”

Bruce’s body relaxed just enough that he could feel the muscle knots along his shoulders instead of a
constant, impermeable blanket of tension. He curled his arms against his stomach. “You, too.”

Clint watched him for a second, smiling faintly, and then buried his hands under the pillow again and
closed his eyes.

Natasha was right about waking him up. In the dead of night, when he was shivering and making
strangled sounds into the pillow, it only took a firm “Hawkeye, you hear me?” to get his eyes
flashing open. He pushed himself off the mattress too fast, cringing, and hunched over, rubbing a
hand down his face.

Bruce sat up and turned on the lamp. “You all right?”

Clint shook his head with a strangled laugh. “Loki with a baseball bat. My brain is an asshole.”
Pushing himself up, he walked out of the room without looking at Bruce. Something clinked in the
kitchen. Bruce cracked open a book from the bedside table and settled back against the headboard to
wait it out.

After ten minutes, Clint came back in looking a little better, two mugs of tea in his hands. He set one
down on the table beside Bruce and curled up against the headboard on his own side of the bed,
knees to chest, blowing at the steaming surface of his drink. “How far are you?” he asked.

“Katniss just teamed up with Rue.”
“You read fast.”

“Yeah. Let me know when you want the light back off.”

Clint drank his tea slowly, watching him read, and didn’t ask for the light off even when his mug was empty and Bruce was swearing at the book. When Bruce hit the last page, he found his tea cold and Clint snoring softly into a pillow near his hip.

Lying down, he reached out and ran an experimental stroke across the ruff of Clint’s hair. No alarms.

Warmth spread in his chest. Maybe this was actually doable. If he was a disaster area, maybe at least he had foundations still intact enough to build on. Crossing his arms against his stomach, he settled in to sleep.

Bruce stayed over for the first few nights that Clint was out of medical. Having Clint in the tower made things immeasurably easier than it would have been otherwise. It was just a quick private elevator ride to his apartment - no outside world to deal with, no phone calls to make, not even any need to wear shoes. The one night that Bruce slept in his own bed, he’d caught one too many news stories about the Park Avenue reconstruction on his phone and couldn’t stop seeing potential paths of destruction in the city out those massive windows, even with the curtains closed. Clint escorted him down to the basement and took the couch for himself, so they wound up sitting up with tea at 3 AM anyway.

By the weekend, Bruce had a package of his favorite tea in Clint’s pantry, a handful of books and files stacked on the bedside table of Clint’s bed, and a growing sense that he was going to ruin everything good about this. Clint started keeping notes about Bruce’s touch preferences in clearly labeled lists on the inside of the pantry door, right next to his grocery list - in pencil, even, the goddamn optimist. The notes were sorted into Always OK, Ask First, and Never OK, and the only thing listed under Always OK was hands. For God’s sake, leaning against was on the Ask First list. He’d had to argue hair up from Never OK after the first attempt ended in total shut-down, because dammit, he remembered loving having his hair stroked once upon a time and it was fucking ridiculous to lose it now. He didn’t even know where that particular anxiety came from. For fuck’s sake, was it even his?

This was what a relationship with Bruce Banner looked like: a kiss fresh out of the shower with terry cloth to muffle contact, comfortable silence after a nightmare, another person’s worth of space between the two of you, and a few fumbling attempts at closeness every day which may or may not end with him on the other side of a door, cursing his treacherous brain. It didn’t seem like nearly enough.

Natasha and Pepper returned from their vacation just in time for Tony’s publicist to call for an all-Avengers meeting. Natasha came straight to Stark Tower from the airport with her duffel bag still slung over her shoulder, did a cursory tour of Clint’s new apartment, left her bag on the coffee table, and accompanied them down to the meeting. On the way there, Bruce made the mistake of making small talk about books, which turned into the most heated argument he’d ever had with her.
“That whole sequence was pointless,” Natasha said, her voice hard. “It was poorly planned, needlessly deadly, and didn’t have any affect on the finale - which, I might add, was also poorly planned and needlessly deadly.”

“That’s the whole point of war, though,” Bruce objected, hands in the air. “It’s all just meaningless violence.”

“The point of fiction is that nothing is meaningless,” Natasha said.

“But thematically—” Bruce started.

Natasha and Clint both groaned.

“Fuck theme,” Clint said.

“You can’t spend three books building up beloved characters and then throw their lives and agency under the bus in the name of theme!” Natasha pushed through the door to the conference room a little too hard, making Bruce jump.

Bruce shook his head. “It’s a series about how war breaks people.”

“It’s a dystopian - it’s about persevering,” Natasha replied, “and broken people are capable of better than that ending.”

“What are we talking about?” Tony interjected. He sat at the opposite side of the round conference table, his sneakers up on the table and a suit coat folded over the arm of his chair. A few seats away was Steve, dressed like someone’s muscular grandfather as usual. Between them, with her hands folded on the end of the table, sat a heavyset Asian woman in a dress that must cost more than Bruce’s entire wardrobe.

“The Hunger Games,” Natasha answered, taking a seat beside Steve.

“No spoilers,” Tony said. “I’m waiting for the second movie.”

“What are the Hunger Games?” Steve said, glancing between them all with that almost endearingly clueless expression.

“It’s a book series,” Natasha said. “I’ll loan them to you.”

“Don’t make him read The Hunger Games,” Tony said, shooting her an offended look. “He’ll cry. ‘Don’t make Captain America cry’ is rule number one of the Avengers.”

“That is not rule number one of the Avengers,” Steve said, crossing his arms. “Don’t make fun of our work.”

Tony leaned forward. “I’m sorry, I must have forgotten to read the ‘No horsing around’ clause in our contracts while I was saving the city from a nuclear warhead.”

“You can’t go pulling out that trump card every time you make an ass of yourself—”

“I don’t know, I think I can, seeing as that was my hero play and this is my tower.”

“Being a hero means you don’t go shouting it from the rooftops,” Steve said.

Tony’s hands clenched on the tabletop. “Oh, yeah? How should I do it, then? Should I be touring the country with a couple dozen star-spangled chorus girls instead?”
“That wasn’t—”

Bruce stood by the door, crossing his arms and wondering if he should step outside until the fighting stopped.

Clint took a seat by Natasha and put his foot up on her chair. Giving Bruce a glance, he frowned. “Do we need to put these two in separate kennels?”

“Boys,” Natasha said loudly, and Steve and Tony shut their mouths. She gave the publicist a polite SHIELD-issue smile. “I apologize for my colleagues.”

“It’s all right,” the publicist said. “I’ve met with just the two of them before, so I’m already used to it.” Turning to Steve, she added: “Don’t get so defensive, Rogers. You know he’s just trying to get your dander up to hide his own insecurities.” To Tony: “Kiddo, I’m not putting you on The Daily Show until you get your head out of that wormhole”

Tony sank back in his chair with a groan. “But I haven’t seen Jon Stewart in forever.”

“It’s nice to finally meet the rest of you,” the publicist said, ignoring him. “I’m Sylvia Cho-Gable - you can call me Sylvia. I’ve spent seventeen years standing between Tony and a Lohan-esque media meltdown, and if you’re willing to play ball with me, I will make sure the Avengers’ public approval rating is the highest it can get. But first, I want to make sure this doesn’t happen again.” She gestured toward Clint, who was itching his splinted fingers.

“And how’re you gonna do that, Sylvia?” Clint said. “Lock me in my apartment?”

“On the contrary, Agent Barton, I’m going to put you out where the world can see you.” Sylvia snapped her fingers at Bruce. “Please have a seat, Doctor Banner. I assure you, this conversation concerns you, too.”

Fantastic. He was going to have his public image hand-crafted by someone who thought he would sit on command like a golden retriever. Maybe it was a step up from having the media define him by his trail of destruction, but either way, someone else got to decide how he got presented to the world.

“Goody,” Bruce muttered, pulling up a chair as close to the door as he could manage.

“I’m really more of a behind the scenes guy,” Clint said, hunching slightly.

“I’ve spoken with Director Fury, and he agrees that the best use for you - and Agent Romanov - at present is representing the Avengers Initiative. With that in mind, I’ve come up with a plan of attack that involves all of you, both individually and as a team.” Clicking a button on her phone, Sylvia sent a message that made every phone in the room buzz.

Bruce dragged out his phone with a sense of mounting dread and opened the email. While the publicist spoke, he read, that feeling settling like a rock in his stomach.

“Here’s your overview,” Sylvia said. “We have a press conference on Thursday to address Agent Barton’s situation - all of you will be in attendance - and immediately following that, I want at least two of you out in the public eye every week. Fundraisers, TV appearances, meet and greets with the press.”

“You’re putting Thor on The Colbert Report?” Clint said, raising an eyebrow at his phone.

“The moment he’s earthside again,” Sylvia said. “Stephen’s the only anchor I trust to match an Asgardian in hyperbole and ego. It’ll be television gold.”
“I like her,” Clint whispered to Natasha.

“My assignments are all charity events,” Tony said, giving her a suspicious look. “I can’t wear the suit to these.”

“You certainly can’t,” Sylvia said. “Rule number one: no super suits. The public’s seen enough of your superhero antics for now. They’re burned out on violence and flashy personas, and Rogers is right - they’re confused. Confused, burned out people get angry, and angry people lash out like that couple did to Agent Barton. Our job right now is to make them think they understand you on a human level. We’re playing to each of your strengths.”

“My strength is being interviewed by Jon Stewart,” Tony said, setting his phone down.

Sylvia set a hand on his arm and gave him a stern look. “Tony, see a therapist, and then we’ll talk. You’re the most public person here, so what we need from you right now is some semblance of normalcy. We’re going to get you out there being a good influence, shmoozing and sassing the paparazzi like usual so the public sees you’re still the lovable jerk they reblog all over Tumblr. If you behave yourself, I’ll consider putting you on Mythbusters with Bruce.”

Tony didn’t look happy with the verdict, but he nodded anyway. “Fine. Yay, more tax write-offs.”

“Agent Romanov,” Sylvia said, “Director Fury tells me you’re the best they’ve got at manipulation. I’m putting you on the tough ones: hard news, invasive reporters, anchors who are openly hostile toward the Avengers. Be open, be honest, and when someone tries to tear down the Avengers, take him down.”

“You’ll have to be more specific,” Natasha said, a smug little smile playing at her lips.

“If you make Bill O’Reilly cry, you’ve gone too far.”

Natasha shrugged. “Fair enough.”

“Rogers,” Sylvia said, “You’re likable, you’re modest, and the public is clamoring for more of you. I’m giving you a heavy load with a little bit of everything. Think you can handle it?”

“Who’s Ellen?” Steve said, squinting at the screen of his phone.

“She’s a comedian with a light-hearted daytime talk show,” Sylvia answered. “She already adores you, you’ll love her, you’ll have a blast. Just be yourself and dance when she asks you to.”

“I don’t, uh…know how to dance,” Steve said, grimacing at his phone.

“Perfect. Follow her lead, embrace the awkwardness, the audience will think it’s endearing. I believe we’ve already spoken about the rest in some capacity.” She scrolled through her notes. “Agent Barton.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Clint said.

“Jarvis informs me you’re ‘more than adequate’ at exchanging sarcastic banter. How familiar are you with late-night talk shows?”

Clint smiled ominously. “Just tell me where to be and when.”

“Think you can handle Craig Ferguson next week?”

“Absolutely.”

“No,” Bruce said.

The conversation came to a dead halt for a second. Sylvia folded her hands on the table and regarded him coolly. “No?” she repeated.

“I can’t do this,” he said. “I can’t just step in front of a camera, okay? I was off the radar for a reason.”

“That reason hasn’t reappeared since the invasion, while you’ve been navigating a city of millions, dealing with hospital visits, and getting microphones shoved in your face,” Sylvia said, giving a sympathetic little head tilt. “Do you really think he’s going to come out on Sesame Street?”

Bruce raised his hands in front of himself. “I don’t want to be on Sesame Street. I don’t want to be on Mythbusters. I can’t just get out there and be charming or funny or expect people to root for me. I’m here because I’m good at destroying things. I’m—I’m not personable.”

“Bruce,” Tony said in a sad little voice. “Mythbusters.”

“I can’t,” Bruce said, dropping his hands to his knees. “I’m sorry, but if we’re talking about making the Avengers seem more human, I’m your worst-case scenario. If something sets me off on camera, nobody’s going to be paying attention to Steve playing Pictionary with Ellen. All they’re going to see is the giant green ragemonster this team keeps around that just took out two city blocks.”

“That’s all they see of you now,” Sylvia said, staring him down. “The video of you scaring off reporters last Sunday morning has had millions of views. I’ll advise you, if you look it up, not to read the comments. You gave them exactly the monster they were looking for.”

“I gave them a reason to stop harassing me,” Bruce said.

Clint reached under the table and took Bruce’s left hand, the fabric cover of his splint stiff against Bruce’s fingers. It was enough to make the weight in his stomach lift slightly.

“I understand that,” Sylvia said, and by her tone, he was pretty sure she actually did. “I’m not proposing that you sacrifice your safety in any way. All I want is the chance to show the public the whole story — introduce them to the man who controls the monster.”

A bitter laugh caught in Bruce’s throat at the word controls.

“Let’s table this for later,” Clint said. “It’s more to ask of him than you think.”

“All right,” Sylvia said, giving Bruce a stern look, “but Doctor Banner, you will be at the press conference this Thursday. You don’t have to smile, you won’t be the main focus of the question portion, and I’ll give you a Xanax if you need it.”

Bruce wanted to decline, but the press conference was a team event, and it was about Clint. The whole thing made him feel a little sick, but he nodded anyway.

“Good.” Sylvia scrolled through notes on her phone. “Agent Barton, I’ll be keeping you late to plan out your words to the press. Just one last thing before I let you go: I understand you and Doctor Banner are dating?”

Shit. Not that Bruce hadn’t expected word to spread farther than Tony, Natasha, and Fury, but
something about hearing the words come out of the marketing shark’s mouth made it feel like he was being turned inside out in front of a live studio audience. He hunched forward, his hand tightening around Clint’s.

Steve shot a bewildered look between them. “You are? I didn’t know you were…dating.”

“And neither does the public,” Sylvia added, studying the two of them. “Do we want to keep it that way?”

Bruce barely tamped down a shout of Yes! and the spike of fear that accompanied it. That was private information. Jesus, he was barely out to the people who knew him best. To have millions of people reading about his sexual orientation and relationship, firing slurs and hate speech back, to have Betty Ross out there finding out things he never told her from a magazine— No.

Clint gave him a quick glance and asked, “Are you really leaving it up to us?”

Sylvia set down her phone. “If you decide to out yourselves to the media, I’ll provide any help you need, but this is one decision I’m not going to make for you.”

Shrugging, Clint said, “I don’t usually tell CNN about my relationships until they’re at least a month old.”

Bruce tried not to let his breath out too loudly or squeeze Clint’s hand too hard. He nodded.

“All right,” Sylvia said, clapping her hands. “Barton, huddle up. Everyone else, you’re dismissed.”

Natasha came back to Clint’s apartment for dinner, and the two of them sat with their legs intertwined in the sectional for hours after, talking. Bruce relegated himself to Natasha’s usual recliner and kept quiet unless addressed directly, paging through Stark Archives from 1992 and letting them catch up. When bedtime crept in, Natasha dug a set of pajama pants out of her duffel and Bruce took that as his cue to leave. He got halfway down to the basement before Clint texted him: bring my blanket back up with you?

Bruce stared at his phone for a second, wondering if there had been some misunderstanding. You want me to stay over with Natasha there? why not? came the response. I don't want to be in the way.

your never in the way, Clint texted back. get your ruggedly handsome ass back up here banner.

Bruce smiled at his phone, grateful there was no one in the elevator because his cheeks had gone pink. Well, technically Jarvis was probably here to witness it, but Jarvis wasn't programmed to record and collect his slip-ups and sheepish moments for Tony's reference. Probably. Maybe. Okay, he really shouldn't think about that, because Tony sitting in a control room somewhere with a bucket of popcorn and a digital reel of Bruce Banner's Most Embarrassing Hits was a little too easy to picture.

He brushed his teeth and rode back up in his pajamas with Clint’s fleece throw over one arm. Natasha had changed into a gray jersey pajama set and Clint was down to a pair of sweatpants. Bruce flashed back to a sleepover birthday party he'd been invited to once in third grade. Would this
arrangement involve sleeping bags, too?

"So, uh," Bruce started.

"I'll take the couch," Natasha said, giving him a knowing look.

Bruce nodded, letting her take the fleece throw out of his hands.

It wasn't as awkward as he expected, sleeping over with Natasha in the next room. Clint didn't even bother whispering when they talked in bed, which made the whole thing feel sort of normal. Which shouldn't surprise him, Bruce supposed. Lying in bed with his boyfriend while said boyfriend's platonic assassin soulmate read a young adult novel on the couch on the other side of the wall? Given the trajectory of his life thus far, yeah, that seemed relatively normal.

He drifted off while Clint was explaining the current array of late-night talk show hosts on network television and woke up in the middle of the night to the sound of scavenging in the kitchen. Clint was asleep on the other side of the bed, curled in on himself just as tightly as usual but with his left arm extended across the bed, hand open. Letting his eyes adjust to the low light, Bruce traced the gaps between Clint's fingers with his own, following the warm skin from fingertips to knuckles and noting every line and scar. Rote memorization - he'd have that whole hand diagrammed in his mind eventually. He ran his fingers lightly across Clint's palm, and Clint made a soft annoyed sound in his sleep. Smiling, Bruce sat up and pushed himself out of bed.

The light over the kitchen sink was on, casting long shadows and a yellow glow across the carpet. Bruce wandered into the kitchen, scratching his shoulder. Natasha was perched on a stool in front of the open pantry door, studying something closely.

It took Bruce a moment to realize what she was looking at, and when he did, his stomach dropped through the floor. The list. Shit. "No," he said, starting forward, "that's not—"

"It's a good idea," Natasha said, twirling a pen between her fingers. "He forgot half of it, though. I've made some additions."

Bruce stepped up beside her and peered at the list. She'd divided the page in two, with the already marked side labeled Bruce and a new side on the right labeled Clint. The Clint side had its own list, with a long Always OK section and a surprising number of things on the other two sections.

"Wrists?" Bruce asked.

"Some people grab wrists to get your attention or pull you along," Natasha said. "Don't do that to him. Ever."

"Bad reaction?"

"He'll probably throw you."

"Good to know." Filing the information away, Bruce pointed to the list. "What about throat? The back of his neck's under Ask First, so what's the delineation there?"

Natasha wrapped her own hand around her throat in an unsettlingly calm pantomime of strangulation.

"Okay," Bruce said, swallowing involuntarily as he studied the list. The items on the cautionary sections of Clint's side, when added up, painted a violent history - triggers from self-defense training and times when that training hadn't been enough. Natasha didn't elaborate on the reasons why when
he asked about certain items, but she didn’t have to. How many *incidents*, to follow SHIELD’s terminology, were represented on that page?

The bedroom door opened, and Clint shuffled down the hallway toward them, calling, “What’re we in the kitchen for?”

Before Bruce could catch himself, his eyes flicked over Clint’s body, overlaying maps of old assaults where he hadn’t been there for the aftermath, assessing the slowly yellowing bruises along his right side and the way he curled his injured hand slightly toward his middle, and wondering whether the list would change as he moved away from the attack in his apartment.

Clint’s feet slowed, and he frowned, glanced between the two of them. “What?”

“I fixed your paperwork,” Natasha said, pointing her pen at the list.

Circling around the door, Clint looked it over and swore. “Tasha, I don’t need you to—” He paused, tipping his head, and read for a minute. “Actually, that’s scary accurate.”

“Told you,” she said.

“This useful for you?” he asked Bruce.

Bruce crossed his arms, worked up his nerve, and pressed a kiss to Clint’s unbruised shoulder - firmly in the *Always OK* section. “Very,” he said.

Clint stared for a second, like he was trying to decide whether he’d actually woken up. Then he said “Thanks” to Natasha, borrowed her pen, and wrote in *tickling* on his *Never OK* list.

The press conference on Thursday was down on the first floor, in the area of the tower that Bruce liked to pretend didn’t exist: a bustling business hub filled with enormous windows, water features, and screens upon screens of constantly scrolling news and stock reports. He’d never been in the press room before, but he’d seen it on the news plenty of times. What CNN didn’t show was the green room: a flatteringly lit little room with a couple of comfortable couches and enough mirrors to make Bruce feel like he was in some kind of Avengers-themed funhouse. It smelled like new car, and Bruce couldn’t figure out for the life of him where the scent was coming from. Sylvia met them there and gave them an extremely thorough briefing on how this event was going to go while her assistant double-checked their wardrobes and makeup.

The clothes had shown up hung on the doors of their apartments early that morning. Bruce had conceded to wearing the neutral two-piece suit, but he’d ditched the shirt immediately in favor of one of his own. No fucking way were they going to dress him in green. It’d probably throw off Sylvia’s careful color coding: Steve in a patriotic navy blue button-down, Tony with his shiny gold and silver tie, Natasha in a tasteful black dress with red jewelry, and Clint a flash of purple for the center of the table, his shirtsleeves rolled up and his top button undone to make him more approachable. Bruce would be on the end, anyway, nearest the green room door. He could be gray and white: ignorable. Please God, let him be ignorable.

The assistant approached him with a makeup kit, and he growled, “You try to put foundation on my face and you’re gonna lose that hand.”

“Doctor Banner,” Sylvia said, switching gears in the middle of a sentence, “would you like that
“Xanax now?”

“Those don’t do a thing for me,” Bruce said.

She sighed, looking at him like he was an inconvenient sex tape scandal. “Sweetheart, I could make you into such a media darling if you’d just work with me a little.”

