No Winter Lasts Forever

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/870608.

Rating: General Audiences
Archive Warning: No Archive Warnings Apply
Category: Gen
Fandom: The Avengers (2012), Captain America (Movies), Captain America (Comics), The Incredible Hulk (2008), Iron Man (Movies)
Relationship: Phil Coulson & Avengers Team, James "Bucky" Barnes & Steve Rogers, James "Bucky" Barnes & Natasha Romanov, Bruce Banner & James "Bucky" Barnes, James "Bucky" Barnes & Tony Stark, Clint Barton & Natasha Romanov, Steve Rogers & Natasha Romanov, Bruce Banner/Betty Ross
Character: Phil Coulson, Clint Barton, Natasha Romanova, Tony Stark, Bruce Banner, Hulk, Steve Rogers, Betty Ross, Jarvis, Nick Fury, James "Bucky" Barnes, Winter Soldier
Series: Part 10 of Love Is For Children
Stats: Published: 2013-07-05 Completed: 2013-09-23 Chapters: 76/76 Words: 83043

No Winter Lasts Forever

by Ysabetwordsmit
Summary

A mission in Russia introduces the Avengers to the Winter Soldier. Steve wants Bucky back and will stop at nothing to make that happen. Everyone else helps however they can.

Notes

The preliminary notes for this story ran long because the story is long, so I've posted them separately.

A note on feedback: While it's not necessary to comment on every post I make, remember that I don't know who reads/likes things if nobody says anything. Particularly on long stories, I've discovered that I get antsy if there's nothing but crickets chirping for several posts. So it helps to give me feedback at least once, even if it's just "I like this" or "This one doesn't grab me." First and last episodes are ideal if you rarely feel inspired to comment in the middle. There is already extensive conversation about this story on Dreamwidth if you like reading other people's comments.

Regarding the series: If you're new here, this is the latest story in a set, and it builds on previous ones. Ideally, visit the Love Is For Children series page and read the others in order first. As a shortcut for those of you who are primarily interested in the Winter Soldier, skim the first story "Love Is For Children" and that should be enough to set the stage for this one. If you've been reading along, and you suddenly wonder "Where did that come from?" then you might want to reread earlier stories, because this one touches on a lot of threads that have been running for a while, like Steve's early attachment to Bucky or the intrapersonal dynamics of Bruce-and-Hulk.

Regarding length: The 70 chapters figure is an estimate, because I'm still posting this story on Dreamwidth. It is fully written, but sometimes I add stuff while posting, so I don't know exactly how many chapters there will be. As of 7/5/13, there are 54 and counting. Chapters in this story are roughly 1000 words of fiction. There are also endnotes, a popular feature in this series, which you may read or skip as you prefer.

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

On a mission in Russia, the Avengers make an unexpected discovery, and must mount a rescue.

It began as a simple surveillance mission in Russia. Black Widow and Hawkeye infiltrated a group of arms dealers from Department X, which they gladly targeted given the connection to the Red Room. They followed a long chain of leads that actually had its roots back in the interrogation Black Widow was conducting when Agent Coulson announced Hawkeye's capture by Loki.

Things went so well, they needed an extra pair of hands. They pulled in Captain America, carefully undercover. Then Iron Man turned up a connection with Ten Rings while trying to track down some misappropriated Stark Industries weaponry. So Agent Coulson sent him in because he could control some of that ordnance in case of trouble. When Dr. Ross discovered a cache of AIM equipment in the same vicinity, she all but threw Banner at them with an admonishment to get the gamma cannons out of the hands of the crazy people.

That's when things stopped going quite so well.

"See, this is what happens when you try to privatize world peace," Hawkeye complained. "Now all the people who hate us suddenly want to make friends with each other. This arms exchange could turn into a flaming death trap."

"Quit whining, Robin Hood," said Iron Man as he tapped away at a holographic keyboard. "This way, we get a whole bunch of bad guys in one place at one time. We bowl a strike, and none of them will have enough command structure left to bother us for months at least. The head honchos will be too busy replacing their right-hand men."

"Yeah, but if we drop the ball in the gutter, we're fucked," Hawkeye said. "They have enough firepower to hurt us for real."

"We can't pull out now without scuttling the entire deal," Captain America said. "They set it up so that if anyone doesn't show, everyone scatters. Black Widow's our buyer, Hawkeye and I are her bodyguards, we're locked into this deal tonight and that's it."

"Paranoid little darlings, aren't they," Iron Man muttered.

"It's not paranoia when people really are out to get you," Banner said.

"Less chatter, more work, people," Agent Coulson said firmly. "We're approaching the drop zone now." The idea was for the transport to hang back and provide a quick escape in case something went wrong. "Stick to the plan. Your first priority is to gain control of the weaponry for sale, unconventional first and then conventional. Your second priority is to capture or kill the various arms runners, with intent to cripple as many of the criminal organizations as possible. Get moving."

They got moving. Agent Coulson monitored their progress on his screen.

The initial stage unfolded as anticipated, everyone in their places around the dark frozen parking lot.
When Black Widow signaled that all the weaponry was on site and in transaction, Iron Man and Hulk ambushed the dealers. Given the attendees at the event, everyone had expected trouble, but most of them had not expected the Hulk. He was a smash hit. Three of AIM's officers went down under a single blow from a missile that Hulk swung like a baseball bat. He was still angry about that last lab of theirs.

Black Widow and Captain America worked to corral the Russian hosts, who would be the most useful for questioning as they had arranged the event. Aware of Department X’s role in Black Widow’s past, Captain America dropped one fleeing lieutenant with the edge of the shield, shattering his pelvis. Iron Man targeted the Ten Rings contingent. Hawkeye provided cover fire for him, putting a broadhead through one terrorist’s chest just to the right of his heart. Hulk finished folding a lamp post around the surviving AIM leaders. Then he bounded over to help Iron Man. Agent Coulson noted their steadily improving teamwork.

That was when the plan came apart at the seams.

The Russians clustered together around an imposing figure clad in black leather who stood out boldly against the snowy background. Shaggy brown hair hung to his shoulders. Each hand gripped a massive gun. He watched the battle with an impassive gaze. Seeing his firepower blocked by Captain America’s shield, he coolly dropped the muzzle to shoot the car under his opponent’s feet. The explosion of the gas tank chased away the shadows to give everyone a clear view of his face.

"That’s a positive on the Winter Soldier, sir," said Black Widow.

"Bucky!" Steve cried in the same instant, and it was definitely Steve rather than Captain America. His voice was a torrent of shock-joy-grief-guilt.

"Get me a close-up visual on that," Agent Coulson snapped. The camera zoomed in. He knew what James Barnes had looked like from certain pieces of Captain America memorabilia. Strong resemblance, but I can't be sure -- and it is impossible anyway -- Agent Coulson thought, scrambling for an explanation.


Well, that was one possible explanation. Agent Coulson recalled the reports from Captain America’s first spectacular mission rescuing prisoners from a HYDRA base. Given that James Barnes had survived a turn as a human lab rat, maybe he had somehow survived his fall from the train ...

"JARVIS, assist, we need facial identification here," said Iron Man.

"Identity confirmed. The Winter Soldier matches the physical appearance of James Barnes," JARVIS replied a second later.

Captain America came back online at the same time, somehow perfectly calm. "Agent Coulson, I hereby notify you of an urgent change in mission parameters from capture/kill to extraction," he said.

"Mission update acknowledged," Agent Coulson replied. "Use your best judgment and inform me if you require any further assistance." He shared Captain America’s policy of never leave a man behind. Barnes had been an American soldier when he fell off that train. They’d failed him once before; they wouldn't fail him again now.

"Hawkeye, can you hit the Winter Soldier with a tranq arrow?" Captain America asked.

"If you can get him out from behind that truck, yes," Hawkeye said.
"His metabolism is metahuman, so you'll need to use one of the ones meant for us," Black Widow said. They'd developed those in case of emergency, if someone took control of their heavy hitters, so they could neutralize a teammate safely. Agent Coulson was profoundly grateful for that foresight even in this unanticipated situation.

The Winter Soldier was doing his level best to kill Captain America and Black Widow. They were hampered by their unwillingness to hurt him. Iron Man tried to draw him out with repulsor fire, but the man was just too quick and canny. Hulk finally put an end to the violent dance by yanking the truck out of the way. It went skidding across the ice and left the Winter Soldier exposed.

"I have the shot," Hawkeye announced.

"Take him," Captain America said quietly.

The Winter Soldier dropped to the ground with an arrow in the back of one thigh.

"Target down," Hawkeye said.
Light 'Em Up

Chapter Summary

The Avengers extract the Winter Soldier from the firefight and depart for safer territory.

Chapter Notes

The end notes didn't all fit, so I'm moving the first of them here.

The Department X operative does exactly the wrong thing by running around while on fire. The right thing to do is extinguish the flames as fast as possible; stop-drop-and-roll is a good rule of thumb. In real life, people often panic and run, which tends to fan the flames and make the injuries much worse, sometimes even fatal. In fanfic, minions are often stupid. Plus some of you folks expressed a desire to burn in effigy the bad guys responsible for messing up our heroes. So here you go. I can just see you-all sitting around the smouldering wreckage of this firefight, toasting marshmallows...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Package acquired," Black Widow said as she vaulted over a crate to stand guard over the fallen form. "Clear the field!"

"Want me to light some party favors?" Iron Man said. "I can time the explosions of the Stark tech to hem in the last of the stragglers from the other groups, if somebody else can get the rest of the Russians."

"Light 'em up," Captain America said, and Iron Man did.

The resulting blast drove several of the Russians into the remnants of the burning car that the Winter Soldier had blown up earlier. One Department X operative caught fire and ran blazing through the night to dive into a snowbank.

"Guess I was right about the flaming death trap," Hawkeye said dispassionately as he shot someone trying to sneak up behind him. "Better them than us."

An AIM minion crawled into a tank and swung the turret toward Iron Man. Hulk dropped on top and crumpled the tank like a soda can, its gun barrel dangling like a bendy straw. The last of the resistance crumpled along with it.

By the time Agent Coulson made it to the field, the surviving enemies were contained along with the captured ordnance. Black Widow knelt over the Winter Soldier. She had already cut the cloth away from his leg so she could treat the small wound.

"He heals fast," she explained. "If I don't clean this now, we won't get a chance to do it later." That was no joke. One time Captain America had skidded over a gravel driveway early in a fight, and by the time the fight ended, his skin had healed over the grit. It had taken several miserable hours for
SHIELD medics to dig it out.

"Make it quick, Black Widow," Agent Coulson warned. "We're picking up chatter that the Russian military has noticed our little light show. We need to get out of here before they arrive."

"Done, sir," she said.

Captain America scooped up the limp body and said, "Move out, everyone."

Agent Coulson supervised the rapid collection of prisoners and goods. He saw Hawkeye and Black Widow flanking Captain America on the way to the transport. Hulk voiced a querulous rumble. Agent Coulson gave him a sharp look, but he needn't have worried.

"Hey, big guy, Cap's got his hands full. How about I give you a ride instead?" Iron Man said, holding out his arms.

"Okay," Hulk said. He stepped close so that Iron Man could catch him as he transformed back into Banner.

"And we're done here," Agent Coulson declared as he climbed into the transport behind them. They lifted off. Agent Coulson automatically compensated for the swaying deck underfoot as he hurried to his team.

Iron Man was wrapping Banner in a blanket with Hawkeye's help. Captain America sat on one of the long padded benches with the Winter Soldier in his lap, Black Widow beside him. "Why can I find a pulse on his right wrist but not the left?" he said, voice even, still completely in control.

"Because his left arm is prosthetic," she said with a sigh. "Don't ... mention that to him if you can avoid it. He doesn't talk about it willingly."

"Yeah, it feels a bit different," Captain America said. He slid his fingers carefully over the artificial wrist. "How do you know about that?"

"He helped with some of my training. We worked together over the course of several missions. We got shot once, patched each other up, became allies rather than just coworkers," Black Widow said. "It was ... a comfort to both of us, when we didn't have much of that at all. So. He means something to me too."

"Okay," said Captain America. "Do you have anything else helpful to share?"

"Hold onto him; don't put him down anywhere else," Black Widow advised. "From what very little I know, Department X keeps the Winter Soldier in cryonic suspension outside of missions. Between that and some high-caliber brainwashing, he doesn't have much memory left. But ... he starts to get it back if he stays active long enough, and we learned some things that help. Specific anchors, familiar words or things from his previous life. If he wakes up before we get back to base, you may be able to jump-start his memory."

"I'll do my best," Captain America said.

Agent Coulson sat down beside him. Captain America's boots were a lost cause, courtesy of that exploding car, but the burned skin had already healed. Hawkeye had a deep scrape all down one arm, which Iron Man was tending. Nobody else was injured.

The Winter Soldier lay placid in Captain America's lap. Strong arms held him with infinitely tender care, one around the leather-clad waist, the other supporting his neck and head against a broad blue
shoulder. Captain America had clearly picked up techniques from Banner on the topic of aid and comfort. Black Widow held one lax hand in her two smaller ones, stroking over what looked like but was not human skin. She rarely showed such open concern for anyone except Hawkeye. It would have looked sweet, if one of the three hadn't just tried to kill the other two.

Agent Coulson worried about all of them. Captain America and Black Widow had the package well in hand; if he woke up early they could control him. Agent Coulson trusted that they could find some way to salvage Bucky from the wreckage of the Winter Soldier. But that was one hell of a bombshell from the past and Agent Coulson didn't think anyone involved could walk away from it without taking damage. He reached out to lay a reassuring hand on Captain America's shoulder.

"Not here, sir," Captain America said in a cool tone as he removed the hand and placed it firmly back on the bench. "Not now."

"All right," Agent Coulson said. He flicked a glance over the members of his team. Nothing else urgent demanded his attention. All he could do now was watch over an unconscious soldier as he slept ... and the two people wrapped so very carefully around him.

Chapter End Notes

Some people experience body image issues regarding prosthetic limbs. There are general tips about overcoming body-consciousness and self-consciousness.

Various canon lines connect Black Widow with the Winter Soldier. A key difference in this series is that, because Natasha is asexual, there is no romantic or erotic connection between them. They do have nonsexual affinity, and that's going to have advantages and disadvantages later in the story. I'm telling you this stuff now so that any of you familiar with Marvel canon(s) won't be confused by the divergence.

Cryogenics is the study of deep cold. Cryonics is about attempting to preserve humans or other animals at low temperatures. This appears as the "Human Popsicle" trope in popular entertainment and science fiction history. For the purposes of this story, Avengerverse cryonic technology is more advanced than ours, and Department X helpfully mixed it with some other stuff. I'm drawing on my knowledge of both science and science fiction to extrapolate the probable methods and their effects on Bucky. So it's going to look less solid than hard science, but more serious than most fictional portrayals.

Brainwashing is a form of mind control. Science has various explanations for how brainwashing works. While some techniques are torture, others are more subtle and pervade modern society. The more you know about mental manipulation, the less well it works. Brainwashing is another popular trope. There are many more articles if you want to explore further.

Amnesia refers to a cluster of different but related mental effects that impair the formation and/or retrieval of memories. Memory loss may result from many causes including drugs, sleep deprivation, head injuries, and other trauma. There are various ways to treat memory loss. Amnesia in fiction is different and kind of weird, with some rather silly motifs. In fact there's a whole cluster of memory tropes in entertainment.
Put all that together and you can figure that Bucky is pretty messed up. I considered what Department X would want from him, and how they'd try to achieve that. They couldn't afford to obliterate all of his memories or learning capacity, or he'd be useless in the field. They wanted a controllable asset. So some of the effects will be deliberate, some will be collateral damage, and nobody alive has all the details about any of this. I used science to suggest some possible complications, and came up with something that fits the story and the characters. Some of the details are more realistic, others more speculative; but memory loss is not a joke and no version of it is as easily fixed as the "amnesia trope" often implies. You'll get to see this revealed in stages, but I wanted you to know up front that this is another topic I take seriously and it's a primary theme for this story.
We Have a Man Down

Chapter Summary

The Avengers bring the Winter Soldier back to SHIELD, and then head home to the tower to deal with the aftermath.

Chapter Notes

One of the end notes didn't fit, so I'm moving it here:

The process of brainwashing influences whether and how it can be broken. Mind control leaves warning signs, during and afterward. Cults brainwash people, and there are various options for deprogramming or exit counseling. The intervention method is laborious but fairly effective and does not infringe the person's rights. There are also tips on breaking free of emotional bondage, which is related to other types of mind control. Deprogramming is a common trope in entertainment. In Bucky's case, the brainwashing is complex.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Hours after the firefight, the Avengers handed over the Winter Soldier to SHIELD medical. The doctors there knew about all kinds of brainwashing; they insisted that they could break whatever Department X had done to him. Barton blanched at the topic of discussion and hastily excused himself. Romanova stuck it out through the whole explanation, though, as did Rogers. For Agent Coulson it was a grim reminder of too many times when he'd brought assets back with head injuries, mental damage, or worse.

Stark pinned him with a worried gaze for a moment, then returned his attention to the computer in his palm. Agent Coulson ignored the busy genius. He was more concerned about Rogers, who seemed impassive ... except that Agent Coulson had seen that look on men who were quietly bleeding to death inside.

He may be physically uninjured, but he's far from unhurt, Agent Coulson thought. Stark turned his anxious eyes on Rogers, frowned, and tapped something else into the tiny keyboard. Rogers didn't even notice, all his attention riveted on the doctors. Usually he tracks teammates better than this. His situational awareness is dropping; we need to get him home as soon as possible.

Agent Coulson furnished Director Fury with a preliminary report, augmented by camera footage from the battle that Stark had quick-sorted. He also managed a list of the most readily identifiable prisoners and weaponry, although they'd need to make a more thorough inventory of both later. He told Fury that the Avengers weren't up to more than cursory debriefing.

"Nobody's dying. We have auxiliary teams set to capitalize on the chaos, and they need all the intel they can get before they leave," Director Fury insisted. He leaned toward a stone-faced Rogers. "You all can damn well finish the full debriefing now."
"Well we have a man down and a whole lot of collateral damage from that, and we need to get the fuck home," said Stark, pushing between Fury and Rogers. "You are getting on my last nerve, One-Eye."

Romanova reinforced Agent Coulson's assessment by pinning her single-page summary to Fury's desk with a knife. Hawkeye's mouth twitched.

There were no more delays getting the team home after that.

The ride to the tower itself was quiet. Nobody felt like talking. The warm spring weather didn't cheer them up, although it was a relief after the chill of Russia's late-running winter. Even the bustle of the city around them felt muffled and strange.

"I need to go pour Bruce into bed," Tony said when they arrived. Bruce had recovered enough to stagger along with some assistance, but no more than that. Betty hurried up from the lab levels to support Bruce from the other side.

Phil nodded agreement. That left him torn between Natasha and Steve. Natasha was visibly trembling and taking deep measured breaths in an effort to maintain control of herself. Steve sidled around proffered hands to head briskly toward the door, and that just wasn't like him. He might keep silent about some things, especially his own grief, but he didn't tend to shy away from physical contact as some of the others did.

"I've got this," Clint said, taking charge of Natasha. He led her away.

Phil hustled after Steve. He had no hope of catching up to the long legs and determined stride, but at a jog he could at least avoid falling any further behind. Oddly enough, Steve went straight to the common room instead of to his own floor. He dropped himself on the couch just as Phil crossed the threshold.

It was like watching a vase hit pavement.

Steve's composure broke all at once, scattering into a thousand razor shards. He folded over his own knees without any effort to support himself. Everything hidden spilled out all at once, broken open with no hope of containment. The deep, shattering sobs tore at Phil's heart. Steve's whole body shook with the force of them, heavy breaths dragged in and coughed back out. Words mingled with the cries, too tattered and incoherent for Phil to interpret.

Mindful of how firmly Steve had rebuffed earlier offers of comfort, Phil approached with caution. He did not want to intrude where unwelcome. If Steve truly wanted privacy, though, he would have retreated to his own floor, Phil reasoned. Maybe he feels ready to deal with this now that we're safe ...

As soon as Phil came within arm's reach, Steve grabbed him and bawled into his legs. It took a few minutes for Phil to untangle himself enough even to sit down. He shifted Steve into a more comfortable position, draping the soldier over his lap so that Steve's head rested on Phil's shoulder. Steve didn't resist, but neither did he help; he simply let Phil move him as desired. Steve cried as if he would choke up pieces of himself into the open air. Phil could feel how broken Steve was, a sensation as disturbing as bone shards shifting under his hands.

The first words that Phil could make out were "my fault."

It's going to be one of those nights, Phil thought. Sometimes all you could do after a bad mission was hold the emotional garbage can for your assets to puke into so they wouldn't have to suffer through
"This is all my fault," Steve wailed. "I let him fall. I left him there, I thought he was dead but he wasn't, and I left him there to die! I should have gone back for him. I should have saved him. Bucky's my brother and my best friend and I want him back I want him back I want him back."

Steve's voice sawed through the phrases with harsh, desperate haste.

Phil combed his fingers through Steve's hair. "You're not alone. I'll take care of you," he said. "Get it all out." There would be no talking sense to Steve until he ran through everything he'd stifled while they were in the field. Truth and lies mixed together like broken glass in molasses, and Steve had no way of sorting them out as long as he held them inside. Phil held him and let him talk.

Chapter End Notes

**Emotional suppression** is an emergency function that can shut off feelings during a crisis. It can be helpful in the short term by allowing people to function, but it turns harmful in the long run. People can learn to ignore physical and emotional pain. This shuts off the warning that pain provides, which enables greater activity at the risk of compounding the damage -- much like taking painkillers to cope with a physical injury. Use with caution. **Emotional competence** involves processing and coping with painful feelings. There are tips for expressing and releasing emotions.

**Situational awareness** is the perception and interpretation of information from the surrounding environment. While commonly considered a skill of soldiers, it has applications in everyday life, and anyone can practice it. This is a fundamental aspect of female self-defense. For anyone well-trained in situational awareness, losing it is a sign that something is going wrong.

**Emotional trauma**, emotional shock, and acute stress reaction are different ways of framing what happens when someone experiences a severely upsetting situation. There are options for treating it, and steps for overcoming disasters in general. It is healthier to express the pain than to suppress it. While exact responses may vary, a bad enough hit to the emotions can do damage to the psyche, just like getting hit by a truck can do damage to the body. **Appropriate first aid** can reduce the chance of long-lasting harm.

**Survivor guilt** often plagues people who live through an event when someone else dies or gets hurt. Soldiers are especially vulnerable to this. There are tips for understanding and coping with survivor guilt. It can help to read about how other people have processed it. Here's a list of further resources on survivor guilt. This is another entertainment trope.

An emotional garbage can or emotional toilet is a person you tell your troubles to so you feel better. This is a cornerstone of talk therapy, but any good listener can help. In particular, repressing emotions will put them under pressure and cause them to spew out later when released. The result tends to be a stream of really toxic ideas that need to come out before there will be room for anything more sensible or effective to take root.
Whatever You Need to Say

Chapter Summary

Steve cries on Phil a whole lot more. Tony has little in the way of nurturing instincts but still tries to take care of his people.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I left a man behind," Steve said. "Bucky was following my plan, that makes it my fault, I'm the worst leader ever. We were in the middle of nowhere. He was injured and helpless, must have been. I let him get captured. I let him get tortured. They took his memories, his mind, everything." The monologue dissolved into wracking sobs again.

"I'm here. We're home now," Phil murmured, sticking to neutral facts. He stroked a hand down Steve's back and felt the broad muscles hitch and heave under his palm. "Feel my hand on your body. Use me as your anchor to the here and now. You can say whatever you need to say, and I'll listen."

"As bad as it was for me, it was worse for Bucky," Steve said. "I am such a loser. I can barely function in the modern world. Look at me, I'm a mess, good-for-nothing washout, no wonder everybody laughs at me. At least I've had the team to pick me up when I fall down, but Bucky's had nothing, and that's my fault, all mine. I'm the one who left him all alone, out there in the cold." Steve shivered. Phil pulled him a little closer. The air vents whuffed with a breath of warmer air as JARVIS raised the temperature a notch.

"Bucky isn't alone now," Phil said. "As soon as we realized what was going on, we got him away from his captors. We'll do everything we can to bring him back to himself." He swayed in place a little, rocking Steve in the cradling softness of the couch. "Whatever you feel is all right. Just let it happen. Talk it out. I'll stay with you the whole way. I promise."

"I want him back. I know I don't deserve it, but I still want it. I can't help myself," Steve said hoarsely. "Bucky deserves better than this. He should have someone who can actually back him up when he needs it. Not some feckless coward who can't be bothered to make sure the whole team gets home. I just hate myself so much right now. I'm a complete failure but I can't stop wanting it. Any of it. He's all I have left from my whole life before! I don't deserve him anymore, but I want my Bucky back."

That was the last Steve said for a while, words going down into garble and finally subsiding into quieter grief. Phil stayed with him, sitting still or rocking him gently, determined to provide what support he could for as long as it took. Just being there was the best Phil could do for Steve in this state. Time crawled past.

Then the ambiance of the room shifted ever so slightly. Phil's head came up from where he'd tucked his chin over Steve's shoulder. Steve kept weeping into Phil's embrace, heedless of the interruption.

Tony slipped through the door, light on his feet, almost silent. He looked at Steve and shook his head. Then he went into the bathroom. Phil heard water running. Tony came back out with a wet
washcloth in hand.

"Hey, buddy," Tony said softly as he sat down. "Thought I'd find you like this. Here, sit up and wash your face. You're all red and blotchy."

Steve sniffled as he pressed the wet cloth over his face. He cried messily, but it took a great deal of crying to overwhelm his body enough to show like that. He looked wretched. "Thanks, Tony," he mumbled through the cloth.

"Yeah, so, I suck at this stuff but I gotta try anyway," Tony said. "Remember last month when I got drunk and morbid over Yinsen? What'd you tell me then?"

"That it was his choice and you should honor it," Steve said.

"You give good advice," Tony said. "Just wanted to say, I'm glad to have you when I need it."

"It's not mine," Steve cried. "That's what P-Peggy said to m-me the first time!" He burst into tears again.

"Yep, I totally suck at this," Tony said, rubbing a hand over his face. "Can't imagine why anyone puts up with me."

"Because you keep trying," Phil said. Somebody had to. Steve had cried himself into exhaustion and Phil was little better at this point. Tony's lack of nurturing instincts and experience left him awkward in application, but he didn't let that stop him. It mattered.

"Come on, let's get you two to bed," Tony said. He tugged at their hands. "Bunk with me, I'm thinking nobody should sleep alone tonight."

Phil looked at the smear of pallid pre-dawn light streaking across the windows. "Tonight," he echoed, tired beyond belief at the sight. "Today."

"Tonight, today, whatever. Clint and Natasha. Bruce and Betty. Everyone's asleep but us stragglers," Tony said. He somehow got both of them to their feet and headed up to his bedroom. At least in this case, Tony was farther from the core of the crisis and thus more able to respond without being overwhelmed by it.

Phil stumbled through his bedtime routine. He managed to coax Steve into drinking a bottle of water, after all that crying, before pointing him toward the bathroom. Phil collapsed onto the bed and wallowed out of his suit. Won't kill me to sleep in my underwear for one night, he thought. Tony loaned him a set of red silk pajamas anyway.

Steve crawled between Phil and Tony, clearly still miserable, but at least he had stopped crying for now. Phil welcomed him with a tender touch, unsure how to fit the broken pieces of Steve back together again, unwilling to give up. Tony peeled off his top and let the gentle light of the arc reactor wash through the room. Steve pillowed his head on Tony's shoulder. Phil draped himself over Steve's back, a solid grounding presence. Steve heaved a blustery sigh.

"Shh," Phil said. "Let it go now. Sleep."

"JARVIS, play something ... peaceful ... for us, you pick," Tony murmured.

The first notes fell like a gentle rain from heaven, barely audible as a sitar began a simple melody. The sound of a bansuri flute joined it with a soft whisper. One of Bruce's meditation albums, Phil thought muzzily. Steve finally relaxed in his grasp. With that, Phil could let himself drift to sleep.
Leadership and responsibility can weigh on anyone, but especially on soldiers. There are signs of good and bad leadership that relate to taking responsibility for what happens. In this case, Steve's usually apt leadership skills are turning against him as he tries to claim responsibility for things outside his knowledge and control.

Self-blame is a significant problem, especially for trauma survivors. It can extend to self-hate and self-bullying. They have strong negative effects on mood and performance. Sometimes you can help someone move past self-blame by asking the right questions. There are also tips for dealing with your own guilt and forgiving yourself.

It's important to know how to comfort someone in a crisis. There are many ways to do this. The Ring Theory advises directing comfort toward the center of a crisis and the person(s) most affected by it, while venting outward to people less affected. This spreads out the impact so it does less damage, reducing the chance of burnout.

Indian meditative music is very relaxing. A sitar is a stringed instrument distantly related to a guitar, with a tangy sound similar to a banjo. A bansuri flute is made from bamboo and has a mellow sound.
Who Helps You When You Stumble

Chapter Summary

Phil, Tony, and Steve deal with the morning after. Betty and Bruce join them for breakfast and more discussion.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Steve woke first, in the afternoon, because he didn't need much sleep these days. That roused the other two men in the bed. Tony didn't have a consistent circadian rhythm to begin with, and Phil could get by on far less sleep than he'd gotten. Steve disappeared into the bathroom without a word.

Tony rolled out of bed. "JARVIS, coffee," he said. Then he turned to Phil. "I need to get down to my lab, start working on an analysis of the Stark tech from yesterday. Send me whatever else you turn up in the captured goods, 'kay?" He raked a hand through the short scruff of his hair. "Didn't really hit me yesterday, but today, shit. Feels like I'll never finish cleaning up this mess. Fucking Obie."

The way Tony felt about all the weaponry Obadiah Stane had sold to terrorists paralleled the way Phil felt about the damage done to Tony's self-esteem and ability to trust people. Stane is so very fortunate that he is already dead and out of my reach, Phil thought. I would have taken my sweet time with him otherwise.

"You stepped in as soon as you knew what went wrong, and now you're doing everything you can to put things right. Be gentle with yourself, Tony," Phil said, laying a hand on his shoulder. The skin quivered under his touch.

"Yeah. Okay," Tony said. "I just -- it's hard to keep going. I'm still looking over my shoulder half the time, expecting somebody to stab me in the back again. Howard never -- you know. It was always Obie." Tony looked at Phil, blinking hard the way he did when he was trying not to cry. "How'm I supposed to trust anyone after that? How can I even trust myself?"

Phil pulled him closer. "Trust comes a little at a time, Tony," he said. "You try things and see what works or doesn't, who keeps or breaks their promises, who helps you when you stumble instead of taking advantage of you. You'll make mistakes; we all will. But the good people, the ones worthy of your trust, always own up to their mistakes and fix what they can and strive to do better next time. That includes you."

"I want to, though. Trust you. And -- and the team," Tony said. He clung to Phil. "I just, I have these issues. With authority figures. It's not -- it's not you, really. It's me."

And Howard Stark. And Obadiah Stane, Phil thought, inwardly fuming.

"You do trust us, Tony," Phil said aloud. "You may not see it or feel it all the time, but it's there and it's real and it's growing. Just take your time with it." Tony nodded against Phil's shoulder. "You know what else? I trust you. I trust Iron Man to help save the world. I trust Tony Stark to work technological miracles. And I trust Tony Carter to be a lovable little scamp who is slowly but surely
learning how to mind Uncle Phil. After all, I still believe in heroes."

"Thanks," Tony said, pulling back a bit. Phil let him go. "Thanks for -- for not giving up on me, I guess."

"I never give up," Phil said. The very corners of his mouth turned up in a thin, determined smile.

Steve came out of the bathroom looking battered but not broken. "Morning," he said quietly.

*Well, that's a relief,* Phil thought before saying aloud, "Morning, Steve."

"Sorry I fell apart on you last night. I really appreciate you catching me when I crashed like that," Steve said.

"That's what friends are for," Phil said.

"More than friends," Steve said in a barely-there voice.

"Family, then," Phil said.

A smile flickered across Steve's face, like a sunbeam soon lost in the gloom of clouds. "Yeah. Family," he said. "It's been *so hard* for me. I feel like I've been drifting ever since I woke up. I need something to anchor me in this time and there just -- there isn't anything. You guys are all I have. *Had.* Yesterday, finding Bucky -- I just don't know what I'm going to do, Phil."

"Well, I know," Phil said. "You'll do what you always do, Steve. You'll pick yourself up, dust off, and keep going. That's what heroes do -- especially ones with a good team to help them when the going gets rough."

"We'll be your anchor, Steve. Turning you on to the cool stuff in modern life is kinda fun. So if you need us, just say so. We'll be here for you," Tony promised.

Steve's stomach growled, which shifted the mood. Phil chuckled at Steve's rueful expression. "Let's go find you something to eat," Phil said.

They went down to breakfast. Tony simply grabbed his coffee before disappearing. Betty was already eager to dig into her lab, although she stuck with Bruce. He looked considerably better than expected this morning, not as ragged as he used to the morning after a transformation.

*It's getting a little easier on them to trade off,* Phil decided. His working hypothesis was that fighting over control did more harm to Bruce-and-Hulk than the transformation itself, and sometimes more than the combat that usually followed. So if they both let go *willingly,* it wasn't nearly as bad.

"How are you?" Betty asked Steve as he sat down at the table.

"Shaky but functional," he said. "Yesterday was just ... yeah. *Awful.* I'm doing a little better today. And I need food now."

Betty immediately handed him the bowl of instant oatmeal that she'd made for herself. Bruce added one of the toaster waffles from his plate. Steve accepted both and started eating with single-minded determination.

Phil got up and spread a package of sliced ham on the griddle, then started cracking eggs into the electric skillet. He felt pleased that they had finally gotten Steve confident enough about the food supply to alert people when his enhanced metabolism made extra demands -- "need food now" had
become a warning for that.

After the physical and emotional exertion of the battle, it's no wonder he's ravenous, Phil thought. He was just grateful that Steve's resilience had enabled him to recover, if not fully yet, at least enough to function. *The food should help him get back to normal.*

Chapter End Notes

**Circadian rhythm** refers to a variety of natural cycles, particularly the sleep cycle. It affects humans as well as other animals. Some people, like Tony, don't really have one. He may stay awake for a few days straight, then sleep all the next day and night. Another time he might nap on and off all day. Nightmares and insomnia due to PTSD have emerged later, but based on canonical references it just sounds like he never had a circadian rhythm.

**Obadiah Stane** ran Stark Industries after the death of Howard Stark. Obie also did a great deal of raising Tony -- and then tried to kill him. This compounded Tony's already severe issues with father figures, authority figures, and trust of any kind. Think "compound" as in compound fracture with bits of bone sticking out, and you can see why that degree of emotional injury tends not to heal on its own.

