

"THE BEAST WITHIN"

Chapter 9

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The Green Hulk held up an oversized hand, resting it against the glass wall. He'd allowed himself to be placed here, but his patience was wearing thin. He had wanted to escape the chasing military and find some peace, but now he was beginning to think that he was a prisoner all over again. "Hulk wants out!" he bellowed, slamming his open palm against the glass. The wall cracked and the Hulk heard men and women scream. He was right. Someone was watching, on the other side of this mirrored wall. He made a fist, about to break himself free, when he heard the door open behind him.

He whirled about to see General Thunderbolt Ross walking into the room, watching him closely. The Hulk growled like an angry dog. "You! Hulk knows you! Bad man who tried to hurt Hulk and his friends!"

"I'm not a bad man, Hulk. I'm just... misunderstood. Like you are. The same people who hate you are afraid of me... the government. The military. The Avengers. Did you know the Avengers were after you now? They think you're dangerous, because you don't have Banner telling you what to do anymore."

"Hulk doesn't need Banner! Banner tried to destroy Hulk!"

"I agree with you. Banner was a milksop. We're better off without him." Ross moved forward, lowering his voice. "I believe in you, Hulk. I really do. And I'm offering you a place to live and rest -- and where you can leave whenever you want."

"You want something from Hulk."

"Yes. Yes, I do. Sometimes my enemies need to be stopped. I think you can help with that. Will you fight for me, Hulk?"

The Hulk looked away. He felt like he should resist this man's words, that he should knock him aside and leave this place. But something stopped him. He slapped at his ears, feeling it ring deep down inside. "You'll let Hulk leave, if he wants?"

"Of course."

The Hulk grunted. He was glad that Banner was gone but he had to admit that sometimes Banner seemed to think things through more clearly. For the Hulk, everything was so confusing... and confusion made him angry. "Who do you want Hulk to beat up?"

"Twenty minutes ago, we received a report that the Washington branch of Stark Enterprises had been broken into. The security grid has gone up and we know of at least four fatalities so far. We believe it's linked to a murder that took place several months ago. The murder of my daughter."

"Betty?!" the Hulk repeated, raising his voice. He hated how everyone talked so much. Were they stupid?

"Whoever you find there, they are responsible" Ross said. "A secondary group of agents will be going in with you. They're going to recon the area and bring back any tech that we might find useful."

The Hulk snarled, his adrenaline beginning to flow. He felt mad and ready to break something. "Show Hulk how to get there."

Ross allowed himself a small grin. Soon those responsible for his daughter's death would be brought to justice....

FROM THE DESK OF LEONARD SAMSON, MD, PSYCHIATRIST
September 21, 2001

General T. Ross,

As per our recent discussion, I am writing this addendum for the psychological profile I have created for the Hulk. While getting a full overview of Bruce Banner's life was difficult, the available sources (articles, footage, interviewees) did give me enough to work with. As you might expect, material after the "birth" of the Hulk was much more abundant. Now, without further ado, a rough chronology of Bruce Banner.

1974 - June

Rebecca Walters Banner was brought to her hospital in Dayton, Ohio, by ambulance. She gave birth to her son Bruce three weeks early.

Neighbors indicate that Brian Banner celebrated the birth of his son Bruce by drinking himself into a stupor. He first saw his son two days after he was born.

When questioned about the bruises found on her face by the nurses the following day, Rebecca insisted that she fell out of the hospital bed.

1976 - March

Brian Banner, on a drinking binge at the local watering hole, complained about his son Bruce. "He's puny, much smaller than other kids his age," he said. "It's the damn radiation - I bet it damaged my body, and I passed it on to Bruce. How could my son be anything but a monster?"

When I cross-referenced Brian Banner' job history, I saw that he worked as a laborer at Los Alamos during some scientific experiments with Gamma radiation that you headed. With all due respect, General Ross, this would have been important information to pass on. And yes, I can already hear your reply - "need to know basis" or some other regulation jargon.

1979 - July

This incident smacks of the sort of thing that probably circulated the neighborhood whenever a good story was needed:

Early one evening the Banners started arguing. By the time one of the nosier neighbors got close enough to get the gossip, Brian Banner was apologizing and helping wipe the blood off his wife's face. "Its not your fault. It will never happen again."

1980 - October

Childhood schoolmates of Bruce Banner easily recalled Bruce's cold demeanor, even at a young age. When teachers probed, Bruce had an excuse that seemed perfectly legitimate for a youngster: Bruce's mother had taught him that anger, any form of anger, was childish and immature. "If I get mad," Bruce told one teacher, "I'll be a dumb baby all my life."

I shudder to think how far Rebecca Banner went to convince her son the truth of this. And apparently this wasn't the only lesson Rebecca Banner passed along. When Bruce wanted to stay up late, she would reply by stating that he must want to be like his father. "Up all night like the rest of the bad men, doing Lord knows what? Only the nasty, sneaky people stay up after dark!"