He snorted. Clint patted his hand.

The press was already waiting, and a round of flashbulbs went off as they filed in. Bruce couldn’t remember being more annoyed to enter a room. He took his seat with the rest of them, frowning at the microphone on the table in front of him.

“Thank you for coming,” Steve said, leaning toward his microphone at the other end of the table. He looked at ease, Mr. Experiment Gone Right at home in front of the cameras, and for a second Bruce was bitterly jealous. “We’ll try not to keep you too long. Agent Barton has a few words prepared regarding the incident last Saturday, and after he’s done that, we’ll take a few questions. Clint?”

Clint straightened the index cards he’d written his statement on and exhaled while another round of flashes went off. Leaning forward, he said, “Hi. I’m, uh…I guess you already know who I am. Let’s just do this. Uh, okay. Twelve days ago, I was attacked in my home by a pair of civilians.”

Once he started reading from the cards, the “uhs” stopped and his voice went practiced, almost monotone. It was uncomfortable to listen to, that flat tone reciting the gory details in chronological order - especially when Bruce knew enough to notice all the blank spots that went uncovered.

He didn’t say that he hadn’t fought back. He didn’t talk about the ruined soup or the nightmares. He didn’t mention that he still slept in the position Natasha had found him because the only side of him that didn’t hurt to lie on was the side that had been on the floor. He used words like *assailants* and *blunt force trauma* instead of *strangers* and *hit me with a fucking baseball bat*, and Bruce hated it.

“My assailants’ identities haven’t been released to the press, but on behalf of the Avengers, I want to assure you they’re being dealt with,” Clint said, starting a new card. He paused, licking his lips, and stared the card down like it was a distant target. “On behalf of the Avengers.” That’s a weird way of putting it, right? Like we’re some kind of corporation. That’s not…” He trailed off.

The audience leaned in just visibly. Bruce looked down the table at the uncertainty forming on his teammates’ faces as the silence stretched out.

“Hawkeye?” a reporter in the front row said tentatively.

Clint tilted his head to the side, frowning. “Y’know, that’s a codename. Three months ago, hardly anybody outside my organization knew it. Now, I walk down the street and I get you guys shoving cameras in my face, always calling me Hawkeye. Like all I am is the uniform.” He glanced both ways down the table. “They do that to you guys, too?”

Natasha and Steve nodded. Tony shrugged, clearly not minding it.

“Not me,” Bruce said, just loud enough to get picked up by the microphone. “It’s always Doctor Banner.”

Clint made a face halfway between a wince and a smile. “Well, that makes sense. I think they’d piss themselves if they had to interview your other side.”

Scattered laughter from the room. Bruce wasn’t sure whether that was a good thing or not.
Tapping his cue cards on the table, Clint set them face-down. He got really quiet again, but this time no one pushed him.

“Look,” he said after a minute, “we all lost something when Loki attacked. For some of us it was people we loved, for some it was any sense of safety we were clawing at, for some it was… something we don’t really have the words for. But we’ve all had a shitty couple of months, right?”

Murmurs of agreement circled the room.

Clint sighed and leaned in closer to the microphone. “Well, whether you wanna believe me or not, the truth is everyone up here’s been struggling same as you. We’re all just trying to pick ourselves up and get back to okay, and okay isn’t something money can buy you.”

“I can vouch for that,” Tony interjected. “I haven’t been okay since 1987.”

Laughter from the audience. Tony smiled and nodded, at home playing class clown, though Bruce was sure he wasn’t entirely kidding.

Clint angled his head farther down the table to his right. “And glory doesn’t protect you from grief and loneliness.”

Steve swallowed, rolling the cord of his microphone between his fingertips.

“You should come over sometime, Steve,” Clint said, quieter. “I’ll introduce you to Star Wars. You’ll love it.”

Steve smiled in spite of himself. “All right.”

Clint turned his head the other way, and Bruce’s chest went tight as his eyes settled on him. “Invincibility means no one can touch you,” he said, “even when you want to let ‘em in.”

Bruce folded his hands and leaned back, not knowing what to say. It felt like hearing a sentiment he’d wanted to express for years finally put into words. It was kind of annoying.

Clint turned to Natasha, and his eyes went a little wet. “And being the deadliest person in the room won’t keep you from getting hurt.” He lowered his voice. “I’m sorry, Natasha.”

She reached across the table, grasped his hand, and whispered something the mics didn’t pick up. Clint nodded, squeezing her hand back.

He cleared his throat, facing the audience again. “Anyway, point is, we’re with you, in more ways than you know. Which is why we’re not releasing the names of the people who broke into my place: because they wanted the world to make a little more sense again, they just went about it wrong. They fucked up. SHIELD’s made sure they pay for that. We don’t want any more vigilante justice from civilians, on either side of things. Loki doesn’t get to do this. We took him down; he doesn’t get to keep tearing us apart. We’re better than that. You with me?”

Murmuring. Bruce thought he heard a quiet “We’re with you” from the second row.

“All right,” Clint said, leaning back in his seat. “Then that’s all I got to say.”

Steve shot him an uncertain look from the other end of the table and leaned forward. “I guess we’ll take some questions.”

The press room exploded in voices clamoring for attention. Bruce raised his hands toward his ears,
but Steve quickly got it under control, playing moderator like a pro. After a few questions about the attack, the press moved on to the rest of the team. Tony fielded questions about his suits and his relationship with Pepper, getting either laughter or looks of deep discomfort after every statement. Steve answered a couple of questions about waking up in the wrong century, which just underscored what Clint had said about him. Bruce actually felt a pang of sympathy for the guy.

Natasha got one in-depth question about the challenges of being a woman in such a male-centric field, followed almost immediately with a question about whether the rumors of her affair with Clint were true. To answer, she took out her phone and played snippets from her voicemail. Of the half dozen messages of Clint singing “500 Miles” off-key, one sounded like it was in the shower and one had Bruce in the background groaning, “Please stop.”

“That is not the sound of a man who’s concerned with getting laid,” she said as she tucked the phone away. She got the biggest laugh of the evening for that.

For once, the press mostly addressed them by their real names.

“Doctor Banner,” one reporter said, “could you tell us what it’s like turning into the Hulk?”

Bruce crossed his arms on the table. Staring down the reporter, he enunciated, “It hurts.”

He didn’t elaborate. They didn’t ask him any more questions.

“Beautiful,” Sylvia exclaimed the moment the green room door shut after them. “You were on point, personal, and very approachable, with one exception. You should all be very pleased with the way that went.”

Said exception stuck to the wall near the door, watching the rest of the team collect around the middle of the room - or rather, around Clint. Steve approached him to say a few words Bruce didn’t catch, Natasha gave his hand a quick squeeze before turning her attention to getting the prop jewelry off herself, and Tony clapped him on the shoulder with a “Nice work, Katniss.”

“Barton, you were perfect,” Sylvia said. “Didn’t believe me about putting down the cue cards, did you?”

“You were right, I’m shit at cue cards,” Clint said, giving a high-pitched laugh.

“You engaged with those people,” she said, clearly thrilled. “Your honesty was refreshing. I particularly liked the swearing, it was just enough to humanize you without going over the top.”

“Oh,” he said, looking a little dazed.

“Anyone can go out on stage with a script,” Steve said. “What you did out there was impressive.”

Clint nodded. “I said…all that. In front of them.”

“Yeah, you did.” Tony chuckled. “Over-sharing at a press conference. I’ve been there.”

“You have a summer home there,” Natasha said.

“I purchased beachfront property and built a marina there,” Tony corrected, grinning.

Clint slipped away to one of the couches along the wall behind them and fell into it, his arms limp. “I feel like I’m gonna throw up. Would that humanize me, throwing up?”

Bruce winced.
Clint slouched over, resting his elbows on his knees and locking his hands over the back of his head. “Fuck,” he breathed, his voice shaking.

The wall suddenly seemed like the wrong place to be. Pushing himself off it, Bruce walked past Sylvia and took a seat on the couch next to Clint, lining his leg up close enough to touch. Clint’s fingers slackened visibly, and a small huff left his nose.

Bruce leaned in close and whispered, “Okay if I rub your back?”

Clint nodded.

Bruce raised his hand and started making small circles in the pressed cotton of the back of Clint’s shirt, feeling out the dip between his shoulder blades and the line of his spine. Clint exhaled so far it sounded like the last breath of air left in the room. Slowly, his hands slid away from his neck, coming to rest in his lap. This was okay - not exactly familiar territory, but safe. And necessary.

Natasha perched on the couch opposite them, giving Bruce a little nod of approval.

“The first time you pour your guts out on national television is the worst,” Tony said, sitting down on the couch next to her. “It gets easier the more you do it.”

Clint made a sound that wasn’t quite a laugh. “So does having a heart attack, but that doesn’t mean I wanna get practiced at it.”

Bruce traced a wide arc up his side and arm, leaning in close. “I’m with you,” he said, keeping his voice low. “Everything you said out there, I’m with you.”

Clint looked up at him, and the expression on his face was so grateful Bruce wasn’t sure what to do with it being aimed at him. “I know,” he said. “You always are.”

Bruce’s chest felt tight, so instead of letting the statement hang between them like that, he said, “Except when it comes to The Hunger Games.”

Clint’s brow furrowed. “Your opinions are so, so wrong.”

“I know.” Bruce smiled. “You need the trash bin?”

Shaking his head, Clint said, “Nah.”

Bruce let his arm tighten, drawing Clint in close enough to rest the guy’s head on his shoulder. When he glanced up, Steve was watching them, his face softened by a smile. When his eyes met Bruce’s, he pretended to be looking at something on the wall.

Sylvia wasn’t nearly so subtle, studying them with a look of unabashed interest. Crossing her arms, she curled a hand up under her chin. The words I can work with this were practically emblazoned across her forehead.

“What now?” Bruce said, sighing.

“I’m revising my approach to you,” she said, tapping a finger on her chin.

"Great," Bruce said. "What, you want me in a lab coat now?"

"I want you with him," she said, motioning to Clint. "I've been trying to figure you out for a week, Banner, and between ten hours of Tony's lab footage and in-person exposure, this is the first time I've seen you smile like you mean it. This right here? This is a guy who will play beautifully in front
of the cameras. Be as abrasive as you want now, and once you’re comfortable going public, we’ll give the world a transformation they never expected. They’ll love you.”

"She's right," Tony said. "You're downright adorable when you're happy."

Happy? Sinking back into the couch, Bruce felt the rhythm of Clint’s breathing against his chest and shoulder and thought, Jesus, what a terrifying thought.

Chapter End Notes

1) You might notice that the chapter count on this fic has increased from 8 to 9. That's because a certain enormous chapter got cut into two. Not THIS enormous chapter, though. This one was 10k. I'm still a little mad at it for that.

2) Clearly, I'm unable to stick to the one chapter a day plan. As it turns out, revising a 50k+ word fic takes work. I kind of...forgot that work takes time. (Bad Hufflepuff, no cookie.) From now on, I'm aiming for every other day.

3) Singing obnoxiously into voicemail is a gift Clint reserves for Natasha, but when I discussed it with my cheerleaders, we decided that if he DID have to pick a song to sing into Bruce's voicemail, it would be either A-ha's "Take On Me" or The Darkness's "I Believe in a Thing Called Love." Either way, please enjoy this mental image of Clint Barton singing falsetto into his cell phone.
Chapter 6

Bruce hadn’t been happy in a long time - nor had he wanted to. Anger was safe. He knew how to control anger. Happiness, though? The idea felt like it needed a lot of thought before he could reasonably be expected to go along with it - research, an annotated bibliography, maybe a committee to approve it. Too bad the only people he’d trust to serve on any sort of committee about his life were his teammates, who seemed to think it was hilarious.

Clint followed through on his offer to have Steve over for *Star Wars*, which somehow turned into Avengers movie night with a home-cooked dinner. By the time Steve got there, Tony had already camped out in the apex of the sectional with a small collection of screens around him, and Natasha had commandeered the area nearest the snacks.

Bruce was in the kitchen, having insisted on helping with the pizza dough after watching Clint swear at his splinted fingers during the mixing that morning. Pizza dough was satisfying to make, all kneading and shaping unbreakable matter. He was beginning to understand why Clint enjoyed cooking so much: following a recipe felt like a pleasant vacation from his own mind, instructions lined up to tell him exactly what he needed to do next. He almost never knew what to do next lately.

“Good?” he asked, showing Clint the first finished crust in its pan.

Clint stopped chopping vegetables to assess his work. “Excellent. I should outsource to you more often.”

“I wouldn’t mind that,” Bruce said, smiling. As he opened the upper cabinets to dig for more olive oil, he started singing lightly under his breath - “I Melt With You” by Modern English, which had been on the radio in the lab that morning and jostled its lyrics loose in his memory. He got halfway through the first chorus before he heard a snicker from Clint and looked up from the pan he was greasing to find the rest of the team staring at him with varying looks of amusement. Tony had his phone out and appeared to be recording him.

Bruce frowned. “What?”

Tony put on nature documentary narrator voice. “Here we have the fearsome Hulk in his natural environment, serenading his mate with pop hits of the 1980s while making organic pizza.”

Natasha hid a noise suspiciously like a laugh behind her hand. Clint didn’t even try to hide his.

“What?” Bruce said again, spreading out his arms. He was still smiling - it wouldn’t seem to stop. “It’s been stuck in my head all day.”

“Don’t mind him,” Steve said. “It’s nice to see you in a good mood.”

Bastards, all of them.

Tony hit something on his phone that made a beep, and Bruce bristled.

“You are not posting that on YouTube,” Clint said, beating him to it.

“I’m not allowed on YouTube anymore,” Tony said, grinning at his phone. “I sent it to Sylvia. The woman loves candid video - says it helps her understand a subject.”

“Great,” Bruce deadpanned.
“Believe it or not, Bruce, she’s one of the good guys. Have you seen our approval ratings since the press conference? She got the governor to RSVP yes to an Avengers charity banquet I’m apparently throwing, and I haven’t even planned the thing yet.” Tony pocketed his phone, turning his attention to the Iron Man glove redesign he was working on. “I still can’t believe you turned down Mythbusters.”

“And Sesame Street,” Clint added, giving him a wounded look over one shoulder. “Why do you hate Muppets, Bruce?”

“I don’t hate Muppets,” Bruce said. “I have generally positive feelings toward Muppets. Muppets taught me Portuguese when I was in Brazil.”

Tony shot him a look like he had actually lapsed into first grade Portuguese.

“You want basic language immersion in a new place,” Bruce said, “you watch children’s programming. Sesame Street is broadcast in over a hundred and twenty countries.”

“Huh,” Tony said. “That’s really smart. I wouldn’t have thought of that.”

Bruce gave a modest little nod.

“Now you definitely have to go on Sesame Street,” Clint said, making Bruce toss his head back and roll his eyes at the ceiling.

“He’s right,” Natasha said. “You owe them.”

“Plus,” Tony said, “that’s the greatest endorsement ever. ‘Sesame Street: educating children and genius fugitives the world over since 1969.’”

Bruce was about to reiterate his position on television appearances when Steve raised a hand sheepishly and asked, “What’s a Muppet?”

And thank God for Steve Rogers’ egregious pop culture ignorance, because that small question completely derailed the conversation. Inside a minute, the apartment was filled with voices as Tony argued for switching the evening’s showing to The Muppet Movie, Clint shouted him down because they were already making Death Star pizzas, and Natasha calmly explained Muppets to Steve in encyclopedia-precise terms.

Bruce took the opportunity to go back to making pizza crusts. His smile still wouldn’t go away, and as the voices around him rose, he gave in, letting himself return to singing under his breath.

Clint was getting better every day. As his bruises faded away and he was able to shoot a bow again, his mood lifted, leaving Bruce more and more often with the passionate smartass he’d been attracted to in the first place. It showed under studio lights, too: every time Bruce caught an interview with him on TV, he seemed to laugh a little easier, be a little looser joking around. He barely wore the damn sunglasses except when he wanted to evade the paparazzi. His schedule was increasingly filled with mornings at SHIELD’s shooting range and afternoons with interviewers and television personalities. Being busy suited him. The self-injury cut back dramatically, and the nightmares dropped off to once or twice a week.

It was funny how happiness did nothing whatsoever to temper a rising sense of uselessness. Sitting
up over tea in the middle of the night was one of the few things Bruce felt like he was actually qualified to do in this relationship. Everything else was like attempting to cook a complex dish without a recipe to follow, and one of these days, Clint was probably going to wake up and realize the kitchen was on fire.

Bruce didn’t say so, though. It seemed cruel to point out his own glaring lack when Clint was doing so well, and anyway, it was just a difference of timing. Clint’s progress was now measured in press events, targets hit from 500 yards in high wind, and doctor’s visits where SHIELD’s medical staff declared him a quick healer. Bruce’s progress was measured in minor research projects for StarkIndustries and his own achingly slow and failure-ridden acclimatization to touch.

He could remember almost every touch he’d had from a human being in the past five years, when he sat down and really studied the parts of him that set off alarms. His arms and shoulders had a long history of being tugged at and held down. No one touched him from behind unless they were trying to sneak up on him, so his back was only used to military operatives and muggers who saw a lone American traveler as a potential goldmine. His head had been shocked, hit, skimmed with bullets close enough to burn, and slammed into cobblestone, so the spots that used to retain the sensation of lithe fingers combing through his hair were now nothing but painful memories and wary nerves. Any position that felt like being trapped was right out, for the same reason that smoke made him nervous.

And those were just the interruptions from his own memories. There were times when a touch or a light or a sound surged panic into his throat and he had no memory for why, just a vague sense that it was a remnant from the Other Guy. A reminder that this body could be rented out without his consent at any time, given the wrong circumstances.

He wanted to overwrite it all with Clint. Clint’s palms flattening over the spots where he’d been attacked from behind or had his shoulder blade speckled with tranq darts. Clint’s arms holding him still without trapping him. Clint’s fingertips caressing the back of his head where his skull had fractured on a street just outside Rome.

The current data resisted being overwritten. It protected itself with alarms and spikes of claustrophobia, forcing him to repeat new touches again and again to build up a tolerance. Kissing was starting to feel normal a month in, but it was hard-won, built upon dozens of marginally successful attempts and a couple of minor disasters. Clint let Bruce initiate things at his own pace, which left Bruce a lot of time to feel like shit for not being faster to adapt. He’d made himself a leader in the field of quantum electrodynamics, evaded the US military on and off for a decade, and learned half a dozen languages while living in hovels, for God’s sake - why couldn’t he do this? Why, a fucking month into their relationship, did it feel like such a victory the first time he fell asleep with Clint’s elbows and knees just resting against him?

Clint didn’t seem to mind much, citing sniper’s patience and opening himself up to physical affection at any time. Bruce made a habit of trying something whenever he had the nerve worked up, seeing how far he could push himself while his tolerance held out.

The first few days of that plan were all right - he’d sit down beside Clint on the couch or cozy up next to him in the kitchen, run a hand through Clint’s hair, and pull him in for a kiss while aiming to get as close as possible. His hands on Clint and their stomachs flush through layers of fabric felt increasingly okay, but guiding Clint’s hands around his back was asking to feel like he was being cornered. A hand on the back of his neck felt like he was going to get thrown. After those first few days’ attempts, Bruce had already run into so many unexpectedly sturdy road blocks that it felt like the only options were to quit or accept a certain constant level of discomfort until he succeeded.

Which was how he wound up lying in bed one night with his eyes squeezed shut, saying, “Touch
“I don’t know if that’s a good idea,” Clint said, his voice flat.

“Just fucking touch it,” Bruce urged. “Before I change my mind.”

Clint drew back, his dip in the mattress receding. “You know what? No.”

Bruce opened his eyes and frowned across the bed at him. He’d been building up his nerve all day, even meditated this afternoon, and all for what? To lie here with his hair untouched, apparently.

“Why not?” he said, trying not to hiss the words. Failing.

“Because!” Clint said, raising his hands toward the ceiling - hands that should be running fingers through Bruce’s hair. “You’re pushing your boundaries just to push them, and it’s just going to end with you behind the bathroom door and me feeling like an asshole again.”

“You’re not an asshole,” Bruce said, shaking his head. “You’re extremely helpful.”

“Maybe I don’t want to be helpful sometimes,” Clint said. “Maybe I just want to hang out with my boyfriend and do things we’re both comfortable with.”

Bruce flattened his hands against his face and swore against his palms.

“I don’t think that’s unfair,” Clint said, dropping his hands to the mattress. “I get that this is frustrating for you, but when you do this shit, it feels like you want me to touch you because it’s some kind of experiment. I want to touch you because I want to touch you. I’d rather feel wanted and stick to a limited menu than feel like your fucking lab assistant and get a little more.”

“I want to touch you,” Bruce said. “That’s the whole point! I want—I want you. It’s just that there’s a certain standard—”

“What standard? There’s no standard, Bruce.”

“A standard—menu, if that’s what you want to call it. Mine only comes with appetizers right now, but I know I can do better.”

Clint glared at him. “I don’t want better, you fucking head case. I want you.”

Bruce stared at him for a second, processing the words. “I’m the head case?” he said.

“Yeah, doc, you’re the head case.”

“Well, it takes one to know one.”

Clint raised his head off the pillow. “Did you just go third grade playground comeback on me?”

“It fits,” Bruce said, shrugging. “You remember why this all got started? It was because you were such a head case that I looked like a success story in comparison.”

Clint tapped a finger against his chest. “I thought it was because I saw you turn back into yourself in Tony’s apartment after the battle and thought ‘Damn, that scruffy little professor’s got a nice ass.’”

Bruce couldn’t help it: he laughed. “ Seriously?”

“Man, it was right there. It was impossible not to notice.”
Bruce pushed himself upright and crossed the gap between them, leaning down to kiss him.