**Betrayal of trust** has serious impact on a survivor's life, including in the workplace. Tony not only feels betrayed by Obie, he also feels that he himself betrayed other people by letting his weapons get into terrorist hands. There are steps for making amends after betrayal and for healing from betrayal. It's also important to learn to trust yourself and trust others again.

**Be gentle with yourself** when things go wrong. This means many different things and it can be a slow process. Consider whether you would treat a friend the way you treat yourself, and strive to treat yourself the way you would treat a friend. Follow the steps for being gentle with yourself.

**Family of choice** can provide an emotional anchor in times of stress. This is especially valuable for people coming from a deprived or abusive background.

"Need Food Now" is a good key phrase for indicating urgency. Some people have health conditions that mean they need to be extra careful about eating regularly. Others just have quirky bodies that sometimes demand food on short notice. Otherwise nausea, short tempers, or other misfortunes may arise. In our household, "need food now" is about a five-minute warning, but it varies. Do what works for you. Ideally there should be a range of notification from "starting to think about food" to "hungry" to "need food now." The latter means it's time to drop everything else and obtain something edible from the closest source. Steve's four-times-normal metabolism means that he can go through that whole range in very little time, and at some point after heavy exertion, he'll need a LOT of calories to make up for what he burned off.
Chapter Summary

Phil returns to SHIELD with Clint, Natasha, and Steve in tow. They manage a brief visit to Bucky while there.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Soon Clint and Natasha came into the kitchen and sat beside Steve. Phil cast a careful look at Natasha, but she seemed to be more or less back to her usual state of calm reserve. "We should finish the debriefing today," she said, "and then I wish to begin the interrogations."

"All right," Phil said as he put breakfast on the table. What with one thing and another, Black Widow hadn't gotten to hunt recently. Given any of the rank-and-file prisoners who didn't recognize her, she could seduce the information out of them. For the ones who did know her reputation, well, she had other methods. This would give her an excellent chance to release some stress on legitimate targets. "I'll make sure your part of the debriefing gets scheduled first. You can peel off for interrogation after that, and rejoin us later for group analysis."

"Agreed," Natasha said. She licked her lips.

Then Phil turned his attention to Bruce and Betty. "Are you two staying in the lab here, or coming to SHIELD with us?"

Bruce looked up, his mouth full of waffle. SHIELD still made him nervous.

Betty answered for both of them, "Bruce is staying in the lab. I'm coming to SHIELD to pick up the captured gamma equipment that they want us to study, and what little is left from Stark Industries for Tony."

"I'm coming in with Natasha," Clint said. He wolfed down ham and eggs as fast as possible. "Steve, what about you?"

"I'll come too," Steve said, cutting his ham into neat pieces. "It was my call to refocus the mission; I need to answer for that."

"I approved it," Phil reminded him. "Let me deal with Director Fury on that account, and you just concentrate on giving a detailed report of the action. We've been wanting to get the Winter Soldier for a long time. What happened yesterday actually exceeded our previous projection of a best possible scenario."

"Best possible ...?" Steve said, his voice cracking.

"No casualties on our side, nothing more than trivial injuries. Original mission goals met. Winter Soldier contained, with nothing but a scratch that healed by the time we got him to SHIELD medical. With you and Natasha as anchors, we have a good chance to break the brainwashing and recover his original personality," Phil said, ticking off the points on his fingers.
They finished breakfast expeditiously and then went to work. Betty disappeared with several SHIELD lab techs, their animated chatter bouncing off the metal walls. *She makes friends like bees make honey, sweetly and busily,* Phil observed.

Clint and Natasha had plenty of experience with debriefing. They went through the interviews and written reports at a brisk pace. Then Natasha headed eagerly for the prisoners. Information was about to flow.

Phil managed his own debriefing with professional grace. When the Winter Soldier came up, though, Director Fury got a glint in his eye that made Phil uneasy. *Fury uses people. This could get ugly if he tries to manipulate the Avengers right now, or worse, Bucky. I'll have to watch the situation closely,* Phil realized.

Steve had less experience than the rest of them, but he made up for it with determination. His account of the battle was precise and thorough. Nobody challenged his decisions. He had handled himself and his team well in the face of difficult and rapidly changing circumstances, with excellent results in the end. Everyone was thrilled to have the Winter Soldier in hand.

"Do you think they'll let us see him?" Steve asked when they regrouped in Phil's office after a collective debriefing session.

Clint and Natasha looked at each other but said nothing.

"Based on the reports I have, Bucky is still unconscious while the doctors try to flush out a bunch of foreign chemicals from his body," Phil said. "They're finding substances associated with cryonic suspension, state-dependent memory, and suggestibility. The progress looks good, but it's going to take some time."

"If he's still got that much in his system, then he's not long out of storage," Natasha said. "No wonder he didn't recognize me. We'd gotten to where, somewhere toward the end of our first day together or into the second, he'd think he knew me even without prompting, and by the next he could remember bits of our joint missions. It came back faster if he had me there to tell him things. I think he may have been primed for that kind of input, and I simply ... coasted along with it."

"But Bucky will be okay, right ...?" Steve said. Huge and hopeful, his eyes turned to Phil.

"That's very likely, although there are no guarantees. I'll see what I can do about a visit," Phil said. He had to pull a few strings, but he managed to convince one of the more sympathetic doctors that a five-minute visit from Steve and Natasha wouldn't do any harm.

They fell into place around Bucky as if choreographed. Phil stopped at the foot of the bed. Steve folded his massive frame into the flimsy plastic chair. Natasha perched on the edge of the bed like an autumn-red leaf alighting on a snowdrift. Clint stood watch at the door, clearly uncomfortable, but unwilling to abandon his teammates.

Even though Phil didn't know Bucky, it hurt to see him lying so still and silent in the narrow white bed. The Winter Soldier had been such a valiant, ferocious enemy for so long that it was eerie for him to be reduced to this vulnerability. It just seemed wrong.

The whole scene brought up painful memories for Phil. The soft whirr and beep of the equipment scraped along his nerves. The sharp smell of disinfectant made it just a little harder to breathe. Too many times Phil had lost people this way, or gotten them back ... not entirely whole. He concentrated on maintaining his composure so that he could support those who needed him now.
Phil looked at his assets, grateful again that they had survived the mission. Clint could have passed for a statue. Natasha's face showed no emotion, but her shoulders were taut and Steve's cheeks were wet. Phil's Starkphone chimed. He took a deep, steadying breath and then said, "Time."

Natasha leaned down to kiss Bucky on the forehead. "Доверяй, но проверяй," she whispered to him. Trust, but verify.

"We'll come back when we can," Steve promised, trailing his fingertips through Bucky's hair. "I swear I won't abandon you again, never again." Then he followed Phil and Natasha out of the room, dragging his feet every step of the way.

Phil knew that Steve tolerated the separation only because the SHIELD doctors could do things for Bucky that Steve couldn't do himself. It was not trust, but reliance, and fragile at that. I really hope Fury doesn't do anything stupid, Phil thought. It wouldn't take much to destabilize this situation all over again.

Chapter End Notes

Interrogation is the art and science of extracting accurate data from unwilling informants. Enhanced interrogation is torture. In order to be effective, this requires a superlative understanding of both the psychological and physical aspects. Getting accurate answers entails figuring out which techniques will work against a given target, applying them, preventing the person from dying too soon, and sorting truth from falsehood. Most torture amounts to brute force abuse of mind and body; it is rarely subtle. Therefore, it is considered unreliable. Excuses aside, torture is usually done for personal and/or institutional gratification, not because it elicits usable information.

However, canon establishes Black Widow as brilliant and subtle. Both in psychological and physical combat, she uses finesse rather than brute force. Therefore she gets results that most other people could not. It is indeed possible to perform that well, something that opponents of torture prefer to deny or overlook -- but it takes someone about this caliber to do so. It's extremely rare to find that skill set at a high enough level. While I don't dwell on them much in a series this gentle, neither have I removed these core traits from her character.

Dealing with manipulators is difficult because they often gravitate to positions of power, disguise their manipulations, or both. They also cast the blame on other people and never consider what they themselves might be doing wrong or could do better. Consider common manipulation tactics. Here are some examples of manipulative behavior. Learn how to identify and cope with manipulators. Now think about this material in the context of Nick Fury's dialog and behavior in the movies.

All kinds of triggers can reactivate associations with unpleasant past experiences. It is difficult for anyone to forget painful memories. This is particularly a concern for people with PTSD. There are strategies for dealing with and letting go of painful memories.

Unconscious people may perceive some of what happens around them, especially sounds and touches. Gentle words and contact can help them feel better.

Доверяй, но проверяй.
Transliteration: Doveray, no proveryay.
Translation: Trust, but verify.
I'm Stuck Remembering

Chapter Summary

Clint stresses out over memories stirred up by Bucky's situation. Phil helps him cope.

Chapter Notes

One of the end notes didn't fit, so I'm moving it here:

Dealing with tension can be especially hard with workplace conflicts. There are many ways to deal with stress, including emergency stress stoppers, Exercise, relaxation, and socializing can all help relieve tension. There are also tips for parents helping children with stress. You can see how the Avengers use different techniques over time, and they don't all have the same favorite one(s).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was better once they got home. Betty took the confiscated equipment down to the lab like a lioness dragging home a whole zebra, Bruce trotting eagerly behind her. Steve and Natasha headed to the gym to work off their tension with some hand-to-hand practice. Clint flittered around the edges of Phil's personal space.

"Something bothering you, Clint?" Phil asked.

Clint sighed. "Yes, Uncle Phil," he admitted. "I, uh, I'm not really a fan of the brainwashing. I thought I could handle things. I mean, Steve and Natasha are the ones who know Bucky, and you take care of everyone, so it was up to me to provide the backup this time. But it's starting to get to me."

Phil instantly oriented on Clint, alerted by the phrasing. Outside of game night, Uncle Phil indicated some kind of emotional turmoil in need of support. "I'm listening," he said.

"Today hit me pretty hard. It hurts to think of someone else ..." Clint's voice fell. "... unmade."

"Come here," Phil said, opening his arms. "It sounds like you're anxious because Bucky's situation reminds you of yours. That's only natural. Just remember that you're safe now."

Clint leaned against him. The archer's powerful body trembled faintly. "I don't know how to stop thinking about this," Clint said. That was a common problem for trauma survivors; memories would flare up and refuse to go away again. It happened to all of the Avengers from time to time.

If training away the stress would have helped, Clint would already be in the gym or the firing range, Phil realized. We need to think of something else. "Let's go into the common room," he suggested aloud. "We can watch a movie, and that should help take your mind off today."

"Okay," Clint said. "Seeing Bucky just dragged up a lot of old shit. Sometimes I think I can almost
feel Loki, not controlling my mind exactly ... I'm not sure how to describe it. I'm still *myself*, but I'm stuck remembering him. His touch, his thoughts, in me."

Phil's shoulder burned with the memory of Loki's spear stabbing through the Life Model Decoy. "I know," he said. "It happens to me sometimes too. It's natural to feel upset by that."

"I need something ... something that Loki never touched, you know?" Clint said. "Something else to think about."

"Of course, Clint. I understand," Phil said. He led Clint into the common room and settled him on the couch. "JARVIS, please lock the door, and if anyone comes looking for us, let them know we're busy unless it's an emergency. We'll be watching *Brave* tonight." The viewscreen flicked on, showing the menu page for the movie, and the theme music whispered through the speakers.

"Yeah, that's a good one. I never get tired of that," Clint said.

Phil went to the cabinet and brought out spare pajamas for Clint along with his own bathrobe. "Switch down," Phil said. "I know it's not Saturday, but I think you'll have an easier time if you don't have to worry about being a grownup for a little while. Let me take care of you. That will help relax me too. I could use it. I need to feel useful right now."

So they both changed clothes, and little-Clint started to unwind. "Thanks, Uncle Phil," he said.

"You're welcome," Phil replied.

"I think it's cool that this movie shows Merida *practicing* archery instead of just being able to hit the targets," Clint said. "It's not like the skill just magically appeared. You can see how she worked to develop it. Shooting from horseback is hard but it's fun."

"Practice is important," Phil said. "What else do you like about *Brave*?"

"I like how Merida stands up for herself instead of falling for a stupid arranged marriage. *Brave* is the only ace princess movie ever," Clint said.

"Well, she's young, and the movie doesn't go into detail, so it's open to interpretation. Merida could be asexual, or aromantic, or both -- or even just a late bloomer," Phil said.

"Demisexual," Clint said thoughtfully. "She never met any of the boys before."

"Good point," Phil said. "I like movies that leave some flexibility in the characters like that. Young people should have a chance to explore themselves, not get pushed into somebody else's mold."

"Yeah," Clint said. "That must be nice." He certainly lacked that opportunity growing up. Clint's brother Barney had violated his trust with ruthless determination, dragging them both into a life of crime.

"Is there anything else that would help you feel safe and cared for right now?" Uncle Phil asked. He couldn't do anything about Barney -- another abuser dead and therefore out of his reach -- but he could look after Clint now.

"Make me a grilled cheese sandwich?" Clint asked, his tone wistful.

"I can do that," Phil agreed. He remembered that as one of Clint's favorite childhood foods. "We have some nice melty cheeses in the refrigerator -- smoked gouda, shredded mozzarella --"
"Do we have any clingy-slices or just the fancy stuff?" Clint asked.

"We always have the clingy-slices. Tony and Steve both like them," Phil said. He recognized Clint's interest in nostalgia over gourmet quality.

"Those, please," Clint said.

Phil went back into the kitchen. He made each of them a sandwich from thick slices of bakery-fresh bread and layers of American cheese, heated in a sandwich press because of course Tony had one of those in the kitchen. The man collected kitchen gadgets like some women collected shoes, even though he barely knew how to cook. Phil rummaged in a drawer until he found the dinosaur-shaped cutter. He used that to cut the crusts off Clint's sandwich, transferring them to his own plate. Finally Phil carried both plates into the common room.

"Here you go," Phil said, sitting down on the couch.

Clint made a happy little noise as he took his plate. "Hot," he said, melted butter and cheese already dribbling over his fingers.

"Be careful and don't burn yourself," Phil said. He handed Clint a napkin.

"Where's the fun in that?" Clint replied, but he took the napkin and wiped the bright orange drips off his fingers.

"Silly boy," Phil said fondly, draping an arm around him. "I love you and I want you to be safe. That's all."

Clint tilted his head and gave Phil a sidelong glance. "It's nice," he said. "I know I don't say it often but ... I like that you care about me that much. It helps."

"I'm glad. It helps me too," Phil said. "JARVIS, please start the movie now." The lights dimmed and the viewscreen leaped into action.

Clint snuggled against Phil and, eventually, cracked a smile.

Chapter End Notes

**Intrusive memories** or **traumatic memories** are characteristic of PTSD and some other conditions. They **function a bit differently** than other types of memory. There are **steps for overcoming traumatic stress**. Another option is to **suppress the unwanted memories**, worth considering as a temporary or last-resort solution, but fraught with drawbacks.

Healing from violation can be a complex and painful process. There are no resources for "mentally violated by a deranged god with an alien artifact," so I've drawn on examples like **sexual assault** and **spiritual abuse** to extrapolate what kind of aftereffects Clint might face. **Value violation** is a direct parallel because he was forced to attack his coworkers. (This is a huge issue for Tony as well, as revealed in other chapters.) There are tips for **helping someone heal from sexual assault** and for **recovering from abuse**. A crucial step after any kind of violation is for the survivor to **regain personal power** -- their **agency**, their ability to make choices that affect what happens next. **Forgiveness** is an optional **step**, for which there are also **instructions**.
Read about the movie *Brave*. There is a controversy about the remodeling of Merida into a sexualized Disney Princess, which you can explore in "*Keep Merida Brave*" and "*A Mighty Girl's Response*." Thanks to for reminding me to include this.

Watching and analyzing movies are fun family activities. I was disappointed that I couldn't find much in the way of tips for how to discuss shows with kids, because I grew up with family movie discussions that got pretty involved even when I was little.

Learn how to make a grilled cheese sandwich. There are simple and gourmet recipes. Explore different kinds of sandwich presses; the Avengers probably have a big fancy one like this.

See the dinosaur crust cutter.
His Memory Lay in Ruins

Chapter Summary

Phil, Steve, and Natasha discuss what's going on with Bucky. So far the news is very mixed and they are not happy about that.

Chapter Notes

One of the end notes didn't fit, so I've placed it here instead:

Traumatic brain injury comes from a blow to the head, with physical and mental aftereffects which may be temporary or permanent; there is a glossary of related terms. (Consider that Bucky fell a tremendous distance from the train, even before Department X got its hands on him, although most of the damage is chemical and psychological from their abuse.) TBI is hard on families, but there are resources for coping with it. This kind of handicap is often humiliating for the survivor, embarrassing for the family, frustrating and tedious for everyone. Sometimes it gets better, others times the damage is permanent, and often a mix with different symptoms improving or not.

Over the next few days, the team slowly settled toward normal. Phil kept a careful eye on Steve and Natasha, but they seemed to be recovering from the sudden shock. Sometimes they sparred together. Steve also worked out alone. After he demolished even the reinforced heavy bag from Stark Industries, Tony built him a sparring frame with a forcefield that would absorb his blows without breaking anything. Natasha came out of her interrogations with an armload of information, a slinky spring in her stride, and a sated smile on her face. She hunkered down with the fresh data and waited for the trembling strands of her web to alert her to opportunities for action.

Tony, Bruce, and Betty tore into the enemy arsenal with savage glee and gave regular reports on their findings. Clint stopped skittering around the issue of mind control and started pestering the trio of scientists for gamma-powered arrowheads. So far they refused, thank god. Phil shuddered to think what kind of havoc could have resulted from those.

Matters with the Winter Soldier fared less well. Phil read every report meticulously as it arrived. The doctors had cleaned out the mess of chemicals, which broke the primary enforcement of the brainwashing. The imposed control was gone, but a great deal of damage remained. His memory lay in ruins and he considered himself fallen into enemy hands, which was ... not entirely untrue.

Phil flipped through his research on memory and amnesia. This case didn't match any documented examples, probably because it had been sculpted on purpose. Retrograde amnesia affects old memories prior to an event. Department X wanted to limit Bucky's access to his past, without removing so much as to make him useless, so it's blocked rather than wiped, Phil thought. Anterograde amnesia affects the formation of new memories. Department X wanted to prevent Bucky from formulating escape plans. So he cycles through awareness, sometimes not retaining new
information, other times losing it into the well of the past.

Phil pored over another report and called up articles on types of amnesia related to specific causes. **Dissociative amnesia comes from psychological trauma. That'll be the brainwashing part. Imposed patterns have broken down, so natural personality and recall may emerge in a safe place, Phil thought. Drug-induced amnesia comes from specific chemicals, probably used to obscure what was done to him. Anything affected by that is probably gone, though some of the drugs may have been intended to support other aspects of amnesia or mind control. Freeze damage from repeated cryonic suspension is minimal but present, and again, anything affected by that is lost permanently.** Phil rested his head in his hands for a moment, fingers rubbing at his temples. The whole situation gave him a headache that no amount of painkillers seemed to help.

**Summaries in hand, Phil went to explain the situation to Steve and Natasha. He found them in the gym again, sparring with an intensity that Phil rarely saw, Steve's focused power against Natasha's feral grace. When he made them halt, Steve went to get an ice pack for his bruised jaw and Natasha wrapped fresh gauze over her scraped knuckles. For a long moment, the only sound was the drip of sweat against the mats.**

"So far the SHIELD doctors have finished flushing out the foreign chemicals from Bucky's body," Phil said. "He seems to be intermittently lucid and not following any explicit programming. However, he displays an unusual kind of amnesia, cycling through phases of awareness and then out again. It's hard for him to remember his deep past or to form new memories properly. What he does remember is randomized -- different memories come and go. It's getting better, slowly. The doctors are still trying to map the parameters." Phil added more details, showed Steve and Natasha the reports, and then waited for their response.

Natasha huffed. "It is not unlike some of the Red Room's techniques, I think," she said. "They would have us dazed, disoriented -- pour the mission into us like soup into a canning jar. That made it harder to remember who we were, aside from the tools they meant us to be. Bucky needs someone to remind him who he is, someone who knows these things."

"We should go see him again," Steve declared, his voice muffled by the ice pack. He chucked it on the bench. The dense bruising was already beginning to fade. The blow that had delivered it would likely have broken an ordinary man's jaw.

They went to see Bucky as often as they could. All three of them followed his progress intently. The doctors compared the symptoms to traumatic brain injury, plus probable post-traumatic stress. They still wouldn't allow more than brief visits, even after repeated explanations of the time factor. Phil suspected that they wanted to take advantage of the nearly blank slate, as Department X had done, to fill it with whatever they pleased. Control the input, control the output. It fit Fury's tendency to view people as tools.

*I don't think that's going to work very well for them, considering how far Department X had to tighten the noose to turn Bucky into the Winter Soldier,* Phil mused. *With the drugs gone and the cryochamber out of the picture, he's much less malleable. This was, after all, the man who had helped raise Steve Rogers. Even without his memory, he was not so easily manipulated.*

"This is maddening," Steve said. "Natasha and I can just about get Bucky to where he recognizes both of us without further prompting. That's better and faster than what she used to manage. We think it's because there are two of us and Bucky has known me longer." Steve paced restlessly. "But then we have to leave. Next visit, he's lost it all and we have to start from scratch again. This can't be good for him. I'm really starting to worry, Phil."

"So am I," Phil said.
It got harder and harder to pry Steve away from Bucky every time they had to leave. Eventually that wasn't going to work at all; Steve would just plant himself and refuse to budge. That's not optimal, Phil decided. I need to come up with a better plan of action before that happens. The question is ... what?

Bruce finally dragged Phil away from the situation. "Steve, Natasha, find something else to do other than haunting Phil," he said. "Phil, find a stopping place."

"I don't see that happening soon," Phil said without looking up from the latest report.

"All right, then I'll do it for you. JARVIS, freeze workstation," said Bruce. He reached past Phil and closed everything, ignoring Phil's bark of dismay. "Phil, hush. You wearing yourself to rags is not helping Bucky. I'm putting you to bed. You can walk on your own two feet or ride over Steve's shoulder, whichever you prefer."

"I'll walk," Phil said grudgingly.

Bruce escorted him to bed, as promised, and tucked him in. Phil was already half-asleep by the time his head reached the pillow. He barely registered the sequence of tender touches arranging him comfortably in bed. The last thing Phil remembered was Bruce's rich, mellow voice lulling him to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Post-traumatic stress syndrome or prolonged duress stress syndrome may result from horrific experiences. Originally the focus was on acute events such as rape or being wounded in combat; later on chronic events such as bullying or imprisonment have been considered. This is particularly a concern for veterans.

Like Natasha, Bucky reads more as a prisoner of war than an ordinary trauma survivor. Some soldiers, spies, and special operatives receive training on how to cope with such challenges. The POW experience raises difficult questions about free will and the human spirit.

Amnesia is a loss of memory spanning various types. Two basic categories include retrograde and anterograde. Retrograde amnesia can erase decades of life experience. Anterograde amnesia creates an effect of living in the moment, as the person is unable to form new memories; the waking window varies in length from one person to another. Dissociative amnesia is most often caused by psychological trauma and involves separating the mind from memories and events. Memory types and processes interact with those of amnesia to create different effects. This influences the chance of retrieving lost memories.

Memory is the brain's database. There are different aspects of memory which work in different ways. If something goes wrong, it may impact some but not others. Memory loss and stress are reflexive: each contributes to the other.

So you can see that what I've done here is create a condition for the Winter Soldier that draws on canonical accounts of what has happened to him, extrapolations of what Department X and the Red Room were into and why, and real-life injuries that soldiers sometimes bring home. I hope I can do it justice, because this subject area is delicate and
challenging. Too often writers handwave it away; I want to explore how something like this affects not just the survivor but everyone around him.

**Reality orientation** is the practice of using verbal, visual, and other cues to support a disoriented person in keeping track of everyday life. Experts are just starting to **study this** formally. Informal exploration has gone a lot further because it's not hard to think of and it works. But the lack of formal study means we don't know much yet about which methods work best for which problems, or why things work better for some people than others. Anyhow, this is what Steve and Natasha have been doing for Bucky: trying to remind him of the date, location, who he is, who they are, and other basic details that his injured mind can't grip securely. Notice that this also parallels some of how the Avengers help each other **handle different dissociative experiences** such as flashbacks, by providing an anchor to the here-and-now.
Now We Need a Plan

Chapter Summary

The Avengers discuss how to retrieve Bucky from SHIELD.

Chapter Notes

One of the end notes didn't fit, so I'm moving it here:

Morale concerns the mental and emotional state of people within an organization, especially in the face of challenges to their loyalty. Betrayal undermines morale -- for example, sexual assault in the military. This also reflects on the moral character of those involved. It's important to establish and maintain trust in the workplace in order to have good morale. There are ways to boost employee morale.

"Wake up, Agent Coulson," said JARVIS. The bedroom lights turned on halfway and slowly brightened. "It is 2:38 AM and you just received a text message that I believe is urgent."

Coulson shook himself awake in an instant. He trusted JARVIS to scan incoming messages and alert him if necessary. That worked so much better than just turning his phone on and off. "Show me," he said.

A hologram appeared in front of him with a single line reading, If you want your man back better come get him while there's something left.

Coulson felt an icy chill creep down his spine. This wasn't the first time an anonymous tip from someone in medical had alerted him to a problem with one of his assets so that he could ride to the rescue. Some of the medics truly meant well. Others were ... just following orders.

"Wake everyone else, summarize the situation, tell them it's urgent but not yet an emergency," Coulson said as he scrambled out of bed. "Assemble in the common room."

"Done," JARVIS said a minute later. "Sir is already awake; he was busy in the lab. The others are getting ready now."

Coulson finished buttoning his suit coat as he strode into the common room. "All right, you know the problem. Now we need a plan to retrieve James Barnes from SHIELD medical; the floor's open for suggestions," he said, looking around at the Avengers. They gazed back at him, calm and professional.

"How can we get him out of there without fighting our way out?" Rogers said. "I'd rather not destroy the Helicarrier unless we have to -- there are uninvolved bystanders on board -- but I don't think they'll turn him loose willingly."
"If they don't turn him loose, they could have a mutiny on their hands," Stark said. "It took a few
days to dig this up because the paperwork was made of actual paper, so it had to be located by hand
and then scanned into the current database." He handed Rogers a Starkpad with the relevant file.

"Oh my God, I forgot about this," Rogers said in a wondering tone.

"Yep, you two originally listed each other as next of kin. That gives you a lot of say in his medical
care," Stark said.

"On that note, I can start the paperwork to acknowledge you as brothers, if you both want that," Phil
said to Rogers. "Talk to him once he's more himself, and let me know."

Stark continued, "If SHIELD doesn't respect next of kin for you, then nobody would trust them to
respect it for anyone else. I don't think they can afford that kind of hit to morale and discipline."

"Especially not after that bullshit Fury pulled on us," Barton said grimly. Both he and Romanova
were listed for Coulson, as Coulson was for them. None of them had forgiven the lies about
Coulson's supposed death nor the damage that had done to their nascent team.

"Yes, I've been waiting for an opportunity to hit Fury back for that," Stark said, baring his teeth in a
shark-like grin. "This approach leaves him no safe ground on which to mount an effective defense
against our objective. He'll just be shooting himself in his other foot if he tries."

"Good point," Coulson said. Sometimes Stark's skill at the Machiavellian intrigue of business and
politics proved as useful as his engineering aptitude. "All right, division of labor is that Rogers and
Romanova come with me to retrieve Barnes now; Stark, Barton, Dr. Banner, and Dr. Ross stay here
to provide backup in case we don't return in, say, three hours. Plan A: Rogers and I talk Director
Fury into releasing Barnes to our care, however grudgingly, while Romanova goes down to collect
him from medical. Plan B: Romanova smuggles or breaks Barnes out with however much fuss
people insist on making, while Rogers and I provide support."

"Are we sheltering him here, or running him to safety elsewhere?" Banner asked. "Because I've still
got a few contacts in the underground if necessary..."

"He's a hero, not a fugitive," Rogers snapped. The stress had frayed his usually steady temper into a
ragged mess.

"Sorry, just trying to be helpful," Banner said, holding up his hands.

"We'll bring him back to the tower if feasible. If not, Romanova and I have some safehouses outside
of SHIELD's knowledge," Phil said.

They made the trip to SHIELD in grim silence. When they arrived, Romanova peeled off toward
medical. Fury managed to be behind the desk in his office when Coulson and Rogers tracked him
down, but it was clear from his sullen and bleary expression that someone had hurriedly roused him
from his bunk when they first appeared on the security screens.

"What do you want at oh-dark-hundred?" Fury said without preamble.

"I'm here to pick up James Barnes. I'm dissatisfied with the care he's getting down in SHIELD
medical," Rogers said.

"No," Fury said. "The World Security Council isn't entirely pleased that the Winter Soldier was
captured instead of killed. This is an espionage organization, not a nursery. Don't push your luck."
"Check your personnel records. We're listed as next of kin for each other," Rogers said evenly. "I don't think you want to reopen that can of worms by violating those regulations again."

"Irrelevant," Fury said. "The Winter Soldier is an enemy combatant, until the doctors can certify him completely free of hostile influence. He goes nowhere unless the inside of his head contains something safer than whatever Department X stuffed in there."

Coulson crossed his arms. "You've received the same reports I have, Director Fury," he said. "They've done all they can for him. They've broken the controls held up by chemistry. His memory is wrecked, which limits hostile influence. What's left is psychological damage, and you know my track record for dealing with that." Coulson and Barton had done most of the work deprogramming Black Widow, for the simple reason that nobody else could get an idea in edgewise through all her defenses. "There are rules about proper handling of prisoners of war which, if not followed, could have a negative impact on SHIELD morale considering how often our people get captured. Let me take over this situation before it goes any more sour."

"When he went down, James Barnes was serving in the U.S. Army and under my command. His physical and mental injuries were received in the line of duty and will be respected accordingly," Rogers said.

"Not everyone sees it that way. The Winter Soldier has done too much damage over the years for them to overlook so easily," Fury pointed out.

"Because that approach worked so well with Hawkeye," Coulson said. Despite Hawkeye's inclusion in the Battle of New York, the Helicarrier crew still gave him a mixed reception at best. It made healing the harm done by Loki's mind control all the harder.

It was suddenly, vividly Captain America who slammed his hands down on Fury's desk. The thick wooden top cracked in half. "Where I come from, people treat veterans with some gratitude for their sacrifices," he said. His voice held the implacable cold of the glacier from which he had emerged. "I don't know where this modern idea of treating them like kleenex came from, but I won't stand for it. I will not. You don't use people up and then throw them away like that. I've given up a lot to fit in here. I've adapted, but there are limits. I was raised to respect veterans. You don't get to take that away from me!"

Agent Coulson listened, rubbing his thumb and fingers together. He became acutely aware that if he tried to hold onto the Captain's ripcord at this time, all he'd get for his trouble would be a strip of emotional blisters. Deliberately Coulson opened his hand and pressed it against the impeccable fabric of his trousers.

"Forget about him and go home. That's an order," Fury said. A faint sheen of sweat glistened at his temples.

"I don't leave behind members of my team," Captain America said, now inches away from Fury's face.

"The Winter Soldier is not a member of your team," Fury said. "Consider the big picture. He is of no use as he is, and may never be again. We must simply wait and see whether the program can return him to a secure state of mind."

"The rest of us disagree," Coulson said, his voice level. "We very much consider James Barnes a part of our team, considering that he is Steve Rogers' family and a capable asset in his own right once he recovers from the harm he suffered at enemy hands."
"Which the current treatment in medical is not helping, as you well know if you have read the furnished materials ... sir," Captain America said. "Now we can do this the easy way or --"

"Or you'll what, Rogers -- break him out?" Fury said. His eye twitched.

"Wouldn't be the first time," Captain America said grimly. He leaned even further over what was left of Fury's desk. Metal and wood groaned under the pressure. Fury tilted back a fraction of an inch. "Do you really want to put yourself in the same position as HYDRA?"

"Let me add a few more examples," Coulson said, activating his Starkphone. He sent a file to Fury's screen. "Black Widow takes a dim view of brainwashing. This is what happened the last time that came up." He cued a few scenes from the Helicarrier battle when she'd broken Loki's control over Hawkeye. "Naturally you can imagine that Hawkeye is also sensitive about this topic. I'm sure you remember the vulnerabilities in the Tesseract base and the Helicarrier revealed during that incident." Fury winced at the pictures, rubbing his chest.

"Banner takes exception to people being treated as lab rats. This is what happens when he gets angry about that sort of thing," Phil continued. The Hulk's roar sounded from Fury's screen. The Director wheezed a little. Nobody on the Helicarrier would forget that sound any time soon. Coulson and Captain America ignored his growing distress. "Iron Man disapproves of using people as living weapons. He expresses that very dramatically." Afghanistan. Stane. Hammer and Vanko. Explosions rattled the speakers.

Fury's brown skin was turning an interesting shade of grey. "You -- you wouldn't really --"

"After what you've done to my team?" Agent Coulson said, honing the edge of his voice on the words. "I would. Really. Gladly. And so would every one of the Avengers. You need us more than we need you. Think about it."

"I'm through with this," Captain America said, turning to leave.

"Where the hell do you think you're going, soldier?" Fury snapped.

"To get my brother," Captain America said as he walked to the door. "If you insist on continuing this argument, feel free to shoot me in the back."

Coulson couldn't resist flicking one last image onto Fury's screen. "That's what happened to the last man who tried shooting Captain America in the back. Consider that he was a Nazi before you decide to repeat his incredibly poor plan of attack," Coulson said. Then he hurried after Captain America.

Chapter End Notes

Machiavellianism is a style of intrigue, politics, and manipulation. It was most famously described in The Prince by Niccolo Machiavelli. Read the book online.

The World Security Council purports to protect peace and supervise SHIELD. As this organization considered it acceptable to nuke New York, you can see how they're not very convincing.

Prisoners of war captured during armed conflicts have certain rights. They still tend to sustain damage during captivity, and rehabilitation takes a lot of work. Note that Bucky
qualifies both coming and going: he was first captured and abused by Department X, and now Fury is taking a mixed view, not throwing him in the brig but also still considering him an enemy combatant (rather than a rescued ally as the Avengers do).

Aggressive body language carries on a discussion of dominance and submission. A threat display is actually intended to avoid a physical fight by warning off a potential opponent. Captain America is not just demonstrating that he's at the end of his temper; he's also reminding Fury who has the greater strength if actual combat ensues. This is a subtle but important difference compared to someone who uses aggressive poses to intimidate someone because they enjoy scaring and hurting people.