The first "lesson" seems to provide a rough explanation as to why the Hulk appears as a simple-minded child of sorts. He is a personification of the pent-up rage and hostility Bruce hid all his life. As for the significance of the second "lesson", I'll be honest in saying that I have no answer yet. I have some dark suspicions about Bruce's mother as well. I feel that he may have painted a brighter mental picture of her as some sort of coping mechanism.

1981 - April

This one is more an anecdote than anything, but the context makes it chilling: Rebecca Banner and her son Bruce arrived uninvited at Rebecca's sisters. As Bruce met his cousin Jennifer Walters, his Uncle Morris and Aunt Elaine tried to convince Rebecca to stay away from Brian. Nothing but trouble will come of it, they said.

"I'm gonna be a lawyer when I grow up," bragged Jennifer. "What about you?" she asked Bruce.

"I was gonna be a helper like my dad," said Bruce, disdain almost crystal clear in his young voice. "But I think I'll be a scientist or something now!" Despite the attempts of Morris and Elaine, Rebecca and her son returned to Dayton. I'd imagine that it took a lot of makeup for Rebecca to cover up the bruises for the next two weeks.

1982 - August

Again, an anecdote pieced together from interviews with Bruce's childhood classmates:

Bruce went into the House of Mirrors and thought he'd wet himself when the flickering colored lights and the distorted mirrors showed him two twisted images of himself. The first was a fearsome green-tinted brute, the second a gray-hued, sly-looking monster, teeth clenched fiercely.

Easily explained when one considers the "hectic" environment of a House of Mirrors, but the unintentional foreshadowing this would have on Bruce's life was amusing enough to warrant inclusion on this chronology.

1983 - November

Brian Banner killed Rebecca Walters Banner in an alcoholic rage. Brian later claims that he was trying to stop Rebecca from harming Bruce. He spends much of the rest of his life in a mental institution.

Strangely enough, we don't have a lot of documentation showing how Bruce Banner felt about it at the time.

1984 - September

Deborah Drake, another of Bruce's aunts, raised Bruce for almost a year, encouraging him to excel in his science studies. His skill in engineering and science was quite obvious, his ideas far more advanced than his ten years.

1990 - June

Sarah Smith recalls mocking Bruce Banner when he asked her to a dance. Though she denies being cruel about it, she remembers coming up with the fastest excuse she could. She asked him his astrological sign and replied:

"A Gemini, are you? I don't date Geminis, they usually have two sides."

This is nothing unusual. Apparently Banner was mocked with regularity at his school, the subject of taunts, pranks and hostility. That's a lot of abuse to bottle up.

1990 - September

Having graduated high school, Bruce began his studies in the sciences, finally finding comfort in those who shared his enthusiasm. The classmates he'd cross paths with in his studies reads like a who's who of North America's scientific community: Reed Richards, Henry Pym, Hank McCoy, and Walter Langkowski. He interviews Dr. Charles Xavier as part of a college research project on mutant DNA. The Professor would later recall that he was quite impressed with Banners diligence as a student and open mindedness about those who were different.

1996 - August

AIM, better known to the world as Advanced Idea Mechanics, offered Bruce a job when they heard of his plans for alternative energy sources. He signed up for a tidy salary.

It didn't last, and the end of the job was an indication that Bruce's idealistic goals might one day turn against him.

"You don't understand," he told Kyle Kirkwood as he resigned the company shortly after. "This isn't just about profits." His stand for ethics seems all the more ironic when we consider where his research was heading.

1998 - March

Banner begins independent work on designs for a non-lethal Gamma energy weapon. He quickly gained the interest of the government. I believe you are familiar with the rest of the story.....

Stark Solutions - Seattle, Washington

The Abomination lay dead at the Hulk's feet.

He hadn't killed him of course, hadn't even achieved the satisfaction of getting fight him one last time. Someone had beaten him to it. His enemy was broken from end to end. On the wall was scrawled a single word in green blood, "Golgotha."

Slowly, the Green Hulk transformed back into Bruce Banner. It was too hard for him to think about these developments, he needed Banner.

Several security guards and a well-dressed man ran up the hallway, well-deserved looks of terror stretched across their faces. Banner takes a moment to move his arms and hands. The feeling has returned to them. That's probably a good sign....

He tries to smile when he greets me... but I can tell he's nervous

"Doctor Banner... how nice to see you sir."

James Rhodney, Stark's right hand man and close friend. We've met a few times, but never under such circumstances. He'd rather be anywhere else than here.

Anywhere else than just out of my reach. He keeps shifting his stance, away from me. It wouldn't save him, and he knows it. If I wanted to tear this entire place down around him, there would be nothing he could do to stop me. Nothing.

"Where's Tony? I need to speak with Tony."

His heart is racing, I can practically hear it even in this form. He's wondering what to tell me. Finally he seems to figure the truth will set him free.