Clint chuckled, the sound sending a hum through their lips. Pulling back, he said, “What’s that for?”

“Just felt like it,” Bruce said.

“Compliments on your ass really do it for you, huh?”

“Shut up,” he said, but he found himself grinning and leaning in again.

Clint angled his head up and opened his mouth, inviting him in. Bruce’s free hand gripped the warm, bare skin above Clint’s boxers and held on. With a little readjustment, he was half on top of Clint, his knee lodged between legs, and his hand exploring a stomach much less doughy than his own in the few inches of space between their bodies.

“This okay?” he asked against Clint’s lips.

“Yeah. For you?”

Bruce nodded and deepened the kiss, guiding one of Clint’s hands down toward the waistband of his pajama bottoms. No way was Clint going to risk getting a hand down his pants, but having those fingers close enough to skirt the elastic at his hip felt like a small victory. Bruce pushed in closer, trying to get contact wherever he reasonably could - legs, arms, chest, hands fumbling to find a comfortable spot. Jesus, what did people do with their hands when they weren’t mixing and matching from a mental spreadsheet of acceptable placement?

Clint’s hands were steady on his hips, gripping harder than usual. His chest rose and fell quickly against Bruce’s, and when he shifted his legs, he was half-hard against Bruce’s thigh. Lowering himself flush against him, Bruce soaked in the pressure.

This was okay. It was. Every part of him that currently had contact with Clint had been touched before. He knew exactly which memories were pressing at the backs of his eyes - no surprises here. He was not going to freak out.

Clint pulled back, raising a hand. “Can I?”

Bruce nodded, and that hand settled on his cheek with a warm, familiar pressure. He desperately it wanted to feel normal, and not like his face being held against cold concrete. Dammit.

Running his thumb across Bruce’s lower lip, Clint said, “I can see your pulse racing in your neck.”

“It’s fine. Heart rate is Control 101. I’m fine.”

“Oh, let’s say I believe you on the ‘fine’ bullshit. Can we quit while we’re ahead?”

Bruce sighed, turning his head away from Clint’s hand.

“I know,” Clint said softly, giving his hip a push. “Let me up. I’m gonna go jerk off in the bathroom, and when I get back we’ll do the hand-holding thing for as long as you want, okay?”

Bruce rolled over, dropping his head heavily against his pillow. “Okay.” He crossed his arms and closed his eyes.

Clint’s weight left the mattress to his side, and bare feet padded across the bedroom. They paused halfway to the door. “This is good. You know that, right? Everything doesn’t gotta be a step forward.”
“Mm-hm,” Bruce said, his jaw shut tight.

Footsteps approached the bed, and a hand dipped the very edge of the mattress. “Cool if I kiss you real quick?”

Bruce shook his head.

“All right. Let me know when it’s okay again.”

It should be okay all the time. It should be a small, easy thing. Bruce listened as Clint left the room and turned onto his side with his back to the door, letting his body curl in on itself like it wanted.

Natasha came with them when they went out into the city. It was Sylvia’s suggestion: to keep the press from speculating about the nature of their relationship when they were caught out and about together, throw a woman into the mix. And it worked. In spite of what Natasha had said at the press conference, the press devoured any hint that they were together. She and Clint were so cozy with each other that certain news outlets had assumed them to be a couple since day one.

The first time he saw a photo of the three of them out together next to an article on Clint and Natasha’s supposed affair, it was on the cover of a gossip rag someone had left at a neighboring table at a cafe. He handed it to Natasha, who read the article inside aloud. All three of them got a laugh out of it.

“‘Teammate and neighbor Bruce Banner is often seen with the pair,’” Natasha read, her eyebrows rising. “‘He’s rumored to be under Barton’s supervision in public thanks to his little Mr. Hyde problem. Don’t let him off your leash, Barton!’”

Clint grabbed the magazine from her hands. “Did they seriously just relegate Bruce to attack dog?”

Natasha shrugged. “I’m more surprised that People magazine went for the 19th century literature joke.”

“I’m not,” Bruce said into his coffee. “‘Dr. Banner and Mr. Hyde’ was standard fare back in the day.”

And apparently it was back in fashion again. Between his occasional trips outside the tower and online articles that came across his radar, he started seeing it more and more. He was Dr. Banner/Mr. Hyde in the headline of pieces in The New York Times, Us Weekly, and CNN all in three days. He watched with growing exasperation as the major news outlets labeled him a time bomb, the Avengers’ attack dog, and an experiment (like he was the only one on the team). Of course. While Steve Rogers’s painfully bad dancing on Ellen earned him fan mail, Oh No They Didn’t posted a photo gallery of Bruce not smiling in public called You Won’t Like Him When He’s Mildly Annoyed and turned him into an unflattering meme. He was the only local member of the Avengers who didn’t play nice with the cameras, so of course they’d made him the team punchline.

Bruce could handle that. Really, he’d been expecting that sort of treatment. What he hadn’t been expecting was for it to show up on the same page as the rumors about Clint and Natasha. They’d been funny at first, but the more he saw them, the more they chafed. After the fifteenth time he drove himself to distraction with an article like that, he had to have Jarvis block them.

He wasn’t sure why it got under his skin so badly. He was right there in the photos, for fuck’s sake,
having an actual relationship with the guy. Although, next to their constant closeness and Clint’s foot on Natasha’s chair at restaurants, the small gestures of physical affection that Bruce had managed to get used to looked like nothing more than a teammate’s solidarity. Or a tail wag from the team’s surly attack dog.

He still didn’t want to go public. Handing his sexual identity and relationship over to the press seemed like tossing them the keys to his own home and saying, “Here, take whatever you like.” They’d turn him inside out. They’d drag this thing he had with Clint out into the light and snip it apart in front of a live studio audience. Goddammit, no one else was allowed to ruin this for him; that was his job.

Natasha stayed over about half the time when she was in town. (The gossip magazines reported the number as much higher.) Bruce tried to give her space, even though he was fairly certain he’d insinuated himself into her comfort zone at this point. He knew the whole press circle jerk over her and Clint wasn’t her fault, and he hated the nauseous anger that had started creeping up his throat when he saw her and Clint gravitating toward one another on the couch. On nights she was over and he couldn’t push the anger down down, he retreated to his own apartment and buried himself in readings relevant to his work.

He had five years of scientific journals to wade through still, so there was always plenty of material at hand. Sometimes, when he was really ambitious, he’d dip into the files of writing Tony kept from the R&D interns and take notes on their work.

On one such night, he fell asleep on the couch over the Stark Archives from the past six months and woke to the smell of jasmine tea steeping. Jerking awake, he pushed himself upright and scanned his apartment for the source of the smell. The lights were still on, illuminating Natasha’s hair as she sat at his kitchen table. There were two mugs in front of her.

Bruce ran a hand across his face. “What time is it?”

“3 AM,” she said. “Jarvis says you wake up between 2:30 and 4:47 every night, so I picked somewhere in the middle.”

“He just let you in here?”

“Welfare check,” she said, blowing steam off the surface of her tea. “No one’s heard from you in 36 hours.”

Had it really been that long? Bruce blinked blearily at the work he’d fallen asleep on and pushed himself upright. “You could’ve just asked Jarvis if I was okay.”

Natasha looked him up and down, assessing. “Sit with me,” she said.

Sighing, Bruce got up and walked over to the table. He took the seat across from hers and the tea she offered him, served in his favorite mug. He wondered how she knew.

“I want to thank you for helping me take care of Clint,” she said. “I’m not sure how I would have gotten through the past five weeks if you weren’t here.”

“Oh. Well, that’s, uh…” Bruce hunched over his mug. “It was my pleasure. Mostly.”

She leaned toward him, forcing eye contact. “You and I are not in competition over him. I’m not a threat to your relationship with Clint, and you’re not a threat to mine. Do you understand that?”

Bruce nodded, feeling oddly exposed under her gaze. “You and him being a romantic thing, that’s
just something the media made up. I’m not an idiot.”

“No, you’re not. But it bothers you.”

He looked away, taking a sip of his tea. She knew anyway, no point in hiding it. “It’s my own shit. I’m not your problem, don’t worry about it.”

“What if I want you to be my problem?” Natasha said, tipping her head to the side.

Words got stuck in Bruce’s throat. Jesus, that night cleaning up in Clint’s old apartment seemed like a long time ago. Clint had come such a long way since then, while he’d—what? Barely gotten used to minor physical contact and become a complete mess of insecurities? He swallowed. “Then I think you’re out of your mind.”

She smiled. “The way I see it, the three of us are a team. He’s mine and he’s yours, and when one of us falls down, the others carry them. So if something like this is getting to you, that’s my problem.”

“I’m not sure there’s anything you can do,” Bruce said. It was nice to know she wanted to try, though. The team idea was hard to fit into his head, but comforting.

“There is something,” she said. “Clint wants to come out publicly - be the world’s first openly gay superhero, play the role model card. He’s been discussing his options with Sylvia for a few weeks now.”

“He’s never mentioned that to me,” Bruce said, frowning.

“Because he doesn’t want you to feel pressured into joining him. He knows he’ll get his chance eventually, once you’re ready, so he’s put it off.” Natasha slipped her fingers around her mug and took a sip. “Thanks to a gay rights debate I got into last week, I’ve got an interview with The Advocate scheduled.” Bruce had seen that debate. It ended with the anchor red in the face and swearing and Natasha smiling pleasantly. She was smiling again now, softer. “I could pass it to Clint. I’m sure they’d jump on a coming out story about one of the Avengers. If he comes out, the rumors about him and me die.”

Bruce mulled over the idea. “And you think he could do that without pulling me into it, too?”

“He keeps a ‘no comment’ policy toward relationship questions, Sylvia leaks rumors to the press about him and various other men, and we get him out of the house with Tony and Steve more often to take a little of the attention off you. Given your current role in the media’s Avengers line-up, Sylvia says it’s unlikely that any rumors involving you will persist. How’s that sound?”

Bruce’s shoulders sank. “Honestly, it sounds like a relief.”

“Seeing him connected to Ryan Gosling won’t drive you up a wall?”

Ryan Gosling didn’t have a preexisting relationship with Clint that was easier and more intimate than Bruce was capable of. He didn’t say that. He just nodded. “Sounds great. You’d be okay with it?”

“I would risk my life for Clint without batting an eye,” she said, “but if I get one more so-called journalist asking me if he’s a good kisser, I might actually snap a neck on national television.”

“Fair enough,” Bruce said, smiling.

Natasha pulled out her phone and fired off a couple of texts, periodically eyeing him over the screen while he drank his tea. “You know, you can tell me if something else is eating at you.”
No, he couldn’t. No one deserved to have his ridiculous insecurities poured all over them. Shrugging, he said, “I’m fine. Just tired.”

Natasha looked him up and down but didn’t push it.

The Advocate article was slated to run almost exactly six weeks after Clint’s assault. Clint spent two of the three days beforehand pacing his apartment, trying to keep busy and squeezing his little rubber physical therapy ball obsessively with his right hand.

“Are you supposed to do that so much?” Bruce asked.

“Yeah, it’s fine.”

“You’re not gonna overextend yourself and damage something?”

“Nah.”

“You’re sure?”

“I got strong hands.” Clint extended his right hand toward him, the ball gripped tightly. “This hand’s had twelve different breaks, and it’s always gotten back to full strength inside two months. I could give you a massage with this hand right now and it’d be the best goddamn massage of your life. You want a massage?”

Bruce brushed his fingertips along Clint’s knuckles, tracing the spots where the fractures had healed. He was still working on removing the texture of the tape and fabric from this section of his mental map. “No, thanks.”

“Offer stands,” Clint said, squeezing the ball hard enough to make the tendons in his hand stand out. “Anytime, best massage of your life.”

On the last day before the article ran, Bruce was spending an afternoon mentoring Salma, the young woman that Tony had hired based on the Mario Kart session back in June. She was an exceptionally quick learner, and she seemed to genuinely enjoy Bruce’s company, but her understanding of anti-electron collisions was shit. He was an hour into a lecture on his own work and halfway through erasing the chemistry puns on the whiteboard to make it usable for diagrams when there was a knock at the door of the lab.

Salma answered the door, still typing out notes on her smartphone. “Doctor Banner? I think it’s for you.”

Bruce erased a dick joke with a quick swipe - leave it to Tony to corrupt chemistry jokes with sex - and turned. Clint stood just beyond the door, holding a small bouquet of red roses and wearing—God almighty, was that a suit? It was. It was a tailored black suit with a crisp white shirt, government agent chic and so perfectly un-Clint that Bruce’s brain had to reboot to process it.

“What,” he managed.

Clint grinned. “Shine your shoes, baby, ‘cause we’ve gotta get to Gordon Ramsay at The London!” He paused, glancing at Salma, and looked like he was going to eat his words for a second. “That is, uh—”
“Don’t worry about it,” she said, shaking her head. “Stark Industries has a very thorough confidentiality clause. I didn’t hear a thing.”


“Closer to $300 when you add the wine pairing,” Clint said, practically bouncing across the room. “Which we don’t have to worry about, because Tony Stark is a lunatic fairy godmother who’s paying for us to sit at the chef’s table. The chef’s table, Bruce!”

“Jesus,” Bruce said, laughing. “Why?”

“He said we oughtta have one big night out before I’m out. There’s a good chance the press is gonna make locusts look respectful after tomorrow.” Clint handed him the roses. “I got you these.”

Bruce held the bouquet awkwardly, giving one of the roses a careful sniff. He’d never really understood the appeal of flowers, but the unspoken sentiment of because you’re a total catch made him smile. “Thanks.”

“I wasn’t kidding about getting going, though,” Clint said, aiming a thumb at the door. “Our reservation’s in an hour and a half. Let’s get you ready.”

Bruce was trying to think how best to wrap up his lecture when Salma caught his eye and mouthed, “Just go.”

He clapped his hands. “Okay, Salma, we’re gonna pause here. I want you to read that article I co-authored with Drummond, and we’ll talk about it tomorrow.”

“Yes, Doctor Banner,” she said, waving him toward the door.

At 6 PM, Bruce was sitting in a deep black leather booth in the extremely clean kitchen of The London, wearing his press conference clothes and watching Clint watch the staff. Clint tried to keep his cool, but his whole face lit up as he studied the workings of the kitchen. Bruce had seen him focus like this at the archery range, but never with the sort of grin he was trying to hide behind his hand.

“Pity Chef Ramsay isn’t in town at the moment,” the head chef said after introducing them to the amuse-bouche. “He’s a great fan of the Avengers. I’m sure he’d have loved to meet you.”

Clint went so still that for a second Bruce worried he might have actually died. In a calm, calculated voice, he said, “Give him my regards.” Then he turned to Bruce, his jaw clenched tight and his eyes silently screaming.

“I will,” the chef said. “Enjoy.”

“Gordon Ramsay is a fan of our work,” Clint hissed the moment the chef was out of earshot. “Bruce. I’m sitting at a table Chef Gordon Ramsay has personally eaten at, and he’s a fan of our work. Chef knows who I am. What do I do?”

Bruce laughed. “I think you eat that truffle thing with the fork on the outside and you try to look casual.”

“Casual,” Clint repeated. “Right. I can do casual.”

No, he couldn’t. With every dish they tried, he made borderline obscene noises around the fork and
asked so many questions about its preparation that Bruce caught the kitchen staff exchanging smiles. Between dishes, he cut himself off in the middle of a sentence every five minutes to give Bruce that overwhelmed fanboy look. By dessert, Bruce had tears in his eyes from trying not to laugh, a substantial buzz from all the wine, and a hand resting on Clint’s knee under the table.

They thanked the head chef profusely at the end of the meal, and he made them promise to return another time when Chef Ramsay was in town. (Bruce had to be the one to say “Of course we will, thank you so much,” because Clint just turned red and clenched his jaw.)

“You ready to head home?” Clint said once they were back in the car.

Bruce shook his head. “I could stand to burn off some energy.”

“Me too.”

“What do you want to do?”

Clint grinned.

They stopped at an arcade in his old neighborhood. The place was nearly deserted this time of night, just a couple of middle school-aged kids hanging around the bank of high-tech racing games near the entrance. When they walked in past, one of the boys recognized them, his eyes going wide and his hands freezing on the wheel of his game. Bruce raised a finger to his lips.

They worked their way across the back of the arcade, dumping quarters into machines and playing until they got bored or failed spectacularly. Bruce felt like a kid again, his hands at home on the joystick of the Ms. Pac-Man machine like he was passing time in an arcade after school. Clint aced the 90’s zombie shooting game in the corner but spent twenty minutes swearing under his breath at a cutesy candy-themed racing game in the middle of the arcade. They ended with something called Dance Dance Revolution, a blinking, hyperactive dancing game that Bruce could not keep up with for the life of him.

The local kids were leaning on a nearby machine to watch at this point, so there were witnesses when Bruce slipped on the button pad and caught himself clumsily on the guard rail. Clint called in one of the onlookers as a substitute contender, and the kid’s friend recorded it on her phone. Bruce was pretty sure by morning there would be a video on YouTube titled Fifth grader kicks Hawkeye’s ass at DDR, but at least the kid was a gracious winner. He shook Clint’s hand and asked both of them to sign his t-shirt, which they did.

When they got back to the car, Bruce was half exhausted from laughter and Clint was grinning ear to ear. Bruce waited until their doors were closed to take his hand and didn’t let it go for the whole ride to Stark Tower.

They went back to Clint’s apartment and kissed on the couch like teenagers. Undoing buttons, it turned out, was on Bruce’s Ask First list - along with carefully telegraphed kisses along his collar and chest. By the time his body betrayed him and they called it quits for the night, Bruce was torn between frustration and endorphins.

He let the endorphins win this time. Being wanted felt so damn good, even if he couldn’t do more about it. Stretching as close to Clint as reasonably possible on the bed, he let that sense of chemical-induced wholeness carry him to sleep.

Bruce woke up thinking he heard his name. The other side of the bed stretched out empty under his arm, and the cold blue of early morning peeked in under the curtains. He raised his head off the
pillow, listening for sounds from the bathroom - nothing. It didn’t look like any of the main lights were on in the apartment.

“Doctor Banner,” Jarvis said. “I believe you might be needed in the kitchen.” His voice was oddly hushed and a little flustered. Could AIs get flustered? Even if so, it was unsettling.

Pulling himself out of bed, Bruce padded down the hallway and out into the main living area. He squinted, not seeing anything at first. Then a faint flicker of color caught his over the edge of the kitchen island. Circling the island, he stopped cold.

Clint sat in a tight ball with his back to the island, a tablet playing news footage on mute beside him and what looked like every dangerous implement in the kitchen laid out in neat rows in front of him on a bath towel: knives organized by size, appliances with warning labels on them lined up according to type of potential injury, and even the electric tea kettle, placed in front of the oven with other things that could burn. Bruce hoped for a moment that this was some sort of study in weapons of kitchen self-defense, but when he stepped closer, he spotted a small tube of antibacterial first aid ointment and a pack of tissues sitting by Clint’s feet. Shit.

“He’s been running searches on the long-term effects of injuries by various devices for an hour,” Jarvis said.

Clint sighed, dropping his head back against the cupboards. “You’re a goddamn tattle tale, Jarvis.”

“I’m afraid I didn’t know what else to do,” the AI said - and yeah, that was definitely flustered. “Ms. Potts has insisted I run certain protocols upon suspicion of severe self-injurious behavior. I’m terribly sorry for any inconvenience.”

“It’s all right, Jarvis,” Bruce said. “We’re good here.”

Clint laughed bitterly, one hand fidgeting in front of his chin. “You think so, huh.”

Bruce assessed the scene, his eyes landing on the still capped ointment. “You hurt yourself yet?”

Clint tightened his arms around his knees, his fingers curling in tight. He shook his head.

Bruce’s shoulders sank a little. Picking his way across the field of neatly organized kitchen implements, he found himself a space just opposite Clint and sat down cross-legged. A bread knife and a stainless steel mallet were edging in on his left and right feet, respectively, so he pushed them an inch farther away from himself to give his toes some wiggle room.

Clint just watched him over his arms, his eyes narrowed and shining in the light from the tablet.

“So,” Bruce said, leaning back against the cupboards. “This is...thorough.”

Clint actually laughed, a tiny choked sound. “Thanks.”

Bruce wanted to ask, but he couldn’t seem to find the right words. Instead, he just settled in, letting the silence stretch out.

“You just gonna sit there waiting for me to spill my guts?” Clint said, giving him a half-hearted glare.

“Or until you do whatever it is you need to do here,” Bruce said. “Either way, I’m with you.”

Clint’s fidgeting fingers stopped dead. “You don’t have to do that.”
“Going to anyway,” Bruce said, shrugging. “Up to you where this goes.”

Clint stared him down, not moving except for the methodical twitching of his fingers and the slow in and out of his breath. After a minute, he closed his eyes and rubbed his hands over his head, locking them together at the back of his neck. “I got up to piss, checked my phone, and saw I’d missed an email about a SHIELD memorial event. It came in while I was out enjoying myself.”

Bruce’s stomach knotted as he realized where this was going.

“I hadn’t even thought about everything I did for Loki since the day before. I remember wondering what kind of funeral Coulson’s family threw for him when I saw his hat in the closet in the morning, and then I just…didn’t.” He glanced up at Bruce. “You called it, that night you talked my drunk ass down from a meltdown. I did all those things, I killed people, and then for a day it was like it never happened, like someone else did that. Like it didn’t matter.”

“So you came out here and started looking into nonfatal ways to mangle yourself with kitchen tools?” Bruce surmised.

“Seemed like the thing to do.” Clint surveyed his arsenal. “This was a lot easier before I had to deal with paparazzi taking pictures of me.”

“I bet,” Bruce said. “You settled on anything?”