I consider this the iconic Captain America speech.

Veterans are people who have served in the armed forces. Disrespect for veterans is a fact and a problem, spanning time and wars in contemporary culture. (I totally feel with Steve: I got the earlier imprint from my grandparents, not the later one.) Benefits and services are constantly under attack; there are older and newer examples. Veterans suffer long waits even for what remains. This contributes to the high rates of homelessness, suicide, and other problems. Veterans deserve respect and gratitude. There are ways to honor and help veterans, including those with PTSD. You can see why Captain America loses his shit over this.

Captain America delivers the military version of RTFM.

Agent Coulson's educational slide show features events shown in the movies The Avengers, The Incredible Hulk, Iron Man 1, Iron Man 2, and Captain America. Using a cluehammer is just like using a regular hammer: If it doesn't work, use a bigger hammer. If it breaks, it needed replacing anyway.
A Welcome Recognition

Chapter Summary

Phil, Steve, and Natasha rescue Bucky from SHIELD medical.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The walk provided time to regroup and step back a little from the edge of conflict, still alert for threats but no longer on combat footing. Helping Bucky would require a more personal touch. The halls were quiet and half-lit for the night, almost empty. The few personnel on duty scurried out of the way.

By the time Phil and Steve made it to medical, Natasha had freed Bucky from most of the restraints and other equipment. Bucky pushed himself up onto his elbows as they came in. Phil frowned over the gleam of bare metal all along Bucky's left arm and the livid bruise around his right wrist.

"What happened?" Steve said, his fingers hovering above the mark.

"Stevie," said Bucky. His dark eyes brightened with a welcome recognition. Natasha must have been prompting him as fast as possible. Then he frowned. "I thought you were smaller."

"I grew up," Steve said softly. He laced their fingers together. Steve's large, broad hand made Bucky's look almost dainty in comparison, long slim digits folding down over the back of Steve's hand.

Fury would have to kill Steve and Bucky to separate them now, Phil realized as he watched the two men clinging to each other. It's a good thing the Director is in no shape to come after us. It had been harsh to hit the man's triggers so hard, which certainly hadn't done his blood pressure any good. Still, that was preferable to a fistfight or, worse, a gunfight.

"Bucky doesn't respond well to restraints," Natasha explained to Steve. "According to the chart, he's broken each leg once and his arm twice. The second break is fused but not fully healed yet. Also he managed to do enough damage to various members of the staff that they gladly cleared the way for me to remove him from the premises. The guards had orders to avoid hurting him 'if feasible' but things got pretty rough. You should have seen them running from me like little cockroaches. I don't think Director Fury realizes how much his support is eroding."

Steve growled. Phil hoped that the culpable personnel would stay out of Steve's reach. It was important to get Bucky to safety; they couldn't afford any avoidable delays.

"Sorry," Bucky said, his voice blurry. "Thought I was back in Russia, bad situation..."

"We're in New York. You're back in friendly hands," Phil assured him.

"Where are we going?" Bucky asked.

"The future," Steve said with a smile. "We're taking you home, Bucky. Can you walk?"
"Can walk outta here," Bucky said with a brisk lift of his chin.

"Good, get dressed," Phil said, handing him the small stack of clothes that Natasha had brought along.

"I'll help," Steve said, as Bucky fumbled his way into the garments. The injured arm posed a challenge. Steve made short work of the sleeves and buttons. His hands were deft and gentle as they supported Bucky while he tugged everything into place. All that practice handling a half-conscious Bruce paid off.

Nearby, a patch of color caught Phil's eye and he wondered who had left the flowers, because it hadn't been any of the Avengers. *Salmon-red daffodils for respect, white tulips for forgiveness, blue hyacinths for sincerity,* Phil read easily. He scooped them up. Bucky had so little left to him in the modern world, Phil couldn't bear to abandon any of it.

*It seems that someone on staff counts him as a real veteran ... maybe they heard something about the mission, or maybe they rank high enough to have seen the old sealed files about Captain America and Sergeant James Barnes,* Phil thought. Agent Hill liked daffodils, and several of the medics liked tulips. The results were therefore inconclusive.

"Get me out of here," Bucky muttered, sliding off the bed. He swayed on his feet. Steve caught him.

"We will," Steve said. "I've gotten you out of worse with no backup."

Phil turned to Natasha. "Make sure nobody gets in our way as we leave."

"Yes, sir," she said crisply. No one dared to challenge her on the way out.

Phil and Steve had to sling Bucky's arms over their shoulders to keep him upright, but he managed to support most of his own weight. The height difference made it awkward, because Steve stood a little taller than Bucky while Phil was considerably shorter. They made it work anyway.

The farther they went, the stronger Bucky seemed to get, his body shaking off the effects of captivity. Phil took that as a hopeful sign. On the ride home, Steve and Natasha took turns touching their respective memory anchors to revive as much of his old personality as possible.

"Remember the bakery two blocks from where we lived, how it always smelled of pastrami and rye," said Steve.

"I remember," Bucky said after a minute. There was a desperate undertone to his voice, the sound of a man clutching a lifeline. "They had, they had a really good black bread there, and fresh butter." A faint smile touched his lips.

"Remember Peterhof, the trick fountains at the palace -- so obvious," Natasha said.

Bucky actually laughed. "You could see and feel them, the trigger stones, they didn't sit quite right with the others."

"And then the stupid tourist stepped on one and we got wet anyway," Natasha said.

"A few drops only, we dodged most of it," said Bucky. "We're quick on our feet."

"Remember when you made me ride the Cyclone on Coney Island?" Steve asked. His words held a soft note of nostalgia.
"Yeah, you threw up all over me." Bucky cocked his head at Steve. "You're bigger. Are you ... okay?"

"Healthy as a horse," Steve said. "You don't need to worry about me, Bucky."

"I always worry about you," Bucky said. He rested his head against Steve's shoulder, moving with the slow rise and fall of his chest. Still woozy, then. Bucky was lucky to be functional at all, after what he had survived.

Phil wanted to help. He felt honored to touch a piece of living history, and hoped that this time his eagerness wouldn't run away with him so much. Phil hadn't known Bucky before this, but he had read all the old sealed files and plenty of public memorabilia. Steve talked about Bucky, too, so Phil knew some of the stories. That gave him a place to start.

"Did Steve really pick up a garbage can lid to use as a shield in a street fight, before?" Phil asked.


Steve's cheeks were wet, but he was smiling. It's been too long since he had someone to share his memories with, Phil thought. Once we get past the rough start, this will be good for everyone.

Chapter End Notes

Memory plays a crucial role in social interactions. Sometimes it's possible to help someone cope with memory loss by prompting them with names and descriptions, past events, specific questions, and so forth. There are also tips particular to helping someone suffering from dissociative amnesia.

A few of the lines in this chapter are movie quotes from the film Captain America.

Low morale and burnout cause serious problems in the workplace. They can result from betrayal, manipulation, harassment, and other offenses from superiors. Employees may also simply become unsupportive and less productive at work, a problem called presenteeism. There are tips for handling an unsupportive boss and improving morale.

Dressing someone can be a little challenging.

The language of flowers can be used to send discreet messages, which is why Phil knows it. Here I've used salmon-red daffodils for respect, white tulips for forgiveness, and blue hyacinths for sincerity. The meanings do vary; I'm condensing them for literary effect, and allowing for the fact that clustering flowers into a combined message makes it easier to guess which of the possible meanings are most likely.

Memories often surface in response to specific cues. Positive cues are called emotional anchors; negative cues are called triggers. Emotional triggers indicate feelings most likely to cause unpleasant incidents. Here people are helping Bucky remember himself by prompting him with past events and sensations. Furthermore, a useful trick in combating PTSD is to activate a positive anchor and a negative trigger at the same time; this weakens both. These are important coping skills for addressing memory malfunctions such as amnesia and flashbacks.
The trick fountains of Peterhof are part of a famous attraction in Russia. Not everyone found them as obvious as I did.

Coney Island is a beach and amusement park in New York. The Cyclone is a classic wooden roller-coaster.

The garbage can lid is counted as one of the best scenes in Captain America.
**This Is My Brother**

Chapter Summary

Phil, Steve, and Natasha bring Bucky home to the tower. Bruce takes care of them. Bucky isn't thrilled about that.

Chapter Notes

Some of the end notes didn't fit, so I'm moving them here:

**JARVIS** is impressive because he does so much that contemporary computers and programs can't. One of the more dramatic is voice recognition, which includes both speech recognition (what is meant) and speaker recognition (who is talking). People claim that current technology is good at this, but it's really not; it misses a great deal. So just listening to JARVIS converse with other characters indicates that he's a person, and that his code is stupendously sophisticated, if you know about computers.

**Avengers Tower**, which began as Stark Tower, is one base for the team. It has formidable defenses. JARVIS is very protective of his people, and he's just added Bucky to that list.

В гостях хорошо, а дома лучше. (Russian proverb)
Translation: Visiting is good, but home is better.

**Bullying** is a serious problem, not just for children but also adults. Bullies really do tend to be cowards, although not all of them are, and they often have other mental problems. Some people have a distorted image of bullies. Serial bullies are especially problematic because they hunt for victims and pick a new one at once if the old one escapes. Happy, healthy people do not pick on others like this. More recent observations indicate that bullying harms the bully in addition to the victim(s).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Phil and Steve kept ahold of Bucky as they walked into the tower, more for reassurance than physical support now. "JARVIS, this is my brother Bucky, also known as Sergeant James Barnes. Bucky, JARVIS is ... kind of our electric butler, I'll explain more later. Say something so he'll know your voice," Steve said.

"Hello?" Bucky said tentatively.

"Welcome home, James," said JARVIS. "Please rest assured that you are safe here. Mr. Stark has raised the alert status of tower defenses in case of hostile pursuit."

"My friends call me Bucky."
"I am honored by your friendship, Bucky," said JARVIS.

Phil was intrigued by the way JARVIS tended toward formality at first, but would warm up to a more familiar tone with people he knew and liked. JARVIS also had a sarcastic streak a mile wide, no doubt courtesy of Tony, but could still be careful and compassionate when the situation called for it.

Bucky gazed around at the opulent modern fixtures of the tower. Everything gleamed with chrome and marble and glass, Tony's elegant engineering coupled with Pepper's artful design. It was rich and sophisticated and far out of Bucky's league so far as familiarity went, even if he could remember more than fragments of his early life. Bucky seemed awed, and a little daunted, but determined too -- he moved forward without hesitation.

"What do you think?" Phil prompted gently.

"В гостях хорошо, а дома лучше," Bucky said, dropping back into Russian.

"I agree, Visiting is good, but home is better," Natasha said.

Bruce and Clint were waiting for them in the common room. Bucky hung back, shoulder angled toward the door, keeping a wary eye on the unfamiliar people. Phil didn't push him.

"How did it go?" Clint asked after a quick round of introductions.

"Not too badly," Phil said. "Director Fury wasn't happy with us at all; the verbal confrontation got rather heated. That's liable to cause more fallout later, both for him and for us. However, nobody shot at us and we made it home intact. Mission accomplished."

"Is anyone else surprised that we got off this lightly?" Clint asked.

Steve snorted. "Fury is a bully. You know something I've learned about bullies? They also tend to be cowards."

Well, no wonder the Director had been sweating with Captain America looming over him in high rant. Fury might not fear a fistfight, but a credible threat to undermine his authority would bother him. That could have contributed to the physical stress reaction. Phil mulled over Steve's observation in more detail. It's true that Fury postures. It's also true that he prefers subterfuge to honesty, and an attack from behind or the sides to a frontal assault, Phil thought.

"Great. That's a good point. I'm going back to bed now. It is stupidly late, or rather, early," Clint said.

"I'll come with you," Natasha said, falling into step with Clint as he left.

"Tony's down in the lab," Bruce said. "I think he wanted access to his best equipment in case you needed virtual backup."

I wonder if Tony sent Fury some pictures too. He's very good at pulling triggers, figurative as well as literal, Phil thought, then said aloud, "That was prudent of him."

Steve grimaced over his left hand, scraping at something with a fingernail. "Darn it," he muttered.

"What's wrong?" Phil asked.

"Think I got a splinter," Steve said.
"Well, quit picking at it and let me see," Bruce said. Steve nodded. Bruce tilted Steve's hand toward the light. "A splinter, he says -- Steve, this thing is over a centimeter long! That's not a splinter, it's shrapnel. How did you even do this to yourself?"

Steve looked down at his shoes. "I, uh, kind of broke Fury's desk. In half. With my hands."

Bruce chuckled. "For that lovely image, I will excuse you from the usual lecture about taking better care of yourself," he said. Phil handed Bruce the first-aid kit. It took only a minute to remove the splinter and clean the tiny wound, which healed by the time Phil put the supplies away.

"Thanks," Steve said, and Bruce nodded.

Just then Bucky, who had clasped his hands behind his back, rested one on the side of the couch as he sat down. Bruce frowned and asked, "How'd you manage to break your arm in medical?"

"It's not broken," Bucky said. He pressed his knees together, tucking his hands tightly in his lap.

"Yeah, not at the moment, but a few hours ago it was," Bruce said. "I've seen Steve looking like that after busting out of cuffs -- oh. Well I guess that explains it. God damn SHIELD."

That made Phil wonder how well Hulk was taking this situation. Hulk could be very sensitive about unkind people in white coats and threats to freedom. He also had a weirdly protective streak. If Bruce got angry ... that would not be a good thing. Phil kept a careful eye on him.

"Bucky broke that arm twice and each leg once," Steve added. He leaned against the back of the couch to rest his hands on Bucky's shoulders. "I suspect that inspired one of the staff to alert Phil."

"Almost certainly," Phil said. "When I get a tip like that, it usually comes after an avoidable in-house injury. Friendly fire isn't. Some SHIELD staff have a better understanding of that than others." The problem was, most people interested in healing professions wouldn't put up with SHIELD's cloak-and-dagger worldview, but the organization absolutely required medical support. The few who could balance both sides of that equation were treasured accordingly. As for the rest ... sometimes you just had to take what you could get, and hope that it would do more good than harm.

Bruce reached for Bucky's wrist. Bucky instantly twisted it out of his grasp. "Don't touch me," Bucky said.

"Sorry, my vocation got ahead of my manners there," Bruce said. "I should've asked first." He sank to the floor, curling his legs under to put himself deliberately lower than Bucky. "Will you let me take a look at you? Just a quick peek, nothing pushy, I promise. Phil would've called me if you were really hurt."

"I just got out of medical," Bucky snapped.

Bruce looked away. "Yeah, well ... I don't entirely trust them with people I care about."

Chapter End Notes

Bullying can have a devastating impact on people. Health concerns can make people quit a job or fight back. There are tips on how to intervene in bullying and how to stop a bully in the workplace. Unfortunately none of them work well: the most effective (hiring a lawyer) only succeeds 16% of the time. The leadership needs to focus on
stopping workplace bullies. The most effective solution is to fire the bully.

**Anger management** is an vital intrapersonal skill. There are signs of difficulty with controlling anger. It's important to understand anger and how to handle it. From another angle, there are ways to calm yourself.

**Friendly fire** means harm done by allies. "Friendly fire isn't" belongs to a list of military Murphy's laws.

Body language can indicate when someone is uncomfortable, as with Bucky's edgy stance.

It's polite to ask permission before touching someone for first aid. Skipping that step is a no-no, although familiarity can grant implied consent. Bruce knows better than to do this, he really does. However, his conscious attention is focused on controlling his anger. So it's his nurturing instinct in the forefront yammering Do something! that drives him to move before asking. It's not exactly a mistake (even though touching without permission is a wrong move here) because it comes from Bruce's quite correct prioritization of resources (concentrating on keeping his temper). Bucky's response pulls Bruce's attention away from anger management and onto bedside manner.

Having set off Bucky's defensive reaction, Bruce reassures Bucky that he's not a threat by shifting his position. **Submitive body language** is effective for that, and something Bruce does much of the time anyhow. Putting Bucky in a dominant position gives him back control of the situation and helps nudge him toward rationality. This is an effective step for anyone whose agency has been violated. However, it's also an expression of Bruce's own damage, because he has a very strong fawn response. This was vividly displayed early in *The Avengers* when Black Widow went to kidnap him.
Bruce Knows to Be Careful

Chapter Summary

After some coaxing, Bucky consents to let Bruce look him over.

Chapter Notes

Not all of the end notes would fit, so I'm moving some here:

Memory loss and anxiety are closely linked: each can cause the other. Forgetting things can make people confused, frustrated, frightened, and otherwise upset. There are tips for helping someone cope with memory loss.

Body dysphoria is a general and intense feeling that one's body is not what it should be. Body dysmorphic disorder is more specific. It's far more than just negative body image. Body dysphoria feels like wearing uncomfortable, poorly fitting clothes that you can never take off. There are ways to reduce the effects somewhat. Social dysphoria is a similar kind of unease based on interactions with other people that don't fit who someone really is. This can relate to imposter syndrome too. Social and body dysphoria usually interweave. These problems often occur with alternative sex/gender identity or multiple personalities. For Bruce, it ties into his relationship with Hulk and the way their body physically changes, making him feel alienated from his own flesh (which is also a dissociative problem).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"I don't -- don't know you. Do I? Did I forget something else?" Bucky said, his voice turning from sharp to anxious. He twisted around to look up at Steve.

"No, you didn't forget anything," Steve said gently. He patted Bucky's shoulder. "You haven't really met Bruce before now."

"Steve talks about you, Bucky, and he has good taste in people. That's all I meant," Bruce said, keeping his gaze down. "Humor me a little?"

"Bruce is the in-house medic for our team. He's trustworthy," Phil said. He didn't hesitate to vouch for Bruce, even to someone agitated by ungentle care at SHIELD. "I share his interest in making sure you're reasonably stable."

"He's a good guy, Bucky," Steve chimed in, "and he's got ... some things in common with you, that you can talk about later. Bruce knows to be careful. You saw how he took care of me. Okay, he's kind of a fussbudget at times, but we've given him reason to be so it's hardly fair to complain. Please go along with him."

"Fine," Bucky grumbled. At least he accepted their validation of Bruce.
Bruce looked up at Bucky -- and Steve yelped in shock, backing away. "Bruce, your eyes just flashed green! What's wrong?"

"Yeah, I saw it too. Weird," said Bucky.

"I don't know, I -- really? But the Other Guy isn't angry, no more than usual, less actually," said Bruce.

"Frightened, then?" Phil asked.

Bruce shook his head. "No, and he's not pushing at me, not at all. If I had to pick a word, I'd say maybe ... worried? But that doesn't make sense."

"Maybe he just wanted to see for himself that Bucky is home safe," Phil mused. Perhaps Hulk was starting to respond to something other than threats, beyond the small cluster of anger, fear, and pain that always got his attention. That would be an improvement.

"That feels right," Bruce said. "Huh. That's a new one." He shook himself a little, as if trying to make his body fit better than it did.

"Guess we should explain some of this after all," Steve said to Bucky, returning to his position behind the couch. His fingers drifted over Bucky's shoulders. "Bruce survived a lab accident, as a result of which he sometimes changes into a different form, the Hulk, who is very large and green and temperamental."

"That's a delicate way of phrasing wildly destructive," Bruce muttered. He resented his other self. Even the recent changes in Bruce's awareness of Hulk's nature had not altered that. Phil was still trying to ease their relationship in a more positive direction, so far with limited success.

"Hey, I like both of you, so please don't go putting down my other friend," Steve said. At least the team had grown more comfortable with Hulk, especially after the messy fight with bilgesnipe that ended with everyone helping him clean up. As they grew more protective of Hulk, though, it made Bruce uneasy.

"This sounds ... almost familiar?" Bucky said slowly. "Big and green, loud."

"How much do you remember from the last fight?" Phil asked.

"Not much, just fragments," Bucky said. "Some explosions maybe."

"Same here," said Bruce. "Every time I shift form, it shatters my memory. The Other Guy and I get a little carryover, but not a lot." Showing Bruce some pictures of the post-battle bathing had helped, but he still had only one clear memory of that, everyone drying Hulk off. The balloons from a later event had made more of an impression. Bruce remained dubious, though. "It's like squinting through broken windows."

Bucky nodded. "Yes. Like that," he said. "Sorry, I'm just ... sensitive. After what's happened." The fingers of his left hand twitched, naked metal glinting in the light.

"Exposed, like a nerve," Bruce murmured. "I understand."

"I feel almost like I've been skinned alive. Sometimes it gets overwhelming," Bucky said. Then he sighed. "You still want to look at me?"

"Just to make sure you're not in need of immediate attention. Okay, Bucky?" Bruce said. Bucky
nodded his acceptance. Bruce kept his movements slow and careful, his touches delicate. His fingertips barely skimmed over the fading bruise, and rested lightly on the pulse point without closing around Bucky's wrist.

"Your hands seem warmer than they should, almost feverish," Bucky said. He watched Bruce carefully, but this time he didn't flinch away from the contact.

"Yeah, I run hot," said Bruce. "Feels like you're cooler than standard."

"Most people would need a thermometer to tell that," Bucky said.

"I've learned to do a lot without equipment," Bruce said. "Couldn't count on having any, some of the places I've been."

"That's some medic you've got," Bucky said to Steve, a note of respect brightening his voice. Steve nodded.

Phil recalled the chronic shortages of supplies that plagued the army during World War II, with shipping between America and Europe precarious and so much of the local infrastructure in ruins. *No wonder Bucky admires that kind of skill.* Phil thought. He hoped that Bucky would find things in common with other members of the team besides Steve and Natasha. This was a promising sign.

"All done," Bruce said finally, patting Bucky on the knee. He backed away. "You seem steady enough for now. If anything feels wrong to you, though, you can come to me any time. Meanwhile, you should get some sleep."

"I don't sleep," Bucky said. "Well, only when they drugged me and put me back in the cryochamber, or they ordered me to take heavy-duty sleeping pills on longer missions. Or if I stayed awake so long I passed out from exhaustion. Or got hit over the head hard enough to knock me out."

Phil could see Steve's jaw clench, muscles bunching under stress as Bucky went through the litany of what constituted "sleep" for him. Phil wanted to grind his own teeth too.

Bruce rubbed the bridge of his nose under his glasses. "That's ... really not good," he said to Bucky. "Okay, I'm not at my best right now and you're obviously fed up with me. We can explore options tomorrow. Maybe just ... lie down and try to get some kind of rest."

Bucky just gazed at him silently.

Chapter End Notes

It always sucks to get trapped between two friends who are having a fight. There are tips on staying neutral and mediating between them. The most important thing is to follow the basic rules of friendship. Often either the quarreling friends split apart, or the person caught between will avoid one or both of them to get out of the middle. In this case, Bruce-and-Hulk can't split apart and their teammates won't abandon them. Until recently, the other Avengers mostly took Bruce's side because he gave a convincing if biased description of the Other Guy, and Hulk wasn't articulate enough to refute it. But now they're realizing that Hulk is his own person, a pretty decent person, so they are starting to balk when Bruce picks on him. It causes increasing tension in the team, even though it's a positive progress.
Bilgesnipe are monsters mentioned in *The Avengers*. Various renditions have been made; I like this one, although I've always thought of them as a bit more goatlike with a touch of skunk.

State-dependent memory can rely on emotional, physical, or other factors. It means that memories are difficult or impossible to access in a different state than when they were created. This is one reason why Bruce and Hulk have a hard time sharing memories with each other. Dissociation also plays into memory fragmentation, especially for multiple personalities. PTSD and multiple personalities are often linked, but not always; some multiples are healthy. Bruce-and-Hulk haven't come that far yet, but they're making progress. Bucky's experiences have left his memory with some similar problems.

Bruce is basically treating Bucky as a survivor of trauma or abuse, handling him with extra care and compassion. That means coaxing him to allow necessary attention, rather than forcing him and violating his agency even further.

It is possible to check temperature without a thermometer. Some people derive more precise results than others, and practice usually improves the skill.

Supply shortages tend to accompany any war, but were especially vivid in World War II.

Insomnia can pose a major threat to health. Dreams are vital for the integration of memories and for other functions. Without proper sleep and dreams, people can go insane. This is why sleep deprivation is used as torture. Manipulating or withholding sleep is a deep and intimate violation of the psyche, hence an ideal tool for Department X in controlling the Winter Soldier. So now Bucky can't sleep normally, as a lingering after-effect. You can see why Bruce is quietly freaking out over this. If sleep is impossible, however, other methods of rest can compensate to some extent.
Our Luck's Not That Good

Chapter Summary

Tony makes an alarming discovery. Steve and Bucky do not respond very well. Tony then resorts to an alarming solution.

Chapter Notes

Not all the end notes fit, so I moved some here:

The Cosmic Cube or Tesseract appears in many variations within Marvel canon. It holds a tremendous amount of highly volatile energy. There are instructions for building a model of it.

Loki's staff, also called the Chitauri scepter, figures highly in the Avengers movie. It holds power over the mind, channels magic, changes its form, and also makes a deadly edged weapon. Instructions for modeling it feature the long spear version. (Also, if you're making copies of evil artifacts? Only use them for decorative purposes, and please don't try to imbue them with actual energy. Thoughts have power and sometimes things go wrong in upsetting ways.) The staff may also bear some relation to the Mind Gem in the Gauntlet from elsewhere in Marvel lore.

Reassuring someone who is upset can prevent a situation from getting worse. It helps to use empathy, attention, and respect. There are tips for comforting a scared child and working with a traumatized dog. The general idea is to stay calm, address the source of distress, and move toward a peaceful state. Steve, Phil, and Tony all try different ways to soothe Bucky who is, understandably, freaking out over yet another thing going wrong.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As Bruce left, Tony came into the room. He waved a handheld scanner in front of him. Chirps and clicks sputtered from the small box. "I was afraid of that," he muttered.

"What's wrong, Tony?" Phil asked.

"I picked up an anomaly, some kind of energy source in the tower. It doesn't match any known signature exactly but I do not like the ones it resembles," Tony said, staring at the display on the scanner's screen.

"Those being ...?" Phil said.

"The Tesseract and Loki's staff," Tony said. "Initial readings placed the anomaly on this floor, so I came up to track it closer by hand."

"You think SHIELD planted something on us?" Steve asked.
"Our luck's not that good," Tony said darkly. He swept the scanner past Bucky. It chirped and flashed red.

"It's me, isn't it." Bucky's voice was quiet.

"Yep, noticed," said Tony without looking up from his scanner. "Bucky, what's your power source for the prosthetic arm?"

Bucky flinched. "I don't want to talk about it," he said, clenching his hands between his thighs again.

"Tony, drop it. Natasha said not to mention that," Steve said sternly.

"Sorry, no can do," Tony said. "Something's turning on the red lights and I want to make sure it's not going to turn this tower into a smoking hole in the ground, starting with Bucky."

Steve's knuckles went white where they gripped the back of the couch. The wood creaked under his grip.

"Steve, let Tony work. He's good with technology. If there's a problem, he'll find it and fix it," Phil said, keeping his voice low and calm. "Tony, this is Bucky. He's had a rough time. Pay attention to him and not just his hardware. Bucky, this is Tony Stark. He's our engineer. He'll be as careful with your left arm as Bruce is with the rest of your body. You can trust him to do a good job."

Despite having known Howard during the war, Bucky showed no sign of recognition at either the name or the family resemblance. Another memory lost in time, Phil thought. The loss ached, even though it wasn't his own. Well, maybe it will come back later.

"Pleased to meet you, Bucky," Tony said smoothly. "Shake on it?" He held out his left hand to shake, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Phil recognized the grace of long practice and deduced the source. If you spend enough time with people who have lost body parts, you learn to compensate. Stark Industries used to make weapons for the military, and the Maria Stark Foundation cleaned up the mess among other charitable actions. Tony must have had plenty of exposure, Phil recalled. He himself was perfectly comfortable left-handing someone who'd lost his right arm, but this was the first time Phil had seen anyone offer his left hand to make personal contact with a prosthesis. It was a clever, low-key way to open a connection.

Bucky reached out and hesitantly slipped his silvery fingers into Tony's grasp, not closing his hand. Tony's sharp eyes observed the grip. He gave Bucky a firm squeeze and, after a moment, Bucky mimicked the gesture. Bucky could easily have crushed Tony's hand, but seemed reluctant to apply any significant pressure. Bucky had not extended the same caution to the staff in SHIELD medical.

Tony rubbed a gentle, appraising thumb over the back of Bucky's hand. Then he let go. Bucky pulled back at once. "Okay. So now we've met. Let's try this again," Tony said, looking down at his scanner again. "In the interest of everyone's safety, what can you tell me about your equipment?"

Bucky tapped his left shoulder under the collarbone. "The power source is here, hidden inside my body," he said. "I don't know what it is, though. I'm just a weapon. Nobody tells me anything."

That brought Tony's head right up. "Here, look at this, it shows all the energy sources in the tower and where they lead," he said, flipping the scanner around to show Bucky. "Green for known, red for unknown. These are the arc reactors, the electrical lines, and so forth. This red bit -- huh. That's odd."
"What is?" Bucky asked.

Tony shifted the scanner back and forth. "Seems like it's not alerting over your primary power source; that one's electric. This must be something else, about halfway down your upper arm," he said. He trailed his fingers over the gleaming surface. "Yeah, think I can feel it, just a bit. Like static electricity over the surface of a television screen, almost. It'll take me a while to figure out exactly --"

"Just leave me alone," Bucky said, pushing his hand away. "I'm tired of being poked and prodded."

"Yeah, that always sucks," Tony said. "Thing is, I can't just walk away from this. Because this?" He flicked a fingernail against the metal arm. "This was built by people I neither know nor trust. I need to make sure it's not going to hurt you or us. You're not going to talk me out of that."

"Tony has a point, Bucky," Phil said, hoping that Bucky would place some kind of worth in his judgment, as he had regarding Bruce. Steve was wavering, clearly torn between protecting Bucky and trusting Tony's mastery of technology. Tony poured off spurts of nervous tension, even shakier than usual about giving or receiving trust due to the recent reminder of Stane's betrayal. The last thing they needed was to start a fight amongst the team.

"So much for not being a research subject anymore," Bucky said bitterly, but he didn't knock Tony's hands away from his arm again.

"Whoa, no no no, I am not ever gonna be the guy dishing out the torture and mad science on somebody else," Tony said. "I get that you feel that way, okay. I can fix that." He took a few deep breaths, visibly steeling himself for something. "Phil, come here and unbutton me, please. I really don't want to lift both hands off this thing; it's kind of hard to track."

Phil suddenly realized what Tony meant, and a chill went through him. "Tony, are you sure this is a good idea?" he asked.

"I'm sure it's necessary," Tony said.

"All right, then. It's your choice," Phil said, moving to stand behind Tony. He reached around carefully unbuttoned the shirt. Then he pulled the sides out of the way, tucking the tails into the back of Tony's pants.

"What is that?" Bucky said, leaning forward as the light spilled out to wash over his face.

Chapter End Notes

Bucky feels reserved about his prosthetic arm. Psychological adjustment to amputation is a complex process with many factors. Bucky hasn't really had an opportunity to deal with this in any healthy way, so his feelings are very mixed. Even the most advanced replacements are challenging to use and may pose body image issues.

There is some fascinating history about prosthetic limbs. Reading about their evolution may help understand the ways in which Bucky's equipment is more advanced than current technology allows -- but shows a clear relation to it. This is one reason why we need stories about handicapped people and their adaptive equipment: sometimes it gives us ideas to pursue in this world. The stories go all the way back into history, too; Nuada of the Silver Arm belongs to ancient Celtic legend.
It is possible and polite to shake hands with a prosthetic arm, although models vary in their dexterity. The new myoelectric ones are quite sophisticated. Hands play a vital role in social interaction, so you can understand why Bucky feels so self-conscious sometimes. His prosthesis works almost as well as a natural arm, but he did not choose it, and having it forced upon him has made it difficult for him to identify with it in a way that makes it feel comfortable to use or display. Even people who are satisfied with the functionality of their adaptive equipment may feel shy about revealing it. There are resources about disability awareness and etiquette that suggest ways of helping people feel more comfortable and welcome. Watch out for tropes like An Arm and a Leg; disability is often handled poorly in entertainment.

The primary rule of prosthetic etiquette is: Give the handicapped person the option of making the first move. Shake whatever hand is offered to you, whether it is right or left, flesh or replacement. If offered a left hand, you may take it with your right or left. If shaking hands isn’t an option, a touch on the arm or shoulder provides an equivalent greeting and acknowledgement. The secondary rule is the tricky part, what to do if the handicapped person doesn’t make a move. Some won’t because they feel excluded, in which case making a gesture of inclusion such as offering your hand may be helpful. It won’t work if the person is too self-conscious, so don’t insist. Never grab.

Prosthetic devices can have different power sources. A new one is a rocket motor. Other options include electrical motors, batteries, and pneumatic systems.

Trust is a major issue here. Bucky has to decide whether he can trust Phil and Steve vouching for Tony, and therefore, trust Tony who is completely unknown to him. There are ways to figure out whether someone is trustworthy. It’s also important to distinguish between healthy and unhealthy trust, and to keep the level as close to equal as possible between two people. Trustworthiness is a challenging and complex virtue to develop, but well worthwhile: it will solve some problems that nothing else can. Interestingly, genes play into both compassion and trustworthiness; based on this reference, I definitely think of Steve as GG. He gives off trust like roses pour out perfume.
This Makes Us Equals

Chapter Summary

Tony exposes the arc reactor to coax Bucky into letting him take a closer look at the prosthetic arm. Phil provides support to keep Tony from freaking himself out in the process. Tony's boundary issues, let me show you them.

Chapter Notes

Not all the end notes fit, so I moved some here:

Read about the arc reactor.

The subjective definition of violation comes up most dramatically in the interpretation of rape and torture. The psychology of torture indicates that the worst scars are often in the mind, not the body. However, there remain countervailing arguments for an objective definition of torture. In general, taking away someone's agency and forcing them to do things they don't want to do tends to cause harm, even if the perpetrator does not intend or realize that the actions are harmful.

Equality is an essential component of intimacy, not just in romantic relationships but others as well. Equal and unequal relationships function very differently. Healthy relationships have certain characteristics that reflect equality. Compare facets of equality and control.

Personal boundaries define what is and isn't okay for people to do with each other. Note that Tony's awareness of boundaries is impaired due to abuse (and probably low due to innate personality), not completely nonexistent. This disproves Natalie Rushman's claim of "textbook narcissism." Boundaries have layers that can be rendered in simple or more complex diagrams. Dynamics of power and control can create very inappropriate boundary situations. Healthy relationships need healthy boundaries. There are tips for beginning to set personal boundaries. (In order to do this, you must have agency: control over your own life. Many people don't, their personal integrity is constantly violated, and that is abuse.) It helps to start small with a list of five things. Boundaries also relate to which things you can control, or influence, or have no effect upon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"This is an arc reactor. I built it to keep myself alive," Tony said evenly. He picked up Bucky's right hand and placed it over the radiant blue disc. "So here's the deal. You show me yours, I show you mine. For everything I ask you about your arm, I'll tell you something about the arc reactor. I'll try not to be unnecessarily nosy so I don't wind up owing you serious trade secrets."