"He's not here right now*"

Good call. He has to know that I'd know if he was lying. If Stark were here, Iron Man would already be here trying to subdue me. It would do him little good, unless Stark was trying to cash in his insurance policy on the place.

"Can I help you with anything?"

I hesitate for a moment. Once I say my peace, the path can only lead to one of two places. Neither of the forks are easy, but I have to travel down one of them. I have to - for her, for Betty.

"I've come with a message... with a challenge."

"Dr. Banner?"

"He can call out anyone he wants - Iron Man, the Avengers, Fantastic Four... ANYONE he wants, on me. I'll take them down."

He's trembling, trying to figure me out. It's in his eyes. He thinks I've gone mad. Maybe he's right... maybe he's right.

"What is this all about?"

"This is about survival Rhodey. It's about survival. They manage to find a way to beat me, I meet their justice whatever they deem it to be. After all, I'm a murderer... I mean...look at this....and maybe you've read the papers..."

"You didn't actually... did you?"

Images. Images of crashing through the forest. Of tearing men to pieces after the beast had taken over. I knew what I was doing, at some level. I wasn't in control of my body, or my mind. But damnit, I should have been. I shouldn't have lost that control. I never will again... I never will again...

"I'm ultimately responsible for my actions." Banner removed his glasses and placed them in his shirt pocket. A moment later, the frail man was replaced by the looming figure of the green goliath, the Professor.

"But if I beat them" the Hulk continued, "Then they stop coming after me. I'll go to whatever justice *I* deem appropriate. One last time that pays for it all... is that understood?"

He keeps looking back toward the office like a trapped animal wanting to get to freedom. There is no doubt in my mind now... he thinks me insane. He doesn't see the logic in Banner's... in MY plan. I should have known... perhaps Stark himself though, or Richards will understand. Or maybe it will take a man like Grimm to get the point. It's not about insanity... not entirely... it's about freedom. MY freedom. Once and for all - I'm going to take it back. Even if I have to go through the rest of the universe to do it.

"Oh, and tell them to watch out for this Golgotha thing. It would have to be pretty powerful to break Blonski like this."

With that, the Hulk leapt skyward without effort.

"Three hundred and twelve soldiers dead," Colonel Cary St. Lawrence tapped her pencil on her desktop, "Unbelievable."

"I have to agree Colonel, this sort of mass murder is completely inconsistent with the patterns of either Bruce Banner or the Hulk for that matter." Doctor Katherine Spar had to suppress the urge to smile, despite the circumstances. She was usually the one with the neurotic pencil-tapping quirk. It was irritating to the extreme, but strangely lulling.

"That's more along the lines of MY specialty" Doctor Leonard Samson interjected, "but I have to concur. This pattern of behavior, even after the death of his wife, is not consistent with the Banner I've known over the years. I'm afraid I might have to concur with the Avengers suggestion; he may well have gone insane. However...I did tell you not to send troops after him."

"However?" Spar inquired.

"However, I don't think we need to jump to conclusions. The very fact that the Avengers haven't acted on their own conclusions does cast some further doubt on the prospect. We need to locate Banner and find out first-hand what happened."

"Before anyone else does." Spar suggested.

Colonel St. Lawrence chuckled, "As if anyone COULD do anything about it if they found him."

"You'd be surprised Colonel," Samson replied, "You'd be surprised."

General Thunderbolt Ross sat straight up in bed, pointing a small revolver at the person seated near his bed. "How the hell did you get in here?!"

Bruce Banner gave no response. Sitting there dressed in all black, with shades (at night no less) he finally said, "You remember the day we first met general. You called be a milksop, said I'd never amount to anything significant. Kind of ironic under the circumstances."

Ross lowed his gun, looking puzzled. "Banner, what the hell are you doing here. Where did you..."

"I wasn't ok for a while after Betty passed away, but I'm feeling much better now."

And then Banner laughed really weird.

He told Ross everything he'd been up to for the last year in an almost calm, distant way, about the unexpected death of the Abomination, and the emergence of the mysterious Golgotha message. He seemed almost amused that he'd tried to kill himself, "A permanent problem to a temporary solution," he'd said.

Ross nodded, calmly listening. "Banner, you have to turn yourself in. Everyone's looking for you. You're sick, you need help."

"You know Ross, nothing matters. All that is really a constant in the universe is the ability to help one another. You need to reprioritize your life, while you still can. I searched for power, searched for it by trying to master nature while destroying it. To be the strongest one there is. But power is an illusion. There is no strongest one. Look at me, all of my power and I couldn't save your daughter."

Banner rose to leave. Ross began to get out of bed. "Damnit Banner, I'm not finished with you yet!"

Banner turned to him, lowering his sunglasses. His eyes glowed green in the darkness. "Sometimes its best just to move on."

Then he changed, just like that. No howl of pain, no doubling over. One second he was Banner, the next he was the Hulk. The Grey Hulk leapt off into the night, as quickly as he had appeared. He was in search of answers, in search of the mysterious Golgotha.

TO BE CONTINUED