Clint frowned at the floor. “Everything that seems like it’d hurt enough would be hard to hide.”

“Well, I don’t recommend the blender.”

“Yeah, blender was the first one I ruled out.”

They both tipped their heads, looking at the blender. Clint smirked like it was some sort of joke.

“I’ve got a great trump card if you want to be talked down,” Bruce offered.

Clint blew out through his mouth, still staring at the blender. “All right, shoot.”

Bruce waited until Clint looked up enough to catch his gaze, then said, “Gordon Ramsay wouldn’t want you to hurt yourself. He’s a fan.”

That startled a laugh out of Clint. “Oh, fuck you.” Pursing his lips, he seemed to mull it over for a second, then shook his head at Bruce. “Fuck you, that’s way more effective than it should be.”

Bruce smiled. “I thought it might be.”

Clint sat there for a minute with his hands still locked behind his head and his eyes wide. Slowly, he lowered his arms and let his palms flatten against the floor. “Would you, uh…would you put the knives away?”

“Sure,” Bruce said, pushing himself up off the floor. Bending down, he plucked up a couple of knives at a time and slotted them into their appropriate spots on the butcher block and in the drawer by the stove. Clint put away the appliances and blunt instruments. In a couple minutes, the kitchen floor was clear of everything but the towel and Clint’s tablet, which was still displaying old footage from the aftermath of the invasion. Bruce switched it off, and the kitchen went dark.

“My cover story’s probably on news stands by now,” Clint said quietly, leaning against the counter. “I’m gonna be a role model.” He got out about half a second of laughter before a sob punctuated it.
Leaning over, he clenched his eyes shut and covered his mouth with one hand.

“You were already a role model,” Bruce pointed out, and wow, did that not help.

Clint fell apart all at once. Once he let a little bit through, the flood gates crashed open, spilling tears and snot and drawing unflattering lines around his face. He cried almost silently, except for the hitching sound in his breath. Curling in on himself, he slid back to the floor as if the things he’d been holding in were a physical weight.

Bruce sank to the floor next to him and handed him the pack of tissues, completely out of his depth.

“I forgot,” Clint said, his voice tight. “I just forgot about the people I helped kill. Who does that?”

“You didn’t forget,” Bruce said. “You’re just not dwelling on it anymore. It’s a good thing - means you’re moving on.”

“It doesn’t feel like a good thing,” Clint said, holding a tissue to his nose. “It feels guilty as shit. Like I got away with something unforgivable.”

“I know,” Bruce said, draping an arm around his shoulders. He remembered that feeling - God, did he. Sometimes it still pressed against the inside of his ribs like it was trapped inside him. He couldn’t say anything to make it leave himself alone, so there was no way he’d have the words to fix it for Clint.

“Hey, c’mere,” he said, pulling Clint in to lean against him. Clint folded against him, a thin, pained sound caught behind his teeth.

It had been well over a decade since someone had physically cried on Bruce. He’d forgotten how gross it was, wet seeping through the collar of his t-shirt and another person’s liquid noises up close. But it was Clint, so it was worth the discomfort - even if he did have to pull away after a few minutes because of a trapped sensation rising in his throat. It only took a few minutes for the proper sobbing and pained sounds part of the process, and then Clint settled into a less exhausting pattern of sniffs and shaky crying.

“Jarvis,” Bruce said, keeping one hand on Clint’s arm, “send Sylvia Cho-Gable a message saying Agent Barton will be taking a mental health day from all press activity. And call Natasha.”

“Right away, Doctor Banner,” the AI said.

Twenty minutes later, Natasha was at the door with a bag of fresh croissants from a bakery down the street that had just opened for the morning. After they’d each had a bit of warm comfort food, she managed to get Clint off the floor and back to bed. The three of them fit comfortably on the bed together, Natasha spooning Clint and Bruce lying on his back a few inches away. Natasha told stories about what it was like backstage at CNN and working for Tony Stark. She managed to get Clint laughing, for which Bruce was grateful. He couldn’t even find it in himself to be annoyed that his big night out with Clint had ended with Natasha in their bed, because Clint drifted off within an hour and didn’t wake up again until almost noon.
Chapter 7

The next day, Bruce left Clint alone with Natasha for a couple of hours in the afternoon to go down to his own apartment. On his way down, he stopped at the mail room to check if his journals were in yet. Clint’s mailbox was comedically full, and when he asked Jarvis for permission to take the contents to him, the AI didn’t even hesitate before unlocking the door and letting what looked like a month worth of mail spill to the floor.

“You didn’t want to, I dunno, ask permission upstairs?” Bruce said, watching the last subscription card linger and tip over the edge.

“Agent Barton has you listed in the permissions for every lock he controls in this building,” Jarvis replied.

“Okay then,” Bruce said, trying not to read too much into it. Clint’s last building barely had locks. He was used to guests coming and going. Meanwhile, Bruce hadn’t changed his own permissions since he moved in, except to try and take Tony’s front door access away.

When he got to his apartment, he took a very long bath and stared at the ceiling, watching the steam fog his vision and just breathing for awhile. It felt like he hadn’t taken a full breath in hours, caught with Clint and Natasha between a panorama of Midtown and a kitchen full of potential weapons.

Bruce took his time getting dressed, read for a little while, and went back upstairs when his chest felt less like a cage, bringing Clint’s mail with him. It made a satisfying thunk when he dropped the pile on the coffee table.

“What’s this?” Clint said.

“It’s called mail,” Bruce said. “Understandable that you haven’t heard about it - the system’s only been in place for about 140 years. Which may be the age of some of these letters.”

“I pay all my bills online,” Clint said, kicking his heels up onto the couch.

Natasha examined the pile and pulled out a thick manilla envelope, her eyes lighting up. “Contributor copies,” she said.

Clint sat bolt upright and reached for the envelope, but she side-stepped him, tearing it open herself and pulling out a short stack of copies of *The Advocate*. Bruce leaned over her shoulder to see. It was an eye-catching cover, Clint standing against a wall with arrows embedded everywhere except the space he occupied. He had his arms crossed and his chin up, giving the camera a defiant little smirk, and the headline read simply: *Our First Gay Superhero*.

It was a really striking cover, even if it did send a bolt of fear down Bruce’s spine. Taking the copy
that Natasha offered him, he sank into the recliner and tried to swallow. Clint was staring at his copy like it was something magical, not like he’d just irretrievably exposed a vulnerable part of himself to the world.

Pushing the magazine away from him on the coffee table, Clint clasped his hands in front of his mouth and shook his head. “I can’t do it. Somebody read my interview and tell me it doesn’t suck.”

Natasha already had her copy flipped open and was reading. Bruce followed suit. It was a good piece. Clint came off as relaxed and funny, like he was catching up with an old friend across the table at his favorite deli instead of answering questions from a stranger with a voice recorder. They covered his coming out right up front with just a few follow-up questions, then ran him through the gamut, touching on everything from his love of cooking to his opinions on recent politics to how celebrity was treating him in the wake of the battle. It got surprisingly personal in a few places, at one point even mentioning that he was in therapy.

By the end of it, Bruce was beginning to see why Sylvia wanted to give him so much exposure - he played really well with interviewers, going from serious to joking around in two sentences flat.

The Advocate: Is there anything you wish the press would ask you?

Clint Barton: You know, I’ve got nothing I’m dying to tell. Although, sometimes I watch Natasha in her interviews and I think, “Damn, why are they asking her that?” Because they’ll give her the like…the shitty questions they always ask the girl, the “What do you eat to maintain your figure?” and “Which of your teammates has the best butt?” questions, and she doesn’t care, she won’t answer, but I have opinions about these things. I’m like, let me tell you about grilled tilapia, oh man.

A: [laughs] Now that you mention it, which of your teammates has the best butt?

CB: Oh, I really shouldn’t answer that.

A: You brought it up.

CB: I know, but it’s a catch-22, because Tony [Stark]’s involved. If I say Tony, he’ll just be insufferable gloating, and if I don’t say Tony, he’ll mope. He’s got a very fragile ego.

Bruce wanted to smile at that. He tried to smile, but he kept getting hung up on the big picture of the thing he was reading. A feature like this would have been deeply inadvisable, if not impossible, when he was growing up. He knew that should make him impressed with how far US culture had come, but instead, it only made him afraid for Clint.

“It doesn’t suck,” Natasha said, smiling over the magazine. “It’s very you.”

Clint nodded nervously and turned toward the recliner. “Come on, Bruce, you read faster than anybody I know, and not a peep yet. What is it, did I screw something up?”

Bruce shook his head. “No, I just got kinda caught up staring at your arms in this picture.” Which wasn’t a lie - the photographer was a big fan of Clint’s arms, and the photo on the third page was extremely distracting. More to the point… “They didn’t ask you if you were seeing anyone. I expected them to ask.”

“That was my one stipulation with the interview,” Clint said. “No questions about my current love life. Now, for the love of God, what did you think?”

“It’s good,” Bruce said finally. “Natasha’s right, it’s very you. Very personable.”
Clint glanced between the two of them, his mouth closed hard, and exhaled, sinking back into the couch cushions. “Okay, gimme a copy.”

Over the next couple of weeks, Bruce watched the aftermath unfold. Tony had been right about the paparazzi: they descended on Stark Tower like a fucking Biblical plague, choking the sidewalk by the parking garage so badly that it was difficult to get out for the first few days, and even when they did settle down a little, it seemed like there was suddenly always at least one of them tracking Clint when they went out in public. Bruce couldn’t even tell where they came from, but there they were, calling out completely inappropriate questions or taking photos that showed up online within hours.

Clint took to the new attention better than Bruce expected - but then, the guy was used to combat, so keeping his calm during high-stress situations was second nature. Crowds of reporters were probably easier to deal with than attacking aliens, even if they had less tact. By the end of the first week, Clint’s new favorite hobby had become finding the most over the top homophobic comments about himself online and reading them aloud dramatically, and Bruce had stopped worrying about the knives in the kitchen.

Bruce couldn’t say he’d react as well himself, but he didn’t have to. Clint evaded all questions about current relationship with an ease that spoke of SHIELD training. Instead of answering directly, he talked circles around them, joked about banging the entire team, or just gave a scoff and said, “You really think I’m gonna answer that?” Meanwhile, between Sylvia’s leaked rumors and whatever the gossip magazines dragged in and called “news,” it was a total surprise every week whether Clint was supposedly single, fucking the Hollywood heartthrob of the moment, or carrying on some secret affair under the media’s noses.

Bruce was beginning to feel like Schrödinger’s boyfriend. It was definitely a relief compared to the previous setup with Natasha. The flip side was, instead of comparing himself to her during low moments and then feeling like a failure, he skipped straight to step two.

He was 43 years old, by all accounts invincible, and unable to kiss his goddamn boyfriend in public because he was afraid of the world knowing he was bi. Well, and because he couldn’t always kiss his boyfriend anyway thanks to his body’s faulty alarm system, which was a direct result of the whole Other Guy thing, which…really, his life was a fucking daisy chain of failures.

Bruce remembered the moment he hadn’t told Betty. They’d just gotten back together after a year-long break, and they were lying in bed, catching up. She’d told him all about the people she’d met during her internship abroad, ending with an off-hand mention of a handful of dates with a colleague.

“What about you?” she said, smiling in that disarmingly open way of hers. “Did you meet anyone special?”

His mind reeled through four months of Saturday morning cartoons at his now ex-boyfriend’s apartment, shared bottles of beer on the roof, lying in bed just like this, and a coffee pot shattering on the wall that would’ve been his head if he hadn’t ducked. His mouth said, “No, not really.”

If he hadn’t been able to tell her, one of the most accepting people he’d ever known, how the hell was he supposed to follow Clint out into the spotlight?

A small, naive part of him asked why he couldn’t just ignore the whole thing - like one of the most
upvoted posts on Clint’s Facebook fan page put it, *Why do we need labels? Why can’t we all just be people?* It seemed like a good idea until he thought about it. No, goddammit, they couldn’t all just be people. This wasn’t utopian fiction. In reality, shutting up and being “just a person” meant not giving a name to part of himself that mattered and accepting the notion that, at least according to the absurd social constructs that dominated US culture, him being a person and him being anything other than straight were mutually exclusive concepts.

And his sexual identity mattered. Tony had said as much months ago, over the coming out cake, and Bruce hadn’t believed him then. He’d been framing it wrong, thinking of his own sexuality as something that could expire if left unused for too long, like his drivers license. But that wasn’t quite right.

Bruce had spent a decade living in a world of isolation and violence, and here was a part of him that didn’t just acknowledge his potential to form a human connection, it defined where that potential lay and what it looked like. At its most basic level, claiming a label for it felt like saying, “This is the kind of person I’d like to love me back and how I’d like them to do it,” which implied that maybe he was worth being loved back. Tony was right. If his back was against the wall, this sort of detail didn’t stop mattering; it became a reminder of why his life was worth defending.

He was bisexual. He’d dated six women, one of whom he’d almost asked to marry him, and two men, one of whom was snoring softly on the other side of the bed right now, and none of those experiences canceled out the others. They were all the sorts of people he’d like to love him back.

But knowing why something mattered and being able to say the words to an international audience who already viewed him as little more than a monster on a leash were two very different things.

The middle of the night was the worst, especially on nights when Bruce was playing hermit in his own apartment. It was like all the most worried and lonely parts of his brain drew power from the pre-dawn digits on the clock, and tea and reading material wouldn’t shut them up. Those parts of his brain were convinced he would ruin everything he touched, and between two and four in the morning, it felt like they must be right. They dredged up worries so old he’d almost forgotten about them and paraded them across the back of Bruce’s eyes. He was unworthy, dangerous, toxic, blah, blah, blah. On his third hermit night in a week, he got fed up with listening to their lack of current evidence and decided to do something about it.

He was leaning over a microscope in the lab an hour later when Tony found him. Or rather, when Tony shambled in half-asleep, wearing pajama shorts and what appeared to be an oversized women’s sleep shirt with Tigger on it, and headed straight for the dry ice bin by the refrigerator. Bruce watched with mild curiosity as Tony used tongs to fish out a cardboard box, from which he withdrew one small, paper-wrapped parcel before closing everything back up again. Unwrapping it, he took a bite. It was an ice cream sandwich.

“Oh, hey,” Tony said as he spotted Bruce. “What are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same thing,” Bruce said.

Tony gave him an incredulous look and waggled his snack in the air. “I wanted ice cream.”

“Don’t you have a fully stocked gourmet freezer in your apartment?”
“I fail to see your point,” Tony said, wandering over toward Bruce’s lab station. “What’s got you up here so late? New project?”

Bruce minimizing his notes on the display to his right. “No, uh, nothing new. Please don’t—”

Tony did. Of course he did. Pulling up a seat opposite Bruce, he surveyed the equipment - a full array of Geiger counters, the microscope, and tissue samples spread out across small vials and slides - and pulled the rack of vials toward himself. “What are these samples from?”

Bruce clenched his jaw. Tony was too smart to lie to effectively and too perseverant to simply push away. Exhaling hard through his nose, he said, “Me.”

“Huh.” Taking a bite of ice cream sandwich, Tony traipsed his fingertips over the stoppers of vials of blood, saliva, and skin tissue and picked up—of course—the most embarrassing possible sample. “Is this semen?”

Bruce crossed his arms tightly. “I didn’t collect it in the lab, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“I’m not worried. Who hasn’t put their swimmers under a microscope at 4 AM?” Tony pointed his snack back toward the dry ice bin. “Hey, you want an ice cream sandwich? I’ve got extras.”

“I don’t want an ice cream sandwich.”

“You sure? You look surprisingly tense for a guy with a fresh semen sample. An ice cream sandwich could help with that.”

“Look, it’s not a big deal,” Bruce snapped, raising his hands. “I’m just trying to establish exactly how toxic my tissues are to someone who comes in contact with them, and I’d rather not have you teasing me about it.”

Tony didn’t even flinch. Instead, he set the vial back in its spot and said, “I could double-check your work, if you want.”

Bruce paused. He’d been over his readings twice already and was starting on a third round, his nerves growing gradually more frayed with doubt. A second set of eyes would be a relief, but this particular set of eyes came with a certain big mouth attached—

“I’ll let you take a picture of me in my Tigger PJs,” Tony offered. “If I say a word to anyone, release it to the press. Mutually assured destruction.”

Bruce caved. “Yeah, okay.”

Tony spent half of Black Sabbath’s Paranoid album meticulously repeating Bruce’s readings while Bruce tried not to jump out of his skin waiting on the other side of the lab counter.

“Your work checks out,” Tony said finally, turning down the music. “You’re more radioactive than the average bear, but nowhere near where you used to be. Blood, saliva, skin tissue, everything - it’s all way down.”

Good. Okay. Logically, he’d known that must be the case, but having the numbers displayed in front of him actually drove it home. At least enough to make the worries ringing in his head change tactics. He may be a walking disaster area, a closet case, and a PR nightmare, but at least he wasn’t literally poisonous. Jesus, fuck his brain.

“You sure?” he asked, looking for a nail to drive into the coffin.
“Yeah,” Tony said, shrugging. “You know, you don’t show up on aerial gamma ray spectrometers like you used to, either. You were pretty easy to keep an eye on those first couple of years.”

Bruce frowned up at him, his mind following the course off-topic. “You kept an eye on me?”

“I told you I was a fan, remember? I’ve been following your career since the late 90’s. When you turned green and went rogue, hell yeah, I tracked your radiation signature across three continents. I read everything you ever published, of course I was gonna follow this, too.”

Bruce didn’t know what to say. He caught himself staring.

Tony pointed the vial of semen at him with a look of dawning awkwardness. “And you admired my father’s work in clean energy but didn’t keep up with me beyond water cooler gossip when I crashed the Nobel banquet or fucked a former Mouseketeer.”

Bruce hunched a little, crossing his arms. “Your work wasn’t exactly in my area until recently.”

“I’m wounded, Bruce. You wound me.” Tony dropped the vial back into its rack. “But not in the ‘hot carcinogenic love’ way. In terms of radiation, I’d say your payload is equivalent to a transatlantic flight on a commercial airliner. Probably a lot more fun to take, though. Have you been using condoms?”

“We haven’t—” Bruce started, and winced at the disapproving look that was forming on Tony’s face. “It hasn’t gotten that far. If it does, I will.”

“‘If?’” Tony repeated. “Don’t tell me you’re having second thoughts about Princess Merida.”

Bruce frowned. “Princess who?”

“Merida,” Tony said, and paused like he was waiting for some flicker of recognition. “From Brave? The new Pixar movie?”

Bruce shook his head, blank-faced.

Tony dropped his arms at his sides. “She’s an archer. That’s the joke, she’s an archer. For fuck’s sake, Bruce, turn on a TV once in awhile.”

“What about skin-to-skin contact?” Bruce said, not looking at him. “Say, sleeping next to someone six hours a night? Added up—”

“Insignificant enough that it’s not worth noting,” Tony interrupted. “And answer me, now I’m worried.”

Slouching over the counter, Bruce dropped his head against his folded arms. “I’m not having second thoughts, and I’m not discussing my sex life with you.” Not that there was anything to discuss beyond an occasional make out session on the couch.

Tony put up his hands. “All right, but I’d just like to point out that a minute ago I was literally handling your love potion.”

“Tissue samples break down into concrete numbers and extrapolations. They’re quantifiable, understandable.”

Tony sighed. “Okay, clearly you’re freaking out about more than your precious bodily fluids here.
Do you want to talk about it?”

Bruce did. And he didn’t. And he really wished he’d been getting more sleep, because the indecision was making his head spin. Propping his chin up on his arm, he said, “Do you ever feel like you’re going to destroy everything good in your life?”

Tony thought the question over for a second and shook his head. “No, I don’t have nearly as fragile an ego as your boyfriend’s been telling the press.” He paused, tilting his head. “Though I do feel like at any second there’s a 50/50 chance that everything good in my life will be taken away from me by some crazy cosmic force I have no hope of understanding or preventing.”

Bruce nodded. “Okay, good talk.”

When he left the lab, he stood at the elevator bank for a moment, debating, before taking the stairs down one level. He’d never wandered into Clint’s apartment without at least knocking, but the front door let him in with a swipe of his keycard. Once again, Clint had given him permission without asking him to return it. That was starting to feel uncomfortably thematic.

Natasha was over, watching him over the arm of the couch in the dark when he stepped inside.

“Sorry,” he whispered, closing the door as quietly as possible. “Didn’t mean to wake you.”

“I was already up,” she said, raising a paperback with a book light attached to it.

“Anything good?”

“A Love Story Starring My Dead Best Friend. It’s got a cross-country road trip and a coming of age queer romance. I think you’d like it.”

“Great. Put it in my stack when you’re done.”

She closed the book on her finger. “Haven’t seen you in a couple of days.”

“Yeah, I’ve been…” He didn’t know how to finish the sentence, so he just shrugged.

“Something on your mind?” she asked.

Dammit, people needed to stop trying to get him to talk. They should know by now he was no good with words.

“Just need some sleep,” he said, turning the corner into the hallway. “Good night.”

“Night,” she echoed, curling up with her book again.

Clint didn’t try to make him talk. He woke up to Bruce’s weight on the mattress, smiled, and sleepily asked Jarvis to close the curtains. Bruce laced their fingers together and buried his face in the pillow, trying to will his brain to sleep.

Bruce wondered how he’d managed to get this attached to someone he’d known for so little time. He remembered how it had been with Betty: months of flirting between classes, years of fitting their lives together one detail at a time, a break here and there when their lives failed to keep them in the same place, and a gradual dawning of the realization that he this was the woman he was going to
He’d known Clint for just under four months. That didn’t seem like nearly enough time to care this much. He was practically living with the guy, and there were so many things he didn’t know about him that sometimes at night he stared at the ceiling cataloguing them like counting sheep. He didn’t know Clint’s middle name or where he’d grown up. He didn’t know if there was any family to speak of outside of Natasha. He didn’t know if Clint was the sort of person who yelled at or sweet-talked tech support workers. He’d never seen him naked.