Phil pressed himself against Tony's back in hopes of providing an emotional anchor. He knew that Tony rarely revealed the device, and almost never let anyone touch it, with good reason. Phil could feel the slender man quivering ever so slightly already.
"What ... why?" Bucky asked. Steve kept a comforting grasp on him. Bucky tilted his head to lean against Steve's arm. They had been clinging to each other ever since they reunited in SHIELD medical, and didn't seem likely to stop soon.

"Because this makes us equals," Tony explained. "It isn't about me doing something to you, it's about me doing something with you, together. We're going to figure out what you're wearing and whether it's safe, and you get to know me a whole lot better. Hell of an icebreaker but then nobody ever said I had an appropriate sense of boundaries. Deal?"

There was the core of the matter. Tony had been tortured by terrorists, then emotionally and physically violated by Obadiah Stane. Out of those experiences had come Iron Man -- and a complete unwillingness to perpetrate similar torment on anyone else, ever, for any reason. It comprised one of the key differences between heroes and villains.

*Tony views torture as a subjective experience, not just an objective one. If Bucky feels like an unwilling research subject, then Tony counts that as a valid complaint, Phil realized. Change the power dynamic, change the situation, and it just might stop being torture. They really couldn't afford to ignore the foreign energy source, but neither were they willing to traumatize Bucky yet again. So the only option was to change Bucky's mind -- hence Tony's effort to put them on the same footing, because abuse required a power differential. Tony invited Bucky to lower his barriers by first flinging aside his own. It was a brilliant, daring, risky solution. It depended entirely on Bucky's ability to trust them. Seconds ticked by. Phil concentrated on not holding his breath.*

"Deal," Bucky said finally. He still hadn't taken his eyes off Tony's chest. That would have worried Phil, except for the growing respect that showed through Bucky's discomfort. Maybe this would work.

"Great. Take your shirt off so I can see what we're working with here," Tony said.

"Okay," Bucky said. This time he managed the buttons on his own, although he allowed Steve to help him out of the shirt.

"What the actual fuck?" Tony said, scowling as he ran a thumb over the short edge of synthetic skin near the seam between prosthetic and body.

"Hmm? Oh, that. The medics couldn't figure out how it fastened so they just cut the cosmetic cover off," Bucky said.

"They thought it was somehow okay to skin you? Damned butchers. Wouldn't kill them to do things right once in a while," Tony said.

"Let's focus on doing things the right way here and now," Phil murmured. What SHIELD had done was done; dwelling on that so soon would just make it worse. Bucky's acceptance of necessary treatment was fragile enough without stressing it further.

"Yeah, fix what can be fixed, worry about the rest later," Tony said. One fingernail picked at an almost invisible seam in the metal. "So the parts aren't meant to be exposed, Bucky? You're going to pick up all kinds of crud in these grooves. I'll have to make a replacement cover for you. Don't worry, Stark Industries makes some prosthetic equipment for the army, so I've got stuff in stock that should work for a quick fix."

"The fake skin is kind of new. Originally it was just the metal -- you can still see the old insignia on the shoulder," Bucky said. The hammer and sickle were faded, barely visible. He glanced down at the design, then away again. "There used to be metal cladding, too, all these horizontal bands, with a
red star high up on my arm. But somebody took that off when they switched to the skin so I could pass for normal."

"Yeah, the arc reactor went through some revisions too," Tony said. "First one almost killed me. This one's safer and stronger. Feel that raised edge on the cover? That's so it can attach to my armor. The arc reactor powers Iron Man as well as keeping me alive -- thrusters, repulsors, electronics, everything."

"That's amazing," Bucky said reverently. He smoothed a thumb along the curving line of the device.

Phil felt the flinch ripple through Tony's entire body. "Shh, it's all right," he murmured. He wanted to suggest that Tony pull away from Bucky's touch and close his shirt, but there was no hope of that. The man was stubborn.

"Also, um. Someone I foolishly trusted once ripped that out of my chest and left me to die. So. If you could just. Not move. That would help," Tony said.

"Sorry," Bucky said, freezing in place.

"S'okay, you didn't know. Most people don't," Tony said, his tone light now, almost flippant. "How much feeling do you have in your left arm?"

"Not much, just pain and pressure, mostly in the hand so I can aim," Bucky said. "How do you breathe around that thing?"

"Very carefully," Tony muttered. He leaned over Bucky, pressing the two of them close so that he could look behind and examine the part of the prosthetic device that attached to the shoulderblade. "Hmm, looks like three leads in front and another three in back, where the hardware hooks into the nervous system ..."

"You smell like home," Bucky said softly. "Motor oil and dirt floor."

"Yeah, I've noticed that too," Steve said. He leaned down to sniff at Tony's hair. "How do you even have a dirt floor in the tower? It's all glass and metal and fancy modern stuff."

"It's part of the garage level, and I have it because it smells like home to me too," Tony said, pulling away to stand straighter. "That's really not something I feel like discussing now." Phil silently wondered what lay behind that.

"Okay," Steve said. He had learned not to pick at Tony's past.

Chapter End Notes

**Touch therapy** can help people recover from trauma if done right, or make it worse if done wrong. Usually this involves things like massage, but it can lap over into how people touch each other, like what Tony does with Bucky. The idea is to create a sense of safety and comfort.

**Complex post-traumatic stress syndrome** builds up over time and is easy to exacerbate with any remotely similar circumstance. This makes treatment very difficult. It's even harder when *everyone in the room* has issues, but at least they're all understanding about triggers for the same reason.
Disability etiquette views a prosthesis as part of the body. The brain tends toward the same perception. A person’s body image may or may not evolve to consider their prosthetic device part of their self-image. Generally speaking, it is intrusive to handle someone else's adaptive equipment without invitation, and an attack on it is equivalent to an attack on the flesh part of their body, even if the device has no pain receptors. Tony's understanding of this is considerably more advanced than Bucky's is.

I used this image of the Winter Soldier as partial inspiration.

Neuroprosthetics connect with the nervous system to provide sensory input to the brain. There are projects aimed at giving prosthetic hands a sense of touch. Rerouting the nerves inside the body is one option. This also relates back to how the brain perceives prosthetic devices as part of the body, because it can adapt to bodily changes, thus influencing self-image.

Tool use is another example of how you are what you touch. The most common examples include weapons and paintbrushes among things that feel like an extension of the body. Tony is completely fluent with this across the arc reactor, Iron Man, various tools, etc. Clint can do it with his bow. Bucky can do it with a gun but hasn't really thought of his arm the same way, hence his shyness about it.

Scent is a strong memory cue because of how the brain works. Smells can trigger traumatic memories. There are ways of managing triggers. Sometimes smells can even activate repressed memories. This makes scent useful in treating memory loss.

Howard Stark was Tony's father, known to both Bucky and Steve. I write Howard as neglectful, alcoholic, and emotionally abusive which is a pretty close match to canon. I also play up the mechanic side of his skill set. I figure that this connected for Tony, because he adores tinkering with things, despite their crappy relationship. So Tony still clings to certain things that he remembers from childhood, but he feels ashamed of doing it.
Where the Sensitive Parts Are

Chapter Summary

Tony continues his exploration of Bucky's prosthetic arm, and teaches Bucky a little about the arc reactor in exchange.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Tell me where the sensitive parts are," Tony said as he peered at the sleek metal.

"Fingertips and palm especially," Bucky said. "There's a little on the back of my hand, a few spots inside and outside the forearm. Then there's a cluster around the middle of my upper arm ..."

"Probably so you'll protect that secondary power source," Tony said. He moved his fingers along the lines of Bucky's arm, listening to the murmurs of feedback. "JARVIS, map this for me. I need to see where to aim and what to avoid."

A hologram appeared in a sudden burst of light, translucent and intricate. Bucky startled, pressing himself back into the couch cushions. Steve ran a calming hand over his right shoulder. "You're safe, Bucky, it's just a picture," Steve said to him. "A hologram is like, um, a cross between a blueprint and a model. So you can use it for planning before you need to touch the original."

"Sorry, didn't mean to surprise you," Tony added. "JARVIS, show Bucky what the arc reactor looks like outside the casing, just the surface image. Label the visible parts." A second hologram appeared more slowly. Words appeared one at a time as if typed into place around the illustration.

"It looks like a Christmas tree ornament," Bucky said, grinning. He was utterly enchanted with the arc reactor, all right.

"Now there's an idea," Phil said. He made a mental note to plan Christmas with the team. Most of them probably never had one worth mentioning. It would take some careful thought to find out what they might find fun and meaningful, then make the necessary plans. He could put the intervening months to good use.

Phil also started to worry a bit over how much Tony was revealing in an act of desperate compassion. It was clearly working in terms of soothing Bucky, but Tony laying himself open like that -- especially to someone he didn't know well yet -- was liable to cause a backlash sooner or later. Tony just had too much emotional and physical trauma in this area to get away unscathed. Phil suspected that part of Pepper's aversion to the Iron Man armor stemmed from the time Tony asked her to reach into his chest with no warning. Rhodey was touchy about Iron Man and War Machine. If Bucky fussled over the arc reactor, it would make matters even worse.

"Yeah, it does look a bit like an ornament," Tony said to Bucky. He tapped the metal over the secondary power signature. "I need to get a reading under the surface of the metal. Think I can slip a probe in here without hurting you?"

"Depending on exactly where you put it, yeah, probably," Bucky said.
"And yes, before you ask, I can always feel the arc reactor. It doesn't hurt unless somebody hits it pretty hard, it's just ... there, at the edge of my awareness," Tony said quietly. He consulted the hologram. It rotated, expanded, and contracted as Tony tested several different options. Then he popped open a Stark Industries toolkit and very carefully pressed a set of tiny plastic wedges into the metal seams of Bucky's arm to open a gap.

"Golly," Bucky breathed. "Those are some fine tools."

"This? This isn't anything to get excited about --" Tony said.

Steve chuckled. "Bucky's a mechanic, Tony. Can't you tell from way he's staring at your ..." he said, cupping a hand at his own chest to mime the arc reactor. "Remember how impressed I was about satellite maps? What you've got in your mini-kit there is probably better than anything else Bucky has seen."

"In that case, Bucky, I'll give you a tour of the workshop in my garage some time," Tony said with a quicksilver smile. The corners of his eyes crinkled.

"It's nice of you to offer," Bucky said. "I'd like to spend some time fixing things instead of killing people all the time."

"I know the feeling," Tony said. Then he checked the narrow gap he'd opened amongst the slats and struts of metal that made up Bucky's arm, measuring it against the slim probe connected to the scanner. "I think that's enough room. You tell me if I hurt you, and I'll try somewhere else, okay?"

"Okay," Bucky said.

"Then just hold ... reeeaaally ... still," Tony said. He slid the probe into the gap, angling toward the hidden energy source. Tony watched the display on the scanner very closely. He paused, then shifted the angle a little and pressed deeper. The scanner beeped. Tony didn't say anything, but Phil felt him tense.

"That bad?" Phil murmured.

Tony shook his head, carefully removing the probe and all the little plastic wedges. He smoothed a hand over the shiny metal. "It's not good, but it could be a whole lot worse," he said. "The best news is, the energy has a very short range, less than two feet. It shouldn't affect anyone but you, Bucky, or someone basically lying right on top of you. It's contained; it's stable."

"Yeah, that's good," Steve said. His thumb brushed the side of Bucky's neck, a slow tracery of circles.

"I guess," Bucky said, slumping into the couch. He didn't look particularly reassured.

"The bad news is, given the resemblance to known and problematic sources, this probably influences your state of mind -- memory, mood, that sort of thing. It's not there to control the prosthesis; it's there to control you," Tony said, still talking directly to Bucky. "It doesn't have the complexity to respond to commands, though, so whatever it's for must be simple. I'd say the amnesia."

Steve waited, but when Bucky still didn't respond, he said, "Black Widow's report on the Winter Soldier mentioned mood swings."

"That matches what we've heard from other sources: calm and quiet, then sudden bursts of extreme violence," Phil said. "Bucky, how does that compare to your subjective experience?"
"Sometimes I just get so angry, and I don't even know why," Bucky said. "Other times, I know why, but it's these little *stupid* things."

"That's not like you," Steve said, frowning.

Chapter End Notes

The sense of **touch** typically resides in the skin. For Bucky's left arm, the artificial sensors are set deeper, because the cosmetic cover was a later addition. Nerves cluster more in **certain parts of the body**, especially the hands. The distribution of sensors is pretty close to that of the **major nerves** and **other anatomy** of a natural arm. While not the most sophisticated approach, it is logical and efficient in terms of getting the most benefit without running weight and power demand to unfeasible levels.

This is the kind of **Christmas tree ornament** that reminds me of the arc reactor, the blue and silver ones with the faceted indentations. We used to have some like those.

Trust and intimacy require **delicate adjustment** or they can repel instead of attracting. Tony is actually on the right track in terms of **striving for a balance** between himself and Bucky in terms of intimacy. Going too far too fast may trigger a **pursuit-and-distancing** maneuver. Of course in this case they don't have the luxury of time to build up the level of trust that such deep sharing normally requires, so they just have to make the best of it. There are tips for **safely increasing emotional intimacy** in relationships.

**Territory** includes both personal space (the body and its immediate surroundings) and personal places (home, room, a favorite chair). These **vary according to individual and culture**, but in general, new acquaintances move through the layers in a logical progression from public to private to intimate range. The rooms and other spaces in a residence are **mapped along that spectrum of intimacy**, requiring more permission to move deeper. Everyone has places they are more, or less, willing to share with other people; but as Tony demonstrates, not everyone puts their most intimate space in the expected location. In canon, few people get access to his garage and other work spaces, yet here he's extending an invitation to Bucky.

**Mood swings** or **emotional dysregulation** are characteristic of some injuries to the brain or mind. Notice that Bucky's mood tends to shift very rapidly, and may swing out of proportion to the scope of the stimulus, but more often than not there is some kind of reason for the feeling. The random moods pop up less often. Mood swings are better known in women but **also happen in men**. There are **ways to cope with this emotional lability** and **ease the mood swings**.

Anger may come out of nowhere, **or from complex sources**, or from a trivial matter, or as a morph of some other emotion **such as anxiety**. There are ways to **manage anger**.
Such a Special Kind of Crazy

Chapter Summary

Phil, Tony, Steve, and Bucky discuss the possible side effects of Bucky's prosthetic (and related energy sources).

Chapter Notes

Not all the end notes fit, so I'm moving some here:

**HYDRA** is an enemy organization that caused problems for both Steve and Bucky early on, and has reappeared in other contexts since then.

Multiple versions of **super-soldier serum** have appeared in Marvel canon, used by different individuals and groups. The results vary widely but there are some core similarities. We might consider this a family of drugs, the way opiates share some characteristics but differ in others. In this case, they all seem to affect both emotional and physical qualities, but do so in different ways; and only Erskine's version in Project Rebirth had no lasting negative side effects.

**Defensive body language** includes protecting vulnerable areas and withdrawing from contact. Sometimes hostility is used to warn off a potential attack. Bucky keeps using different types of defensive body language because he's been badly hurt and is not comfortable with what's going on, even though he knows it's necessary and people are taking steps to comfort him. However, Bucky is still able to interact with Steve in a positive manner, seeking and receiving reassurance from him. They share a **secure bond** that helps them both deal with the separation and reunion, despite the intervening trauma.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

*It's like Bruce-and-Hulk, Phil thought. Bucky survived human experimentation in a HYDRA lab; we don't know the details but we know they studied enhancement methods. I wonder if something in super-soldier serums has a tendency to distort people's moods. No, that doesn't make sense, because Steve almost never gets angry; it takes a lot to provoke him. I need to talk this over with Bruce. Phil wished that the doctor hadn't gone to bed already. There was a limit to how much stress people could take, though, and tonight had been hard on Bruce too. Issues this complex were rarely resolved all at one time. There would be time to explore these ramifications later.*

"I can fix this, but I can't fix it quickly, because I'll have to replace your whole arm and shoulder," Tony said. His gentle fingers traced the seam where the prosthetic plating joined with the rest of Bucky's body. "That's going to require some careful design. Ideally I'd like for Dr. Banner to have a better idea of how your body works, and for you to feel more comfortable with us, before we start tinkering around in here."

Bucky had hunched almost into a ball, obviously distressed by the discussion. "They only upgraded
"this thing a few times, because it's really hard to do," Bucky said.

"Yeah well, they're a bunch of psychotic hacks and I'm Tony Stark. Give me some time and I can build you something better and safer," the engineer said.

Phil remembered the incident with the palladium poisoning and hoped that this would not turn into such a disaster. He trusted Tony's craftsmanship but working with unfamiliar technology always posed a certain irreducible risk. Then he noticed the particularly thoughtful frown that Steve had.

"Steve? What are you thinking?" Phil prompted. He knew that Steve often saw more than he said. Phil wanted to encourage the development of intellectual as well as physical skills, but for Steve that took extra coaxing because he wasn't used to people expecting or valuing that from him.

"I just -- this seems vaguely familiar," Steve said. "HYDRA had the Cosmic Cube, the Tesseract, for a while before I got it away from them. I don't know everything they did with it but I do know they used it to charge weapons, somehow. They had a way to tap off and store energy from it. After what I saw with Loki and the staff, it makes me wonder if that might explain why HYDRA agents are such a special kind of crazy. That stuff just messes with people's heads."

Howard Stark found the Tesseract and worked with it for a while, Phil mused. It was another possible explanation for Howard's emotional degradation, along with the previous one about him taking damage when Steve went down. Then an even more unsettling thought occurred to Phil. SHIELD had the Tesseract even longer and built all that Phase II equipment. If this kind of energy has psychotropic effects, we need to take more precautions. I'll have to write that up later.

"You think Department X got their hands on something from HYDRA? Worked it into the Winter Soldier somehow?" Tony said, cupping a hand around Bucky's upper arm. "Why would they do that?"

"If they knew that he spent some time in a HYDRA lab, they might think HYDRA tech would give them more impressive results," Steve said. He leaned over Bucky as if to shelter him.

Phil sighed. "That is ... disturbingly plausible." Bucky must have fought them so hard, if they needed to go that far in order to control him, Phil thought.

"Okay, well, we're done here for now. We can worry about the rest of this later. It's a long-term concern rather than a short-term one," Tony said. He packed away his equipment and closed the holograms. "Bucky, thanks for putting up with me."

"You're welcome," Bucky said as he lifted his hand carefully away from the arc reactor. "I just wanted to say ... out of all the things I've seen in the future, this is the most beautiful. Thank you for showing it to me."

Phil felt Tony go completely rigid and then jerk away from him, striding briskly out of the room. Backlash, he thought, bad one.

"What just happened?" Bucky asked faintly.

"Tony tends to be very ... reserved about the arc reactor," Phil said. "He has mixed feelings about it. I wouldn't ordinarily mention this part, but since Tony already alluded to it: people who admire the arc reactor have tried to take it or at least duplicate it. So that kind of compliment, thoughtful as it was, may be something he's not ready to hear."

"That doesn't make any sense," Bucky said. He shrugged back into his shirt, buttoning it with haste. "He was, I was, we were -- Steve, I didn't imagine it, did I? Tony and I were connected. That was
the whole point."

"You didn't imagine it," Steve assured him. "Tony kind of ... jumped you to the head of a line that usually takes a lot longer to wait through. He just doesn't do things like that often, and when people get close to him, he doesn't always deal with it very well."

*Sometimes spectacularly unwell,* Phil thought, casting a worried glance at the door where Tony had vanished. This tendency to pull away from any kind of communion had wrecked many relationships for him, from personal to professional. It was just now getting to the point where Tony trusted the Avengers enough to let them inside his formidable barriers. That he had more or less yanked Bucky in was an indication that Tony already considered him part of the family, probably for Steve's sake but possibly for other reasons. Bucky had known Howard too, after all. That didn't make it a safe thing to do; the abrupt conjunction could still do damage. Tony pushing himself too far, too fast had caused plenty of problems before.

Chapter End Notes

**Palladium poisoning** showed up in *Iron Man 2* as a side effect of the early arc reactor design. Nobody handled that situation very well, although JARVIS seems to have made the fewest mistakes.

**HYDRA weapons** have appeared in multiple forms across Marvel canons. They are powerful but often unpredictable, originally inspired and powered by the Cosmic Cube. The Phase II weapons of SHIELD are related but not identical.

**Psychotropic** means anything that alters the mind. Such substances or techniques can change mood, cognition, perception, consciousness, behavior, and other aspects.

Resisting mind control spans a complex array of knowledge, skills, and innate personality traits. There are techniques for resisting hypnosis and manipulation, interpersonal manipulation, interrogation, and torture. People can also take steps to increase mental awareness and resilience in general. An informed, alert victim is really quite difficult to break. **Nonviolent resistance** includes many techniques designed to cope with situations where more forceful resistance is impossible, unfeasible, or undesirable. It is a popular and effective response to slavery.

In addition to Bucky's military background and personal integrity, he may have another factor in his favor. The Incredible Hulk is well known for his resistance to mind control. Part of that is because Bruce-and-Hulk are a multiple system, which always makes mind control difficult or impossible; but also because they fight all the time, they've just built up a tremendous amount of practice that nobody else can match. But another part may come from the super-soldier serum itself, which conveys not just enhancement but dynamic adaptation. While it is possible to brainwash some enhanced individuals, it takes a lot more work than usual and it doesn't stick nearly as well. Since Bucky survived what HYDRA did to him, that may have boosted his resistance to what Department X did later.

**Fear of intimacy** poses an obstacle in close relationships, not just romantic ones but friendships and others as well. This fear ties into communication and conflict. It can happen for various reasons. It raises a lot of questions. Because everyone becomes
vulnerable sometimes, it's important to cultivate a tolerance for intimacy. There are tips for sustaining intimacy.

Pulling away from relationships is fairly common. Although most often described as men pulling away from women in romance, it can happen in any relationship and between any combination of sex/gender. The recommendation is usually to let the person withdraw, which is sometimes a good idea -- but other times not, because as we've seen, some people withdraw when they really need support, or an apology, or some other help. This also relates to attachment type, which again applies to more than just the romantic context people usually use. The avoidant type in particular can be hard to get a grip on during interpersonal contact.
You Go Say Sorry

Chapter Summary

Bucky decides that he owes Tony an apology. Phil is a little reluctant to let Bucky go chasing after Tony, but eventually relents. Tony is sufficiently mollified to show Bucky his workshop.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"I'll keep that in mind," Bucky said as he stood up.

"Where are you going?" Steve asked.

Bucky gave him an absolutely scathing look. "Going after him, of course," he said. "I taught you better than to let a girl run crying out of the bedroom."

"Okay, whoa, this is not like that!" Steve exclaimed.

"Just because it wasn't sex, doesn't mean --" Bucky broke off and shook his head. "I don't know how to describe what happened. It was ... we were close. And then I spooked him, which makes this problem my fault, which is worse because he was trying to help me. So. Same rule applies. You upset somebody, you go say sorry."

"It wasn't sexual, but it was intimate, hence the difficulty," Phil said quietly. He hesitated to allow Bucky to go after Tony in such a delicate situation, especially since Bucky was still in rough shape himself. On the other hand, Bucky was pulling up genteel social rules from his deep past; any progress toward recovering his memories and personality was precious and something to be supported rather than discouraged.

"Yeah, that's probably not gonna go over well," Steve said.

Then Phil had an idea. "JARVIS, situation report?" he asked.

"Tony is in his garage. He has not locked the door, blocked the security feed, nor instructed me to conceal his location," JARVIS replied.

"Private space, but permeable access," Phil said. Parts of the tower were semi-public space, other parts restricted to the Avengers only, with periodic visits from bonded cleaning staff. Some areas like labs belonged to individuals or smaller teams; Tony and Bruce wandered pretty freely through each other's main lab space. Intimate space varied. Plenty of people had visited bedrooms belonging to Tony Stark, but he rarely gave anyone access to the more personal parts of his lab and workshop and garage, and he was prone to locking everyone out when got upset. Yet he had offered to give Bucky a tour ...

"So either he's willing to be found, or he's so distracted that he hasn't thought to cover his tracks," Steve guessed. They had all gotten abundant practice in dealing with Tony's volatile personality and his erratic tolerance for company.
"It's wrong to upset someone and then just ignore them, isn't it? I thought I remembered that, but everything gets ... fuzzy at the edges," Bucky said, rubbing his right hand up and down the metal arm.

"Yes, it's wrong. You remembered that correctly," Steve said in a firm tone, covering Bucky's fingers with his own. He gave Phil a questioning look.

"All right, go down and see if Tony will hear your apology," Phil said. As much as he worried about Tony, he didn't want to shake Bucky's wobbly grasp on morality. "If he asks you to leave him alone, though, you have to go."

"That's fair," Bucky said. "Steve?"

"Of course I'll come with you," Steve said. He and Natasha had decided that keeping Bucky company would help his recovery.

Phil watched them go. Then he sat down on the couch and said, "JARVIS, please bring up the security feed for the garage."

The viewscreen flicked on and displayed the requested image. When Bucky and Steve appeared at the door, JARVIS turned down Tony's music. "What do you want?" Tony asked.

"I just came down to apologize," Bucky said.

Tony looked at him blankly. "For what?"

"For whatever I said or did wrong that made you leave the room so abruptly," Bucky said. "It was my fault. You were trying to be helpful, it's just that I'm kind of a mess right now but that doesn't excuse me acting like a jerk. So, I'm sorry. I'll try not to do it again."

"Yeah, um ... okay fine," Tony said restlessly. Phil could tell that he still wasn't used to that kind of consideration. Tony pasted on a smile and clapped his hands together. "So, this is my garage, I could show you it. Or you could go back upstairs and go to bed, which you should probably do instead. I hear sleep is good. People who are not me are big fans of sleep." Phil wondered if he'd have to haul them out of the garage after all.

"I don't sleep," Bucky said. "Not that easily, anyway." That was hardly better.

"Well, there's a couch if you want to get off your feet. Or you could watch me work. I need something to do with my hands, don't think I could sleep either right now. My brain won't shut up, you know? It's a thing," Tony said.

"This is really swell," Bucky said, gazing around the garage. "Steve and I used to do odd jobs for a mechanic in our neighborhood, but he never had anything this fancy, just a little shack out back really. We loved the place anyway, though, it was like a second home to us. Who owns all these cars?"

"I do," Tony said. "I like to buy 'em and fix 'em up. Got an engine laid out on my workbench if you want to see. It's got a knock that I don't like. I could use someone to help me with the tools, just put 'em within reach because I don't like to be handed things," Tony said. Letting anyone into his garage was a show of trust; letting them do anything there, even more so. No wonder that Tony drew the line at a known trigger, as much pressure as he'd already put on himself.

"I'll help," Steve volunteered.
"Say no," Bucky said to Tony. "Seriously, Steve killed a jeep once trying to fix a flat tire."

Steve groaned. "Bucky! Are you ever going to lay off that?"

"We had to hike forty miles to the next town, Steve. Forty. Miles. So no, not planning to forget about it or let you pretend to be a mechanic any time soon," Bucky said. "I'll give Tony a hand myself."

"Oh, I have got to hear this," Tony said. "Steve, put your hands in your pockets and don't touch my stuff. Bucky, tell me about the helpless jeep that Steve massacred."

Phil couldn't help smiling over the story about how Steve, not knowing his own strength, had broken the axle off a jeep in the middle of nowhere. Of course Phil knew that Tony was just trying to distract himself and everyone from the technological but very deep intimacy that had made him so uncomfortable. It seemed to help, though, so Phil let it slide.

He gave a tired sigh and rubbed his hands over his face. His body ached with exhaustion. His eyeballs felt dry and gritty. "I really hope they'll be all right," Phil muttered.

"I believe so, Phil," said JARVIS. "Allow me to suggest that you get some rest while you can. I have the watch."

"Okay," Phil said. He went to bed. He trusted JARVIS to wake him again if anything required his immediate attention.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies are a basic technique of relationship management when things go wrong. Ideally, people try not to hurt those they care about; when that fails, they take steps to make amends. The timing of an apology is important: usually it's best to apologize immediately, but sometimes waiting is safer. There are tips on making a good apology.

Bucky is following the rule, "Never go to bed angry," popular in romantic relationships but also among friends and family. Among other reasons, anger makes for difficult sleep and a restless spirit. Science supports this observation. Also, if you delay apologizing, you might not get a chance later. However, some people debate whether going to bed angry is okay or not. There are tips on how to fight constructively. Phil looks at two opposed directives -- don't chase someone who wants to withdraw, and don't go to bed angry -- then sensibly seeks extra information to help prioritize them in this case.

Rubbing one arm with the opposite hand is a defensive gesture. Bucky does this a lot because he feels self-conscious about the replacement, and to him it symbolizes everything that has gone wrong with his life.

Evasive body language and speech indicates a communication breakdown. This also goes along with Tony's emotional unavailability. Under stress, Tony tends to create distractions, both verbally by changing the subject and physically by doing something to shift attention. (Not all of the startling things that happen in his workspace during an awkward conversation are necessarily accidents.) Having difficult conversations is not a skill everyone has. However, Tony's distracting tactics also have positive applications in terms of coping with PTSD. Since that's what just got triggered, nobody calls him on it this time.
Chapter Summary

The morning after Bucky arrives at the tower, the Avengers share breakfast and pick their way carefully through the minefield of Issues.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Breakfast the next day was more like brunch, after the interruption of sleep. Bruce made something eggy and herbal that came in casserole dishes and smelled divine. Phil recognized some but not all of the recipes that Bruce had picked up in his travels. This one he didn't know. Like all the Avengers, though, Phil had come to trust Bruce's cooking and even look forward to the surprises, a rare luxury for a spy.

Steve shoveled half a pan's worth onto his plate and dug in. Bucky took one spoonful and gave it a dubious poke with his fork. Phil frowned at that. He didn't know Bucky's metabolism exactly but it must require more fuel than that.

"I could make something else if you prefer," Bruce said softly.

"Food's food," Bucky said. He started eating with an almost mechanical air, not seeming to taste any of it.

Phil savored the subtle flavor of the breakfast casserole and wished that Bucky could appreciate it too. When Bucky finished the first serving, Phil said, "There's plenty left if you want more." Bucky took another spoonful, as precise as the first. Something about that bothered Phil.

He's measuring everything, Phil realized finally. That must be why he hesitated over the casserole: he didn't know how to count it. He wondered why Bucky would do that. Maybe he had specific dietary requirements, or maybe his appetite had gone missing in action so he made up for it by eating consistent amounts. Control issues could be a concern, though, given his recent captivity. Phil would keep an eye on that. He'd gotten Steve to eat properly; he could get Bucky to do the same.

A timer dinged. Bruce started to get up. "I've got this. You cooked, I can carry," Betty said, heading to the oven. She pulled out trays of sticky buns and poured orange icing over them. "How many do people want?"

Phil's mouth watered. He held up two fingers. Bruce held up three, and Steve spread his hand for five. Betty brought the sticky buns to the table and passed them out. Steve put one of his on Bucky's plate. "I know it's different, but just try it," Steve said. "Bruce is a great cook."

Bucky hesitated, but accepted the offering. "Thanks," he said. He spent more time looking down at his plate than at anyone else. He raked his long hair out of his face as if it bothered him.

Mood shifts, Phil remembered. So far he'd seen Bucky confused, nostalgic, angry, sullen, charmed, thoughtful, and now withdrawn.

Tony wandered in and dumped two pounds of assorted fruit into the juicer. Everyone winced at the
shriek of the motor. Steve and Bruce covered their ears. After a moment's hesitation, so did Bucky. "Anybody else want some of this?" Tony asked. Hands went up around the table. He looked at them, looked at the juicer, then said, "You guys split this batch, I'll make more." He poured the juice into a pitcher and set it on the table. Then he ran the juicer again.

"Thanks, Tony," Steve said when Tony finally sat down at the table.

"No problem," Tony said. "So where are my two favorite assassins?"

"Clint and Natasha got up early enough that they finished breakfast before I even got into the kitchen," Phil said. "JARVIS told me they went to the shooting range to practice."

"You have your own shooting range?" Bucky said, perking up.

"Bucky's a sharpshooter," Steve added.

Bucky nodded, his hair swaying. He tucked it behind his ears again with a rough gesture. "I miss my guns already."

"Whatever you had, I can do better," Tony said airily. "Also if your hair's bugging you, I can recommend a good stylist."

"No," Bucky growled. Phil gave him a sharp look.

"Okay, fine, just trying to be helpful. You don't have to bite my head off," Tony said. He finished his juice and set down the empty glass with a clack. Steve rescued it and started picking up empty dishes from the table.

"You know, we have a dishwasher like civilized people use," Tony said to Steve.

"I know. I like washing dishes by hand. Here I can use all the hot water I want," Steve said, as if that was a treat. Perhaps for him it was.

"I just don't like strangers with blades near my head," Bucky said to Tony, shifting from anger to something almost like shame. "It wouldn't be safe for me to go into a barber shop like this. Not for me, or for anyone else in there."

"Yyyyeah," Tony said. "I get that. There are things I don't do anymore."

"You don't have to eat the eggplant," Steve said with a nod. "It's a line from an essay about bad memories, Bucky. Some things are too important to give up, even if they trigger a reaction, so you have to adapt to those somehow. The little stuff you can just skip, though. Save your energy for things that really matter."

"Everyone here has their own sensitivities. We learn to work around them," Phil said. He made a mental note about Bucky's. The more they knew about him, the less chance of setting him off by accident.

Bucky yanked at the long wavy locks. "I hate this," he said. "They'd shove me in the cryochamber and I'd come out with my hair all in my face. As soon as I got on the road for a mission, I'd hack it off with a knife. They'd put me back in storage and -- and for me it was moments, but there I'd be with my hair down to my shoulders again. I fucking hate this."

"They kept you under for years at a stretch, sometimes," Phil observed. "The cryochamber slowed time for you but didn't stop it completely. No wonder you're upset. Anyone would be. The question
is -- what you want to do about this now that you're out and not going back?"

"I don't know," Bucky said. He hunched forward, hair falling forward to hide his face behind a brown curtain.

Choice paralysis, Phil realized. He'd give Bucky some time to work through it and then intervene if necessary.

Chapter End Notes

The recipe Phil doesn't recognize is **Mexican Egg Casserole**.

**Eating disorders** and **disordered eating** are different branches of unhealthy relationship with food. **Among the many symptoms** are measuring food, eating only one thing at a time, and hesitation over unfamiliar foods. This kind of problem often overlaps with **control issues** and **PTSD**. Bucky's particular problem comes out of long captivity under crazy control freaks, and mishandling that has disrupted many of his body's natural processes. So it looks very different from what people usually think of as "eating disorders," but it's still not a safe situation. One solution is to cultivate internal awareness of the body's messages to **achieve intuitive eating**. Something useful when there is no appetite and/or the body's metabolism runs high is **packing extra nutrition into food**. This is why, for example, the Avengers always have heavy cream in the fridge.

Mechanical **juicers** are convenient for making fresh delicious beverages, but they tend to be outrageously noisy. Tony hasn't gotten around to building a quiet one yet, because his personal tolerance for noise is much higher than average.

Haircuts can be a source of stress for some people, especially if they are hypersensitive or have PTSD. There are tips for **preparing a toddler for a haircut** and for **making haircuts safe for people with autism**, which address some of the potential triggers. The idea that haircuts don't hurt is true for most people but not **everyone**, so be careful saying that. If someone disputes it, their lived experience probably differs and should be respected.

**Hair cutting** can be a sign of mental disturbance, if done in a rough and negative manner. There is **some debate** over whether this qualifies as **self-harm**, because it doesn't cause injury but is an assault on bodily integrity and self-image. (I tend to classify destructive hair cutting as self-mutilation but not self-injury; it's in a gray area between healthy behavior and harmful behavior.) In this case, Bucky hasn't been treating himself gently; part of that is wanting to exert some kind of control over his own body, and part is picking up bad habits from his captors. However, in the current context, he's still aware of other people and concerned about their safety, because he knows that he can lash out under stress.

The eggplant reference comes from the essay "**What Does a Flashback Feel Like?**" on the topic of PTSD.

**Choice paralysis** or **analysis paralysis** happens when a high number of options overwhelm someone, often to the point of preventing a decision from occurring. People with PTSD, memory loss, or other cognitive challenges are especially prone to this kind of indecision. Open-ended questions are most likely to cause choice paralysis. It helps to
offer short, simple choices. Another approach is to create choices where both answers are "right."
Chapter Summary

Betty coaxes Bucky into letting her cut his hair so that it won't keep bugging him.

Chapter Notes

One of the end notes wouldn't fit, so I'm moving it here:

A bowl cut is a simple hairstyle that looks something like this. Yes, it can be done by putting a bowl over someone's head and cutting around the rim. Most people used to cut their hair at home instead of going to a salon. Because the bowl cut is so easy, it's popular for children and people who can't or won't go to a stylist.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"I could cut your hair, Bucky," Steve offered.

"If you ever put a bowl over my head again, I will paint your shield pink," Bucky said, his mood brightening to mischief.

It's like watching clouds move over the sun and then away again, Phil thought. He suspected that the mercurial quality was more imposed than innate, although it had built on earlier traits, based on Steve's previous stories about Bucky. Perhaps in time the wild swings would settle back toward normal.

"How was I supposed to know you wouldn't like it?" Steve asked Bucky. "You cut my hair that way."

"I could do it," Betty said quietly. "You've at least met me, Bucky. I've cut Bruce's hair before, pretty much for the same reason as yours. He'd been on the run for a while, it was all shaggy, and that bothered Hulk when they shifted. Hulk doesn't like it when his hair gets over his eyes so he can't see clearly." Phil remembered that from the bilgesnipe fight that ended with a team bath and Hulk mopping his wet hair out of his face.

Bucky stared at her. "My control is ... not very reliable right now," he said, rubbing a hand over his metal arm. "Do you not realize that I could snap and kill you?"

"In a room full of superheroes, that's not very likely," Betty said, sweeping a gaze around the table. "Besides, if your control is shaky then you need to practice holding it steady. I'm happy to help with that too. Bruce-and-Hulk find my presence soothing."

"So do I," Tony said. "I think it's your voice, you know? That time I hacked into the AIM system to call for pickup, hearing you on the other end was just -- okay, everything's fine now, we're going home. Such a relief."
It's not just Bruce responding to her as a handler. Betty is starting to have the same effect on the other team members too, Phil realized. It felt good to know they had more than one person who could fill that role if needed.

"Thank you, Tony, that's very sweet," Betty said. Bruce draped an arm around her waist and leaned into her.

Bucky sniffed, then said in a wondering tone, "You're not scared of me at all, are you?"

"No. Not much scares me anymore. Besides, you're a decent person who's been injured and might lash out, not a violent person who just likes intimidating and hurting people. That makes a big difference," Betty said. "So, do you want me to trim your hair or not?"

"... go ahead," Bucky said.

*That's a good sign,* Phil thought. He saw Bruce slip out of the room.

Tony jittered around the cabinets, pocketing a few extra smoothie ingredients from the bulk jars. "Little of this, dab of that..." he muttered as he scooped things into baggies. His voice sounded edgy.

Phil didn't think it came from any fear of Bucky, but he suspected it was related somehow. He sidled over to Tony's corner of the kitchen. "Are you all right?" he murmured.

"Yeah, it's just -- Steve told me about the crap with Fury and the World Insecurity Council," Tony said. His eyes narrowed. "I am so very pissed with them right now. I have a few things in mind. Don't get in my way."

"I wasn't planning to," Phil said mildly. People had been warned not to toy with the Avengers; let them reap the consequences of ignoring those warnings. "Just don't leave yourself vulnerable, Tony. Those people have no mercy."

Tony clicked his nails sharply against the arc reactor. "I don't need their mercy. I have brains and science," he said. "Guys who tried manipulating me in the past never had any mercy either, and look how well that turned out for them."

"I did actually point that out to Fury, pictures and all," Phil said.

Tony flashed the razored grin that Phil recalled from the infamous Senate meeting. "Knew there was a reason I kept you around," Tony said.

"The only thing I'll ask is that, if you haven't already released the recording of the confrontation in Fury's office -- and I know you have that -- please hold onto it for now," Phil said. "Seeing proof of betrayal would destroy SHIELD morale. Let's see if we can find a way to defuse the situation that will do less collateral damage than Fury's style of planning usually does."

"And meanwhile it doesn't hurt to have blackmail material," Tony said. "Okay. I can work around that. By the way, I loved watching you go Agent Uncle all over Fury's ass. You're so protective."

Then Tony disappeared out the door. He was getting to where he'd do things for other people, but either never thought of cleanup or considered it beneath him. Phil returned to the table.

"JARVIS, please find me one of the old photos of Bucky," said Betty. A hologram popped up showing Steve and Bucky together. "Now give us a few samples from current fashion that have a similar look and won't let his hair get in the way." Five more images appeared next to the first. "Okay, Bucky, pick one that you like, or if you hate them all, you can ask for more choices."
"The middle one looks fine," Bucky said.

Betty got up to stand next to Bucky. "JARVIS, display instructions," she said. The extra images closed, leaving the old picture and the middle sample for reference. Then a column of text appeared.

"You think you can learn hairstyling, just like that?" Bucky asked.

Betty chuckled. "Tony isn't the only genius who can pick up new skills with a good book and a few hours," she said. "Actually it's easier this time because I've got JARVIS to give me step-by-step instructions. Last time I just had to guess with what I could remember from styling magazines that I'd read in salons."

Bruce came back with a bath towel and a pair of scissors. "Figured you'd want these," he said.

"Thank you," Betty said. She draped the towel around Bucky's shoulders, making sure it covered everything. Then she put three fingers under his chin to tilt his head up and said, "Relax. Sit still. Be patient."

Chapter End Notes

PTSD can cause serious control issues. It's linked to anger, violence, and impaired impulse control. This can raise the risk of domestic violence and other crimes. Bucky recognizes that he can't always control himself, so he's trying to find other ways of avoiding mishaps. There are tips for strengthening self-control.

The Avengers have an advantage in coping with outbursts: they're not just super-powered, they have some training in how to de-escalate conflicts. There is advice on what to do and not to do in calming an angry person, along with general ideas on controlling angry people. De-escalation is an important skill with step-by-step methods and techniques to avoid violence. There are also ways to control someone without hurting him.

Betty's soothing voice likely comes from a combination of innate talent and learned skill. Growing up in an abusive home, you learn to use whatever you've got to stay alive. There are general guidelines for improving your voice. There are also tips on how to cultivate a relaxing, friendly, and calm voice. It helps to speak gently to yourself and others. Betty also understands that good leaders stay calm in a crisis, and how to do that. Basically when people feel out of control, confused, or threatened they tend to gravitate to anyone who makes them feel safe.

The World Security Council is in charge of SHIELD and various other activities allegedly aimed at peace and stability. Their actions conflict with their stated intent. You can see why Tony doesn't like them.

Collateral damage is harm done to anything or anyone outside the intended target or goal. Director Fury believes that the end justifies the means and favors expediency over precision. Agent Coulson believes that today's mistakes become tomorrow's disasters and favors efficiency over speed. It's the difference between a chainsaw and a scalpel.

Here's an "old" picture of Bucky and Steve together. If you look closely at Bucky, then at the Winter Soldier in comics and the upcoming movie, you can see why the floppy
hair would be driving him nuts. The modern haircut Bucky picked out would probably be along these lines.
Teaching Him to Be Gentle with Himself

Chapter Summary

Betty trims Bucky's hair for him. Then Bucky helps Steve with the dishes from brunch.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bruce kept a careful eye on Bucky. Phil had no doubt that if trouble ensued, Hulk would jump to Betty's defense. Steve seemed content with that arrangement, because he got up to start washing the dishes. It added a comfortable air of normality to the atmosphere. Phil settled back in his chair to watch Betty work. He stretched out his legs under the table so that he could keep his toes on Bucky's ankle and provide a grounding presence. Bucky glanced at him but did not turn his head, mindful of Betty's direction to keep still.

Betty didn't move the way a professional stylist did. Every motion was slow and deliberate. Bucky gave an occasional shiver but did not pull away. Betty used her fingers instead of a comb, gently carding through Bucky's hair. She took care not to snag on tangles. Instead she eased them apart with her fingertips. The strands spilled through her hands, thick and lush but so silk-fine that they fluffed at every touch.

No wonder Bucky's hair was driving him crazy, Phil realized. It must move and tickle with the least breath of air. Besides, he grew up in a time when only women wore their hair long; that can't be helping.

After a few minutes, Bucky closed his eyes and leaned back a little, surrendering himself to her care. Betty smiled at that. Phil noticed that Bruce smiled too, caught in some happy memory of Betty doing the same thing for him.

Betty brought her fingernails into play next, thoughtfully testing the sensitivity of Bucky's scalp. Light scratching he didn't mind. Hair-pulling he did; even a slight tug made him twitch. Betty soothed him into stillness again, making sure to keep the locks of hair slack so they wouldn't pull. She used her fingertips to rub the sensitive skin. The leisurely massage gave Bucky time to get used to her touch, to avoid startling him when she picked up the scissors.

She's teaching him to be gentle with himself, as well as showing him that we'll take care of him, Phil mused. He could see it working, Betty's tender touch gradually making the squared shoulders loosen.

The scissors were quiet in Betty's hands, a slow scrape instead of the sharp snick-snick at a salon. She never let the silver blades touch Bucky's skin or reflect the kitchen lighting into his face. Phil was downright impressed with the level of situational awareness and dexterity that required. Betty used both hands together, clipping and catching tufts of hair. She set the loose ends on the table rather than letting them flutter down around Bucky's face where they might bother him.

For all the worry, Bucky actually relaxed more as Betty worked, instead of tensing up. Phil could see him swaying ever so slightly under her touch. Bruce leaned back, evidently satisfied that Betty had everything well in hand.
A strange frisson went through Phil's awareness. *That was Hulk standing down,* he realized. Bruce wasn't the one who gauged danger or dealt in emotions, although he tried hard. Those were Hulk's areas of expertise. It surprised Phil that Hulk would trust Bucky with Betty so quickly. Bucky wasn't stable yet. Then again, Hulk was a swift judge of character. Phil's awareness tilted again. *Ah. It's not necessarily that Hulk trusts Bucky's self-control, but that he trusts Betty's ability to control Bucky even if he flips out. After all, she's already proven that she can handle a superhero with shapeshifting mood swings.*

"All done," Betty announced. She lifted the towel carefully away from Bucky's shoulders, folding it to catch the fluff of cut hairs that had escaped her grasp. "JARVIS, please show Bucky how he looks."

JARVIS closed the pictures and the instructions, then produced not a reflective surface, but a three-dimensional portrait of Bucky compiled from the kitchen cameras, rotating slowly in place. "If I may say so, you look quite good, Bucky," said JARVIS. Phil silently agreed; the haircut wasn't top salon quality but it came close.

"Thanks," Bucky said. "I appreciate the help, Betty. That was nice of you."

"Any time," she replied. Then Betty and Bruce headed for the lab.

Bucky went to help with the dishes. Steve greeted him with a sunny smile. They worked together with familiar ease, hands touching in passing. Bucky dried the plates as they came out of the water. Then he cast a helpless look around the large common kitchen with its abundant storage space.

Phil stepped up and lifted the dishes gently out of Bucky's hands. "I'll put them away," he said. "Now is as good a time as any to show you where to find things in here." As he worked, he pointed out the shelves that held plates and glasses, the drawers for silverware and cooking utensils, the cabinets of bakeware.

Bucky's gaze followed Phil meticulously, but he got less and less happy. By the time they finished the dishes, Bucky was biting his lip and Steve was giving him a worried look. "$\text{This is so useless,}$ Bucky whispered. "$\text{Sooner or later I'm just going to pass out from exhaustion and lose everything I've learned. Again.}$"

"Then we'll remind you after you wake up," Phil said calmly.

"For how long?" Bucky said, his mouth twisting.

"As long as it takes," Phil said. He clasped Bucky's shoulder. "$\text{I'm a very patient man, Bucky. I handle snipers. I'm completely comfortable with repetitive practice and long-term stakeouts.}$"

"Or we could just label the cabinets," Steve said, "$\text{although JARVIS will explain anything if you ask him. It took me a little while to get the hang of that, and I'm still lousy at using computers by myself, but he's really helpful.}$"

"If I can remember to ask," Bucky said.

"Establish what parameters you want for that, Bucky, and I can prompt you," JARVIS said.

"Oh! Wake-up routine!" Steve said, his tone brightening. "$\text{There's this thing JARVIS does for us, he reads off the date and time and weather when we wake up. I think some people have theirs set for news too. It's -- well, sometimes we have a hard time remembering where we are when we first wake up, so that helps.}$"
"It also applies to flashbacks and other dissociative experiences," Phil added. Unfortunately that wasn't much less familiar than waking up in the morning, for a team of people who had survived various horrific experiences.

Chapter End Notes

Phil, Bruce, and Betty are all mindful of preventing violence. They're watching for warning signs and working to keep everything calm. Phil and Betty are also focused on encouraging nonviolence.

There are instructions for cutting hair and how to keep it a safe experience. Consider two approaches for minimizing angst: going fast, to get through it as soon as possible; or going slow, to avoid building up too much stress. Given the nature of Bucky's issues -- which have more to do with sensitivity than lack of patience -- Betty chooses the slow method and it works.

Scalp massage is a very effective relaxation technique. Learn how to give one. It's a discreet way of encouraging someone to unwind.

There are ways to teach gentleness in a violent world. The best is simply to be gentle. It's important to be gentle with yourself, because that influences how you treat others and the world around you. There are tips for treating yourself gently.

Situational awareness applies not just to military and other survival situations, but also to science and everyday life. The more you perceive, the more you can influence what happens in positive ways. Follow the steps to improve your situational awareness.

There are contextual ways to judge someone's character. You can also look for contrasts.

Sharing chores with family and housemates is a useful life skill. It's not just about fairness, responsibility, and practicality. It's also about spending time together.

Patience is a virtue of waiting through difficulties or for the right opportunity. This is one of Phil's strongest attributes. There are ways to improve patience.

Flashbacks are intrusive memories that cause problems for many trauma survivors. It's possible to help someone get through a flashback. There are coping strategies for people who experience flashbacks too. It helps to make a list of options. Some of the same techniques work with other dissociative experiences. Pretty much all of the Avengers have problems in this area, although the exact manifestations vary a lot.
Why Do You Trust Me?

Chapter Summary

Phil and Steve talk with Bucky about plans for the day, and the discernment of trust. Bucky raises issues of identity and self-doubt.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I have experience serving as a prosthetic memory, Bucky," said JARVIS. "All you have to do is teach me what you need and I will help you keep track of everything."

Phil recalled how often Tony said "JARVIS, make a note..." and how easily he forgot things because he often worked at speed across multiple tasks simultaneously. JARVIS also had a deft skill at interpreting hints or intent, so -- like the butler who had served as a model for his personality -- he could provide what people needed without requiring a direct order. Tony must have designed JARVIS to compensate for his own mind's tendency to flit from one topic to another and drop things in the process. JARVIS reminding Tony of something, or prompting Steve on modern things, had become background patter to the point that Phil scarcely paid attention to it. But it was there, a quiet thread of support running through their days.

"That will work," Phil said to Bucky. "Just keep JARVIS informed of what you're learning. He can store it and shorten the reload time when you wake up, just as Steve and Natasha are learning which memory anchors bring up your recognition the fastest. He can also replay parts of the security feed for you if you need to review a conversation or remind yourself what something looks like."

Bucky's expression had slowly turned from defeated to hopeful. His resilience won out over the stress. "Okay," he said. "That's ... good. Really good."

Phil put away the last of the dishes, then turned to Bucky and asked, "What would you like to do today?"

"I -- you're asking me?" Bucky said, bewildered. "I don't, I don't choose. People give me orders. I follow them. What am I even allowed to do?" He looked lost again.

"Well, we have some basic rules, such as don't hurt yourself or anyone else and try not break things if you can help it. Beyond that, you're allowed to do pretty much whatever you want," Phil said. "Maybe practice a favorite skill."

"Like what?" Bucky said.

Phil thought about what to suggest next, because this wasn't his first time working with someone who suffered from choice paralysis and needed guidance until their volition recovered. Then he remembered a previous snippet of conversation. It was a calculated risk, but given Bucky's recent past, Phil had very little else to choose from that might work. Between Department X training and the memory loss, Bucky's skill set was regrettably narrow at present.

"Earlier you mentioned an interest in our shooting range. You could go try your hand against Clint
and Natasha," Phil said.

"You'd really let me have weapons?" Bucky said. "I could hurt someone, or worse..."

"Do you feel like hurting us right now?" Phil asked. The Winter Soldier had, after all, tried to kill Captain America and Black Widow.

"No, of course not!" Bucky said. He looked horrified at the idea.

"Then it sounds like your personality and moral code are holding sway over your combat conditioning," Phil said. "That's a good sign. Just the fact that you worry about these things is another good sign."

"Why do you trust me so much?" Bucky asked in a forlorn tone. "You shouldn't. SHIELD doesn't. I can't even trust myself."

"SHIELD doesn't really trust anyone. Sometimes that's a problem," Steve said. "We'll help you rebuild your trust in yourself, Bucky." Steve gave Phil a soft smile. "We're getting good at that. We've done it for each other. Just give us a chance. We got you out of enemy hands and broke the primary controls over you. Whatever's left in the way of residual reflexes, we'll deal with it together. That means we need to find out where any trouble spots are."

"When we first assembled this team, we nearly lost someone to mind control," Phil said. "Natasha managed to restore Clint to himself, and he went right back into battle. We're good at gauging who's reliable or not."

"Even with weapons?" Bucky said. "What if ... just holding one brings back something that was done to me, and I try to hurt someone?"

"If weapons are going to cause that kind of problem, better to find out now under controlled circumstances rather than get blindsided by it later," Steve said. "Don't worry, Bucky. I won't let you do anything bad."

Bucky rubbed his right hand over his left shoulder, then down his chest. "I don't know if I'm even really me anymore," he said. "How can I know?"

"You know by comparing your current pattern of behavior to your past pattern," Phil said. "So far you've done well interacting with people. Test the parameters, push a little farther, and see if you hold steady or start to wobble. If you lose your balance, we'll catch you."

"You're still yourself, Bucky. You're banged up but I recognize you," Steve assured him. Bucky leaned against the larger man for comfort. "If you can't trust yourself, then trust me."

"We gave Clint his bow back because we needed him in the Battle of New York, and that worked out fine," Phil said. "Your weapon skill is part of you, Bucky. It's one of the most familiar things you have right now. Taking it away would just make it harder for you to remember yourself." He waved a hand toward Steve. "As Betty pointed out, we're a household of superheroes. Should anything go wrong, we can deal with it. Besides, if you're like most snipers I know, you find range work relaxing. That's a good thing."

"I do, yeah," Bucky said. "I haven't had much time to practice, just missions."

"Something else to consider: you made it through the whole haircut without losing your patience. You deserve a reward for that," Phil said.
Bucky looked at Steve. "Does he really mean that?"

Steve grinned. "He sure does. Phil says that we do a lot of hard things all the time, so we should get nice things to make up for that," Steve said. Then he shrugged. "I know, it's kid stuff, but it works."

"So, would you like to try a practice session on the shooting range?" Phil asked Bucky.

"I would ... but, I don't have my guns ..." Bucky said.

"You can borrow something on the range," Steve assured him. "We have a variety of weapons there, plus both lightweight target ammunition and some heavier stuff. We'll start with the lightest and see how you do with that. It's not what you're used to, but you've never taken long to learn a new model. Come on, I'll walk you there."

"You can barely hit the broad side of a building, runt," said Bucky. "I remember you trying to kill cockroaches with a brick."

"I've gotten better," Steve said. "I'll show you."

"I think I'd enjoy that," Bucky said.

"Go have fun, you two. I'll come get you if you're not out by dinner time," Phil said. He watched them leave, hoping that Clint and Natasha wouldn't mind the interruption of whatever training program they had going. But Clint always loved the chance to challenge another sharpshooter.

Chapter End Notes

Prosthetic memory refers to an artificial augmentation or replacement of natural human memory. Some early research even hints at being able to repair damaged brains. Mobile computing offers many options for memory prosthetics. Prosthetic memory aids are tools designed to enable tasks that require intact memory. Cognitive prosthetic devices similarly help with everyday planning and thinking, particularly among veterans. SenseCam is a wearable camera that snaps photos automatically, providing a visual record of someone's day. The tower's security feed can serve a similar purpose for Bucky. Here are some screenshots of a computer program used for tracking activities.

Daily activities may pose a challenge for people with mental or physical limitations. Sometimes it helps to organize activities with a daily plan. Goal-Fish is a customizable to-do list that accounts for leisure and chore activities based on such limitations as energy/pain level, time, funds, number of people, etc. The task is first described simply, and detailed instructions can be turned on if desired.

Resilience is the ability to bounce back from life's challenges. Bucky has enhanced mental and physical resilience that allow him to recover at least some of his functionality despite the horrific experiences he has survived.

Family rules may be simple or more specific. It helps to create them together.

Checking mental health helps distinguish between ordinary and disordered functioning. Here's a basic checklist for assessing someone else, and a trained spy can get pretty good at this. There are checklists for self-care, feelings and mood intensity, among other
aspects. These are some ways of dealing with cognitive dysfunction. Even with significant mental injury or illness, a person with good support at home may still manage to function pretty well. That boosts the chances and speed of recovery.

Self-knowledge helps people face difficulties and pursue life goals. There are steps for finding yourself and getting to know yourself. Asking questions can help, as can exploring the whys and hows in detail.

Rewarding yourself encourages success. It doesn't have to be expensive; there are frugal options. It helps to sort rewards by size and timing. A worksheet can help replace negative thoughts with positive thoughts, actions and rewards.
Phil spent the next several hours doing what he could to manage Bucky's situation. He started by reviewing the security feed from the garage. Tony had worked on the engine for a while with intermittent assistance from Bucky. Phil was intrigued to see Tony using the same icebreaking technique he had with Bruce: plying them with dried fruit and bottles of gourmet soda. Eventually Tony coaxed Bucky into resting on the couch, though the man never got any real sleep out of it.

Tony called it a night not long after that, but he let Bucky and Steve stay in what they clearly considered safe space rather than insisting they go to bed. It was stunning display of trust and generosity that made Phil worry a little, hoping that Tony wasn't overcompensating after the ugly revelation of Stark weaponry in terrorist hands. Steve chose to stick with Bucky, napping on the end of the couch with his brother's head in his lap. Phil nodded in satisfaction and closed the file.

Next Phil asked JARVIS for Tony's notes about the anomalous power source in Bucky's prosthetic arm. Some of the files updated as he was looking at them, indication of Tony's current line of study downstairs. Phil looked at the wavering lines of energy. He noted how certain parts of the signature matched the Tesseract while others matched Loki's staff.

His left shoulder ached in memory. Phil slipped a hand under his shirt to rub it. There was no scar on his body, because Loki had stabbed the Life Model Decoy instead of Phil himself. It still twinged sometimes, though, a prickly electric sensation that made his skin crawl.

Then Phil went down to the lab levels in search of Bruce. He needed to discuss some of his thoughts about Bucky. He also needed to warn Bruce about the whole tangle of Bucky and Tony and the prosthesis and the arc reactor.

Bruce blew a gasket over that part. "What was he thinking?!"

"It's Tony Stark. I'm pretty sure that thinking was a miniscule part of the equation," Phil said dryly. "He saw the problem Bucky had with feeling like an experimental subject, and he fixed it in the most direct way possible by putting them on equal footing. He wouldn't have paused to consider the social implications or potential collateral damage to himself."

"Gordian knot, meet laser beam," Bruce muttered.

"Tony's aim with a laser beam is less than precise," Phil said, recalling the wreckage of the room in which Tony had created the new core for the arc reactor.

"Tony's aim with his mouth is what's imprecise," Bruce said.

"Actually he wasn't the one to light that particular fire. Right at the end, Bucky complimented him on the beauty of the arc reactor and Tony bolted out of the room," Phil said.
"This cannot be good," Bruce said. "Tony's going to bounce hard from that."

"He didn't with me," Phil said quietly. He still remembered the smooth feel of the arc reactor under his fingertips and the lucent glow in a darkened room. He had been utterly shocked by Tony's willingness to share that part of himself. As far as Phil knew, the only others granted permission had been Yinsen, Pepper, and Rhodey. Obie's devastating violation had turned a moderate reluctance into a full-blown phobia. Phil still had no idea how Tony managed to overcome that enough to ask for help when he needed it, let alone reach out to comfort other people.

"You proved yourself trustworthy long before that," Bruce said. "Bucky is new, and even with all the stories, Tony had to take it on faith that he was safe. And Tony's faith can be a very shaky thing."

"True. We'll just have to work through this somehow," Phil said.

"Somehow," Bruce said. "How are they, really?"

"Tony's functional, though probably still sensitive. He's in his lab working on things related to Bucky," Phil said. "Remember how he came into the common room last night, just as you left? Tony found an anomalous energy source in Bucky's prosthetic arm that probably affects memory and temperament. Bucky is ... marginally coherent. I suspect you noticed the same thing at brunch that I did, with him."

"Portion control, yes, that worries me," Bruce said. "My guess is that Department X fed him some kind of special ration, always the same few things in the same size serving. So then if he got real food on a mission, he'd try to mimic what was familiar." Bruce tugged his glasses off and rubbed his eyes. "So we're looking at recurrent amnesia, mood swings, violent reflexes, probable flashbacks, a possible eating disorder, and chronic insomnia which just makes everything else worse."

"Choice paralysis," Phil added quietly. "Bucky froze up on me this morning when I asked what he wanted to do today."

Bruce's glasses clattered onto the counter. "I don't think I can help with that one," he said as he turned away.

"Bruce, be careful with these," Phil said. He cleaned the glasses with proper lens cleaner and a microfiber cloth. Then he handed them back to Bruce. "We can spread out the workload so nobody gets overloaded and Bucky gets what he needs. I just wanted to make sure you had all the pieces. Given that, how much improvement do you think we'll see?"

"Probably close to complete, though there may be some permanent personality shifts and memories Bucky never retrieves," Bruce said. He put his glasses back on. "Bucky took a lot of damage, but every version of the super-soldier serum boosts plasticity -- that's one of its core features. Steve survived drowning and freezing; I survived a bullet in the mouth; Natasha survived brainwashing and all kinds of physical trauma. I concur with SHIELD's comparison to traumatic brain injury, and sometimes unmodified humans recover from that. So Bucky will probably recover from this. It's just going to take time, and the progress is difficult to predict because we don't know exactly what his healing factor is or how much drag that anomalous energy source causes."

"Speaking of the energy source, Steve voiced an interesting idea that the Tesseract and related technology might destabilize nearby minds, making HYDRA agents 'a special kind of crazy.' It seems like a promising line of inquiry," Phil said.

"Yes, it does," Bruce said with a firm nod.
Phil raised an eyebrow. "You sound very confident about that."

"He can feel it, the Other Guy ... he really didn't like what Loki's staff did to us on the Helicarrier," Bruce said. He shuddered. "It's like, I don't know, some kind of emotional undertow. I can't make much sense of it, but he can."

Chapter End Notes

Trust and care are vital parts of human interaction. Tony expresses care through generosity, especially by feeding people. It's a way of earning trust by proving himself a good provider. He has also learned about building rapport from his business activities. It's harder to express care when someone isn't feeling well and when people have damaged emotions. In this case, Tony also uses showing trust as a means of building trust, although it's not his natural inclination and it costs him to do that. There are tips for expanding your trust radius.

A Life Model Decoy is an android designed to mimic a specific person, with a fluent link so that the operator can perceive everything that the LMD does. This is one of the more popular explanations for how Coulson could have survived Loki's attack.

Phil's laser reference concerns the scene in Iron Man 2 when Tony created the new arc reactor core, and cut the room in half trying to get the laser beam aimed in the right place.

Tony's sensitivity regarding the arc reactor comes from multiple scenes in Iron Man 1 and Iron Man 2.

Eyeglasses play into self-image and self-esteem much the same way other pieces of adaptive equipment do, such as prosthetic limbs. Like tools, the brain perceives them as part of the body. Children who wear glasses learn how to treat them carefully if their parents are responsible, and there are tips for adults too. Obviously Bruce didn't have responsible parents and missed all this stuff. So, he treats his glasses the same way he treats himself in general: roughly and carelessly. (This really can be a sign of abuse, or otherwise impaired self-image.) Phil doesn't like to see Bruce doing this, so he's starting to teach more appropriate behavior in a matter-of-fact way.

Plasticity refers to a set of scientific circumstances involving expanded capacity for change. Closely related is the concept of fault tolerance, in which a system can sustain a considerable amount of damage before it ceases to function properly. The super-soldier serum makes people more adaptable and resilient, but expresses itself differently based on variations in the formula and in the individual person. Among the more vivid examples is Hulk's dynamic adaptability: he gets stronger and tougher the angrier he gets.
You Are Not a Monster

Chapter Summary

Phil and Bruce discuss the ups and downs of human enhancement.

Chapter Notes

Not all the end notes fit, so I'm moving some here ...

Articulating observations is an important skill both in science and interpersonal communication. There are exercises for practicing this. People need to understand how to express their thoughts and emotions. It also helps for members of a group to articulate their strengths together. You can see how Bruce and Hulk have divided the traits of different emotional types between them, which affects how they express themselves.

A buffer keeps a system close to a particular level, usually near neutral, preventing large or fast changes from wreaking havoc. This is what Steve has: likely one of the final refinements to the super-soldier serum so that it doesn't magnify altogether blind, but gently inclines toward a healthy balance. Alexithymia is a condition of diminished emotional response that can lead to disengagement, like a buffer gone overboard. This is what happened to Natasha as a result of her early training/torture. Bruce and Hulk aren't much farther along: Bruce has minimal access and understanding of emotions, while Hulk gravitates toward anger.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"I wish Hulk could articulate his observations more clearly," Phil said.

"So do I. For that matter, so does he. It's frustrating," Bruce said.

That reminded Phil about his own idea. "I got to thinking about the super-soldier serum and its effect on mood," he said. "People have tried to duplicate it, or modify it, without ever getting consistent results. You and Bucky both have dramatic mood swings, but you change shape and he doesn't. Natasha's emotions are nearly flatlined and Steve is amazingly mellow. Red Skull and the Abomination both shifted form and got stuck there, on top of severe insanity, but not the same ways. I wondered if the serum might distort moods, but then there's Steve -- he doesn't have a temper problem."

"Steve is buffered," Bruce said quietly. "He still has access to the whole range of emotions, it's just harder to knock him off his feet. The serum gave him emotional resilience as well as physical resilience, which is partly why he's still sane after losing as much as he has. What you see with Natasha, that flatlining, it's like a buffer gone crazy. What the Red Room did to her involved both psychological and chemical brainwashing. That's why it turned out differently -- for the rest of us, the change was all physical."

"Bucky was brainwashed," Phil pointed out.
"That came later, though," Bruce said. "It factors in, but not the way people expect." Bruce gave a dark chuckle. "You see, there's something nobody accounted for, that I didn't even know about until Steve told me. It's not a 'super-soldier' serum. It's a chemical lens. It magnifies whatever it touches."

"Thank you for sharing that with me," Phil said. Then he frowned. "Why did you tell me?"

"You're helping us put Bucky back together, so you need to know," Bruce said. "Besides ... Steve said that it was his secret to share, and now mine ... that he trusted me with it. Dr. Erskine told him, but he never told anyone else. It's not in any of the records."

"I'll keep it in confidence," Phil said. "The serum magnifies ... no wonder Blonsky turned into a monster!"

Bruce looked down, a shadow crossing his face. "He was always a monster. It just went from being on the inside to being on the outside. Old Thunderbolt sure knows how to pick 'em," he said. "Then again, same applies to me."

Phil cupped a hand under Bruce's chin and lifted. "You are not a monster," he said firmly. "That goes for both of you."

Bruce pulled away. "Anyhow, what I said: lens effect," he said. "Steve's innate patience turned into tremendous emotional resilience. Judging from Steve's stories, Bucky always had a wild side and a responsible side, and now he's more mercurial. But no amount of tinkering with the formula could make it go against its core nature. So even in evil hands, if the seed of a hero was there, it sprouted. Natasha took the chance that SHIELD offered her. Bucky ... he must have fought so hard, the only way they could turn him was to unmake him, to erase his memory of right and wrong. It's possible to bend someone that way. As soon as the outside pressure lets up, though, they naturally gravitate back toward their own moral lodestone."

Phil smiled. Let's see the scientist try to wriggle out of his own argument. "Bruce, you're in the same set yourself," he said aloud.

"It's not the same," Bruce protested. "The Other Guy is ..." But he trailed off, unable to sustain the 'monster' theme in the face of comparisons like Blonsky, not after having seen proof positive that Hulk could be gentle when he chose to be. The argument was valid; it held strongly enough to make Bruce pause.