In spite of the gaps in knowledge, Clint Barton had managed to burrow inside him and occupy a space that Bruce hadn’t thought was still accessible. It scared the shit out of him.

Watching Clint bounce back from what he’d taken to calling The Night of the Blender (because Clint refused to give that emotional shit show anything resembling dignity), Bruce knew they weren’t evenly matched. Clint knew how to adjust. He saw his therapist, kept Natasha close, and managed to pull himself out of the worrying parts of his head most days. He scheduled meetings with Sylvia and walked past paparazzi on the streets with a swagger that Bruce could never pull off. No new marks showed up on him, except for a couple of small welts on his forearm from the shooting range.

Clint had been brainwashed into murder and sabotage, lost friends and colleagues, fought aliens on the streets of New York, and been beaten with a baseball bat in his own home, and he was going to get through it. This was actually going to all be behind him someday. And here was Bruce, still up making tea for himself in the middle of the night because his body hadn’t slept eight straight hours in a decade and he didn’t know what else to do.

Just shy of two months from their first date, they went shopping for formalwear together with the team. Tony’s charity event - The Avengers Gala, all proceeds donated to the families of Battle of New York victims - was in two days, and Sylvia insisted on getting them all into new formalwear that they could be comfortable in. Select members of the press had been invited and would be recording and taking photos. This was a chance to show the Avengers being social, relaxed, and acting as a team again to help their community. Bruce already hated it.

Tony took them to a menswear shop so exclusive that it was only accessible from an parking garage with an appointment and a key code. The place was surprisingly large for a shop in Midtown, one airy seating area with a couple of dressing rooms and fresh-cut lilies in vases by the couches. Minimalist mannequins displayed tuxedos along the walls. Natasha came along even though she’d already had a dress picked out days before, to offer moral support. Bruce was pretty sure offering moral support translated to laughing at the boys, but he liked having her along.

Sylvia was already there, perched on a chaise lounge with her phone open in one hand and a champagne flute in the other. “You’re early for once,” she said, raising her eyebrows at Tony.

“Steve played time-keeper,” Tony said. “He rushed us. I’m inadequately prepared.”

Steve gave her a nod. “It’s good to see you, ma’am.”

The shop’s owner swept in, greeting Tony in rapid-fire French and—Jesus, cheek kisses were still a thing? Steve, Natasha, and Clint accepted them, but Bruce raised his hands in front of himself and stumbled through what he hoped was adequate Sesame Street level French for “It’s nice to meet you, but please don’t touch me.”

The shop owner looked him up and down and clasped her hands, giving him a nod instead. Maybe
that press conference had been good for something. Natasha stuck within a few feet of him, watchful, until the shop owner moved on. Bruce sent her a smile, and she returned it, taking a seat next to Sylvia.

A bevy of assistants appeared from nowhere, three of them carrying clothing and one of them offering the team champagne.

“They give you champagne while you shop?” Bruce asked.

“Of course they do,” Tony said, taking a glass and holding it out for the assistant to fill it. “If a place doesn’t serve alcohol, why bother buying a tux there?”

“The places I buy clothes at generally serve pre-packaged sandwiches at the deli counter,” Bruce said, locking his fingers together in front of his chest. “Or sometimes those hot dogs that have been sitting out on the rollers for twelve hours.”

“And that’s why you have me, my friend,” Tony said, raising his glass and his phone toward Bruce. “I can show you the world - y’know, the shining, shimmering, splendid parts, anyway.”

“What, like the room in Stark Industries where HR holds the sexual harassment seminars?” Natasha said, giving him an innocent look. Sylvia clinked glasses with her.

“So antagonistic,” Tony tutted, shaking his head at them both.

“I could get used to this,” Clint said, lounging across a couch with his feet up on the arm and a glass of champagne in hand.

“Combat boots off the decor, please,” Sylvia said without looking up from her phone. “Rogers, you’re up first.”

One of the assistants shook Steve’s hand and ushered him into the dressing room.

“So, Sylvia,” Clint said, leaning toward her seat, “what’s the press got to say about my torrid love life this week?”

_The Guardian_ has impeccably Photoshopped pictures of you getting into a car with Anderson Cooper, _People_’s anonymous source says you’re secretly seeing an unnamed and deeply closeted member of the _Twilight_ cast, and Perez Hilton has you pegged as sleeping with Tony.”

“Ooh, I like that last one, encourage it,” Tony said. He shot Clint a wink. “Hey, tiger.”

Clint laughed so hard he almost dropped his drink, and Natasha had to press a hand against her mouth. Tony didn’t seem to think it was _that_ funny, but he recovered enough to be joking around again in thirty seconds.

Bruce sat in a wingback chair off to the side, wishing he’d brought a book - especially when the dressing room door started opening again. Steve tried on five different tuxes, looking like he may as well have been born for every one of them. Sylvia futzed with the details, conferring with the shop owner about cummerbunds and pocket squares, and they eventually settled on something Tony said was a “vintage” cut with a sapphire blue pocket square that “brought out his eyes.” Clint didn’t even hide the fact that he was ogling Steve a little, leaning over to whisper with Natasha whenever he came out. Bruce couldn’t blame him - Captain America was engineered to look good in a suit. That didn’t stop him from wanting to burrow through the floor and hide, though.

This whole morning seemed specially designed to make Bruce want to hide, actually. Between the
obscenely expensive environment, the casual talk about the press, and watching his teammates slip effortlessly into formalwear while he sat there in wrinkled khakis with perpetually disheveled hair, he couldn’t remember feeling quite so out of place in a long time.

When it was his own turn to be manhandled into a tux, he walked into the dressing room like a man headed to war. It took less than three minutes for him to get sick of saying the word “no” and the unlucky shop assistant to throw up his hands and stalk out. Bruce leaned against the wall, curling his arms in on himself and massaging a hand across his brow.

The door opened, and Clint stepped in with the assistant behind him. He was still wearing the shirt and slacks they’d selected for him, his cuffs hanging open without cufflinks but his bowtie firmly knotted. “Hey. You okay?”

“He tried to measure me,” Bruce said, knowing the words sounded ridiculous with that much vitriol behind them.

“I know, that’s his job,” Clint said, approaching him. Taking Bruce’s hand, he squeezed it. “I’m gonna play moderator, all right?”

His fucking boyfriend had to help him try on clothes. The relief just barely outweighed the humiliation. Hanging his head, Bruce nodded.

Clint handed the assistant Bruce’s jacket. “Measure this instead. It fits him perfectly.”

The assistant folded the jacket over his arm and sighed at the compromise. “And for the rest?”

“Guess,” Bruce growled.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Clint said.

They got him into a tuxedo, the shop assistant hovering and giving directions while Clint helped him with the application of buttons and testing of fit. When they stepped out of the dressing room, Sylvia actually clapped.

“Excellent,” she said, raising a glass to him. “I think that’s the one. You clean up nicely, Banner.”

Bruce didn’t have the energy left to thank her for the compliment. He tried to smile.

“You both do, actually,” she said tipping her glass toward Clint. “Would that I could get you two dancing together dressed like that in front of photographers at the gala. Hearts would melt.”

Natasha was watching the two of them with a look of such affection that for a second, Bruce wished they could do exactly that.

“Yeah, well,” Clint said, “maybe another time.”

He sounded almost sad about it, and Bruce felt terrible. Clint was out, he was comfortable with the world knowing. He was just in a holding pattern of media obfuscation, waiting for Bruce to catch up. What if Bruce never did?

“Sorry,” he muttered, eyes on the ground.

Clint squeezed his hand. “Don’t be. Take your time, I’m ready when you are.”

Finding shoes was more of the same, and when they finally left the shop, Bruce felt like he’d spent a whole day running into walls. Tony treated them all to lunch at a high-class steak house, where
Bruce sat as far from everyone else as possible and picked at his salad. They got back to the tower in early afternoon, and Bruce pushed the elevator button for the basement without even asking if Clint wanted him over.

Clint didn’t ask either, though - he just rode the elevator down with Bruce and stepped out after him, making idle conversation about some new restaurant he wanted to check out. The words felt like pin pricks. Ever since they left the formalwear shop, Bruce couldn’t stop thinking about all the things he was unable to do because of the way his life worked out, the family he’d never have, the way he inevitably tore everything around him apart given time and pressure - including, probably, this gala thing. Who thought buttoning him into formalwear and shoving him into a high-stakes crowd with cameras was a good idea? At best he’d say the wrong thing in front of someone in the media; at worst, the Other Guy would say the wrong thing in front of someone in the media. All while his stupid perfect teammates flashed their stupidly perfect smiles and saved the day.

When they got into Bruce’s apartment and Clint stopped talking, Bruce tossed his jacket over the arm of the couch and sighed, dropping his face into his hands.

“You okay?” Clint asked.

“No,” Bruce said, dropping his hands.

Clint took a step closer to him. “Is there anything I can do?”

“Is there anything you can’t do?” Bruce said, biting out the words. He regretted it immediately, but the anger and discomfort had momentum now. “The press loves you, you can put on a suit and look like a Disney prince along with Steve fucking Rogers, you bounce back from traumas that would leave most people scarred for life—”

“I don’t understand,” Clint said. “What’s this about?”

“Haven’t you figured it out yet?” Bruce said, spreading his arms open. “You’re going to leave me behind. And you’ll be right to do it.”

Clint raised an eyebrow at him. “I’ve mentioned you’re a fucking head case, right?”

“What is exactly my point,” Bruce said. “I’m a head case. A disaster area. A permanent, unfixable raw nerve. You’re not, and you’re going to get sick of it.”

“I don’t mind it,” Clint said, and for the first time since they’d started talking, he actually looked a little worried.

“You don’t right now.” Bruce stepped away from him, raising a finger to punctuate his point. “Right now I’m a step ahead of you, I’ve come to terms with my situation, but someday you’re going to get better - you’re already well on your way. All the shit you’re processing will be firmly in the past, and I’ll still be right here, because for me, it will never be over.” He was pacing, his shoulders pulling in and his voice rising. “I’ll always be waiting for the next time. I will always be clawing for control. What happens when you’re okay and I’m still this?”

“I’m flattered you think I could ever be okay,” Clint said wryly, taking a step toward him.

Bruce stepped away, his feet taking him to the window without thinking. “What if you resent me for holding you back? I’m already this big secret you have to work to hide.”

“You’re not holding me back. Bruce, will you stop moving?”
“Or if me being like this was too much to deal with—”

“It won’t be.”

“—and you realize you’re better off without me?” He was yelling, and he couldn’t seem to stop, the words rebounding off the walls of his fucking basement isolation cell.

“Bruce—”

“What if I resent you for passing me by?” he said, his arms locking across his chest. “Even if it’s what I deserve. I mean, everyone talks about what happened to me like the experiment went wrong, but I don’t know if that’s true! It’s possible I got Erskine’s formula right, and Steve turned into Captain America because he was just that fucking perfect to begin with, while I—I turned into the Hulk because that’s what I look like turned inside out, all ugliness and anger. What if it wasn’t my math that was wrong; what if it was just me? Who would stick around for that mess?”

“Bruce!” Clint stopped trying to catch him and just stood in the middle of the living room, dropping his arms to his side. “Bruce, will you please hug me?” The note of fear in his voice made everything seem to slow down.

Bruce stopped and took a deep breath. “I—yeah,” he said, rubbing his forehead. “Shit. Yes.” He closed the space between them, hugging Clint as tightly as he thought he could get away with. Clint’s arms enveloped him, all warm skin and well-worn cotton jersey.

Clint kissed his shoulder and the side of his head and just held on, the thumping of his heart audible through his neck. After a minute, he exhaled and said, “Okay, first off, you being okay was never a prerequisite for me caring about you. You got that? Tell me you got that, Bruce.”

Bruce nodded, resting his forehead against Clint’s shoulder. “It’s more than that, though.”

“What, the formula thing? No offense, doc, but I don’t believe for two seconds that the Hulk is a successful experiment.” His arms closed tighter around Bruce’s shoulders. “How long you been holding in that particular fear?”

Bruce just shook his head. It had been years, the entire time he’d been on the run. Having actually said the words felt like having his insides weighed and evaluated in front of an audience.

Clint kissed the side of his head hard. “You trust me?”

“Yeah.”

“Then you listen to me, Bruce Banner: there is nothing wrong with you. You’re conscientious and funny and smart as hell, and considering how much time you spend around Tony, I’m honestly impressed you’re not more of an asshole. That takes effort.” His arms relaxed a little. “And you’ve been so fucking good to me, I’d think I was dreaming, ‘cept my dreams aren’t that nice.”

Bruce couldn’t breathe for a second, all systems stalled as his brain processed the words. He swallowed. “Regardless, I can still ruin everything. That’s kind of my number one skill.”

“You won’t.”

Bruce disentangled himself from the hug, though he let Clint keep a hand on his arm. “How could you possibly know that?”

“I don’t,” Clint said, shrugging. “I just hope I’m right.”
“I hope I’m wrong,” Bruce said quietly.

“You often are,” Clint pointed out, and raised his fingers to count on them. “You were wrong about *The Hunger Games*, and soccer, and how much pizza Steve would eat, and you made that little scoffing noise when I said Han Solo was the best character in *Star Wars*, which—really, you’re wrong a lot for a guy as smart as you. And frankly, your ambivalence toward Han is way more of a potential deal-breaker for me than your mental state.”

“I’m not ambivalent about him, I just really like Leia.”

“Okay if I kiss you?”

“Yeah.”

Clint leaned in and gave him a lingering, closed-mouth kiss. Bumping their noses together, he said, “Let yourself be wrong on this one.” By the worry in his eyes, Bruce knew he wasn’t talking about Han Solo.

“I’ll try,” he said.

Bruce spent a quiet day by himself in his apartment before the charity gala, trying to build up his reserves for dealing with people. The moment he rolled up to the event with Clint and Natasha, he could tell it wouldn’t be enough. Tony had rented out an island in the East River - because of course Tony Stark knew where to rent a whole island - and the stately old converted mansion on the edge of the water was swarming with people. Peering through the windows of the limo, he caught familiar faces among the crowd, politicians and news anchors and a couple of actors whose names he couldn’t remember.

“Tony said it’d be just a small event,” he said, swallowing.

“Tony threw the Stark Expo,” Natasha said. “Never trust his definition of ‘just a small event.’”

Clint patted his hand one last time before they disembarked.

For all the people, at least it was well organized with regards to the press. A handful of photographers and journalists from sympathetic news outlets had been granted, but with strict rules about how and when they were allowed to approach guests. The rest of the media had news vans parked at the entrance of the property, and the perimeter was being guarded by a small team of SHIELD agents, headed by Fury himself. Only a handful of people from the press would be able to approach Bruce, and if he told them to fuck off, they’d be contractually obligated to do it. That, at least, was a comfort.

The evening started with a banquet. He was fairly certain Sylvia had arranged the assigned seats, because the Avengers were spread out but matched with strangers whose company they might actually enjoy. Bruce wound up at a table with an environmental lawyer whose blog he followed, a physics professor from MIT who’d recently landed a seven-figure book deal, and the president of the Children’s Television Workshop - which he suspected was a subtle nudge toward that *Sesame Street* appearance, but he decided not to mind it. Across the great hall, he spotted Clint deep in conversation with a host from the Food Network, Steve with a group of politicians and artists, and Natasha arguing with—was that J.K. Rowling? Oh boy. Tony, of course, had insinuated himself right between Pepper and Jon Stewart. There was a lot of loud laughter from that table during the course
of the meal.

The sun went down as the last of the desserts were cleared away, and Tony stood up, grabbing a microphone from one of the servers. “Ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of the Avengers, I’d like to thank you for joining us here tonight. Let me tell you a little about why we’re here.” He rambled on for fifteen minutes without cue cards, managing to hit the relevant talking points about the fund he’d set up and get a few good laughs from the room.

Bruce envied that sort of charisma. If he had a little of that himself, maybe his life would be a little easier. Closing his eyes, he put up roadblocks on that train of thought. He was trying not to think about the things he lacked tonight. There were eyes on him, he needed to look confident. He was trying. In this crowd, it was difficult.

“So please, stick around the dining room and enjoy some more wine,” Tony finished up, “or join me out in the courtyard for music and dancing. We’re glad to have you.”

Outside, thousands of lanterns flickered on across the grounds, strung between tree branches and posts, and music drifted in from the courtyard. The crowd slowly fractured, half moving outside. Bruce stayed and talked with the people at his table through the ceremonial passing of business cards, but he could see his teammates migrating outside. He wondered if he could get away with pulling Clint into a hallway for a moment alone. Probably not.

“So thank you, it was really lovely meeting you,” he told the table as he got up to leave. Sticking to the side avenues of the room, he managed to make it to the exit after only a couple times being stopped by total strangers. It was a late summer night just cool enough for formalwear, and the second he stepped outside, a breeze whipped his coat open, cooling the spot on his lower back that had been collecting sweat all evening.

The courtyard was humming with activity, a small sea of formalwear swaying to the beat of the band Tony had brought in - a DJ and a string quartet working in tandem. They broke into a cover of a pop song Bruce kept hearing on the radio—Lady Gaga? That woman with the dollar sign in her name? He couldn’t tell them apart—and the dancing stepped up its pacing, arms in the air and scarves and stoles whipping about.

Bruce spotted Sylvia leaning against a pillar nearby with a glass of wine. Wandering over, he said, “Is this music appropriate for a black tie event?”

Sylvia shrugged. “Tony makes his own definitions of ‘appropriate.’ So long as everyone goes home happy and there isn’t major property damage or a scandal with a foreign embassy involved, he can play a Fifty Shades of Grey audiobook for all I care.”

Bruce smiled. Tony was out there dancing near the front, spinning Pepper and putting on shiny grins for a couple of photographers. Steve was swaying awkwardly off to the side, half in conversation with someone Bruce was pretty sure was the governor of New York.

Natasha and Clint danced near the middle of the crowd, followed by a photographer and clearly not caring. Natasha had perfect rhythm, her red silk dress glinting in the lantern light in time to the music as she moved. Clint made up for his lack of moves with over the top enthusiasm, getting a grin out of her as he waved his arms in the air.

Bruce’s chest felt full like it did sometimes as he was falling asleep next to the guy.

Leaning against the wall beside Sylvia, he took his glasses off and cleaned them. “It’s funny, even after working for SHIELD and everything he’s been through, Clint’s more open about who he is
than most people I’ve met.”

“That’s why he’s good in front of the cameras,” Sylvia said. “People trust that sort of openness. They feel like he’s someone they could joke around with over lunch. It’s the same reason you don’t work.”

“Because I’m a closed-off asshole?” Bruce guessed.

“Well, I wasn’t going to say it quite like that,” Sylvia said, taking a sip of her drink. “Some people face this sort of thing head-on. Some hide.”

Bruce watched the dance floor, bodies in formalwear moving across his view of Clint and Natasha. Even though he had no idea how to dance to this kind of music, he wished he was out there with them. He wanted to get a goofy smile like that from Clint. He even sort of wanted people to see - not because of any desire for celebrity, just...because he was proud that he could.

“You know, I’ve been hiding in one way or another my whole life,” he said. “I had a shitty home life as a kid, and then I was out of that and in the closet, and then I was on the run. Now everything’s fine, and I’m still hiding.”

“That’s rough,” Sylvia said, the tone of her voice sincere.

“It sucks,” Bruce said, laughing a little.

He hated the idea of having his personal life picked apart by the public. But he also didn’t want to feel like he was hiding anymore. No, scratch that. He didn’t deserve to feel like he was hiding. He had a pardon from the US government, a stable home, and friends who cared enough to try to make him talk about his goddamn feelings at four in the morning. He even had a weirdly amazing boyfriend who cooked him French toast and told him there was nothing wrong with him. And that was inaccurate, there were plenty of things wrong with him, but the thing he was hiding wasn’t one of them.

He eyed the photographers on and around the dance floor, trapping the tip of his tongue between his lips.

Sylvia looked him up and down, her eyebrows rising. “You talking yourself into something, sweetheart?”

Bruce weighed the potential for humiliation against the potential for relief. They were dead even until the band switched to a slow song. This, he could dance to. Relief won out.

“Yeah,” Bruce said, pushing himself off the wall. “I think I just did.”

Sylvia smiled and fished her phone out of her pocket. “Go melt some hearts, Banner.”

Bruce walked out into the courtyard, trying to make himself as small as possible in the gaps between dancing couples. Clint and Natasha were swaying together at the center of the courtyard, not really dancing, just sort of chatting through the song. Bruce tapped Clint on the shoulder.

Clint turned and smiled. “I was just wondering if table four’s geek club was going to join the party.”

Bruce cleared his throat. “I was hoping I could have this dance?”

Clint dropped his hands from Natasha’s waist and made to get out of the way. “Sure, I don’t mind.”

Bruce smiled down at the ground for a second, working up his nerve. Deep breath. Extending a hand
to Clint, he tried not to wince as he said, “I meant with you.”

Clint stopped, his eyes going wide. “You’re serious?”

Bruce nodded, biting his lip and praying for a Yes.

“All right,” Clint said, taking his hand with a grin. “You’re leading.”

Bruce pulled him in, hands on his waist, and leaned in close as the band hit the chorus.

“You boys enjoy yourselves,” Natasha said, peering across the crowd at someone. “I have unfinished business regarding Remus Lupin.”

“No unforgivable curses,” Clint called after her as she strode off across the courtyard. Turning his attention back to Bruce, he said, “Where were we?”

Bruce grinned, his heart hammering in his throat, and kissed him. Camera flashes went off nearby, and for once, he was glad to see them.

For a few minutes, they were in their own little world a foot apart, insulated by music and a wall of people. When the song ended, the violins switched to an oddly familiar tune. Bruce paused, looking toward the band. Tony was standing behind the DJ, crossing his arms and sending Bruce a thumbs up that was not nearly as covert as he seemed to think it was.

The opening lyrics of “I Melt With You” came across the sound system.

Clint started laughing.

Bruce shook his head, gave him a shrug, and started singing along. Clint pulled back just enough to move in that exaggerated method of flailing he seemed to deem “dancing.” Bruce wasn’t much better, and they both cracked up more than once.

He could see the headlines now: Hulk and Hawkeye Having Gay Affair, Can’t Dance. When he thought about it, the second part was what he should probably be more worried about. As they danced, he caught glances from the rest of the team around the courtyard: Natasha smiling smugly from where she was talking with Pepper and a small cluster of authors, Steve giving a little nod from his spot against the wall, and Sylvia still by her pillar, pulling media puppet strings from her smartphone and raising her glass in heir direction.

About half a dozen songs in, they retreated from the dance floor to hydrate. The caterers had set up a table with punch along the area where the paving stones of the courtyard turned into the garden. They had to shut down a couple of journalists along the way, but Tony’s strict “No means move the hell on” policy with the press who were invited made sure it was nowhere near as annoying as usual. A quick “Not now, please” sufficed.

One of the caterers served them up ice water and punch, and they stood by edge of the table, looking out over the landscaped hill that rolled into the East River. Bruce stood arm to arm with Clint, unable to stop smiling even when flashes went off behind them. Those were going to be pretty nice pictures. The dots of lanterns along the shore in front of them mimicked the lights of the city on the other shore.

“You know what this means?” Clint said, squeezing his hand.

“What?” Bruce said.
Clint grinned. “When we go back to The London, I can introduce you to Chef Ramsay as my boyfriend.”

God, his face was going to hurt from smiling tomorrow. He took Clint’s free hand.

Clint’s expression darkened suddenly, and Bruce followed him as he turned. The grip on his hand went crushingly tight.

Bruce had just enough time to notice a man in a caterer’s uniform pulling a handgun out from under a serving cart, and then the barrel was aimed right at his face.

The last thought that went through his mind was: I hate being right.

He barely registered the sound of the gunshot before his head jerked back and he was falling, the Other Guy racing to catch him.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Special thanks once again to printed_soot for betaing my Hulk POV.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The bullet tastes bitter, like iron. Ground between your teeth, it sparks and turns to grit. You growl, rising off the stony ground.

Screams issue from the crowd. People scatter - so small and breakable, ants dressed up to impress each other. Ants calling for help. Ants on the hillside hissing “We have a containment situation” into earpieces, as if they could contain you. Let them try. You’ll crush their carefully laid-out tunnels underfoot and mash their bodies to paste against the sidewalk.

Fabric cuts across your waist, too tight but not tight enough to tear away. It hurts. Everything hurts, from your bones to the high-pitched whine in your head, a constant, constant stream of Banner’s worst hits.

“Bruce?” comes a voice from the ground.

Not here, you growl. You are not a small, wounded creature crying into the snow. You are not a child cowering under the stairs. The earth shakes for you. Cities crumble. You’ll outlast them all.

Another ant stands where the crowd has cleared, one with a pitiable weapon and sweat dripping down his forehead. He fires, a burst of light and a pop, and it hits your skin like a spitball and rolls off. A growl coils up from deep in your belly as your fingers curl into fists. Nails bite skin.

This is the man who tried to kill Banner. That’s not allowed. Yell to tell him so, hitting him with hot breath and spittle.

The man with the gun makes a pathetic sound and runs. The sharp twin scents of fear and urine follow him. You dig your fingertips into the paving stones and launch forward.

He ducks inside and slams the door behind himself. You reach for the handle while his hand is still on the other side, ripping it off its hinges. He doesn’t come with it.

Draw back and punch through the wall. It crumbles and groans and tries to bite your knuckles. Bite it back. Tear it down and take the roof with it.

Inside, tables block your path. The man with the gun wrestles with locked doors on the opposite end of the room. Wading through the tables like water, you pick one up and throw it at his head. He’s just fast enough to duck away, and it crashes through plaster beside him.

Someone screams to your left. More ants. You growl, and they trample each other, shatter wine bottles on the floor to get away. When you turn back, the man with the gun is running for an exit. You chase him.

Light fixtures burst and spark against your skull. Another wall gives way, and you’re outside again, grass underfoot. He runs between trees, and you follow. A tripwire of lanterns cuts at your chest.
Tear it down, taking trees with it.

Catch him by the leg. Raise him up slowly, take a long smell of his fear.

“Please!” he cries.

What a funny word. Asking permission, asking mercy, same word. Neither is real.

“Hulk!” someone shouts. Familiar voice.

You turn, and you growl.

Rogers stands by the uprooted trees, dressed up for the ant party and holding his shield. “I know you don’t wanna hear this,” he says, “but we need him alive for questioning. Put him down.”

You snort and shake your head.

Rogers clenches his jaw and says, “All right” as he throws his shield.

The betrayal stings, but not as much as the shield rebounding off your forehead. You pitch over, letting the pain out in a yell that shakes the ground. Then Rogers is on you, prying at your fingers to release the man with the gun.

Hauling back, you hook him with your fist. He crashes back across the lawn, throwing up dirt and grass in his wake.

The man with the gun is still pleading, but his words make no sense. Your head aches and whines. Everything hurts. You’re sick of him.

You do what anyone would do: you turn and throw him into the river. The splash is satisfying. Good riddance.

Rogers lurches up and runs toward the water’s edge. You yell after him, crouching to run, but someone calls, “Stop right there, please.”

They emerge from the trees in front of you, swarms of them in black suits with guns aimed at you. They’ve done this before. They call it containment, surround you, try to puncture your hide, gas you until you choke, make your skin crackle with fire and the hairs burn away. The Chitauri did this, too. You back away, your feet striking paving stones.

The one with the eye patch walks in the center, carrying a handgun. Another man with a gun. “I’m gonna ask you to calm down now,” he says, unafraid. They’re always unafraid. They don’t understand.

Calm is for monsters like them who can afford it. Every inch of your impervious skin, every unsnappable bone in you is built from times when calm failed. Banner lets it fail over and over, keeps returning to it like a security blanket. He’s an idiot.

“No,” you rumble.

“They’re always unafraid. They don’t understand.

“Then I’m afraid we’ll have to do this the hard way,” the man with the eyepatch says. He gestures with his hand, and the black suits around him close in.

Let them. Feed on this fear. Slam your fists into the ground. You won’t be contained. You’ll tear out their spines and hang them from power lines like old sneakers.
“Guns down!” someone shouts.

You know that voice, too. The one Banner loves. Barton. He’s wearing a black suit, but he’s not one of them. He’s unarmed.

Pushing into the circle, he stands between you and the man with the eyepatch. “You shoot at him, and you’ll just make it worse. Stand down and back the fuck off!”

You grunt in agreement, fists clenching at your sides.

The man with the eyepatch looks between you and Barton and gestures with his hand. The rest of the suits pull back, their circle around you widening. “You have two minutes,” he says.

Barton sighs, turning to you. He’s wearing Banner’s blood, a bright red arc staining his white shirt and dappling his chin. He looks you in the eye and says, “Good job. You took the bastard down.”

You grin viciously. No one appreciates your work.

He doesn’t smile. His voice is hard. “SHIELD will take it from here, and they will not be nice about it. He’s never going to see sunlight again.”

Hidden in the dark in pain for the rest of his life. Yes, that sounds good. You nod.

Barton steps toward you, his hands open. “Okay, big guy, I need a favor from you. I’m asking this as a friend. You’ve done your job, and now I need to make sure Bruce is okay. Will you let him out for me?”

You scowl, straightening up to your full height, towering over him.

Barton doesn’t flinch. “No one is going to hurt him again while he’s with me. And if they try, I’ll throw them in the river myself, I fucking promise you that.”

You’re starting to like Barton.

“Please trust me,” he says, quietly. He smells of fear, but not the prey kind. Fear for Banner?

Please is a stupid word. It’s the sort of word Banner likes.

Goddammit, Banner.

Growling low in your throat, you shrug.

Barton makes a small sounds. “Thanks.”

Exhaling, you sit down and let your eyes close.

Everything hurt, his back a line of fire, his hands too stiff to move, his head a foreign body spinning somewhere above. It smelled like blood. Had he—oh, God. Oh, no. Oh, please, no.

Someone said his name nearby, and he took a shaky breath, letting his eyes open. The lights of the courtyard came into focus through a settling cloud of dust. Rubble everywhere, the whole place cleared out. Helicopters nearing.
Clint. Clint crouched over him, one hand supporting the back of his head. His new tux was stained
with dust and a spray of blood that looked like it came from—oh.

“Bruce. You with me?”

Bruce flattened a hand to the gritty paving stones under himself and lurched to a sitting position.
“Did I hurt anyone?”

Clint didn’t back up, his face inches away. “Hulk beat the living hell out of a would-be assassin, but
the party guests are safe. Tony and Natasha got ’em clear, and Steve fished the suspect out of the
river.”

Safe. Jesus. Bruce’s body felt like it was going to collapse right back down. He exhaled, his eyes
prickling with tears. “You sure?”

“Nothing life-threatening,” Clint said. “Landed a pretty good punch to Steve, but he’s all right,
wouldn’t have interfered if he couldn’t take it.”

“I punched Steve?” He didn’t know how to feel about that. The courtyard was spinning. A breeze
gusted across it, raising the hairs on his bare legs. “That was a really expensive suit,” he realized
aloud.

“Less expensive than your funeral,” Clint said, pulling off his tuxedo jacket. “Now, the press is here,
and you are very naked. Let’s get you covered up.” He laid the jacket across Bruce’s middle,
covering him from the bottom of his sternum to the tops of his thighs.

The lining of the jacket was silky and warm from body heat, a sharp contrast to the cold, rough
surface of the paving stones. It almost tickled where it touched hair. Bruce wished it were heavier,

enough to pin him to the ground, enough to flatten him so his skin would stop screaming and his
bones would stay put. This was the Other Guy’s body now, a strange, aching suit with his brain
trapped inside. A series of camera flashes popped somewhere nearby, reminding him of gunfire.

“Help,” he heard himself say, barely a full syllable.

“What can I do?” Clint asked, leaning in.

Bruce grabbed his arm - not wrist, trying not to go too tight, Never OK - and clung, pressing his face
to Clint’s shoulder and inhaling the smell of sweat on him. “Get me out of here.”

“Natasha’s interrogating the bad guy,” Tony said, striding over in his impossibly clean tux. “Man,
she is terrifying when she’s angry. I don’t even know what to say, guys. My caterers go through as
many background checks as SHIELD applicants. This shouldn’t have happened.”

“He wasn’t a professional,” Clint said, his voice tight. “His hands shook when he removed his
weapon, and he barely hit an easy close-range target. But the way he hesitated, it didn’t look like
vengeance, either. He was hired, and not for marksmanship. Probably sabotage.”

“You think somebody paid one of my caterers to set off the Hulk?” Tony said.

“I bet he’s got a mountain of debt and someone back home who’s just had a very generous off-shore
bank account opened in their name.”

Tony swore under his breath. “All right, screw due process, I’m telling Sylvia to get the word out.
Fucking sabotage, really?” He paused just long enough that he must be texting. “Steve’s on civilian-
wrangling duty, Fury’s team is holding the press at arm’s reach, and the police are on their way.
What can I help with here?”

More camera flashes. Bruce swore, hiding his eyes in Clint’s collar.

“I need to get him home,” Clint said. “Ideally, clothed.”

“I’m on it,” Tony said, disappearing.

Clint crouched there, letting Bruce hold onto him. He smelled like home, safe and private, and when a reporter from the crowd beyond the courtyard called out, “Doctor Banner!” he extended his free arm and flipped them off. Bruce peered over his collar at that unbending middle finger and the offended looks on the faces of the press in the middle distance and realized that if he hadn’t already fallen for the guy, this would’ve been the moment to do it.

Tony returned a few minutes later with a bundle of clothes and three guests. Bruce recognized one of them from his table at the banquet, one of them from Steve’s table, and the third…looked really familiar. The face recognition database in his mind brought up static. Tony tossed Bruce the clothes and shrugged off his jacket, nodding to the guests to do the same.

“Gentlemen,” he said. “Madam. A little privacy, please.”

The guests held up their jackets in an arc around Bruce, shielding him from the press. Clint helped Bruce to his feet and let him lean while he clumsily pulled on the cotton jogging pants. They were a little loose, and he thanked whatever genius had invented drawstrings. Once he had the t-shirt on, he leaned heavily against Clint, who draped his own tux jacket over Bruce’s shoulders and said, “Okay.” The people making up the privacy curtain put their jackets back on and started back for the barriers SHIELD had erected around the scene.

“Thanks, Jon,” Tony told the third man, giving him a casual handshake as he turned to leave. “I don’t want to see any big green censor bars on my TV, all right?”

“Too easy,” Jon said, waving the idea off. “Take care, Tony. Hope to see you on the show again soon.”

Tony turned away and frowned, muttering, “I would if my publicist would let me.” Switching gears, he dropped his shoulders and gave a dramatic sigh. “Magical night, huh? My car’s pulling around back to pick you two up. Let me take you there.”

The quiet of the limo’s backseat was a godsend. Bruce already felt like he was coming out of his skin, and the eyes and voices of the hundreds of people behind the barriers had not been helping. He sank into the buttery leather seat and leaned into Clint, trying to take full meditative breaths while only half upright.

Fuck it. Breathing fully was overrated. The Other Guy’d had his time out on the playground tonight, anyway - he was settled in the back of Bruce’s mind, sleeping the sleep of a deeply sated monster.

“We’ll be home in fifteen,” Clint said, his voice almost booming in the quiet of the car. “How can I help until then?”

“Hold onto me,” Bruce said, resting his forehead against Clint’s chest.

“Where?” Clint asked.

Bruce huffed out a laugh. “Anywhere. Doesn’t matter - body’s too shaken up to remember where it hid the panic buttons.”
“You sure about that? I don’t want to make things worse.”

“Yeah,” Bruce breathed, the textured stripes on Clint’s shirt pressing lines into his cheek. “Touching you helps. I feel a little more like myself.”

Only his own body knew the shape of Clint’s. The Other Guy’s hands had never mapped the curve of Clint’s arms or the patterns of scars on his knuckles. The Other Guy didn’t know the satisfyingly human scent he carried around even fresh out of the shower, or how to read his mood in the pressure of a particular touch. No, Clint was all his. Even the idea of his stupid body’s alarm reactions was comforting, because those were uniquely Bruce’s. This malfunctioning body was his, and at least it had an *Always OK* and *Ask First* list, because for the Other Guy, everything was filed under *Never OK*.

Clint roped an arm around his shoulders and pulled him in, pressing a kiss against his hair and making dust sprinkle down. His shirt was stiff enough that Bruce could hear the fabric moving. Bruce reached to take his other hand.

“I got you,” Clint said against his hair. “I got you.” His grip was harder than usual, and listening to his heart jump in his chest, Bruce realized that Clint probably had no idea how far the invincibility thing went.

“I’m okay,” he said, tugging that arm tighter around himself. “I was always okay.”

“I watched you get shot in the face,” Clint said. His voice was even, but there went his heartbeat, hammering.

“He always protects me when that happens,” Bruce said, trying to be comforting.

“How many times have you been shot in the face?” Clint said, and this time his voice accompanied his pulse on its sharp rise.

Maybe they should just talk about cooking shows.

At the tower, they went straight up to Clint’s apartment, where Clint got him into the bathroom and started the water. “Shower or bath?”

“Bath,” Bruce said, sitting on the closed lid of the toilet. “Not a big fan of showers.” Showerheads had an irritating tendency to remind him of gunfire sometimes. That seemed like a thing to avoid right now. While Clint filled the tub, Bruce peeled off the t-shirt he was wearing and stared down at the unfamiliar logo on the front of it. “Did Tony say whose clothes these were?”

“Gym clothes from the governor’s trunk,” Clint said.

Bruce frowned down at himself. “I’ve been wearing the governor’s pants? Do you think he wants them back?”

Clint took the t-shirt from his hands, wadded it up, and tossed it into the corner. “I’m sure Tony will send him a gift card or something.” He got up and made to step out of the room. “I’ll let you clean up.”

Bruce reached out, grabbing his fingers. “Stay.”

Maybe it was a weird request, but Clint didn’t seem to mind. He just took a seat on the floor next to the bathtub and dangled a hand over the edge while Bruce slipped into the water. Bruce certainly didn’t mind having company while he was naked - the last of his culturally ingrained hangups about
nudity had flown out the window years ago, thanks to the Other Guy.

The water was just hot enough to be unignorable, a little reminder to his brain that he was here in this particular body and not a floating head. He plunged himself all the way under the water for a few seconds, holding onto that hand, and pulled himself back up. The water already had a fine film of debris on top. Bruce frowned at it, pushing his hair back from his face.

“You, uh,” Clint said, gesturing. “You’ve still got a little blood there.”

Bruce wiped a hand under his left eye. “Did I get it?”

“No.” Grabbing a washcloth, Clint wet it and ran it across Bruce’s cheek. “There we go,” he said, handing Bruce the cloth.

Bruce ran the nubbly fabric between his fingers, thinking dimly of radiation and transatlantic flights. Right. Hardly a biohazard. He used a clean corner of the washcloth to wipe blood from Clint’s chin, then dropped it into the water. His eyes flickered down to Clint’s shirt. “You’ve still got some on you.”

“Right.” Untying his bowtie, Clint said, “You mind if I take this crap off?”

“Yes,” Bruce deadpanned. “There’s a strict black tie dress code in here.”

Clint chuckled, stripping off his shirt and kicking the slacks across the room. Down to his boxers, he relaxed into the corner where the tub met the wall and dangled his left hand in the water, his fingertips skirting Bruce’s arm.

Bruce reached for the shampoo and groaned, his shoulders aching. Why did his shoulders always hurt worst after the Other Guy? “Could you help me wash my hair?” he asked.

“How about you aren’t kidding about the alarm thing, huh?” Clint said, grabbing the shampoo for him. “He really shut it down.”

“I always have a while after where it feels like I’m living in someone else’s body,” Bruce said, closing his eyes while Clint squeezed the gel onto his head. It was cooler than his wet hair when it seeped down to his scalp.

“Yeah?” Clint said. He hesitated a moment before rubbing the shampoo in, but when Bruce tipped his head back, he dug in, massaging it in properly with both hands.

“It’s sorta like…” Bruce started, trying to think through the fingers in his hair. God, that felt good. “It’s like trying to go on living in your apartment after the place was trashed and robbed. Feels like someone’s taken it away from you, even though it’s still here. Your stuff that’s still intact isn’t where you left it, you gotta take a while to put things back in order. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah,” Clint said, and filled a cup with clean water to pour over Bruce’s head. His jaw was tight as he said, “I know that feeling.”

“I’m sorry,” Bruce said.

“Not your fault,” Clint said. Dumping another cupful over Bruce’s hair, he smoothed it back with his palm.

Bruce leaned back into his hand, exhaling. “This time isn’t that bad because you’re here. Last time wasn’t that bad because the minute I woke up, I had a purpose to cling to. Distractions are good,
those help. The worst—"

He rubbed a hand over his brow, doubting for a second whether he should say. But it was Clint. Clint wasn’t there in the lab when everyone else found out, and he of any of them deserved to know.

“The worst was a while back, when I decided to end it,” he said. “I hiked out into the middle of nowhere, put a gun in my mouth, and pulled the trigger. The Other Guy spat it out. Came to in the snow fifty miles from the nearest town, alone, wishing for a death I couldn’t have and feeling so far out of my own body it took days to come down.”

Clint poured water back over his head and combed fingers through his hair, all the way down to the nape of his neck. “That sucks,” he said. Sincere, no judgment. His hand rubbed a slow circle at the base of Bruce’s neck. “Would you resent me if I said I’m grateful he did that, because it means I get to have you now?”

Bruce mulled over the question. The circles stopped. He smiled a little and answered, “No.”

Clint visibly relaxed, his fingers curling in the back of Bruce’s hair. “I’ve been thinking about what you said the other day,” he said. “I can’t guarantee you won’t resent me, but I can promise you I’ll be here to resent. If you gotta sit in your apartment and have a good hate-on about me for a while, I’ll be just upstairs, waiting for it to pass.” He tipped his head to the side. “And maybe making you a therapy appointment at SHIELD, because I’m pretty sure they’re the only shrinks in the world qualified to deal with you anyway.”

Bruce took a deep breath. “Yeah, I should…probably consider that.”

“Yeah? I’ve got a good one I could refer you to. She watched all five seasons of Kitchen Nightmares just to make me talk to her when we first started out, and she’s already a fan of you.”

“Okay,” Bruce said, settling into the sensation of fingers combing lines through his hair.

When he got out of the bath, Clint toweled off his hair for him and kissed him. Bruce knew it was a joke, but he wrapped his hands around Clint’s hips anyway and kissed him deeply enough to press him up against the wall. If the alarms in his head were temporarily disabled, then dammit, he was going to take advantage of that fact.

When he pulled away, his body was humming pleasantly with warmth, and his hair was dry enough to drop the towel. He kissed the corner of Clint’s mouth and traced his nose along the line of Clint’s cheekbone, saying softly, “If you’re up for it, I’d like to get you off.”

Clint caught his mouth with a quick kiss. “I’m up for it. There’s a definite vertical trend here.”

“How about we move this to a more horizontal location?” Bruce tried, raising his eyebrows.