"Hulk is what he is: a hero. He protects you, and he extends that to other people. He's so bulletproof that he can use his own body as a shield, even if you don't want him to," Phil pointed out.

"I made a mistake ..." Bruce said.

"You didn't make a mistake. You made a difference. That's not the same thing -- and even so, I think you came closer to the original Project Rebirth than you realize," Phil said. "What's more, I think Steve sees that too. Why else keep a secret all this time, and then share it with you?" Phil spread a gentle hand over Bruce's chest. "Steve is relatively simple. You're complex. So the serum did the best it could for you: it created a way for Bruce and Hulk to take turns externally as well as internally. Two heroes for the price of one, each with different and complementary abilities."

"I ... don't really know what to make of that," Bruce said. But he clasped a hand over Phil's instead of pulling away again.

Phil could be content with that. "Take your time thinking about it," he said. "For now, what does all this mean for Bucky?"
"The plasticity works in his favor," Bruce said. "He should revert to himself, rather strongly. We can coach him to help his memory recover. There are even some remedies for amnesia, dietary supplements and such, that might help. That's going to make it difficult for him to live with what he did under the influence of Department X, though."

Phil winced. "You mean it's going to be as bad as Clint after the attack on the Helicarrier."

"Likely so," Bruce said. "For that matter, Natasha's dampened emotional scope is as much advantage as injury; it protects her from feeling most of the pain of betraying and murdering people. Bucky doesn't have that much insulation. It'll hit him harder, probably bounce back and forth between feeling almost nothing and way too much."

"And to think SHIELD wanted to isolate him with no real support network," Phil said.

"Bucky needs all the support he can get from us, or at least, however much he'll accept from us," Bruce said.

"He'll get it," Phil said. "We'll convince him to accept it."

"Okay," Bruce said. "I'll think over some possible solutions for the problems we've observed, then try talking to Bucky. And ... thanks for keeping me in the loop, Phil."

_I'm just a weapon. Nobody tells me anything_. Bucky's words echoed in Phil's head. "I'll always keep you in the loop, Bruce," he said. "We need you to help with the problem-solving." As much as he wanted Bruce to accept the Hulk, he also wanted the man to understand his own value as a scientist and not just a container for the heavy hitter.

Chapter End Notes

[Dr. Erskine's description](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dr._Erskine) of how the serum works is from [Captain America](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Captain_America): "The serum amplifies everything that is inside, so good becomes great; bad becomes worse."

General Ross is a bad officer, who handpicks the kind of bad soldiers that will eagerly follow illegal and immoral orders. [Bad officers can make bad soldiers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bad_officers_can_make_bad_soldiers), and conversely, [drive away good ones](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drive_away_good_ones). Contrast this with Captain America's far more nuanced and moral leadership. There are ways to [discharge bad soldiers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discharge_bad_soldiers). Organizational methods are preferable to [fragging](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fragging).

Phil thinks in terms of [what makes a person a monster](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/What_makes_a_person_a_monster): evil behavior. Being right and good isn't always about appearance or social authority; consider [Quasimodo and Frollo](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quasimodo_and_Frollo). Many [monstrous aspects](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monstrous_aspects) run throughout humanity. The [relationship between creator and creation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Relationship_between_creator_and_creation) -- including parents and children -- also plays a crucial role. This is where Bruce's dysfunctional relationship with Hulk, and their mutual experience of child abuse, really shows up. But at least Bruce is finally starting to come away from counting Hulk as a monster.

[Heroes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heroes) are the counterpoints, who [act for the better when an opportunity arises](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Act_for_the_better_when_an_opportunity_arises). [Soldiers and veterans](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soldiers_and_veterans) are often heroes, but there are [many others kinds](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Many_others_kinds) too. Here's a worksheet about [heroic traits](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heroic_traits). In the end, being a hero isn't about wearing a uniform, having big muscles, or charging into combat. It's about being the person -- regardless of your size, profession, or other characteristics -- who steps between someone else and trouble.
Browse some remedies for amnesia. There's not a lot that can be done for it, but every little bit helps, and supporting the brain in general is a good thing.

Isolation is a key form of abuse. It gives the abuser control, opportunities to work unobserved and free of outside interference. Notice that Director Fury used or ordered isolating tactics against almost all of the Avengers in canon, acting to cut them apart from potential support or escape as much as possible. This is really not okay, a major red flag in any kind of relationship, and a signal to leave.

People may feel reluctant to accept help for themselves or assistance in caring for others. Sometimes nobody asks and nobody offers even though both are willing. However, an exchange of support is a vital part of healthy relationships.
Shoelaces

Chapter Summary

When Bruce trips over a loose shoelace, Phil discovers another piece of his wretched history.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Bruce smiled at Phil then, bashful and sweet. "Thanks, Phil," he said. 

_Maybe there is hope for self-acceptance after all,_ Phil thought. Bruce got up to walk Phil to the door -- and stumbled over his own feet.

_No, over his shoelaces_, Phil realized as he caught Bruce and kept him from tumbling to the floor. The dilapidated sneakers weren't laced and tied properly. Instead, each shoe had a half-length of fraying gray shoelace looped haphazardly through the top few holes, then doubled over and tied in a clumsy slipknot. There wasn't even enough lace in either shoe to go through all the holes. One had come loose and gotten under Bruce's foot, causing him to trip.

"Sorry, guess I'm a bit of a klutz," Bruce mumbled. He sat down in the nearest chair, not looking at Phil and not making any move to re-tie his shoe. Instead he tucked his feet out of sight under the chair.

"Well, it would help if your shoes and laces were in better shape," Phil said. "They won't stay tied like this."

Bruce curled into himself the way he did when he felt threatened. "S'fine," he said.

_Something is deeply wrong here_, Phil thought. He wondered if Hulk might come out to deal with the upset, which Bruce preferred to avoid. Phil put a reassuring hand on Bruce's shoulder. The hard flinch alarmed him further. "Relax, you're safe," Phil murmured. "Do you need me to step back a bit?"

"No," Bruce said. He leaned against Phil's touch, tentatively at first and then more firmly. Phil stroked a hand across Bruce's shoulders and down his back. Under his fingers, the muscles remained taut but no longer twitched away from him.

Phil mulled over the clues. _Shoes, tying laces ... those are things most people learn at an early age_, he thought. Bruce at that age had been trapped in an abusive family. Phil had seen the signs before. He may not have gotten an opportunity to learn this, or might have been punished for simple childhood mistakes.

"Bruce, I need you to tell me the truth. Do you know how to tie your shoelaces in a bow like mine are?" Phil asked.

Bruce clung to him, vibrating with tension. "No," he whispered, his breath warm through Phil's shirt. His face pressed close, leaving damp spots on the fabric. "Please don't be mad at me."
"Of course I'm not mad at you." Phil combed his fingers through Bruce's hair. "Do you think it might help for you to switch down? We can redo this the right way." It was a better plan than trying to work through this with Hulk, and Bruce was already so swamped in memories that he wasn't really thinking with an adult perspective.

"... 'kay, Uncle Phil," Bruce said in a small voice.

"Okay, then," Phil said. "Here's what we're going to do. I'll tie your shoe for you. That way you don't trip over it again. We'll go up to my room, where I've got some spare laces. I'll show you how to lace up your shoes and make a bow. You're a smart boy; I'm sure you'll pick it up in no time."

Phil knelt down and gently tugged Bruce's feet out from where they were hidden far under the chair. He rethreaded the loose lace with care, because it was so old and raveled that a firm tug would have broken it. He tied a neat bow. Then he did the same with the other lace, tying it securely.

"You did a good job sitting still for me," Phil said, because praise helped Bruce feel more secure. That's the hell of it, dealing with abuse, Phil thought. You get these bad ideas ground in to the point they seem like a normal part of your life. They're hard to get rid of, so you can be going about your day and then suddenly get sideswiped by some random little thing like this.

"Okay," Bruce said.

Phil took him by the hand and led him out of the lab. JARVIS discreetly made sure that they didn't encounter anyone else. They went upstairs to Phil's apartment. Shoelaces had plenty of uses besides securing shoes, so Phil always kept an assortment of styles on hand. He picked out a pair of laces. Then he settled Bruce on the floor and sat down beside him.

"I'm going to teach you the bow-tie pattern for lacing," Phil said. "It works with short laces, and there are fewer crossovers. This way it holds well intact, but once the lace breaks, it's easier for the pieces to get loose." Phil undid the old laces and demonstrated once with the new. "Okay, now you do the same thing I just did, on the other shoe."

Bruce gave him a wary glance. "Do I have to?"

"Unless you want to explain to everyone why you're running around barefoot, yes," Phil said. "Don't worry. Even if you make a mistake, I won't yell at you or hit you. They're shoelaces; if you goof, you can just take them out and start over."

Bruce got it right the first time. The pattern was simple enough, and he had the first shoe for an example. He finished the lacing ... and then just sat there, looking at his shoes. There was no smile, no sense of self-congratulation or success at all.

No wonder Bruce thinks so little of his accomplishments, even the big ones, Phil thought. He missed learning how to appreciate his own progress growing up, and nobody celebrated his successes with him. Then later, other people mostly just took advantage of him. It made Phil angry, but he tucked that away to process on his own time, so that it wouldn't spill over onto Bruce.

"You did that very well," Phil told him, draping an arm over Bruce's shoulders to pull him into a hug. "It makes me happy to see you learn something new." Bruce pressed against him, savoring the positive attention. "Okay, now take them both out and do them again."

Bruce pulled away. "Why?" he whined.

"You need to practice so you'll remember this. It's a new skill. I don't want you to do it once and then forget it," Phil said. It was too easy for that to happen, especially with a topic that someone tended to
He made Bruce practice until the lacing went quickly and easily.

Chapter End Notes

**Self-acceptance** embraces both the positive and negative aspects of yourself, making **happiness more attainable**. This is especially challenging for **people with disabilities** or **survivors of abuse**. **Self-awareness** is a necessary first step in **changing beliefs** and **working with self-acceptance**.

Shoe-tying **can be a source of stress for children**. There are several ways to tie shoes, and calm parenting helps avoid trouble. Abusive families can turn a simple task into a small war.

**Praise** is important in **raising confident children**. It helps to give **different types of praise**. This makes it easier for children to learn about feelings and to appreciate their own accomplishments. Without parental support they may not learn these things well.

Abuse can cause **self-loathing** and **negative self-talk**. There are tips for **creating more positive internal dialog**. **Triggers and flashbacks** also come from abuse, turning ordinary items or events into something alarming.

The **bow-tie shoelace pattern** uses less length. Here are **instructions for making it**.

**Practice** helps acquire new skills securely. **Mindful practice** produces better results than autopilot.
Without Losing the Ends

Chapter Summary

Phil teaches Bruce how to tie a bow, and encourages him to appreciate his accomplishments.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Okay?" Bruce asked. "Did I do it right?"

"Yes, you did it right," Phil agreed. "Now, I'll show you how to tie a bow." He snugged the laces into position and then demonstrated the steps, along with a mnemonic rhyme:

*Build a tipi, come inside.*
*Bring a friend. Close it tight so we can hide.*
*Over the mountain, and around we go.*
*Here's my arrow, and here's my bow.*

Bruce giggled. "You taught Clint with that, didn't you?"

"I did indeed," Phil said. Clint had grown up lacing his shoes with string and simply knotting it. Phil showed him a better way. Then Clint got so fascinated with the idea of cords and knots that Phil had referred him to a proper climbing instructor. A good knowledge of ropework made Hawkeye's high perches less nerve-wracking for the handler. Furthermore, people Hawkeye tied up stayed tied, and he could get himself out of almost anything made from rope. "Now try tying your other shoe."

Bruce made the bow, but pulled a bit too hard and the ends slipped through. His hands scrabbled at the shoelace. He only wound up tightening the tangled knot. "Sorry, sorry," Bruce muttered, quivering against Phil's side. A tear trickled down his cheek again.

"It's all right. You're safe here. This skill takes a little practice. Keep trying and you'll get the hang of it," Phil said. He untangled the shoelace for Bruce. Then Phil made another bow, emphasizing how to pull it tight without losing the ends. "Untie that and tie your own."

Bruce moved more carefully this time, each motion slow and precise. He had nimble fingers. The bow formed and settled into place. Yet Bruce tensed where he leaned against Phil, rigid with worry instead of satisfaction.

"See, I knew you could do it," Phil assured him. He hugged Bruce, smoothing a hand over the tight muscles until they relaxed. "I'm very proud of you for sticking with this until you got it right. That deserves a smile. Think you could find one for me?"

Bruce looked up and gave him a watery smile.

"That's my good boy," Phil said. Then he reached down and untied both shoes. "Let's see you do it a few more times."

Bruce worked through the steps with more confidence this time. He tied two crisp bows, undid them,
and redid them. Then he wiggled his toes inside the shoes. "Yeah, that's better," he said.

"Good job," Phil said.

"Uh huh," Bruce said with tepid enthusiasm.

It bothered Phil that Bruce had never gotten around to learning how to lace and tie his shoes beyond a sloppy stopgap method. Bruce could have done that at any time, especially as an adult. He was a genius; it wouldn't have taken him more than a few minutes. Bruce seemed to lack the strong drive for self-teaching that Tony had, at least for things that would benefit himself rather than someone else. Bruce could learn on his own if he had to, but he did better in a more structured and sheltered environment. Even on the run, he had sought out teachers wherever he could find them. He had acquired an impressive array of new skills that way. Bruce could have asked anyone for a quick demonstration of how to make a bow, if that's what he needed.

*Then again, if the initial shoe-tying incident frightened him badly enough, he might have shied away from the whole topic for that reason. I wonder if Bruce remembers that, or if Hulk does,* Phil mused. *Maybe it just never occurred to Bruce to ask for help with something so basic, rather than something advanced enough to have lessons readily available. Well, at least I can fix that much.*

"You know, Bruce, you can always come to me if there's something you want to learn, or just something you want to redo because it didn't go well the first time," Phil said aloud. "I'll never make fun of you for it. If you don't feel like asking me, you can ask JARVIS. You've seen how gentle he is teaching Steve about modern things."

"I know," Bruce said softly. "It's just ... I feel stupid, asking."

"You can work through that, and eventually the feeling will fade. What your parents did to you was wrong. There are better ways to live your life," Phil said. "Asking questions and learning are good things. That should sound familiar to you from science."

"Yeah, but ... that's different," Bruce said, sniffling.

"Different how?" Phil asked.

"Science is about finding out new things that nobody knows yet," Bruce said. "I picked at one shoe where the thread was coming out, letting the fabric separate. "Shoes aren't new. Normal people know how to do this stuff and don't cry over nothing," Bruce said.

"You're not crying over nothing, Bruce. You're grieving a miserable past that you were lucky to survive, and that's okay," said Phil. "Remember that you're not the only one to go through something like that, and everybody cries when they're hurt." He frowned over the fraying seam. "We need to get you some new shoes to go with the new laces."

Bruce shook his head. "I usually rip out of my shoes when the Big Kid comes," he said. "It hurts less if I wear stuff that breaks easy."

*That explains the old laces,* Phil thought. *It's not just his general dislike of spending money on clothes. I need to take care not to assume that all the odd things Bruce does are due to past damage, because some of them have practical reasons. This one turned out to be a combination of both.*

"It sounds like what you need is a cheap pair of sneakers with plastic rings to run the laces through," he said aloud. "That way if you don't have time to kick off your shoes before you transform, the rings will give way. But until then, you can have comfortable shoes with new laces tied properly so that you don't trip."
The mnemonic for how to tie a bow comes from this page.

There are toys for learning how to handle fasteners and get dressed, including buttons and snaps and shoelaces.

**Ropework** is the craft of making, tending, and using rope. A military version includes **artistic knotwork**. **Climbing** is another application of advanced ropework.

**Fear of failure** often results from an **abusive background**. There are **ways to overcome it**. Parents can teach children that mistakes are not bad, but a **natural part of learning**. Notice how often Bruce sabotages himself, and blames himself for the failed experiment that created the Hulk. This makes it harder for him to see any good coming out of that.

**Self-teaching** is a valuable skill, and there are **ways to learn it**. Consider the difference between **intrinsic and extrinsic motivation**, which applies not just to young students but also to adults. There are tips for **raising self-motivated children**. Tony learns out of intense curiosity, and occasionally boredom; he just adores poking at things, and looks for practical applications later. Bruce has curiosity, but is more often motivated by compassion or duty: things that create benefits for other people, rather than just for himself.

**Learning to ask for help** is **hard for many people**. A healthy family or team relies on **interdependence**. You can see the Avengers working hard to develop this: while most of them are crummy at accepting help, they're better at offering it. Closely related is that many people fear asking questions. **They don't want to seem dumb**. There are tips for **asking good questions**.
Phil helps Bruce pick out some new shoes. They talk about what triggered Bruce's reaction in the lab.

"Huh," said Bruce. "I never thought of looking for shoes with breakaway parts. It just ... didn't seem important."

"I'm not important, is what Phil heard, but he made no direct remark about it. "Well, you had other things to think about at the time. Why don't we look at some options now? JARVIS, please find us some shoes to browse."

"I suggest walking shoes," JARVIS said, stacking up a set of holograms. "They tend to be comfortable and lightweight, often with laces held by plastic rings or ribbon loops. Bruce, here are some styles that match your measurements and general fashion preferences."

Bruce made an interested noise, leaning forward. "I haven't seen anything like these before. They look pretty cool," he said.

"Here, take a peek at the canvas ones. They're durable and understated," Phil said.

"Yeah, I like those. These nylon and leather ones are nice too," Bruce said, poking through the holograms.

"Pick out two pairs," Phil said. "Then if you lose a pair, you'll have a backup to wear while you get new ones."

Bruce hesitated, then said, "Okay." It was easier to coax him into expanding his wardrobe if they didn't push too hard all at once. Small steps worked better. Bruce wound up choosing a brown pair and a gray pair. He gave Phil a tentative smile as JARVIS put the order through.

"Well done. I think that's enough excitement for now," Phil declared. It was better to stop on a successful note. "I'm sure you've got work to do."

"Yeah," Bruce said. Then he hugged Phil. "Thanks, Uncle Phil. For everything, not just the shoes. I don't know how you put up with me, I'm such a mess."

"Because you're worth it," Phil said. The shoelaces had provided a catalyst, but something deeper had Bruce clinging to him like this. It was like looking at a layered map, all the ages of him stacked on top of each other, influencing what came to the surface. "Can you tell me what brought this on?"

"I used to trip over my shoelaces all the time when I was really little. That made it hard to run. Then I figured out how to tuck them up out of the way. I guess today reminded me of that," said Bruce.

Hidden trigger, Phil thought, making stress from one issue come out sideways through another.
"What made you think of running and tripping, before you stepped on your shoelace earlier, that upset you so much when you stumbled?" he said aloud.

"With Bucky around, I just keep thinking ... that's what they wanted to do to me. Trip me up, trap me, turn me into a weapon," Bruce admitted. "I'd just be this thing they could take out of the box to use whenever they wanted, and then put back ..." He was shaking again. "General Ross and his men had me before, they still want to track me down, and I can't, I can't ...

"That is not going to happen," Phil said firmly. No wonder Bruce had fallen apart, trying to deal with all that pressure on his own. "I can see why the idea would make you so uncomfortable; it's very scary. However, we won't let anyone take you away or subvert your will like that. It's not okay to treat people that way. We'll protect you if anyone tries it."

"I know," Bruce said. He hiccuped a little, trying not to cry. "It's funny, a year ago I would have been terrified. I'm still freaked out about this, but not as bad now. I know you'd stand up for me, the whole team would. That's new, and it feels weird to me, but ... I kind of like it."

"How does Hulk feel about this? Can you tell?" Phil asked delicately. Bruce's age orientation often wavered when he got upset, and Hulk moved around their inner space; it could make tracking things a challenge.

"He's angry about it, and a little edgy, but not ... not so full of rage that he's trying to break out. He doesn't feel hunted this time. He likes Bucky. I think he worries about Bucky, too; maybe this is why he feels so protective of him," said Bruce. He rubbed a hand over his face, smearing tears away. "Sometimes it's hard to tell what the Other Guy feels, and what I feel."

"You'll learn that too," Phil said. He pulled out a handkerchief to dry Bruce's face properly. "I have faith in you -- both of you."

"Yeah," Bruce said. "That helps. It's just, everyone's concerned over Bucky, and they should be. I didn't want to get in the way."

"We're all feeling sensitive about this, in different ways," Phil said quietly. "Just because you didn't know Bucky before all this happened, doesn't mean the situation won't bring up personal issues for you. We've all got each other for support. We can take turns based on who feels better or worse at the moment. So if you need someone to lean on, you let us know. We'll talk about it and fix what we can. Don't hold back until it wrecks your control or peace of mind."

"I think I like that," Bruce said. "When, when people let me help. When they look after me." He tilted his hands back and forth, like balancing a scale. "It feels better that way."

"I like those things too," Phil said.

Bruce climbed to his feet, wriggling his toes in their newly secured shoes. "I'm ready to go back now," he said.

Phil walked Bruce to the lab, letting him gradually drift back up to his adult self. Sometimes Bruce skipped ahead, hopping over the floor tiles and sliding to make his shoes squeak. They never came loose, though. Sometimes Bruce stayed by Phil, walking together or even holding hands. It was a pleasant interlude.

By the time they arrived, Bruce was alert again, eager to resume his work. Phil left him to it. Still, Phil wondered how the rest of his team was doing. Bucky's condition, miserable as it was for himself, brought up issues for everyone else as well. I'll just have to keep an eye out, Phil decided.
Walking shoes are lightweight and comfortable. Some of them are easy to slip into and out of quickly.

Displacement is a psychological defense mechanism. Something that is too difficult to deal with directly gets shunted into a different direction. This is particularly prone to happening with PTSD triggers.

If not dealt with, stress can come out sideways. One common example is an argument about a superficial complaint that connects to something much deeper. There are ways to reduce stress and avoid this problem.

Bruce has a strong -- and sadly justified -- fear of being captured. It's not a trivial issue; animals and even people can actually die of fear. While death isn't a risk for Bruce, the same biological reactions are likely to make Hulk appear, which can also cause problems. People can overcome a fear of being kidnapped.

Feeling protective can indicate love or other strong connections. Hulk identifies with Bucky so strongly that it's spilling over to the point even Bruce can feel it, though it takes time and some help before Bruce manages to figure out exactly why.

Talking about things is a vital part of family life. Nothing is too big or too small to be worth talking about. Communication can prevent problems from occurring and lessen the ones that do arise.
Such a Fragile and Human Thing

Chapter Summary

Phil studies memory and its impairment. Then he goes down to the shooting range to college Bucky and Clint for supper.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Phil spent the remainder of the afternoon looking through his materials on PTSD and traumatic brain injury, since nobody had really written about "how to treat the aftermath of forced cryonics and brainwashing." He managed to put together some good resources on specific symptoms. Then when he got to the mood swings, JARVIS interrupted.

"Excuse me, Phil, but Betty has already completed a search in this area and flagged her notes for your attention so you don't duplicate efforts," he said. "She also directs your attention to additional material on state-dependent memory, context-dependent memory, and cue-dependent forgetting."

"Open the files," Phil said. A hologram appeared and unstacked itself into a tidy array of information. Some was new, specifically for Bucky. Other material was older, for Bruce-and-Hulk. It looked promising.

There was also a note about Betty's former boyfriend. Dr. Leonard Samson had volunteered his help in case anyone needed somebody to talk with outside the team but familiar with at least some of their situation. That could prove useful.

Phil had debriefed the man after the fiasco with Blonsky and General Ross, and was impressed with Dr. Samson's critical analysis of Ross (obsessive-compulsive, manic, and abusive tendencies; probable sociopathy; textbook paranoia). Phil smiled as he recalled Leonard's jabs at Ross -- He protected her. You almost killed her. and I used to wonder why she never talked about you. Now I know. -- as precise and painful as nerve strikes. His input had already helped keep Ross away from Bruce and now Betty.

Phil sent a message to Dr. Samson. It wouldn't hurt to have an ace up his sleeve. Maybe he could even convince the man to come work for SHIELD. Then Phil settled in to read.

Presently a chime sounded and JARVIS announced, "One hour until dinner, Phil."

Phil sighed. He really didn't feel like cooking and everyone else was busy. He called up the list of the team's favorite delivery restaurants and ordered a selection of things that would, hopefully, be recognizable to Bucky. Then he took a while to organize his research and close all the files. Finally he went down to the shooting range.

Clint had his bow and quiver, a formidable example of Stark engineering. Bucky had a sniper rifle, also courtesy of the Stark arsenal, with a sleek intelligent look to it. Phil considered it a mark of high regard that Tony would make weapons for the team, even after divesting his company from that field at great cost. They all took exquisite care not to dishonor the name and reputation that came attached to those gifts. Now Phil listened to the soft thwip of the bow and sharper crack of the rifle. Natasha
was keeping score for Clint, and Steve was keeping score for Bucky.

"Bite me," Clint said to Bucky. "I beat you by two whole millimeters. You owe me another beer, old man."

Bucky stuck his tongue out at Clint.

Phil felt a flood of joy and relief so piercing that it made him gasp. *It's all right,* he thought. *Bucky really is going to be all right.* That one little gesture showed that Bucky's sense of humor, such a fragile and human thing, had survived everything done to him.

"I ordered supper," Phil said to them. "You have time to shower and change before it arrives."

"I don't have --" Bucky began.

"We sent out for a few basic clothes based on your measurements," Phil said. "They're in the guest room on Steve's floor. Go on, now. I'll see you upstairs."

Supper included personal meatloaves, miniature loaves of bread, an assortment of vegetable sides, and two different cakes. Steve took some of all the vegetables. Then he sliced a meatloaf in half lengthwise, did the same with two bread loaves, and made sandwiches. He put one on his own plate and handed the other to Bucky.

"That looks like a lot," Bucky said.

"Remember how my metabolism runs about four times average?" Steve said, waiting for Bucky's nod. "Okay, Natasha thinks yours falls somewhere between hers and mine. So you need about three times the usual amount of food, or maybe more if you eat that and still feel hungry."

"I don't ... really have much of an appetite anymore," Bucky said.

"With your biochemistry and sleep pattern so messed up, that's not surprising," said Bruce. "Eat the sandwich for now. If you feel like you've got room left, pick one vegetable and one slice of cake. Don't overeat or pressure yourself to try too many new things at once. Snack later if you need it."

Bucky ate slowly, seeming to pay a little more attention this time. He liked the meatloaf. That made Phil happy; he'd picked it because it was one of Steve's favorites.

When they cut the cakes, Steve laughed suddenly, then looked at Bucky and said simply, "Wanna?" Bucky gave an eager nod. Steve took a slice of chocolate and a slice of white cake, then teased apart the layers to create two mixed-flavor slices. He passed the chocolate-vanilla-chocolate one to Bucky, keeping the vanilla-chocolate-vanilla one for himself. "We used to do this when we were younger," he said to Phil.

"Whatever works for you," Phil said mildly. "Should I be getting out the sprinkles?"

"Yeah!" said Clint at the same time Tony said, "And ice cream, preferably peanut butter!"

"Is he serious?" Bucky whispered to Steve. "Why do you even have that stuff?"

"Because we like it," Steve said.

"Do you like the same confetti mix that Steve likes or do you want something different?" Phil said, his hands full of tiny bottles.

Bucky looked down at his plate. "I don't remember that," he said.
"You don't like the multi-colored ones, but you don't -- didn't -- eat your favorite in public," Steve said. He leaned over to whisper in Bucky's ear.

"Well, nobody would dare call me a sissy now," Bucky said, flexing his metal hand. "Phil, I'd like bubblegum sprinkles, please, if you have them."

Chapter End Notes

Here's a review of PTSD and traumatic brain injury.

Memory states influence how people learn and remember things. State-dependent learning can be influenced by emotions, drugs, and other factors. Context-dependent memory relies on places, objects, actions, emotions, etc. Cue-dependent forgetting relates to retrieval failure when the relevant hints are missing. All of these help explain how Department X controlled Bucky's memory to suppress inconvenient history and morals while still leaving a functional assassin -- and how he's regaining more of his memory now with assistance from people he has known.

Leonard Samson appeared in The Incredible Hulk as Betty's then-current boyfriend. The two quotes are from that movie.

Returning sense of humor can be a sign of recovery from PTSD and other problems. Humor can help people heal in general. There are ways to encourage a sense of humor.

Insomnia can interfere with appetite. There are ways to deal with low appetite.
I Was Trying to Be Helpful

Chapter Summary

The Avengers discuss after-supper activities. Bucky puts his foot in his mouth. Phil explains why Bucky's remarks were mean.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Those are mine; I'll get them," Natasha said. She brought out the bright pink discs of sugar. "You introduced me to these, Bucky. We worked an ice cream stand as cover once, in Baku. I think that was one of the first things you remembered from your old life."

Bucky shook the bubblegum sprinkles over his cake. "I don't remember it now, but ... I'm glad you do," he said. He forked up a bite and then added, "This is really good."

Meanwhile Betty had gone for the ice cream, bringing back peanut butter and vanilla. Bucky passed on that, although Steve buried his cake in several scoops. It didn't take long for them to demolish dessert. Steve pushed his plate away and said, "I'm stuffed."

"I think I'm full?" Bucky said. "It's hard to tell."

"You should get some rest after supper," Bruce said to him. "I know you can't fall asleep readily, but a quiet lie-down is better than nothing. Shut the lights off, and turn the temperature down a little. That may help get your melatonin production back in working order, which will support both sleep and memory."

"Doing something quiet before you lie down might help too. You can read, or watch television if you've got a spotter," Steve said.

"A what?" Bucky said.

"A spotter, someone to sit with you and shut off the screen if gets too upsetting," Steve said.

Bucky laughed. "Can't be any worse than what I've already seen," he said. "What kind of nancy idiot needs a wingman for entertainment?"

Tink.

Steve looked down in shock at the cracked glass in his hand. "I do, Bucky," he said as he set the glass carefully on the table.

"Show me your hand. Did you cut yourself?" Bruce said.

Steve opened his hand. "No, I didn't. I'm okay."

Phil reached out and flipped over the glass. Its bottom was smooth. "Wrong glassware," he said. "Who set the table?"
"I -- I did," Tony said, his voice wavering. "I was trying to be helpful."

"I told him to do it," Steve said. "My fault, Tony, I should've checked your work after an unfamiliar task."

"I'm sorry I forgot the right glasses. There's just so much to remember about what subset of pieces to get and where to put them," Tony said.

"No harm, no foul," Phil said. It took work to rebuild Tony's trust in himself, especially when he ventured into areas that his skill set didn't really cover. "You're used to seeing a lot of different place settings when you go out. Next time you'll remember what we use for casual meals at home, and somebody can check your work."

"Genius doesn't know how to set a table? And what's with the glasses?" Bucky said.

"Excuse me," Tony said faintly, and scurried out of the room.

"I'll go after him," Clint said. He hastened to follow Tony.

"Bucky, most of the team grew up in unusual -- if varied -- circumstances," Phil explained. "In Tony's case, his household had servants so he missed out on learning a lot of ordinary skills like setting a table. It doesn't help that he sometimes attends functions where a place setting can run to dozens of pieces."

"The glasses are for me and Steve, because we had some problems at first," Bruce said. He checked the bottom of his. "Here, look. See the Stark Industries logo? These are made from the same shatterproof material that Tony uses for the transparent parts of his armor. So if we squeeze too hard, it won't break like ordinary glass. But on the table, it looks like everyone else's."

Phil remembered that incident vividly. Steve had gotten upset early on, broken a glass, and sliced his hand open. The cuts had healed quickly, but it was still alarming. It had given Phil an idea of just how sensitive Steve was under his good-soldier front. Sadly Bruce hadn't fully grasped that example of how other people's emotional overload sometimes led to unpleasant physical consequences. The next day, Tony had come upstairs with some specialized glassware to make sure that kind of accident didn't happen again.

"It really won't break?" Bucky said. He opened and closed his metal hand. "I've busted a lot of glasses -- even crushed metal cups -- just from getting distracted or angry."

"Watch," Bruce said. He tapped the glass lightly against the edge of the table to telegraph his intent, then gave it a sharp whack. "See, not even a chip. You're welcome to use these too. I'm sure Tony would make more if you asked."

Bucky cast a guilty glance at the door. "I don't think he likes me much right now," he said. "I didn't think -- well, that's just it. I was acting like a thoughtless jerk."

Steve had actually warned Phil about that. Bucky was fundamentally honorable, but he also had a flippant streak that sometimes caused trouble. Phil suspected that was one reason that Steve had warmed up to Tony and Clint: they had a similar flavor of sass as Bucky did. Perhaps Bucky would learn to get along with them based on that common ground.

"You did not know about Tony's background," Natasha said, "and he is ... an easy man to misjudge."

"Really? Coming from you, that says a lot," Bucky said.
"Natasha's right. I read Tony all wrong at our first meeting too," Steve said.

Phil nodded. He had made much the same mistake himself. "Tony encourages the world to see him in a certain light --"

"Genius billionaire playful philanthropist," Steve murmured.

"-- which is, not so much wrong, as troublingly incomplete," Phil said. "Iron Man isn't the only mask he wears, and that public front he puts up is actually harder to get through." Tony had an odd tendency of advertising his more garish flaws to obscure the deeper weaknesses, and he also preferred to keep his courage and valor out of plain sight.

"Just ... try to be a little more understanding," Steve said. "Tony is brilliant at so many things, but he feels self-conscious about the stuff he's not good at."

"Yeah, I should probably apologize for that," Bucky said.

Chapter End Notes

Baku, Azerbaijan lies on the coast of the Caspian Sea. Not far from Russia, it is a popular yet risky vacation spot.

Trauma can create sleep disturbances and interfere with the production of melatonin, a hormone necessary for sleep. A dark, cool, quiet environment encourages the body to release melatonin. (This is why JARVIS often tweaks the environmental controls in the tower if it looks like people are falling asleep. It's his version of tucking them in.) There are more tips for improving sleep.

An emotional spotter is a person trusted to provide support when someone is or might become upset. They may remove obstacles or check to make sure a situation is safe. Wingman is a similar military term, also used socially (especially in dating).

Setting a table can range from simple to moderate to ridiculously complex (there are 70 pieces outlined on that tablecloth). Etiquette guides explain how to decide which pieces to use and how to teach kids to set the table.

Making a trigger list is a basic exercise for coping with PTSD. This helps to avoid the worst triggers while working to reduce your sensitivity and otherwise recover your stability. These are some common triggers for veterans. Trigger identification is part of an action plan for prevention of and recovery from mental symptoms.