Clint laughed a little too hard. “Y’know, that was almost smooth.”

Bruce pulled back. “Too much eyebrow?”

“The eyebrows are fine. I love these eyebrows.” Clint was still snickering as he smoothed his thumbs across Bruce’s brow. “These eyebrows don’t deserve to be subjected to bad innuendo.”

“I haven’t done this in a while,” Bruce admitted. “Like…over a decade.”

“That’s all right, doc,” Clint said, patting him on the cheek. “I’m easy.”
“I just don’t want you to be disappointed if—”

Clint cut him off by stepping out of the bathroom. Trailing down the hallway, his voice called, “Come get your ass in my bed, Banner!”

Bruce dropped his remaining towel and hurried after him.

Clint wasn’t kidding. From the moment Bruce slid a hand down his stomach, the guy was a living tutorial, providing information on where to touch while they were just making out, when to go past the waistband, how he liked to be gripped, what pressure to use, everything. Bruce remembered trying this for the first time in his twenties and fumbling through it silently, alternately guessing blindly and inputting items from the short list of tactics that he’d figured out worked on himself. Having direction was fantastic. Not only did it minimize the awkward guesswork, but it also let him relax, sure he was doing the right thing, so he could spend his time in more productive ways.

Like memorizing the areas of his lover’s body he hadn’t had access to previously.

And deconstructing the appropriate use of the word *lover* in his head, because it was sort of antiquated and felt silly to use, even if did fit literally.

And kissing until Clint lost the focus to respond in kind, then whispering semi-filthy encouragements into his ear instead.

And paying close attention to the final staccato pattern of breaths and the sound they built up to, where the voice that would argue differing opinions with him for hours lost all its reason and consonants and just poured out.

Yeah, instruction was definitely a superior system.

While Bruce grabbed the tissues from next to the bed, Clint rolled onto his back, laughter bubbling out of him. Not mocking laughter.

“That was all right?” Bruce ventured.

“That was better than all right,” Clint said, grinning at him.

“My hand’s kind of cramping,” Bruce muttered, and that set Clint off laughing again. It was contagious. After a minute, Bruce couldn’t help but curl toward him, rubbing his sore hand and giggling.

They calmed down while Clint cleaned himself up. He wiped a tear from his eye with one last little pop of a laugh and said, “You want me to jerk you off or anything?”

Bruce considered it briefly. “No, I think I’m gonna need more time to get comfortable with that. It’s a control thing.”

Clint nodded. “We got time.”

They did. Enough time to work back up to this when Bruce’s body was being its usual pain in the ass self. It wasn’t like either of them were going anywhere.

“A while back, you mentioned giving massages…” Bruce said, letting the statement trail off in case the offer wasn’t on the table anymore.

Clint immediately sat up straight. “You want a massage? I can do that. What parts are bugging
“All of them,” Bruce said. “Shoulders and upper back are the worst, though.”

“Okay,” Clint said. “Roll over. I’ll go real slow and let you know what I’m doing. You tell me if anything’s off-limits or you want me to stop.”

Shifting onto his stomach, Bruce tried to relax his arms against his sides. Even after the hot bath, his muscles felt like knots and knives.

Clint straddled his thighs, warm skin and soft fabric pressing him down into the mattress. His hands skimmed the length of Bruce’s back experimentally, and he leaned forward, planting a light kiss on one shoulder. “Mind if I crack your back?”

“You can try, but even before, it was hard to—” Clint’s hands climbed either side of his spine, bearing his weight down and expertly issuing a series of pops, and Bruce’s sentence trailed off into several syllables of “Jesus.”

Wherever he pushed down, Bruce’s back felt like it was releasing a decade worth of pent-up tension. By the time his hands left Bruce’s neck, it felt good for the first time since he couldn’t remember when, everything aligned and pliable as butter.

“You good?” Clint asked.

“Oh my god,” Bruce answered.

Fingers stroked through his hair. “Awesome. Now let’s see about those shoulders.”

Clint’s hands dug into the muscle where neck and back met, making slow circular motions with his thumbs. They moved confidently, their grip unyieldingly strong and perfectly aimed. The first time his thumb met a knot in Bruce’s shoulder, Bruce groaned into the pillow without meaning to as the tension unraveled.

“It shouldn’t surprise me, but holy shit are you tense,” Clint said, working at the spot in his upper back where he always hunched forward.

“Uh-huh,” Bruce said into the pillow, trying to keep his voice from reaching the upper registers.

Fuck, that was good. It felt like the pressure valve bottoming out while he played Mario Kart, only more physical, and with an undercurrent of such raw comfort that Bruce wasn’t sure what to do with it. He hadn’t trusted anyone with his body like this in such a long time. Part of him was waiting for the pain and violation to catch up, but they didn’t. Instead, calm crept through him quietly, swallowing up every dissenting voice in its path and insisting that he was safe and cared for and exactly where he should be.

Clint’s hands didn’t seem to get weaker as he went on - maybe overdoing the physical therapy exercises had been a good call after all. His fingers exterminated knots with an efficiency Bruce hadn’t known was possible, and once he was done with Bruce’s shoulders and back, he moved on to Bruce’s arms, paying special attention to his hands, and then on to his legs, working from buttocks to ankle.

“Flip over,” Clint said.

Bruce couldn’t actually remember the last time someone had touched his feet. His toes curled in toward Clint’s fingers as they worked the ball of each foot, and the rest of his body sank and settled.
It was like doing corpse pose at the end of a yoga session, except for once, his body actually felt like it would relax for longer than five minutes. That, and he was buck-ass nude, watching a beautiful man with the world’s most talented hands rub his feet.

He might just have to let the Other Guy out more often if he got to do this afterward.

At the end of it, Clint crawled up the bed to lie beside him. “Okay?” he said, yawning.

“Very okay,” Bruce answered.

They settled into their usual sleeping positions, just a few points of contact. It was enough.

Bruce woke to the faint sound of voices and the other side of the bed empty. It took him a few blinks to realize what was so strange about the view from his pillow: the curtains on the bedroom windows were wide open and pouring in sunlight. They must have forgotten to close them the night before, he thought, and blinked heavily. It didn’t look like early morning. That was full-on midday sunlight.

“What time is it?” he muttered, wiping a hand across his eyes.

“It’s 12:30 PM,” Jarvis answered immediately. “The temperature outside is 67°F, and Agent Barton is in the living room.”

Bruce couldn’t remember the last time he’d slept so late. Sitting up, he took a quick survey of his body. It felt mostly relaxed, shoulders already starting to hunch a little but nothing too severe. More importantly, it felt like his.

There was a single red rose lying on the bedside table with his glasses - the sort of beat-up little flower you’d find by the counter at a gas station in February. Tented beside it was a note that said You’ll probably want to put on pants. The dim chatter of voices outside told him why.

Dragging his legs out of bed, Bruce stood up. He didn’t have much of his own in Clint’s closet, so a few minutes later when he walked out into the hallway, he was wearing the fleece Hulk pajama bottoms and one of Clint’s old SHIELD t-shirts. It probably looked ridiculous, but it wasn’t like the press was waiting for him in the living room.

Sylvia was, though - along with Clint, the rest of the Avengers who’d been at the gala, and—Christ, Fury was here. He was sitting in Natasha’s recliner with his boots up on the coffee table, looking extremely out of place. When Bruce shuffled in, he eyed him up and down and lowered his brow.

“I didn’t know you made house calls,” Bruce said.

“I didn’t know you had merchandise,” Fury replied, crossing his arms.

“Hey, Sleeping Beauty’s up,” Tony said, opening his arms wide. “We’ve just been talking about you.”

That didn’t bode well.

Clint pushed himself off the end of the sectional where he was sitting with Natasha and crossed the room. Putting himself between Bruce and the group, he said, “How are you? Can I get you something to eat?”
Bruce tried leaning against him, nose to shoulder and chest to chest. The sensation was familiar in that way that called up a dozen other times touching Clint and one touch he hadn’t quite overwritten yet.

He kissed Clint’s shoulder and pulled away, sighing. “Back to my old self. And food sounds amazing.”

Grinning, Clint took his hand and pressed a kiss to his knuckles. “Coming right up,” he said, retreating into the kitchen.

“Somebody’s in a good mood,” Tony said, raising an eyebrow.

Bruce glanced over at Natasha, who had such a blank poker face on right now that he knew Clint had told her everything about last night. He vaguely remembered Clint texting on his phone while they were drifting off to sleep, and he wondered if the two of them had some kind of code for “I just had sex” or if Natasha’s phone was now filled with embarrassing text messages.

She caught Bruce’s eye and patted the open seat next to her. He shrugged and joined her on the sectional, surveying the group. Sylvia was at the opposite end, near the Director and Tony, a tablet in her lap and her phone on the arm of the couch. Steve was on his other side, and the two of them exchanged an awkward little nod.

“Sorry I punched you,” Bruce whispered.

“It’s okay,” Steve replied, half smiling. “Kind of surprised it didn’t happen sooner.”

“As I was telling the others,” Fury said, giving Bruce his full attention, “the wife of the man who shot you received a sizable payment to a bank account in Switzerland yesterday afternoon. While our agents sweet-talk the Swiss government into handing that information over, we’ve got a suspect under surveillance who had the means, motive, and fortune to pull off this sort of sabotage.”

“I still think it could be One Million Moms,” Tony muttered, toying with his phone.

“It is not One Million Moms,” Fury said, with a tone like he’d had to repeat this more than once. “One Million Moms doesn’t have the resources. Justin Hammer does.”

“Who’s Justin Hammer?” Bruce asked.

“He’s Tony’s nemesis,” Natasha said.

“He is not my nemesis,” Tony piped up, raising a finger. “Justin Hammer is a cheap Tony Stark knock-off that the US military bought out of the trunk of a car in the K-Mart parking lot. He’s currently in prison for, among other things, failing to be me.”

“That’s not why he’s in prison,” Natasha said.

“Among other things!” Tony said.

“And this guy hates you enough to hire someone to take a shot at me?” Bruce said.

Fury folded his hands in his lap. “He’d like nothing more than to discredit Stark, and what better way to do that than to prove the Avengers a threat at their own charity event, hosted by Stark?”

The word threat curled uncomfortably in Bruce’s ears. Clint returned with a sandwich for him: chicken, swiss, and pesto. Bruce stared at it, the hunger in his stomach suddenly replaced with
nerves. “Exactly how much damage did I do?”

“Nothing I can’t cut a check for,” Tony said.

“There were zero casualties and only a dozen people treated for injuries, all minor,” Steve added.

“No,” Bruce said, “I mean…making us look like a threat.”

Sylvia looked up from her tablet. “So far today, we’ve seen a 6% rise in news pieces questioning the Avengers’ ability to protect the populace. But considering the rest of what’s come out, I’m calling it a win.” She tapped her tablet and flared out her fingers, and the device’s screen exploded outward, projecting dozens of images in the air around her.

Bruce set his plate on the coffee table and stood up, moving in closer to see.

Headlines like Assassination Attempt Goes Wrong at Avengers Gala and Gay Superheroes Fend Off Attack.

A photo of Clint standing in front of the Other Guy with his arms raised in an almost pleading way, captioned Hawkeye Tames the Hulk.

A muted video of Bruce being shot and the Other Guy emerging, clearly taken on a guest’s smartphone, with the title Shooting at Charity Event [Warning: disturbing].

And one particular photo being reused over and over: a wall of people holding their jackets out to give Bruce a privacy screen while he got dressed after. The light source was coming from behind him, nearly turning his and Clint’s upper bodies into silhouettes and allowing just enough light to show the faces of the men holding the jackets.

“This one’s my favorite,” Sylvia said, blowing up the New York Times cover story. “‘We’re With You: New York responds to an attack on its mightiest heroes.’ I thought it was a nice touch that Tony enlisted an academic, a liberal newscaster, and a conservative congressman to help with that particular task.”

“You’ve trained me well,” Tony said.

Bruce stared at the cover, relief filling his chest. Last night had been his worst-case scenario brought to life, and this? This was actually kind of okay. More than okay. There wasn’t a single photo of him frowning at cameras. No one was dredging up the old Mr. Hyde jokes - at least, none of the news outlets he usually paid attention to.

A small screencap in the corner caught his eye. He zoomed in on it, bringing up a photo of Clint holding one arm protectively around him and using the other to flip off the press. Oh No They Didn’t had captioned it A Night To Remember. Bruce huffed out a laugh.

“I’ve taken the liberty of holding all media inquiries for you for the day,” Sylvia told him. “Although, I’d like to work out at least a short release regarding your relationship once you’re up for it. A press conference may be in store for later in the week.”

“Uh-huh.” Bruce sat back down, trying to figure out whether it was the media coverage or the fact that he hadn’t eaten yet that was making him feel so dazed all of a sudden.

He must have looked it, because Natasha set a hand on his and said, “Are we done here?”

“Until further notice,” Director Fury said, standing up. “When I know more, I’ll be in touch. I
applaud your handling of last night’s situation - you in particular, Agent Barton.”

Clint nodded. “Thank you, sir.”

He turned to Sylvia. “And you, Ms. Cho-Gable. The unfortunate reality is that this team will always be the target of someone. The public may be prove to be one of the most useful allies they’ve got.”

“Why don’t we catch the elevator together, Nick?” Sylvia said, clicking off her tablet and getting to her feet. “I have a proposal for you.”

“I’m all ears,” Fury said.

After they left, Bruce had no idea what to do. He ate his sandwich because Natasha put the plate in front of his face. He slumped into the couch and watched an episode of *Kitchen Nightmares* because Clint wanted to introduce Steve to it. When everyone else left, he sat at the kitchen island, watching Clint mix up a marinade for tomorrow’s dinner.

After a long stretch of silence, punctuated only by the sounds of clinking utensils and hand washing, Clint asked, “You okay?”

Bruce crossed his arms against the edge of the counter. “Yeah, I just…I was right. I told Sylvia during that first meeting that the Other Guy would get out on camera, and it happened.” He let out a long breath. “I really didn’t want to be right.”

“You were still wrong about it happening on *Sesame Street,*” Clint pointed out. “No excuse not to make an appearance now.”

“I’m not doing *Sesame Street.*”

“See? There you go, being wrong again.” Clint held up a spoon. “Try this.”

Bruce tasted the marinade and nodded. “Needs more salt,” he said, and then, quieter: “I might consider *The Daily Show.* Jon Stewart seemed nice.”

Clint stared up at him with an expression approaching pride. “Cool if I kiss you?”

Bruce answered him by sliding in closer, roping a hand around the back of his head, and drawing him in for a kiss. It was slow, mouths closed, just the languid pressure of lips and a hand pulling gently at his hips. And shit, there was the first hint of the alarms, creeping in at low volume. This was definitely Bruce’s defective body.

He pulled back and kissed Clint’s nose, partly because he felt like it and partly as reassurance that he was all right.

Clint smiled and added the salt. “Hey, I meant to ask you…”

“Hm?” Bruce said.

“Fury brought us a fruit basket,” Clint said, pointing his thumb at a small basket of tropical fruit sitting on the corner of the counter by the mail. “The card just says ‘No paperwork for now.’ What do you think it means?”

Bruce burst out laughing. He didn’t stop until well after Clint seemed to have given up on getting an answer from him.
Epilogue to come in a day or three. Thank you for sticking around, and sorry again about last chapter's cliffhanger. <3
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The plane dipped and bounced when its wheels hit the runway, and Bruce’s stomach went with it. Never mind that his stomach had been empty except for mints since hour three of the flight - the damn thing was threatening mutiny again. He squeezed the hand he’d been holding onto as the plane slowed.

“Son of a bitch,” Tony hissed beside him. Yanking his hand away, he massaged his fingers. “Okay, you are banned from complimentary hand holding during take-off and landing. I need this undamaged for work.”

“Sorry,” Bruce said, gripping the arm of his seat instead and wishing for the thousandth time in the past week that Clint had been able to come with them. He was never going to forgive Jimmy Fallon’s scheduling. Who even watched that show? (Aside from Bruce, in his hotel room on Wednesday night, suffering through the opening monologue just to see Clint’s appearance.)

It had been a week since he’d been home, which was both the longest he’d been away from Stark Tower since he’d moved in and the longest he’d spent away from Clint in the three months they’d been dating. Bruce wasn’t used to having a home to miss, and he really wasn’t used to having someone to come home to. It felt like he’d left a trail of himself from New York to San Francisco and was gathering the pieces back up the closer he got to the tower. Just a couple more hours.

There were two cars waiting for them on the tarmac when the plane came to a stop. In front of them stood Pepper, fresh from the office in a smart suit, and Natasha, in street clothes. Bruce descended the steps toward them behind Tony, his feet like sandbags. Oh God, the ground. The ground was his new favorite thing.

“Welcome home,” Pepper said. “How was Mythbusters?”

“Fantastic,” Tony gushed, taking her by the shoulders and kissing her. “Adam Savage is one of the coolest people I’ve ever met.”

“I think the feeling’s mutual,” Natasha said. “He’s been fanboying over you on Twitter all week.”

“They spent ten straight hours putting the mannequin in the decommissioned Mark VII and hitting it with projectiles,” Bruce added.

Tony raised a finger. “Buster is a crash test dummy, not a mannequin, and he’s a national hero. And don’t tell me you didn’t have fun. I know you did. You and Jamie were thick as thieves.”

“Jamie’s a good guy,” Bruce said. “He’s got a healthy appreciation for silence, unlike some people I could name.”

Pepper stifled a giggle behind her hand, and Tony shot her a wounded look. “All right,” she said, patting him on the arm, “regale me with tales of myth busting in the car. We’re supposed to meet Thor in half an hour.”

Bruce’s stomach took another dip hearing that name. He squeezed his eyes shut and took a deep breath, reminding himself that even clueless Asgardian tourists didn’t tend to start thunderstorms indoors. When he opened his eyes, Tony and Pepper were getting into that silver bullet of a car and
Natasha was standing by the black SHIELD SUV staring up at him. He dropped his duffel bag off his shoulder.

“Well?” she said, raising an eyebrow.

He opened one arm, inviting her into a quick hug. When she pulled away, she was smiling like she’d just checked something off her to-do list.

“Did you finish *Deathly Hallows*?” she asked, helping him get his duffel into the backseat of the SUV.

“I got to chapter 33,” he said. “Then we hit a storm over the Midwest, and I had to spend two and a half hours in the bathroom with my eyes shut, blasting Tony’s music collection through noise-canceling headphones.”

“Sounds awful,” Natasha said, closing her own door and buckling up.

“Third worst flight of my life.” He was still a little shaky, and he hoped he’d get over it before their next stop. “How late are we?”

“About fifteen minutes. I’ve already texted ahead to let her know.”

“Maybe we should cancel. I don’t want to waste her time.”

“She’s waited five years, doc. She can wait fifteen extra minutes.”

Bruce locked his fingers together over his chest. “Okay. Yeah. Clint’s right, this will be good. It’ll be okay.” Maybe if he kept saying it, he’d believe it. He sighed. “How are you?”

“Can’t complain,” Natasha said. As the driver steered them out of the airport, she caught him up on the books she’d been reading, the new lawyer show Clint was trying to get her into, and the team gossip with regards to Thor’s reappearance. He sank into the seat with his head turned toward her, hanging on her every word. Her voice was a little part of home. He was grateful for the distraction.

The cafe was one that Clint had recommended, a hole in the wall in Lower Manhattan that served amazing desserts. Being in the garden level beneath a dry cleaner, it was also pretty far off the radar for paparazzi, which was important. Bruce didn’t want to show up to this in a hoodie and sunglasses. He couldn’t pull it off. Clint made it look casual and Natasha made it look badass, but Bruce just looked like somebody’s dad trying desperately to fit in with kids these days.

When he stepped into the cafe with Natasha behind him, the bell on the door dinged and a patron at the table in the corner looked up. Bruce’s heart threatened to jump right out of his mouth.

Betty Ross caught his eye and broke into a grin, hiding her mouth behind her hand. She was a little more worn by the years, but beautiful as always, her long dark hair pulled back into a bun and new cat’s eye glasses framing her eyes as they teared up. She was wearing a pantsuit and a modest blouse, her standard fare for scientific conferences, and he was rumpled and weary from the plane ride, and it occurred to him that they’d both accidentally shown up looking as unattractive to each other as possible.

She rose from her seat, and he struggled to keep his feet from gluing themselves to the speckled tile floor. The rush of anxiety was overwhelming, his whole brain shouting that he was headed right into the most disappointing rejection of his life. He shoved the thoughts down. They’d been emailing back and forth for three weeks, and she’d been the one to reach out to him.
He debated whether to attempt a hug the whole walk over to the table, but Betty beat him to the decision, offering him a handshake instead. God, the shape of her hand was still so familiar.

“Bruce,” she said, her voice so careful with his name. “It’s so good to see you.”

“You, too,” he said, releasing her hand. “And, uh, this is my friend, Natasha.”

“Of course,” Betty said, shaking Natasha’s hand eagerly. “I am such a fan. I have your takedown of Bill O’Reilly bookmarked on my phone. I played it to psych myself up before presenting my keynote speech to the boys’ club yesterday.”

“That’s so sweet of you to say,” Natasha replied, giving her the sort of genuine smile Bruce almost never saw on her in public. “I’m going to go order for us. Can I get you anything?”

“Oh, no, but thank you,” Betty said, still grinning as she took her seat again.

Natasha waited until Bruce had pulled up a chair, then left for the front counter to give them a minute alone. Betty stirred her coffee, opened her mouth, and hinged it closed again.

“So,” Bruce said.

“Yes,” she said.

“I hope I’m not making you miss anything important,” he said.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “There’s a roundtable discussion on the intersection of philosophy and science, but I know the moderator, it’s bound to be a train wreck.”

They sat in silence for a little while, Betty staring down into her coffee and Bruce locking and unlocking his fingers in front of his stomach.

“So,” Betty said, glancing up at him, “what’s new with you?”

“Oh, you know,” Bruce said, dropping his hands into his lap. “Joined a team of superheroes, moved in with a lunatic billionaire, turned into a giant green ragemonster in front of the governor. Normal mid-life crisis stuff.”

Betty caught his eye, and he couldn’t hold onto his casual expression any longer. They both cracked up laughing. Suddenly, it was a little less awkward and strange sitting here across from her. He asked her about her work, and by the time Natasha got back with drinks and pastries, they were deep into a conversation about the current status of the field.

Bruce had forgotten how easy it was engaging in intellectual conversation with Betty. Her mind was one of the sharpest he’d ever encountered, and she still had a knack for predicting where he was going to go next. Natasha nibbled on a slice of carrot cake, watching them with a bemused look until they were done volleying physics and academia talk back and forth.

Eventually, the conversation shifted back to Bruce’s weird little corner of the world. Betty asked about life at Stark Tower, and Bruce picked apart a sugar packet as he answered, knowing what was coming next.

“And how are things with Clint?”

They hadn’t really talked about it over email. He’d had no idea what to say. “Good,” he said now, nodding at the table. “Really good.”
Betty crossed her arms. “Jesus, Bruce, you look like you’re bracing for bad news. What, you think I’m going to disapprove of your boyfriend?”

“No, I just…” He swallowed, trying to push down the nerves in his stomach. “I never told you I was bi. I didn’t know how you’d react, considering how long I hid that from you.”

“Oh, sweetie,” she said, reaching across the table to squeeze his fingers. “It wasn’t a surprise.”

He took a second to process the words. “You…you knew?”

“We were together for over a decade,” she said, giving him an amused little smirk. “I knew. I just wasn’t sure if you knew.”

Bruce had no idea what to say to that, so he just let her thumb roam across his knuckles and accepted the chuckle that followed.

“He claimed to hate action movies but saw every Bruce Willis movie in the theater,” Betty said to Natasha. “He’d come out with complaints about everything from the physics to the plot, and when I asked him how Willis was in it, he’d just say, ‘He was good.’ I still have most of *The Fifth Element* memorized, he watched it so often.”

“Really?” Natasha said, crinkling her nose. “With the bleached blond hair?”

“I think it was the shredded black tie ensemble that did it for him,” Betty said.

“Oh my god,” Bruce groaned, dropping his head into his hands. “I can’t believe you knew.”

“We have very similar taste in men,” Betty said. Fishing her phone out of her purse, she opened a photo of herself and her husband and showed it to him. “Here’s mine. His name is Greg. He teaches high school English.”

Bruce sat up, peering at the image. She was definitely right about their shared taste. The guy had an expressive face and an easy grin, and he was holding her around the shoulder like he couldn’t believe his luck. Bruce knew the feeling. “He looks nice.”

“He is,” Betty said.

“Good,” Bruce said. “You deserve someone nice.”

She hesitated for a second. “You want to see our daughter?”

“Yes,” Bruce said immediately.

She pulled up a photo of a smiling two-year-old in a denim romper and set the phone down on the table. The little girl had her dad’s smile and her mom’s dark hair and big blue eyes. She was beautiful.

“This is Birdy,” Betty said, tucking her hands into her lap. “Short for Roberta.”

Bruce’s breath caught in his throat. He glanced at Natasha, who was watching him with her lips pursed. She’d read his file - she knew his given name.

“Greg’s late grandfather was also a Robert,” Betty said. “He went by Bob. We figured, we both had important Roberts in our lives who went by other names, so why not honor both at once?”

Bruce picked up the phone and flipped slowly through the rest of the album of baby photos,
struggling to process it all. It was like a window into a life he could’ve had with her if not for the Other Guy: a life of research grant applications and breath held waiting for tenure, baby shoes on the floor and toys encroaching on his den, a sim card full of snapshots of a bright-eyed, dark-haired child just like this. He’d spent years planning a life like that in his head and just as long mourning it once everything fell apart. Someone else got that life instead. A small part of him wanted to hate Betty’s husband for taking what should have been his. A larger part of him just hated himself for holding onto it for so long and making her wait.

He’d put her through a hell of military chase scenes and mildewy motel rooms with him, and now that everything was all right for her, she still regarded him as a worthwhile part of her life instead of a catastrophic waste of time. Jesus, she’d co-named her kid after him.

Honored was definitely the right word. He tried to say so, but what came out instead was a laugh and a choked sensation in his throat. He turned the phone to show Natasha, who gave him a distinct *I don’t like babies, but I’ll nod and smile for you* look in return.

“Tell me about her,” Bruce said, handing the phone back to Betty.

She did.

They only had an hour before Betty had to get back to her conference. She promised to email him an article she’d mentioned, and he swore he’d be better at keeping in contact, and she and Natasha exchanged business cards and shook hands again. Bruce risked a hug. It was brief and surreal, but worth it.

“Bring your action hero down to Virginia sometime,” she said in his ear, “I’d love to meet him.”

“I will,” Bruce said, smiling.

When they got back to Stark Tower, Natasha took the elevator up and Bruce took it down to his own apartment. He needed to scrub the scent of recycled plane air from his skin before he saw Clint.

They’d been apart for a week; another hour wouldn’t hurt, especially if it gave him a bit of emotional downtime after the whiplash that was this day so far.

Jarvis had updates for him: Salma from R&D was requesting a second set of eyes on her proposal materials before she pitched to Tony, Sylvia had official filming dates for the *Sesame Street* appearance he’d been talked into, and the milk in the fridge had gone bad. Bruce dumped out the milk, noting the extra mug sitting on the lip of the sink.

He’d put Clint on the permissions list for his apartment not long ago, and the guy had definitely taken advantage of that fact while he was away. The place held onto the fading smell of curry cooked a few days ago, neatly-labeled leftovers were stacked in the fridge, and a nest of blankets occupied the right side of the couch, a couple of empty beer bottles and a tablet on the end table beside it. Passing the couch, Bruce picked up Clint’s favorite fleece throw and smiled, running his fingers across the worn-out patches in the fabric. It was definitely weird having someone in his space - but a kind of weird he could get used to.

He washed up and put on fresh clothes, read the end of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, and let his mind settle into the idea of being home. Once the last page was turned and his tea mug was empty, he folded Clint’s blanket over his arm and took the elevator up the residential floor.
The familiar weight of Clint’s front door under his hand felt more like coming home than his own apartment. When Bruce walked into the kitchen, Natasha was perched on a stool at the island and Clint was hoisting what had to be at least a twenty-pound turkey into the oven. The kitchen was an absolute wreck, the counter blanketed in utensils and bowls of ingredients, two pots simmering on the stovetop, and a mess of vegetables half chopped on the island.

“Is Thanksgiving coming early this year?” Bruce asked, standing in the entryway.

“Nope,” Natasha said. “He’s just gone off the deep end.”

“I’m cooking for an Asgardian,” Clint said. God, it was good to hear his voice. “You’ve seen Thor eat. I’m not even sure this will be enough.” The roasting pan made a clank as it landed on the lowest oven rack. Shoving it inside, he closed the oven door.

“It’ll be plenty,” Natasha said. “You’ll have us eating turkey sandwiches for days. Or Thor eating turkey sandwiches for days. Actually, he might like that.”

“See? Totally reasonable.” Taking off the Coulson hat, Clint wiped the sweat off his brow. He glanced over at Bruce and offered a quiet “Hey.”

The hunch in his shoulders and the hesitation in his voice were just evident enough for Bruce to pick up on them, and they sent him looking for red flags. He’d noticed the sleepless eyes on TV earlier in the week, but now he saw the beat-up sick day jeans and the pink spots around the guy’s wrists where fidgety fingers had scratched a little too hard. Clint’s texts over the past week had been their usual punctuation-free snark, but he’d been on a downswing when Bruce left, and by the way he was avoiding eye contact now, Bruce knew he’d had a worse time of it than he wanted to let on.

“Hey,” Bruce said back, crossing the distance between them. Running a hand over the messy ruff of Clint’s hair, he kissed his cheek. “How was your week?”

Clint shrugged. “It was fine.”

“Really?” Natasha said, tipping her stool back. “Because Hill told me while I was out of town you got yourself 86’ed from the shooting range.”

“SHIELD’s safety regulations are overprotective bullshit,” Clint said, “and you are such a tattletale.”

Bruce frowned at Natasha. “You went out of town?”

She raised her eyebrows. “He didn’t tell you? Fury sent me to Boston to deal with a national security issue. I left Wednesday, got back yesterday.”

Bruce turned back to Clint, who had stepped away, crossing his arms. “You didn’t think to mention you were alone for three days?”

“Christ,” Clint said, raising his hands toward the ceiling. “Yes, you caught me. I was unsupervised in the big, scary tower. I ate gummy worms for dinner and stayed up past my bedtime watching monster movies. Happy?”

Without his support network for the longest stretch since Loki and deflecting like a goddamn shield. Oh yeah, he was “fine” all right. Given the length of his time on his own and the level of hostility talking about it, Bruce was willing to bet he’d caved to self-injury again and was hiding the marks. Probably somewhere below the waistband of his jeans. He’d been favoring legs and hips lately - easier to hide from the press.
Bruce roped the fleece blanket around Clint’s back and tugged it taut to pull him closer. Clint let him, reluctantly looking him in the eye. Once Bruce was sure he had his full attention, he said, “Adam Savage teased me for watching clips of you on my phone when I had downtime on set, I couldn’t sleep the past few nights without putting on *Kitchen Nightmares* to shut my brain up, and I spent half the flight back sitting on the bathroom floor in Tony’s private jet, listening to AC/DC to block out a storm and wishing like hell you were there to hold my hand. I don’t care if it sounds childish - everything’s harder without you around, and I don’t approve of it.”

Clint stared at him for a second, then swallowed. “Cool if I kiss you?”

“Yes,” Bruce said.

Clint leaned in for a kiss, pressing against him hard enough that Bruce could feel the tension draining out of his shoulders. When Clint hugged him after, Bruce buried his nose in the guy’s collar and draped the blanket around him, holding it tight.

“I missed you, too,” Clint said. “Couldn’t sleep for shit without you waking me up in the middle of the night.”

Bruce smiled. “Well, the only other TV appearance I’ve got scheduled is *Sesame Street* on the 20th, and it’s right over in Astoria. You want to come with me to that?”

Clint drew back, wide-eyed. “Are you actually asking me if I want to come with you to *Sesame Street*? Fuck yes, I want to come with you to *Sesame Street*. How is that even a question?”

Bruce laughed. “I’ll have my people call Grover’s people, we’ll get you in.”

“Awesome,” Clint said, taking the blanket off his shoulders and tossing it over a stool. It was good to see him smiling. “Hey, how’d your meet-up with Betty go?”

“Great,” Bruce said, looking to Natasha. “At least, I think it did.”

“It was great,” she agreed. “I think you two will be good at being friends. Plus, I’m looking forward to the years of embarrassing Bruce Banner stories that will inevitably surface once she and Clint start chatting.”

Clint’s eyes lit up. “Yes! I hadn’t thought of that.”

Bruce folded his hands in front of his stomach. “This is suddenly sounding like a less good idea.”

“It’s the best idea,” Clint said, poking him with the handle of a wooden spoon. “Now, lend a hand here and tell me about your week. Tell me everything.”

Picking up the chopping knife to finish the vegetables on the cutting board, Bruce started talking.

The Avengers assembled for dinner in the community room down the hall, a large space that Tony had recently decked out with a table for meetings and dinners, a projector system, a few dozen games, and a drafting table fully stocked with colored pencils. The drafting table was an obvious ploy to lure Steve to Stark Tower. Natasha had moved into a north-facing one bedroom last week, and Thor had a suite next door to hers, so Steve was the only member of the team without a pillow here. Prying him out of Brooklyn seemed a Herculean task, but Tony was nothing if not persistent.
This dinner was much more enthusiastic than their last one as a team. When he wasn’t exhausted from battle, it turned out, Thor ate with the sort of gusto that put feral dogs to shame. Ate, and spoke, his voice booming around the room at a volume that made Bruce grateful to be all the way at the opposite end of the table. Thor told tall tales of the exploits of himself and his warriors, which prompted Tony to tell his own stories out of one-upsmanch, which ended in Natasha explaining to Thor what a Prince Albert was and Steve nearly choking to death on a bite of turkey.

As much as Bruce hated to admit it, the dinner was entertaining.

Well. Except for the part where Thor congratulated him and Clint on their “successful union” and tried to make awkward small talk about Asgardian gender politics. And the part where Harry Potter came up, because when Bruce mentioned liking the epilogue, the table erupted in such vocal disagreement that he physically ducked. But that wasn’t all bad, because it resulted in Natasha stalking out of the room and coming back with another book to loan him - “You can’t possibly like the wrong parts of this one,” she said, “it’s only got good parts.”

When the group dispersed after dinner, Steve paused next to Bruce on his way out the door and whispered, “I liked the epilogue, too. Nice seeing everybody happy for once.” Then he walked off toward the elevator with his hands in his jacket pockets, like he didn’t expect a response.

Bruce made a mental note to invite the guy out for lunch sometime.

When he and Clint got the last of the tableware back to Clint’s apartment and the door shut behind them, Bruce felt the air leave him in a rush. Finally, some time alone with his boyfriend.

Clint put his hands on his hips and glared at the mountain range of dishes next to the kitchen sink. “I don’t even want to look at this right now. Would you mind if we slept at your place tonight?”

Bruce could count the number of times they’d stayed at his place on one hand, and Clint had never been one to run from dish duty, but he didn’t point that out. He just joined Clint in the elevator - and then in his own bed, testing out his body’s boundaries and making sure the newest additions to the Always OK list hadn’t slid backwards in the week away.

Clint touched him like it was the best thing that had happened to him all day, including watching an Asgardian eat twelve pounds his turkey and declare it “a feast fit for Odin’s table.” He didn’t even shy away when Bruce found the new marks on his left hip. When Bruce asked if there was anything he could do to help him sleep better, Clint burrowed close under the comforter and said, “Read to me?”

Sinking in against the pillow, Bruce opened the beat-up paperback and propped his hand up on his knee. “Okay, Haroun and the Sea of Stories by Salman Rushdie, chapter one. ‘There was once, in the country of Alifbay, a sad city, the saddest of cities, a city so ruinously sad that it had forgotten its name.’”

Clint settled in against him, one arm a comfortable weight across his stomach.

The nightmares hadn’t surprised him. Bruce had long since learned to expect the inevitable turn of his subconscious from non sequiturs to violent flashbacks after the Other Guy’s reappearances. In the days following the Battle of New York, it had been strangely mild, maybe because he’d invited the Other Guy out to play that time. The Avengers Gala was a different story: nightmares nearly every
night for weeks, the same ten minutes of chaos played over and over in Technicolor, waking with his heart hammering and his breath caught on a yell.

Clint was there most nights, though, to press their foreheads together and hold his shaking hands and tease him for swearing like he was playing *Mario Kart* in his sleep.

They didn’t really talk about the gala. Clint always got really quiet when it came up, and he still traced the pad of his thumb under Bruce’s left eye occasionally, unable to shake the one part of the evening that Bruce couldn’t remember. He’d watched the video and seen himself crumple to the ground. It went by so fast: a bang, screams, his body falling, the Other Guy rising up. He wondered how long it had felt for Clint. The guy was still holding his goddamn hand when it happened, the video informed him.

Bruce knew from the news and the first-hand reports that Clint had been the one who talked the Hulk down, but no one had heard what exactly he’d said. The one time Bruce asked Clint directly, Clint just smirked and replied, “That’s between me and the Other Guy.”

It had taken two weeks of nightmares for the answer to start showing up, jumbled in with all the violence: Clint, standing up to the monster, his shirt stained with blood and his hands open wide, asking it to trust him.

“No one is going to hurt him again while he’s with me,” he’d said, with such conviction that Bruce couldn’t get the words out of his mind two weeks later. They circled between his ears whenever Clint touched him, chased by “And if they try, I’ll throw them in the river myself, I fucking promise you that.”

It made Bruce feel weirdly safe.

When he woke up at 3AM with a curse dying between his teeth and Clint’s voice pulling him up out of his own head, he didn’t get moored in a loop of bad memories like before. He just kissed Clint, gave permission to be held, and agreed to tea in bed, feeling so damn lucky he didn’t quite know how to express it. His life was a mess. Millions of people had watched him get shot in the face on the internet. There was a photo album in Betty Ross’s phone of a family that could have been his if he hadn’t ruined everything. Feeling this lucky didn’t make sense, but Bruce decided not to fight it.

He read aloud for a while more until his action hero, still curled around him, started snoring softly into the fabric of his t-shirt.

In the morning, Clint cooked breakfast, and they took a car to the farmers market. They browsed all the produce stands, filling Bruce’s hemp grocery bags with vegetables that had been used up the night before and debating how best to lure Steve into filling the sunny little one bedroom on the south side of the tower.

“Hey, I’ve been meaning to ask you,” Clint said, picking through the heirloom tomatoes. “Do you want an actual office? Seems like you’re always spreading your files out on the couch and floor, and I’ve just been using my second bedroom for weapons storage. We could put a desk in there, maybe some filing cabinets.”

Bruce frowned at him. “You’re not asking me to move in, are you?”

Clint laughed. “You don’t have to sound so put out about it, but no. You need your space, I get that.
It’s just, if you want, you can have a little of my space, too.”

Bruce nodded, his chest feeling full. “Okay.” Taking Clint’s hand, he gave him a quick peck on the shoulder and said, “Thanks.”

He caught the flash of a camera phone from somewhere nearby and rolled his eyes. There was always someone in the crowd who felt entitled to take a picture without asking, and that wasn’t even counting the paparazzi, who—yeah, there were a couple of them this morning, too, hanging back a few stalls wearing cameras the price of a mid-range sedan around their necks. They usually didn’t come into the market. Must’ve been trailing them since the Tower. Bruce tried to ignore them, teasing Clint about the excess of heirloom tomatoes he insisted on buying.

By the time they got to the ultimate butcher shop stall, the photographers had closed the gap to under fifteen feet, and Bruce was getting decidedly sick of them.

“Good morning, boys,” said the butcher, offering Clint a handshake over the refrigerator case. “How are you today?”

“Not bad, Harold. How are you?”

“Phenomenal, as always,” the old man answered, opening the case. “I’ve got the perfect cut of steak for a romantic dinner. Put two aside just for you.”

Clint grinned. “Actually, today I’m looking for bacon. Did you know they don’t have bacon in Asgard?”

“Well, that’s a damn shame,” Harold said, fishing a few vacuum-sealed packages out for him. He snuck a pair of steaks into the bag with them, giving Bruce a wink.

While the two of them made small talk, Bruce turned to check on the paparazzi. They were only a few strides away. One of them called out “Doctor Banner!” He took a deep breath and turned his back on them.

“You all right?” Clint said.

Bruce crossed his arms. “They’re getting cocky. Last time someone followed me this close, I got mugged.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure the one on the left is the same one who snuck into the parking garage last week.”

“Those two bothering you?” Harold leaned toward them, clicking his case shut. “Let me handle them. You enjoy your morning.”

“Thank you,” Clint said, reaching for his wallet. “How much do I owe you?”

The butcher raised a hand. “Don’t worry about it. Just educate your Asgardian friend and bring him to me sometime.”

“Will do.” Clint took Bruce’s hand and started walking up the aisle at a decent pace.

Bruce caught a flash of movement as the paparazzi started after them, and then Harold stepped out in front of his stand, waving his arms and yelling, “You vultures leave those boys alone! They saved your hides along with the rest of ours - what business have you got bothering them like this?”
He went on berating them at top volume the whole time it took Bruce and Clint to get to the end of the aisle. When Bruce looked back, a crowd of farmers market regulars and a couple of sellers had formed around the photographers, blocking them in. A few passers by were filming the scene on their phones.

“This is so much better than Whole Foods,” Clint said.

They jogged around the corner and snuck behind the stalls thanks to a honey seller who already had an order waiting for Clint. Wandering down the long alley between aisles, they doubled back the way they’d come and ducked between a pair of trucks, coming out between stalls about fifty yards behind the ultimate butcher shop.

Clint bartered with the kale seller whose space they were occupying while Bruce stood on his tiptoes, trying to catch a glimpse of the paparazzi. “Looks like security just broke it up. They’re following the way we went.”

“Think we can finish our shopping before they find us again?” Clint said. His cheeks were flushed from the cold, and he was grinning like this was some new kind of obstacle course at the shooting range.

Warmth sparked in Bruce’s chest, beating out the wind that threatened to cut through his suit coat. This was the guy who’d weathered a storm with him in a store room, who’d spent weeks waiting for him to take a risk and three months (and counting) convincing him that he was worth it. Clint had looked the most monstrous part of him in the eye and, instead of fleeing, struck a bargain with it. A couple of assholes with cameras were nothing, compared to that.

“I doubt it,” Bruce answered, “but I’m getting used to being wrong.” Taking Clint’s hand, he pulled them both out into the crowd.

Chapter End Notes

To the friends who’ve helped push this story along: Thank you, thank you, thank you.

To the readers who’ve followed it through to the end: Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Really, just, all my thanks. This was (oh god, past tense, that's WEIRD) a pleasure to work on. And a pain sometimes. But mostly the first thing. I never know what to say in end notes, so I'm just going to leave you with a line from Haroun and the Sea of Stories:

“To give a thing a name, a label, a handle; to rescue it from anonymity, to pluck it out of the Place of Namelessness, in short to identify it — well, that’s a way of bringing the said thing into being.”

(Bruce is going to love this book.)
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