Most people can switch between true and false self, in which the social front protects the inner persona. Interestingly, wearing a physical mask tends to release the true self -- notice that Iron Man reveals much that Tony Stark hides. Therapy, like other forms of intimacy, requires getting beneath the social front in order to accomplish much of import.
Chapter Summary

Natasha introduces Bucky to one of the house rules. Steve and Bucky talk about what it means to lose everything. Phil goes to check on Tony and Clint, discovering that Tony is a mess.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"Bucky, I think you owe Steve an apology too, for the unkind remark about watching television with a spotter," Phil said.

"Sorry," Bucky said to Steve. "I didn't realize you meant yourself when you first said that."

"Does that really matter?" Steve said quietly. "It would have been just as mean aimed at anyone else."

"No being mean," Natasha said. "It's a rule."

"I guess it doesn't matter," Bucky said. "You're right, it would still be mean. I just feel extra bad that it was you. I don't really get it."

Steve fidgeted with his fork. "I lost my whole world, Bucky," Steve said. He had explained his own history to Bucky, several times now as memory came and went. "Sometimes things remind me of that, and I can't always cope with it. I was being stubborn about it at first. Then I messed myself up real bad watching a war documentary. That worried people. So. I don't watch television alone anymore. I get somebody to watch with me and make sure that doesn't happen again. JARVIS has my trigger list so he can warn me about stuff I probably shouldn't watch at all."

"I'm really sorry, Steve. I'll try to be more careful," Bucky said. He covered Steve's fingers with his own. "I guess ... I've lost everything too, except my brother, and that's making it hard to get my bearings."

"I understand," Steve said, letting go of his fork to take Bucky's hand.

Natasha stood up and held out her hands to Steve and Bucky. "Come," she said. "We will watch television together. I will select something relaxing." She led them out of the room.

"Betty and I will take care of the dishes, then join you later," Bruce said as he began to clear the table. "Phil ... you might want to check on Tony."

Phil nodded. "I intend to, yes," he said. "JARVIS, where are Tony and Clint?"

"They are in Clint's living room playing video games," JARVIS replied.

That was ... odd. They usually played in the common room, which had a bigger screen. If Tony wanted privacy, he retreated to his own quarters -- or more often, his lab or garage. Maybe they wanted somewhere out of the way but not such an obvious retreat. "Ask them if I'm welcome to
"Clint says that sooner would be better than later," JARVIS said.

Phil hurried. He found them sitting on Clint's couch, playing one of the science-fiction games with powered armor. Tony was obliterating the enemy while Clint barely held on. Phil worried about Tony picking something so easy for him to play; it suggested that he needed the reassurance of winning. But he also chose something violent rather than one of the kiddie games. Not a good sign.

Clint dropped his controller and said, "Thank god you're here, I'm getting my ass handed to me."

"Tony," Phil called softly. No response. Phil reached over and gently pulled the controller from Tony's hands, turning off the game. "Talk to me, Tony."

Tony talked to his own shoes, but he said, "I'm sorry for messing things up. Bucky's right, normal people know these things."

"Well, normal people don't know how to build robot armor or save the world from psychotic alien armies, so it's a good thing we have a mixed skill set," Phil said. He sat down on the couch and wrapped an arm around Tony, sandwiching him between Phil and Clint. Tony could be utterly obdurate in the face of threats, but then certain types of criticism would drop him into this despondent space where he had no idea of his own worth. Phil suspected that the hasty intimacy with Bucky had left Tony all the more vulnerable.

"I just feel so stupid," Tony whispered. "I hate feeling this way. I learned thermonuclear astrophysics overnight. Why can't I get this right?"

"You already understood a lot of the science and math when you went into thermonuclear astrophysics. It was right up your alley and you considered it important," Phil said. "Setting the table is something you were told not to do in your childhood, that it wasn't your job, it was beneath you. It's not something you ever thought of as important."

"It's important now," Tony said.

"I think what you consider important is being part of the team and pulling your own weight," Phil said. "Most of the time you just ignore this kind of domestic task. Then suddenly you'll notice one bit and want to do it -- and sometimes you overreach yourself. That's a natural part of the learning process, Tony. What is it you say about science? You don't make discoveries without making some mistakes along the way? That's true of everything, you know."

"I guess so," Tony said. "I should probably just redo all the everyday glassware and the dishes too. We've still got the china for special occasions. Bucky should have the shatterproof stuff and really, that applies to most of us in different ways."

"Bruce offered to share what we've already got with Bucky, but yes, that might be a good idea," Phil said. "That's very thoughtful of you."

"I just wanted ..." Tony trailed off. His eyebrows pinched together, mouth thinning.

Phil recognized that routine, all right. "We care about you, Tony. You don't have to buy our friendship, not with things you make or things you do," Phil said.

"Do you think I'd let you beat me at video games by picking ones I suck at, if I didn't like you?" Clint said, bumping their shoulders together.
Tony nodded instantly. "It's what people usually do, because I'm so good at most of the games and I have the best system they want to play on."

Phil winced. Oh, Tony, he thought. That's not the only reason we're here. Not anymore. It hurt to remember how he himself, and Natasha, had played right into Tony's warped self-image. That made it harder to convince Tony, now, that they wanted him for more than his hardware. It was also one reason why Phil insisted on providing the supplies for game night.

"Tony ... we're playing on my game system and it's one I brought with me when I moved in," Clint said gently. Sometimes just being there was the best demonstration of friendship.

"Oh. I forgot about that," Tony said.

"Maybe we can help you remember," Phil said. He took out a felt-tipped pen and wrote on Tony's hand, Mistakes --> Discoveries. "Clint, your turn." Clint wrote We like you! on Tony's other hand. Tony stared at the blue ink.

"So, can we switch to one of the cooperative games? Preferably fantasy?" Clint said. "Because I'm getting tired of wading through alien blood and wrecked machinery."

"Yeah," Tony said. He leaned against Phil. "I think I'm in the mood for something different too."

"Let's play Monkey Island: A Madcap Crew," Phil suggested. The whimsical pirate game featured a lot of exploring and problem-solving with very little actual fighting. The latest version expanded from single to multiplayer format, adding a teamwork requirement as the motley buccaneers had to find enough buried treasure to outfit their newly acquired fixer-upper ship.

Clint whooped in agreement. Tony ventured a small smile and said, "Okay." They were so given to monkeyshines, it made them both naturals at this game.

Tony would be all right.

Chapter End Notes

Thoughtlessness can have undesirable consequences. It's important to apologize for being thoughtless, and also to forgive other people.

Privacy in a shared home requires a delicate balance. Family members need to develop respect for each other as an important social skill. There are tips for parents on respecting children's privacy and games for practicing privacy.

Imposter syndrome entails feeling like a fraud, even if you have relevant credentials and skills. There are strategies for overcoming it. Usually this affects highly skilled people in respected careers. Tony has complete confidence in his technical skills -- but he feels like a fake on a personal level. It doesn't help that he actually does fake a great deal of his interpersonal relations. What he hasn't figured out is there is no such thing as normal. Going through major changes can shake anyone's grip on "normal." But really, even people who seem normal have problems that other folks just aren't aware of.

Learning a new skill is easier said than done. Go through the basic steps carefully.

Setting priorities relies on understanding your core values. There are tips and
organizational methods for prioritizing activities. If you look in canon, you can see that Tony sucks at all this. He flits from one project to another, leaving many unfinished; he rarely does what Pepper tells him is crucial; and he doesn't usually care if things don't get done. Getting Stark Industries out of weaponmaking may have been the first major decision he made about his priorities.

Pulling your own weight is a vital part of teamwork and family life. Dividing up chores and teaching children to help is a good idea. The Avengers don't have a formal schedule in this regard because their workflow is too erratic, but they do shift who does what, and everybody pitches in, because most of them dislike relying too much on outsiders for domestic services.

Mistakes really do lead to discoveries. You just know Tony's workshop is full of examples. Good leaders and good parents allow opportunities to make safe mistakes. Understand how to learn from mistakes.

Monkey Island: A Madcap Crew is an imaginary later installment in the game Monkey Island., which was recommended in a thread about nonviolent video games. There are few nonviolent games, few cooperative games, and almost none which are both. So I extrapolated a bit.
Chapter Summary

The Avengers miss out on game night thanks to giant purple gorillas attacking New York. Natasha comes home with a twisted ankle. Bucky takes care of her -- which to everyone's amazement, she actually permits. Clint proposes a movie night, and Bruce makes popcorn.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The Avengers missed their next game night. They spent Saturday morning and afternoon fighting giant purple primates that some mad scientist released in the concrete jungle of New York. They spent Saturday evening at SHIELD debriefing. Since nobody sustained serious injury, they took the time to report in full detail. Director Fury was fortunate that they had responded at all, the way he'd been treating them; but the Avengers would never stand idly by while anyone trashed their city.

Phil felt intensely grateful for Betty, who stayed at Bucky's side in the tower keeping him anchored in the here-and-now. Her calming influence helped him remain stable even without Steve and Natasha to serve as his living memory. There were so many challenges, so many things needing to be covered -- but the team finally had people to take care of everything.

Everyone came home sore and grouchy, except for Bruce. He was still a bit stiff from the transformation, but with a cheerful air left over from Hulk's delight at fighting enemies whose preferred locomotion -- brachiating, scrambling, and bounding -- so closely matched his own. Their exuberance had mangled part of the High Line, a park made from an old elevated train track. Phil regretted the damage but silently approved Bruce finding even the slightest joy in Hulk's activity.

Tony complained about the battered state of his armor, as the enemy had repeatedly jumped on him in midair and knocked him into buildings. Clint was covered in scrapes and bruises from the apes tackling him on rooftops. One livid welt underscored his right cheekbone. Steve, tired from chasing after enemies whose motion did not match his at all, carried Natasha home. The rolled cuff of her pants left her right ankle bare except for the sport bandage on it.

"You guys don't look too good. Come and sit down," Betty said.

"It's not broken, it's just not working. I twisted my ankle when a couple of the grape apes jumped on my shoulders," Natasha said. Clint had called them that once, and the name stuck.

Bucky stepped up to Steve and said, "You're tired. Give her to me." He slipped his left arm under Natasha's shoulders and his right under her knees. Steve leaned forward a bit, Bucky tilted back, and when they separated Natasha rested securely in Bucky's arms.

"It's like a dance," Phil thought, realizing that they must have perfected this exchange in the war when dealing with injured teammates. Oh! Muscle memory! We should explore that and see if it holds better than autobiographical memory. He hoped that Bucky's attention wouldn't annoy Natasha, because injury always made her touchy. She had spent too much time in places where any weakness brought punishment or attack. That made it hard for her to accept genuine care now.
"Where are you going?" Bucky asked Natasha.

"I'm going to bed," she replied. Without another word, he carried her away.

Clint stared after him. "Did she just ... not argue with him?"

"Evidently so," Phil said. He strove to figure out how it had worked, and why, and whether they could ever replicate the effect.

"There was nothing for her to argue about," Betty observed. "Bucky didn't ask what she wanted or needed, or what he should do. He asked where she was going. He explicitly put her in control and presented himself as, hm, her substitute mobility. If she's anything like the soldiers I've known, it's the limitation that makes her irritable, not necessarily the injury itself. Find a way to relieve that and she should feel a lot more comfortable, thus less prickly."

"Wow," Clint said. "I could not do that. She tends to snipe at me."

"That's because you tease her," Phil said. Then he realized something else. "In fact, I think it's because you call attention to it when she's not at her best." Bucky's approach was so self-effacing that it avoided the problem. Phil wondered how Natasha felt about that. It was hard to tell because she showed so little outwardly.

Phil pulled out his Starkphone and quietly noted the new discoveries. He didn't want that kind of thing announced out loud, but silent reminders could prove helpful. With deft strokes Phil paged through Natasha's mood trackers. He compared the ones he kept with what she reported herself. Natasha tended toward neutral almost all the time, except for sharp swings of aggression and alarm when ill or injured. As Phil had thought, this was indeed the first recorded time when that hadn't happened. *I hope we can replicate this*, he mused.

"I'll just exercise the better part of valor and stay out of her hair until she falls asleep. I've had enough of grape apes and arguments and whining for one day. I'm exhausted," Clint said. "Movie night?"

"Sounds great," Bruce said. He was sitting down, but his left foot flicked back and forth like the tip of a tiger's tail. "King Kong?"

Clint shoved him. "Ugh, no, why won't you wind down? You should be half-asleep like usual and instead you're acting like you've had too much sugar. Well, okay, you did eat half a box of donuts and a liter bottle of Coke on the way home ..."

"Sorry, just, the Other Guy had fun today. I'm sorry it sucked for everyone else. This is weird for me -- usually all I get from him is anger, and having his warm-fuzzies spilling all over me is very disconcerting," Bruce said. His hands patted the air in a conciliatory gesture. "Look, if it's bugging you, let me make it up to you somehow. I could fix popcorn?"

"Ooo! With the white cheddar!" Tony said.

"You can kiss up to me with something spicy," Clint said.

"Going," Bruce said. He headed for the popcorn machine in the kitchen. With so many people -- some of them with enhanced appetites -- watching movies regularly, Tony had sprung for a theatrical appliance. It had its own rack of flavored butters, cheese powders, and other condiments along with cardboard buckets to hold the popcorn. You could even leave it going during the movie and go back for refills after everyone inevitably finished the first batch.

"Can we watch *King Kong* another night, though?" Steve asked wistfully as they settled into the
common room. "I'm not in the mood for it now, but ... I saw the original when it first came out. It was amazing. Some people screamed and ran out of the theater!"

"Yeah, stick with that and not the Jackson monstrosity," Tony advised.

"You rarely like anyone's special effects, Tony," said Phil. "Cut the man some slack. Not everyone can be a technogenius."

"It's not Peter Jackson's special effects that I resent -- Andy Serkis played a brilliant King Kong under the CGI -- it's his complete lack of anything approaching editing skill," Tony said. "Rhodey talked me into seeing the new Kong movie with him. It ran over three hours and my butt nearly became one with the theater seat."

"Huh, I would've thought you'd like all the engine scenes," Clint said.

"The first one, yes. The repetition, no, snip-snip already," Tony said.

Chapter End Notes

Knowing what anchors you in life helps maintain emotional stability. There are ways to keep yourself and others calm under stress.

The High Line Park is an attraction in New York City.

"It's not broken, it's just not working." -- This is a Russian joke based on their language's grammatical structure, in which it's possible to indicate whether a verb applies permanently or not; and on their economy, in which things are often out of order. Not working means it isn't operational at the moment but could be someday; broken means it's never going to work again.

The Great Grape Ape Show was a cartoon show about a giant purple gorilla.

Muscle memory sometimes survives amnesia better than other memory types, because each type is stored differently.

A mood tracker records information about feelings over time, and there are different kinds. This one simply tracks high, middle, and low mood and this one details more specific effects. Natasha needs something like this because she's usually stuck in neutral, and when she's not, sudden bursts of high violence can also cause problems. Over time she is developing a wider range of emotions, so it helps to look at a funnel chart. Feeling words may also help, although Natasha doesn't recognize very many emotions. There are daily picture charts and block charts for mapping specific emotions experienced and what caused them. Understanding emotions can help manage them. Natasha is still at the stage of trying to figure out what emotions are and how to keep on not killing people.

Intrusive ideation is a problem when certain thoughts or feelings make it impossible to concentrate on anything else. Usually this happens with negative concepts. Bruce has learned how to cope with Hulk's pervasive anger. This instance of intrusive ideation is positive rather than negative, but it's still driving Bruce a little nuts.

The original King Kong dates from 1933 and the Jackson version from 2005. Andy
Serkis played King Kong in the later movie.

Bruce's offer to make popcorn is an example of his fawn response. He responds to even mild disapproval with submissive, ingratiating behavior. Many abused children develop a driving need to be of use, in hopes of getting hurt less. Tony's compulsive inventing is a differently flavored version of the same impulse.

The Avengers' popcorn machine looks something like this. Flavored butters are tasty with popcorn: think of things like garlic powder, gourmet pepper, chili powder, curry powder, etc.
Love You Too, Science Bro

Chapter Summary

The Avengers choose a movie to share in place of their lost game night. Bruce and Tony are great big fanboys (to nobody's surprise).

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"All right, that's enough bickering," Phil said. "Let's pick something with a similar mood to the original King Kong for Bruce and Steve to enjoy, minus the giant ape motif."

"How about watching Werewolf of London?" Steve said.

"Negative portrayal of shapeshifting might not be optimum," Phil murmured.

"Sorry. Scratch that suggestion," Steve said.

"What do you think of Gojira?" Tony asked. "I've got the original Japanese version and JARVIS can do subtitles. It's a couple decades later than Kong but the flavor's really close."

"Radioactive breath --" Phil began.

"No, it's great, Bruce loves everything Godzilla, always has," said Betty. "We've only seen the TransWorld version of the old black-and-white movie, though, and the modern stuff. Put it on, put it on!"

JARVIS turned the movie on as soon as Bruce came in with the popcorn and a cooler full of assorted beverages. "Is that, is that -- it's the original in Japanese? Toneeee!" Bruce's voice scaled up almost to a squeal. Phil couldn't help grinning at the fanboy glee.

"Love you too, science bro," Tony said.

Bruce plunked onto the couch beside Tony and said, "Here, I made white cheddar, Hungarian hot paprika, and plain popcorn. Drinks are in the cooler."

"Hey, don't let Tony hog all the snacks, pass them around," Clint said.

Bruce scrambled over to hand him the paprika popcorn. "Have this one, you like it and Tony doesn't."

"If you're gonna keep bouncing like that, get off the couch," Clint said, pushing Bruce with his foot.

"Play nice, children," Phil said.

"Sorry, Uncle Phil," Clint said automatically. This wasn't game night -- it was in fact the earliest sliver of Sunday -- but it was close enough and they'd all gotten into the habit of minding him. It made life easier for everyone.

"Come over here and sit with me, Bruce," said Betty. She patted the loveseat beside her. "I don't
mind you bouncing." Bruce hastened to join her. He cuddled into the soft cradle of her embrace. Betty gave him a soothing pat on the chest. Then she dipped into the bucket of plain popcorn he brought.

Phil settled next to Clint on the couch. He cupped a hand over his Starkphone to hide the light and discreetly requested the security feed from Natasha's room. It wasn't blocked, but it did pop up a note that said, *We're both fine.* Natasha had known that Phil would check on her and Bucky.

The next file that opened was Natasha's mood tracker; she had evidently entered her reports for the day. Her overall mood, as usual, fell in the neutral range. Yet the list of individual feelings ran longer than average, most of them at low to moderate levels. Excitement, frustration, and satisfaction came from the battle with sore and tired following after it. She felt disappointed at missing game night. Natasha had such a hard time identifying what she felt that this list alone showed improvement. What really caught Phil's attention was the sole emotion to rise into the bottom of the high range: relief, tagged to Bucky carrying her to bed.

Why relief? Phil wondered. He couldn't simply ask her; one of Natasha's demands in exchange for reporting her emotions at all was that nobody nag her about how she felt, or didn't feel. *Maybe Betty was right, and Natasha appreciates the compensation for her injury.* Phil suspected, though, that something much deeper and subtler was going on between Natasha and Bucky which would take longer to emerge.

*Ah well, the important thing is that she felt something strongly positive and recorded it,* Phil decided. With that, he closed the mood tracker file, and the security feed came up.

The image showed Natasha and Bucky on the king-size bed that she usually shared with her brother Clint, watching the ballet *Swan Lake.* It was particularly touching because, while Phil knew about Natasha's secret love of ballet, he also knew that she rarely let it out. She had used it on missions a few times when nothing else would serve. She watched ballets or played the music only in private. Phil smiled and turned off his phone. They would be all right for the night.

Phil looked around the darkened room. Weary heroes sprawled on the furniture, gradually winding down toward rest. Even Bruce had stopped bouncing so much. Clint snuggled into Phil's side and offered him the popcorn. This wasn't game night, but it helped.

Phil took a handful of popcorn and turned his attention to the movie. The original dialog added an edge of authenticity to the old classic. JARVIS provided English subtitles for the viewers not fully fluent in Japanese.

Steve was clearly riveted. He startled and grinned at the special effects. Halfway through the show, Steve reached for some popcorn only to find the bucket empty. "Aww, it's all gone," he said.

"I'll get more," said Bruce. As he stood up, JARVIS paused the movie. "The machine should have refilled by now. It's your turn to pick a flavor, Steve, what would you like?"

"Apple cinnamon?" Steve said hopefully. "If it's not too much trouble?"

"What, to crumble in a handful of apple chips with the cinnamon topping? No trouble at all. You worked hard today, so you deserve a treat," Bruce said. "Phil, what about you?"

"Barbecue, please," said Phil. He liked the combination of spicy, smoky, and sweet flavors.

Bruce padded into the kitchen, where he puttered and clattered around for a few minutes. He returned with buckets of fresh popcorn. Bruce nearly dropped one handing it to Steve. Fortunately
Steve's reflexes caught the bucket before it could spill.

"Are you all right?" Phil asked quietly as he accepted the barbecue popcorn from Bruce.

"Not ... entirely," Bruce said. "Sorry, Phil, I guess I'm a little distracted." He rubbed his left hand over right, paused, then did the same thing in reverse. "It's just, the Other Guy keeps raining emotions on me. It's making me all bubbly and weird. I don't know how to cope with what I'm getting from him right now."

"Well, you say that you deal with his anger by keeping it at a low simmer all the time," Phil said. "You might try that."

"With happiness?" Bruce said. "How am I supposed to do that?"

"Yes, Bruce, with happiness," Phil said. It hurt that Bruce found the idea of maintaining a base level of positive emotion so inconceivable. "Now go cuddle up with Betty and give it a try." He shooed Bruce back toward the loveseat.

The movie resumed. The barbecue popcorn tasted delicious. Phil glanced over at Bruce from time to time, but he seemed to be relaxing more. Betty stroked her fingers through the rumple of dark hair. Bruce sighed and wriggled into a more comfortable position that gave her better access.

_You'll learn how to maintain happiness, Phil thought fondly. I have faith in you._

Chapter End Notes

_Werewolf of London_ is a classic movie.

_Godzilla_ is a famous monster with radioactive breath, originally introduced in the _1954_ movie.

_Swan Lake_ is a beautiful ballet. According to various Marvel canons, _Natasha Romanova_ studied ballet and became a skilled dancer.

You can buy flavored popcorn and toppings, or make your own. There are recipes for _cinnamon, barbecue_, and many _other flavors_.

Apple chips are a crunchy snack resembling potato chips, but they are more often baked than fried. Again, you can _buy these_ or _make your own_.

_Maintaining happiness_ is an _act of deliberation_. Happiness _comes from within_. There are ways to _find happiness_ and _keep it from fading_. You can also find _text_ and _video_ meditations on happiness.

The _Hedonic Set Point_ is a level of emotion that a person gravitates toward. Even major positive or negative events typically produce only a temporary change. Steve and Natasha are conspicuously stable, although their levels are different. However, _the baseline can shift_, sometimes on purpose, other times by circumstance. Bruce has adapted to _living with anger_, both in terms of himself and _sharing his life_ with Hulk, maintaining a baseline of anger. Changing the baseline takes a lot of work. It helps to _measure baseline happiness_ to see where you're starting, and later, if you're making progress.
Tony Stark: Yes

Chapter Summary

Sunday morning in the kitchen is a cascade of minor disasters and interpersonal entanglements.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On Sunday morning, Steve broke the coffee machine. Fortunately for everyone's sanity, he knew how to make coffee in a regular pot. Tony brought up a crate of new shatterproof glassware. He put it into the kitchen cabinets. Steve packed away the old glassware for donation.

Natasha arrived, walking under her own power if a bit carefully. She explained that Clint was still upstairs introducing Bucky to some of the fancier functions of the shower. She started dicing vegetables in hope of omelettes for breakfast. Phil headed to the refrigerator for eggs.

Then Tony blew up the coffee machine while trying to repair it. Phil sighed and used the CO2 fire extinguisher to put out the flames. He patched up minor injuries for Tony and Natasha. JARVIS turned up the fans in the air vents.

Bruce and Betty came into the kitchen, waving aside the last wisps of smoke. "Glad I missed all the excitement," Bruce said. He set about making the omelettes. His hands were deft and quick, never dropping a bit of eggshell into the pan.

Natasha borrowed Phil's pen to write Tony Stark: Yes on Tony's palm. It was a visible apology for how her initial assessment had spiked his conviction that nobody wanted him for himself, just what they could get out of him.

"Heard about my little meltdown from Clint, huh?" Tony said. He did not meet her eyes. Phil wondered if that had contributed to the kitchen explosion. Tony worked more intensely under pressure, which raised the accident rate along with the success rate.

"That one was partly my fault, so yes," Natasha said. "I misjudged you badly, Tony. I made the same mistake as Ten Rings: looking more at what you make than at who you are. There aren't many people who can fool a master spy; you're one of them."

"Survival skill," Tony said, his mouth moving in what looked like but was not a smile. "People can't guard against what they can't see."

"Well, at least now you know we're on the same side regarding your survival," Natasha said. "I'll keep repeating that until it sinks in."

"Would you like to help me with sit-down tasks today?" Phil asked her. "I could use a hand with the paperwork, in the interest of the city not clamoring for our heads after yesterday's irregularly scheduled property damage."

"Sure," she said. "Meet you in your office." She snagged a freshly finished omelette and walked out. Not in the mood for socializing, then.
"You know, Natasha is really protective of people she cares about," Steve said to Tony. "She just doesn't show it the same as most women do."

"If she hears you calling her a mother hen, she's more likely to kill you than kiss you," Bruce warned.

"I wouldn't say mother hen," Steve said. "I was thinking of those lady velociraptors in the movie who tore apart a bunch of guys to get their eggs back."

Tony chuckled. "I can see that," he said, "clearly." He rubbed his fingers over the fresh blue ink on his hand.

Clint and Bucky showed up then, both still damp from the shower. Bucky was moving slower today. He picked up an omelette without paying much attention to it. Steve gave him a worried look.

"I see it too," Bruce murmured to Phil as he sat down with his own breakfast. "I'll try talking to Bucky again tonight. He hasn't been enthusiastic about the previous options for getting to sleep. Maybe I can convince him to follow me in thinking outside the box."

"Hey, Tony," said Bucky. "I'm sorry for teasing you about setting the table the other day. That was mean and I shouldn't have said it. I'll work on acting like less of a jerk."

Tony gave him a too-bright smile. "No problem," he said. "It's not like my mouth has brakes either. So just forget about it. Really."

"Well ... I was going ask about the special glasses," Bucky said, looking aside. "I don't want to take them away from Steve and Bruce, but I could use a set of my own. I kind of tend to break things."

His metal fingers clenched.

"Can you feel the difference when you're squeezing too hard?" Tony asked. He picked up Bucky's left hand and prodded the fingers gently.

"Sometimes. It depends on what I'm holding, how the shape of it touches my hand," Bucky said. "If I get upset or distracted though, it doesn't matter."

"Huh. Wonder if there's a short or something," Tony muttered. He let go of Bucky. "As for your glassware, I brought up some new stuff already. It's in the cabinets."

"Thanks, Tony," said Bucky.

Tony waved him off and went back to poking at the remains of the coffee machine. Phil pried him away from that, not wanting to see another fire started. Bruce chuckled at the brief tussle. Then Tony retreated to his lab with a smoothie and promises to produce a new coffee machine. Bucky claimed some breakfast for himself, but it didn't seem to give him much energy.

"Steve, why don't you take Bucky to the gym today and see how his muscle memory holds up?" Phil said. "Based on what we've seen so far, I think that's in much better shape than his memory of events. Maybe try a little hand-to-hand sparring." It was taking advantage of the situation a bit, but the exercise might help Bucky wear out enough to get some sleep.

"That's a good idea," Betty said with a nod. "Amnesia often affects personal memories while leaving some other types intact."

"His aim still works," Clint said. "He did fine on the shooting range, even learned the new guns pretty fast."
"They needed my physical skills in working order. They wanted me for my body, so they couldn't mess with it too much," Bucky said softly. "They just ... didn't want me in it."

"You're a good man. They wanted a mindless assassin. Stands to reason they'd have to get you out of the way, for that," Steve said. "You must have fought them so much that the only way they could control you was to erase your memory and replace it with something else."

"I hadn't really thought about it like that," Bucky said.

"Excuse me," Bruce said faintly and scurried out of the room. Betty hastened to follow him. Phil trusted Betty to take care of Bruce -- this touched on an old fear of his -- allowing Phil to keep watch over Bucky's evolving situation.

Chapter End Notes

Omelettes make a nutritious and versatile breakfast, easy to customize for different people's tastes.

Fire extinguishers come in several types. The CO2 version that Phil uses is good for electrical fires and leaves no residue. The tower has a plentiful supply of fire extinguishers, usually stocked in sets in the main rooms and labs.

Deceit can be a defense mechanism. Parents influence how their children perceive truth and falsehood. Intelligence, domineering parents, and harsh discipline all contribute to lying. Adult survivors of child abuse often rely on deceit as a routine survival skill. Consider how badly people respond in canon when Tony tells the truth, and you can see why he hesitates to do so.

Repetition helps secure a message in the mind. It's especially useful to change negative thoughts to positive ones, or to help negative people gain a positive outlook.

Velociraptors are dinosaurs appearing in all three Jurassic Park movies. The egg plot appears in Jurassic Park III. You can see how Steve is beginning to acclimate to modern life by using cultural references in conversation.

Sleep deprivation can have short-term and long-term impact on functionality and health. Bucky's symptoms gradually get worse the longer he stays awake.

Physical activity can help overcome insomnia, especially aerobic exercise.

Forced dissociation is a fundamental part of mind control. Psychological trauma can lead to dissociative disorders. Notice how Bucky displays all five of the core symptoms of dissociation: amnesia, derealization, depersonalization, identity confusion, and identity alteration. The history of mind control spans many attempts, with varying methods and success, to knap and influence thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors. A sophisticated, deliberate effort such as applied to Bucky and Natasha can produce deeper and more precise results than ordinary child abuse like Bruce suffered.
I Could Have Stopped Them

Chapter Summary

Phil, Clint, and Steve talk to Bucky about being captured and assure him that it wasn't his fault. Then Phil and Natasha start on the paperwork from the most recent battle.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Steve's got a point, though," Clint said to Bucky. "Don't blame yourself too much for things that happened when you weren't yourself. It may take a while to get your head back the way you want it, but it's worth the work." Bucky looked at him curiously. Clint didn't elaborate further. He rarely spoke about what Loki's staff did to him; even mentioning this much was a significant step forward for Bucky's sake.

"It's still my fault, though. I let them take me in the first place, got myself captured by HYDRA and then by Department X," Bucky said. "If I'd just been stronger, faster ... better ... then I could have stopped them."

"No, Bucky," said Phil. He'd heard the same from almost every asset who'd ever fallen into enemy hands. Bucky was just starting to come back to himself enough to identify these feelings, and moving slowly enough that Phil could challenge the worst ideas before they set like concrete. "It's natural to feel that way, but it's not accurate. None of that was your fault. Someone else made the purely evil decision to take advantage of you while you were unconscious. There was nothing you could do to stop them from doing that."

"What happened, that's on them, not on you," Clint said. "If you keep blaming yourself, you'll go crazy for real. You need to let the bad guys be the bad guys."

Phil was gratified to hear that this idea had sunk in enough for Clint to repeat it to someone else. Maybe that will help him believe it himself, Phil thought.

"There's no shame in being outnumbered and outmatched," Steve said. "You told me that often enough. Took me a while to figure out, but you were right."

"That's different," Bucky said. "I'm ashamed of myself because I'm a fully trained soldier, and look what happened to me anyhow. I should have fought harder. I should have escaped."

"You did fight hard," Phil pointed out. "That must be why they went to such lengths to control you, because nothing less worked. That's all in the past, though. You're free now. Work on letting it go. What matters is that you're safe here, and you can move forward."

"I'm trying to believe that things will get better, but ... it's hard," Bucky said. "I keep feeling like the guys in white coats are going to come drag me away from here and shove me back in the cryochamber." He rubbed a hand over his face.

"That is not going to happen," Steve declared, jaw clenched. "Nobody will get past the Avengers to you, Bucky, and if they try then we will end them. We won't let anyone hurt you again." He pulled
Bucky into a hug.

"Yeah, I've been there, done that," Clint said. "First time somebody tried to steal Black Widow from SHIELD, I shot them dead. Second time, I shot them down and let her play with them. So nobody's tried that in a while. They come for you, Bucky, they'll regret it. Briefly."

"Thanks," Bucky said. "It's good to know that somebody's got my back. Been a while since I've had that, guess I'm not used to it anymore. I can't seem to stand down all the way -- I start to relax and then something winds me up again."

"You survived a lot. Of course you feel wary now," Phil said. "That will change as you get used to living in friendly territory again. You'll remember how to relax. We'll all help."

"It's going to be okay," Steve said. "If you can't believe that yet, it's fine, I'll believe it for you. I know you'll catch up eventually. Around here we've gotten pretty good at helping each other feel safe."

"Okay," Bucky said. He clung to Steve for a moment longer before letting go.

Phil watched Bucky eat breakfast, silently wondering about the way he shifted from cheerful to morose, or from one issue to another. It might be an effect of the mood distortion, he mused. It might also connect with the memory impairment, isolated concepts appearing out of a haze like trees suddenly coming clear in a foggy forest, each one overwhelming without a wider context. Then again, it could simply be that the effort to revive Bucky's positive memories digs up the bad ones as well, never letting anything settle out of his awareness. If they could just figure out what was going on inside Bucky's head, they could do a better job of helping him cope with it.

Eventually Steve took Bucky down to the gym as suggested. Phil put his plate in the sink and went to meet Natasha. They spent the morning doing paperwork. Heartlessly Phil put Natasha on denying the claims from businesses that were nowhere near the damaged areas -- they always got some of those. He focused on the more intricate SHIELD forms and resisted the temptation to write grape apes instead of mutated mega-simians with violet pelts. Phil also sent a firm refusal to the Central Park Zoo's request for a live specimen. The last thing they needed was for people to "form a connection to wildlife" of the unnatural sort.

Phil poked around his Bucky files again. The latest reports from SHIELD confirmed that the brainwashing had relied on chemical anchors -- had to, because of the amnesia. It was a cunning trick of state-dependent memory. Some of the memory loss had the same source, while some was attributed to an unknown cause. The sleep disturbances most likely came from the cryonic suspension, but could connect with any of the other factors too.

Phil fingered the energy map of the tower. The red light had changed to amber because Bucky's auxiliary power source was listed but not fully identified. Phil's attempt to access Tony's plans for a new prosthesis brought up a note that said A watched pot never boils -- which made Phil laugh -- plus delicate blueprints of a shoulder and part of a hand. The security feed from the lab showed Tony working on the skin glove to cover the bare metal of Bucky's current arm.

That reminded Phil that he needed to alert SHIELD about the potential hazards of Phase II weaponry. There wasn't much of it left, but perhaps enough to cause trouble. Phil did not know exactly what the range or results might be, just that the answers were probably unpleasant. He sent a note to R&D warning them to check the energy for negative psychotropic effects. He also suggested that they investigate better insulation materials. Though honestly, the Tesseract had laughed at whatever shielding they tried to wrap around it. Phil just did what he could by passing along the ideas, and left the rest to people better skilled in such areas.
Trauma often leads to self-blame. Self-blame comes in two types, characterological and behavioral. It's important to distinguish between blame and responsibility. Bucky's self-blame closely resembles that of a rape survivor. Evil guys brainwashing and torturing a fallen soldier is a lot like evil guys raping the drunk girl who passes out on a couch. It's about responding to vulnerability with an attack instead of assistance. So the damage from the violation is similar.

Shame is another common effect of trauma, part of a whole nest of complex negative feelings. This can be difficult to understand. There are ways to change shame-based thinking.

Powerlessness is a major part of the trauma experience. Survivors need to work through this in order to develop a post-trauma personality. They need to replace powerlessness with empowerment. This can be more challenging for male survivors of trauma due to conflicts between the experience of violation and the social image of manhood as powerful. Bucky feels especially overwhelmed and threatened by this, because he has always viewed himself as the strong one, the protector, the provider. It's hard for him to be vulnerable -- especially now, when he's too broken to be independent and is fresh from the violation.

Survivors often need to forgive themselves as part of the healing process. There are steps to stop blaming yourself, to overcome shame, and to forgive yourself.

Trauma care is a complex topic focused on helping the survivor feel safe and explore their feelings. Friends and family can support this process and make life easier for the survivor. There are tips for creating a sense of safety.

Relaxation aids recovery by lowering stress. There are text and audio guided meditations for relaxing.

The Central Park Zoo is an attraction in New York City.

State-dependent memory can be keyed to drugs. This influences what can be remembered when, and what is erased or never recorded. Studies have explored the effects of marijuana, caffeine, and alcohol on memory.
Bucky notices the band-aids that Natasha and Tony are wearing after the morning's mishaps in the kitchen.

Natasha pulled Phil away from the desk at lunch time. Someone had ordered pizza, the table laden with a leaning tower of boxes. Steve had a large one all to himself, topped with ... evidently everything on the menu, because the crust held such a jumble of food that he had to eat it with a fork. Bucky's plate held one small slice from each pizza.

"He couldn't remember his favorite flavor, so I told him to sample around, because it might have changed," Bruce said. Phil was pleased to see the pineapple-ham on his plate, because Bruce liked salty things while Hulk had a sweet tooth, and that was a brilliant compromise that Bruce had refused at least three times previously.

"Yeah, everything tastes different now," Bucky said. Steve nodded, and Bruce, and Natasha, and then all of the changed ones were looking at each other, startled by the kinship, so used to thinking of themselves as different that they forgot what they had in common. Even Tony touched his chest, where the arc reactor gave everything a hint of coconut. "Pepperoni's good, I think." Bucky munched steadily at the piece of pizza he held.

"Chicken Kiev," Natasha said, flourishing her slice.

Bucky suddenly stared at her hand. "Why are you wearing bandages with funnies on them?"

"They're mine," Tony said instantly. He showed Bucky his own hands, the flourish as skilled and graceful as a magician's. "Steve broke the coffee machine this morning --"

"I'm really sorry about that," Steve said, hanging his head.

"-- which is no big deal, stop looking like a kicked puppy, Steve. Anyway there was a teeny explosion while I was trying to fix it, and I wound up with some blisters and Natasha was slicing vegetables and nicked herself with the knife, so yeah, a few band-aids were in order," Tony said.

Phil felt grateful for Tony's covering patter, though perhaps it would have been prudent to use plain band-aids in this case. If they even had any left in the tower by this point.

"With ... pink ballerinas?" Bucky said dubiously. He leaned forward to examine Tony's hands.

"She's not a ballerina, Bucky, this is Princess Aurora and she comes in two colors," Tony said. He flicked his hands again, keeping Bucky's attention on him and away from Natasha, who had gone still and quiet.

"Make it pink!" Clint said.
"Make it blue!" Steve shot back, and they both cracked up laughing.

Bucky shrank in on himself like a hermit crab withdrawing into its shell. Phil opened his mouth to provide an explanation, but Steve beat him to it.

"Those are lines from the movie Sleeping Beauty, I am so sorry Bucky, I should have known better than to make a reference you wouldn't get," Steve said. "I never wanted to do that to anyone, I hate when it happens to me. I guess ... I hadn't realized how far I've come. People have been catching me up on stuff for a while now, and I just ... I'm sorry."

"Not your fault," Bucky said, shaking himself out of the fugue. "I know I missed a lot."

"Well, you don't have to go on missing it," Tony said. "I've got the movie if you want to watch it some time."

"You'd probably like it," Steve said. "It's kind of like Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs ... only this time you wouldn't have to spend all day picking coins out of the gutter to see it."

Bucky laughed. "Ah, you were worth it, runt. You know I'd do anything to see you smile." Just like that, Steve smiled for him, brilliant as a sunbeam.

It made Phil happy to see the two brothers rebuilding their relationship, compensating for the challenges. He knew that Steve would take as much care in helping Bucky catch up as the rest of the team had done for Steve. We'll get Bucky back on his feet again, whatever it takes, Phil thought.

"Shall we move this into the common room, then?" Phil suggested aloud. "Pizza's portable; we can watch Sleeping Beauty over lunch." It would give him more of a chance to gauge Bucky's response to the kind of things that went along with game night. They'd missed the last one but the matter would come up again in just a week.

Bucky agreed, so they all carried their pizza into the other room and started the movie. Steve and Natasha wrapped themselves around him on the couch. Phil watched Bucky carefully. He seemed to laugh in the right places, and he liked the songs. He didn't mind that the movie was a cartoon. Though to be fair, the idea of cartoons as kid stuff had come after Bucky's time. Adults had still watched them during the war; Phil and Tony both collected propaganda cartoons from that era, particularly Private SNAFU which they really should share with the team some time.

The scenes with Aurora's enchanted sleep brought out a more somber mood for Bucky. The spinning wheel sequence left him nervously rubbing his metal fingers together. He sat quietly as the three good fairies tucked Princess Aurora into bed and cast a spell of sleep over the entire kingdom. Only when Prince Phillip roused her from slumber did Bucky stir again, rubbing his hands one over the other.

At the end of the movie, Steve turned to him and said, "Are you okay, Bucky? You look kind of down. Sorry, maybe watching this wasn't the greatest idea after all ..."

"Yeah," Bucky said, then cleared his throat and repeated on a firmer note, "Yeah, I'm okay. I liked the movie. I just think it's kind of ironic that I'm the one who wound up trapped helplessly in a cursed sleep, rescued by the beautiful princess, even if it didn't involve true love's kiss."

Phil recalled the fond platonic kiss that Natasha had pressed to Bucky's forehead while he was unconscious. Oh, I think that counts, he decided, but he said nothing because apparently she had not mentioned it to Bucky -- or if she had, he didn't remember it at the moment.
People’s perception of taste can change due to age, medical treatment, or other reasons. Individuals may acquire, or lose, a fondness for specific foods as well.

Pineapple and ham is one version of Hawaiian pizza. The contrast between sweet and salty flavors is a major appeal.

Food preferences can develop very early, starting in infancy or even before birth. Both salt and sugar preferences can be affected by what the mother eats during pregnancy and what babies and toddlers are fed, although genetic factors also weigh in. I figure that the shared body responds favorably to both salt and sugar, but that Bruce and Hulk have developed different personal preferences. In particular, Hulk was more likely to be fronting during temper outbursts or fending off attacks, and adults will sometimes give candy to a small child to stop them crying. One of the reference articles also mentioned that sugars can dampen pain, which would appeal to Hulk given his intermittent hypersensitivity.

Chicken Kiev pizza is popular as a novelty flavor.

Princess Aurora appears in the movie Sleeping Beauty. The argument over her dress raises the interesting point of gender segregation of clothes, as girls are increasingly dressed in pink. The same happens in toys; it’s not good for children, and not something Uncle Phil supports in shopping for his "kids."

Distraction is a fundamental technique in stage magic. Tony is a consummate showman, as displayed in movie canon. He has high dexterity, and he learns easily from a wide range of sources. I figured he would know some hand-to-hand manipulation of people and objects.

Cartoon history explains the rise of the age ghetto. It really used to be different, so there are some censored relics and awesome propaganda cartoons. Bear in mind times were different then, but I recommend watching this stuff with an eye to history, if you can find it.

Private SNAFU was among the most famous and beloved propaganda cartoons, and among the best didactic animation ever done. Some of my favorites are on YouTube: "Spies" and "Booby Traps." SNAFU is classic military slang.

Gentleman in Distress is a reverse of the usual Damsel in Distress trope. True Love’s Kiss is also bent here, because I like to treat tropes like pretzel dough. Bucky however is not used to this kind of thing and it is quietly throwing him for a loop. He gets points for not taking this out on Natasha and still being grateful that she helped rescue him.
Watch and Wait

Chapter Summary

Bucky starts showing signs of sleep deprivation. Phil and Steve worry about him. Director Fury's actions have consequences, as Phil discovers traces of Captain America's extreme displeasure.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"There are more kinds of love than just romance," Natasha said. "Brother and sister." She glanced at Clint, who smiled back at her, though Phil caught a shadow in Clint's face that made him wonder if everything was quite all right there. "Friends. Family. It took all of us to rescue you, Bucky."

"You used to say ... something different, didn't you? I don't remember what it was, though," Bucky said, frowning.

"I used to, but I've learned that there's more to the world than I thought at the time," Natasha said. "So I say different things now. 'Love is about making chances,' I like that one."

"I can live with that," Bucky said. That gave Phil a warm glow of satisfaction, until Bucky tried to get off the couch and stumbled. Steve caught him. Bucky shook the hands off and insisted that he was fine.

Bruce looked at his watch. Then he looked up at Phil and gave the tiniest shake of his head.

Phil sighed, but let it ride. Bucky wasn't in any real danger from exhaustion, not yet. It was just worrisome to watch. Phil allowed Bucky to slip out of the room as everyone else scattered.

It was vital for Phil to manage the team, but not micromanage it. The Avengers were all strong, independent people. The changes plucked and pulled at Phil, subtle things snagging his attention, as everyone adjusted to having a new person around and Bucky struggled to cope with his own challenges. Watch and wait, Phil reminded himself firmly.

There was more paperwork to be done, this time followup from the original mission in Russia. Their military was not the most adroit but someone with a brain had discovered more clues than convenient. It was Phil's job to make sure that evidence quietly disappeared. Fortunately most of that consisted of security tapes and other electronic material. With a little help from JARVIS and Tony, the files evaporated into the aether.

The physical evidence was circumstantial except for a shell casing from Black Widow's backup gun. Phil ferreted out who on the cleaner team most likely missed that in the haste to bug out before the military arrived. Then he sent the hapless agent to retrieve it. He'll learn not to do that again, Phil thought.

The paperwork would doubtless simplify if the Avengers ceased to work with SHIELD. On the other hand, that could complicate interactions with the military and the government. For all Fury's obstinace, he had limited General Ross' ability to harass Bruce-and-Hulk ... as long as they made
themselves useful to SHIELD.

If we resign, Tony can afford to support the team financially, but we may have difficulty with politics. I'll need to check his connections. Steve should prove helpful with the military, Phil mused. He believed in preparing for contingencies, and everyone was getting tired of Fury's tendency to hurt people.

At one point JARVIS interrupted to say, "Excuse me, Phil, but Bucky has started dropping things," complete with a video clip. Steve could go longer without sleep if he had to, but he was in better shape than Bucky to start with and those examples had involved long missions. Phil recognized the up-and-down cycle of Bucky's body starting to wear out and then refreshing itself, but there was a limit to how far that would carry him -- especially without the adrenaline boost from combat. It still hurt to watch.

Turning back to his paperwork, Phil noticed a thickening stream of information requests and complaints from the Veterans Administration regarding current and retired agents. How did they even find us? he wondered. SHIELD had a lot of overlap with the military, but the connections were pretty well buried. It shouldn't have been possible for the VA to get inside the personnel system and nag SHIELD about its handling of human resources.

Then Phil remembered Captain America's rant in Fury's office. Of course he would never divulge classified information in a way that might do real harm. However, he was entirely capable of finding people with the right military position and clearance to stir up a storm.

Oh, Director, you pushed the wrong button on your secret weapon, Phil thought with a chuckle. He wondered how long it would take for Steve Rogers to lay into the politicians who kept stripping veteran support. Then Phil filled out the paperwork, politely appending a file of violations the VA had missed along with contact information for the persons responsible.

Supper was quiet. Bucky sat next to Steve and only answered direct questions, clearly exhausted. Clint watched him with meticulous care. Steve fretted.

After supper they moved to the common room. Tony turned on one of the nature documentaries they liked for background sound, then settled into a chair with his Starkpad in his lap. Butterflies flitted across the viewscreen. Bruce patiently worked through his current page in Clint's old copy of The Klutz Book of Knots. From time to time, Clint reached over to help him with a tricky step.

Bucky leaned against Steve on the couch, nodding into that hazy not-quite-sleep and then jerking awake. Finally Steve said, "For Pete's sake, Bucky, please just go to bed already."

"Won't help," Bucky muttered. "Can't sleep."

"Yeah, I know how that goes," Tony said with a sympathetic wince.

"Then leave me the fuck alone!" Bucky snarled, his fists clenching.

Tony flinched away from the vicious show of temper. "You don't have to bite my head off," he said.

"Sorry, I'm sorry," Bucky said. He scrubbed his hands over his face. "I'm just so tired. I can't think and everything makes me angry and nothing helps."

"It happens," Tony said. "Sucks a lot. I won't hold it against you, though." A fleeting look of regret crossed Tony's face.

I wonder how many people have held it against him, Phil thought. Tony's erratic sleep habits posed
enough challenge even when not punctuated by nightmares, which had gotten worse since the Battle of New York. His temper, too, sometimes flared up. So of course Tony sympathized with Bucky.

Bruce caught Phil's eye and tapped his watch. *Time.*

**Chapter End Notes**

"**Love is about making chances!**" comes from the movie *The Sweetest Thing.*

**Micromanagement** is a serious problem in worklife, and can cause trouble at home too. There are tips on how to deal with a micromanaging boss and how to support employee autonomy.

The **Veterans Administration** is responsible for many services for retired military personnel. It is also notorious as a bureaucratic nightmare.

**The Klutz Book of Knots** is among the best guides to basic ropework. It consists of cardboard pages with instructions and holes for the two pieces of rope so you can practice tying knots. You can also read it online. Notice that Bruce has quietly latched onto Clint as an expert teacher in this field.

**Symptoms of exhaustion** include extreme drowsiness, slowed thought, clumsy action, and irritability. You can see Bucky's symptoms getting worse over time.
Trouble Sleeping

Chapter Summary

Bruce and Phil declare that it's time for Bucky to get some sleep. Bucky is still having problems due to his background. Bruce coaxes him into the kitchen to talk about it.

Chapter Notes

Not all the end notes fit, so I'm moving some here...

The safe limit for going without sleep is about three to four days. Some people can go a week, and the record is eleven days, but that's far beyond when people are really cognitive. Lab animals die of sleep deprivation around ten to fourteen days.

Flashbacks can be a dissociative symptom, in this case impairing Bucky's attempt at problem-solving for his insomnia. This is one way that PTSD interferes with relationships.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Bucky, we have a three-day limit on going without sleep, outside of emergencies. It's a house rule," Phil said. They'd actually set that one because of Tony, whose traumatic history and lack of circadian rhythm sometimes led to the kind of insomniac engineering that ended with laboratory fires. "You're into your fourth day awake. We've given you all the time we safely can and then a little extra. Work with me here. We need to find a way of getting you some sleep that won't break you."

"I know, I know," Bucky said. He shook his head as if trying to clear water from his ears. "I just can't. Every time I try to think about options, I keep flashing back on the damn cryochamber. And now you're all staring at me and that is not helping."

"Okay, that at least I can fix," Bruce said gently. He stood up and held out a hand. "Come on, let's sit in the kitchen for a while, just you and me. Maybe we can think of something else. I'm tired too. I have trouble sleeping some nights but the Other Guy isn't very fond of ordinary sleep aids, so I have to get more creative. Maybe one of the things I do for myself would work for you."

Bucky looked at him with bleary eyes and then took his hand. "Fine."

Bruce pulled Bucky effortlessly to his feet, saying, "Up you go."

"You're stronger than you look," Bucky said as they headed for the kitchen.

"Yeah, I get that a lot," Bruce replied. Phil noted that he kept a hand discreetly near Bucky in case of stumbles.

Steve slumped forward and buried his face in his hands. "I hate this," he said.

"So do I," Phil said, laying a hand on his shoulder. Steve leaned into the touch.
"We all do," Natasha said, "but if we pressure Bucky now, we might lose all chance of getting him into anything approaching normal sleep. He's got enough fodder for insomnia and nightmares without adding to that."

"I really hope Bruce can pull a rabbit out of his hat this time," Steve said.

"Trust him," Phil said. "He knows what he's doing. Now that Bucky's tired enough to listen instead of arguing, they should manage to figure something out."

"It's only been a few days, but I'm worn out too. I feel like I haven't slept in a week," Steve said.

"You can tap out if you need to, Steve. Would you like to go to bed? We'll look after Bucky," Phil offered, though honestly he felt the same way. It seemed like such a very long time. He had done things like this before, though, had experience that Steve didn't. Phil had lost assets to traumatic brain injury, and just once, gotten somebody partway past it. He'd sat up with Clint and Natasha through their first restless nights at SHIELD. Phil could cope.

Steve shook his head. "No, I need to see this through."

"All right, then," Phil said. Steve would learn about the importance of teamwork in taking care of someone; pushing him wouldn't help. Meanwhile Phil kept an eye on the door but did not access the security feed from the kitchen. Bucky needed a little privacy, and besides, JARVIS would sound an alert if anything bad happened. The minutes crawled by like five-legged ants.

"It's been an hour," Steve said eventually. "Could we at least ... check on them?"

"I'll come with you," Phil said, and led the way to the kitchen. What he saw made him stop still in the doorway, and Steve ran into him, knocking him over the threshold.

"Whoops, sorry ... what?" Steve stammered.

Bucky was asleep on the table, raspy snores spilling from his open mouth. Bruce sprawled over the other side of the table, one hand still curled around a thick tougher-than-ceramic coffee cup. He had his head pillowed on his arm, drooling on his sleeve. Between them, Natasha's antique silver samovar steamed gently alongside an empty jar of triple-citrus marmalade. The steam smelled of fresh-mown hay with a faint metallic note underneath.

Bruce roused at their approach. He blinked at them in slow motion. "Mission ... 'complished," he said with a lazy grin, tipping a thumb toward the slumbering soldier.

"What did you do to him?" Steve demanded as he pushed his way into the kitchen and hurried to Bucky's side.

"You hit him with the nightstick?" Natasha said in a scandalized tone, coming up behind Phil. Tony and Clint followed her, and then Betty.

"Night ... cap," Bruce enunciated meticulously. "Was just gonna make one cup each, but ... his appetite's bigger ... an' he wanted me to match' im."

Phil picked up the canister of loose-leaf tea labeled with Bruce's distinctive scrawl. The first several ingredients were in English -- chamomile, catnip, lemon balm, skullcap, passion flower, hops, lavender, licorice, cocoa, and valerian -- followed by a few more lines in Latin, Portuguese, and what looked like Hindi. A bright green teddy bear in a whimsical purple nightcap had been drawn on the label with markers.
"Bruce, do you realize that Bucky may never forgive you for this?" Phil asked.

"Nat did," Bruce mumbled. "Sides, told'im it's what I drink ... when I can't sleep. S'fair warning."

Phil stared at Natasha. It was hard to believe she ever touched the stuff. She hated chemical alterations to her body state even more than Clint did, with sadly valid reasons. Phil had seen her turn down painkillers with her shinbone poking through her skin, until the shabby village doctor wanted to bean her with a frying pan. If she couldn't sleep, she wore herself out training. What could possibly ... ? Phil wondered.

Natasha glared at him and crossed her arms over her chest. "That week," she said. "Toward the end I might have gotten ... rather desperate."

_The week they thought I was dead_, Phil realized. _Damn Fury, for putting her in that much pain._ He laid a gentle hand on Natasha’s shoulder. "It's perfectly understandable," he said aloud. "I'm glad Bruce was there for you."

Chapter End Notes

Steve and Phil are skirting early signs of caretaker burnout. There are ways of coping with this and taking care of yourself.

A samovar is an elegant kitchen tool for making hot beverages. Natasha's looks similar to this.

Russians like very strong tea which is cut with jam. You can tell that Natasha and Bruce have been sharing because he's picked up the habit from her, and she's given him permission to use her equipment because he's not the kind of person to do so otherwise. Triple-citrus marmalade is real; you can buy it or make your own.

The Nightstick tea blend is somewhat inspired by other insomnia teas, along with other herbal resources. A heavy version is Nighttime Knockout. A milder version is Sleepytime. What Bruce assembled is nothing like a one-trick pony, but rather a complex web of direct sedatives and indirect sleep aids, stress relievers, anxiety remedies, and adaptogens. This removes a great many barriers to peaceful sleep along with giving a firm but not harsh push in that direction. Enough of the effects stack that even Hulk's metabolism can't wash them all out instantly -- and this recipe is probably the first thing that Bruce-and-Hulk actually collaborated on out of sheer desperation until they found something mutually agreeable.

The specific herbs in order of descending proportion are: chamomile, catnip, lemon balm, skullcap, passion flower, hops, lavender, licorice, cocoa (specifically cocoa nibs), and valerian. The top three keep the flavor palatable, although nothing is going to kill the bitter notes from the other herbs. Yes, combinations often work when a simple won't, and some people who don't respond well to pharmaceuticals will respond better to herbs (and vice versa).

Emotional pain can hurt more than physical pain. Natasha was completely blindsided by how much Phil's "death" hurt her, because she doesn't feel much most of the time and thus had no other coping skills. Insomnia is just one of many effects of grief. There are steps to recover from grief and to help someone who is grieving. Fortunately the
Avengers had each other to lean on during that week, and Bruce was the one who took the least damage from Fury’s sadistic trick, so he was able to help the ones who took direct hits.
Chapter Summary

Tony and Clint help Bruce back to his quarters. Steve carries Bucky to bed. Phil cleans up the kitchen.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Natasha brushed her fingertips over Phil's and then pulled away. "Did you forget that herbs get stronger when you boil them?" she said to Bruce.

"Remembered," he said, "might have underestimated ... little bit." Bruce pinched a sliver of air between his fingertips.

"Well that's marvelous, Bruce," said Natasha in a tart tone. "You've clearly been spending too much time with Tony. You could have overdosed or something."

"Not us. We're too ... 'special.' Wouldn't recommend more'n one cup for real people though," Bruce said. Then he almost fell out of his chair.

"Oh my god, you are so stoned," Tony laughed. He caught Bruce and returned him to the former position.

"Naahhh," Bruce said, "just ... really, really ... relax ..."

"Totally stoned," Clint said with a grin. One hand fished in his hip pocket. "I gotta get a picture of this."

"No, Clint," Phil said firmly, confiscating the phone. There was the security feed, of course, but JARVIS was very determined about not letting people use that to tease each other. "Just help Tony take care of Bruce. I imagine you two are sufficiently familiar with this state of mind and body to manage him safely."

Tony gave a rueful chuckle. "Yeah, this is my payback for all the times Rhodey had to drag me home from wild parties. Thank JSTOR I've got the relevant experience. At least Bruce still has all of his clothes on, which is more than I could say for myself," Tony said with a quicksilver smile. "Hey, Bruce, can you walk or do we need to spoon you into a bucket and carry you to bed?"

"Hah," said Bruce. "Can walk." He made a futile effort to heave himself upright, then slumped back onto the table. Evidently whatever went into the tea wasn't something even Bruce-and-Hulk could shrug off quickly. "Maybe ... need some help up."

Tony and Clint got their shoulders under Bruce and hoisted him to his feet. He didn't like being hemmed in from both sides. "Leggo," Bruce whined, even as he wobbled in place.

Clint soothed him, saying, "Easy, buddy, we'll keep you safe. There's a nice cushy bed waiting for you at the end of this trip."
"Mmkay," Bruce said. He let them walk him toward the door, managing to keep his feet mostly underneath himself.

"I'll come with you and tuck him in," Betty said as she led the way.

Phil tapped a thoughtful finger against the tin of tea. Very little had much effect on Hulk, and therefore on Bruce. Sometimes a combination would work when a single substance would not, at least for a little while. It helped that Hulk's power grew from negative emotions, so without that impetus, the resistance was lower. Phil looked over the label again. Bruce really was a brilliant biochemist.

Then Phil turned his attention to Bucky. "Steve, do you think we can move Bucky to a bed without waking him up?"

"Yeah, he's out cold," Steve said, pressing his fingertips against Bucky's throat. "Pulse is slow and steady. He hasn't so much as twitched at the conversation, either. Once Bucky falls asleep, he tends to sleep like a rock -- or at least he did when we were younger." Steve's hands patted gently over Bucky's body, seeking a secure grip. "This is kind of an awkward position, though ..."

"I have the chair anchored," Natasha said, tucking her foot behind one of the legs and grasping the back.

"Here, let me help you lift him," Phil said to Steve. Together they managed to transfer Bucky from the chair into Steve's arms. Bucky snored on, oblivious to the motion.

Steve looked down at him with a soft expression. "He used to carry me to bed like this, when I was little," he said. Steve smoothed Bucky's shortened hair out of his face and tenderly shifted him into a more comfortable position.

"How? He isn't that much older than you are. You should have been close to the same size," Natasha said.

"Oh, Bucky was always big for his age, and I was ... tiny. When I joined the army I didn't weigh a hundred pounds soaking wet. Bucky took care of me in a lot of ways people didn't expect, or understand, or even believe sometimes," Steve said. "Now it's my turn to return the favor, is all." He carried Bucky out of the room, with Natasha trailing behind them.

That left Phil to tidy up the kitchen. He took care of the samovar. It reminded him of Natasha: elegant in shape, decorated just enough to look special without seeming fussy. He washed the heavy cups, the Stark Industries logo sliding under his soapy fingers.

Then Phil picked up the tea tin. It rustled faintly as he shook it, almost empty. There was probably enough left to make a cup or two of tea, though, so it still needed to be put away. "JARVIS, where does this go?" Phil asked.

"In the tea cabinet, on the middle of Bruce's shelves, in the gap toward the left side. The contents are arranged first by category, then by name in alphabetical order per the English language or closest transliteration," JARVIS replied. A holographic arrow helpfully pointed the way.

"Thank you," Phil said as he set the tin in its place. Then he slumped against the counter, exhaustion catching up with him. It wasn't that late at night. He hadn't exerted himself physically, either. However, the mental and emotional efforts still took a toll. There was SHIELD paperwork to finish -- there always was -- that he'd meant to continue after supper. Phil yawned and pushed away from the counter.
"Phil, allow me to suggest that now might be an opportune time for you to retire for the night," JARVIS said. "I promise to wake you if anyone or anything requires your urgent attention."

"That sounds wonderful, JARVIS, thanks," said Phil. He headed to bed, letting JARVIS turn off the lights behind him. Phil appreciated not having to grope around for the switches all the time. Soft piano music followed him down the hall, wrapping around him like an invisible blanket.

Chapter End Notes

**Boiling herbs** really does make the tea stronger. It's usually used for things like bark or roots, rather than leaves or flowers. Bruce's Nightcap blend contains a variety of plantstuff.

**Taking care of intoxicated friends** is an important point of responsible partying. There are instructions for helping someone who is *drunk* or *stoned*.

**Dynamic durability** is one of Hulk's powers. Anger boosts his strength, but also his healing factor. Hence the importance of Bruce finding a recipe that Hulk would put up with instead of burning off almost immediately.

**Mental exertion can cause fatigue**, just like physical exertion can. Emotional effort likewise expends *emotional energy*. People with a *strong empathic sense* are more prone to emotional fatigue. Both mental and emotional exertion play into combat stress. There are tips for maintaining mental and emotional health.

Music reduces stress and aids relaxation, especially soothing classical music. Piano is popular for this purpose; [here is a good example](#). Phil seems like the kind of person who would appreciate gentle, sophisticated music.
Phil gets a look at Steve's apartment on the way to help Bucky wake up. Phil, Steve, and Natasha provide memory anchors for Bucky, so that he can deal with the cyclic amnesia.

The next morning, Phil had time to pick up a cup of coffee -- Tony had managed to build a new coffee machine -- and start reviewing his morning messages before the day turned challenging. JARVIS interrupted with, "Phil, my readings indicate that Bucky is about to wake up. Steve is with him now and Natasha is on her way to Steve's bedroom."

"I'll be right there," Phil said, already moving in that direction. He wasn't surprised that Steve had brought Bucky into his own space instead of abandoning him in a guest bedroom on the common floor.

As Phil walked through Steve's apartment, he assessed the place out of habit. It had started out with a decorating theme taken entirely from the 1930s and early 1940s. Warm cream walls held period art, some of it by Steve himself. The McMurdo Silver 15-17 console radio came from Tony, personally restored as a housewarming gift. The furniture was sunny maple upholstered in homey shades of green and gold and brown. A wide bank of windows wrapped around one corner to light the art studio with its cluster of easels on which stood several oil paintings in progress.

Phil smiled to see a few modern touches creeping in: the bright blue Plasmic jacket that Steve had bought for himself upon discovering the advances in wilderness clothing, several newspaper clippings about the Avengers, the large viewscreen in a wooden frame over a matching cabinet that probably held more electronics. Two full-color photoprints of the city bracketed a delightfully cheesy laser holograph of the Statue of Liberty. A lava lamp sent smooth blobs of creamy wax floating through the soothing blue-green fluid.

Steve's home, like the man himself, was a patchwork of then and now. The pieces fit together not quite gracefully yet, but at least functionally. It gave Phil hope for Bucky as well.

By the time Phil reached Steve's bedroom, Bucky was awake, in the sense that his eyes were open. He lay very still in the wide tidy bed, staring at the ceiling. On the nightstand rested the flowerpot that Phil had brought home from SHIELD, although most of the flowers had gone to seed. A notecard in Steve's careful handwriting detailed instructions for planting the bulbs after the leaves dried up.

Steve sat on Bucky's right, Natasha on the left, each holding one of his hands. Natasha was dressed, but Steve still wore plain blue pajamas. Phil slipped into place beside Steve, reaching out to lay a hand on Bucky's knee. They took care to leave his wrists and ankles free.

It was painfully familiar to Phil from the time he'd lost a truckful of agents to a road mine. Some of them had died, two sustained permanent brain damage leading to retirement, and one recovered
enough that Phil pressured Director Fury into giving the man a simple job at SHIELD even though he'd never work in the field again.

*Bucky's getting better*, Phil reminded himself firmly. *He just needs our help*. Phil took a deep, calming breath and blew it slowly back out. He concentrated on recent signs of Bucky's improvement, like his sense of humor, and on Steve's happiness at having his brother back in his life. Phil refused to let Bucky down just because supporting him was personally uncomfortable. No matter what it took, Phil would work through his own issues so they didn't undercut his team.

"It's 8:09 AM," Steve said to Bucky. He went on to give the date and the weather report, then more personal details. "My name is Steve Rogers. Your name is Bucky Barnes. Remember who you are. You're my brother by choice and my best friend. We grew up together in Brooklyn ..."

Then Natasha took a turn. "We've been a lot of people, you and I," she said. "When we first met, I told you my name was Natalia but you called me Talia or even Natashka. You told me your name was Yakov and I wound up calling you Yasha. We've saved each other's lives many times. Not long ago, I helped rescue you from Department X in Russia ..."

"I'm Phil Coulson. My job includes taking care of you and the others living in this tower," Phil said. "You're a hero. Some very bad people didn't like that about you, so they tried to cut it out of your memory. That's why you can't recall much or think clearly right now. Just give us a little while to fill you in on things, and you'll start to recover. You're stronger than they thought; you can fight your way through this ..."

"Come back to us, Bucky, we need you," Steve whispered.

It was like filling a bucket with water, one cup at a time. Phil watched the rise and fall of Bucky's chest gradually quicken. His face took on more life. His eyes began to track in the direction of the current speaker as they took turns.

Bucky stirred then, shifting under the covers. His head turned to the right. "Stevie..." he said softly.

"Hey, you remember me," Steve said. "Good morning, sunshine. How much do you know so far?"

"We grew up together," Bucky said. His forehead wrinkled as he groped for more. "I took care of you ...? But you're bigger than me, that doesn't make any sense ..."

"Yeah, I had a late growth spurt courtesy of top-secret science," Steve said.

"Bucky, can you tell us something we didn't tell you this morning?" Phil asked. It was hard for Bucky to access memories without an explicit prompt to draw them out, so it made a good measure of his progress. The sooner that happened, the more he tended to get back. Phil kept an eye on his watch. Bucky was already doing better than he had at SHIELD.

"... you give good orders," Bucky said after a moment, slow but confident.

"The best," Steve said, and Natasha nodded.

"It's coming back to me," Bucky said, "a little fuzzy around the edges, but yeah, I remember you." He propped himself up on his elbows. Steve and Natasha each put a hand behind him to help him sit up. The sheet slid down to reveal that Bucky was wearing his underwear from the day before.

"Take your time," Phil said. "There's no rush to get out of bed."

Bucky reached up to rub his face and then froze, staring at the silvery gleam of his left hand. "What -
“- What happened to my hand?” he stammered.

Chapter End Notes

The **McMurdo Silver 15-17 console radio** is an example of very nice family furniture from Steve's time.

Steve's apartment is decorated in **soothing colors**, primarily **earth tones** and **pale neutrals**. The patriotic color scheme that some authors place in Steve's home seems way too jarring for someone whose nerves are so raw. He needs a home designed for comfort and relaxation.

**Oil painting** requires **patience** but allows exquisite control once you learn the **features of the medium**. This seemed like a good match for Steve's artistic talent and taste, along with the sketching and other things that he does.

This is the **Plasmic jacket**; well made, cheerful in appearance, and warm. I figured if Steve was going to splurge on anything, it would probably be a coat; his body is tough, but he hates feeling the cold.

**Lava lamps** help create a tranquil mood with their slow flow of shapes, especially the ones in cool colors.

There are **instructions for planting bulbs** that started as potted flowers.

Phil understands the importance of **emotional support** and always wants to be there for his teamfamily. He knows how to **release stress** and **stay calm** in a serious situation.

**Memory aids** can help with **reality orientation** for people with mental issues. **Repetition of simple information** helps the listener to recognize the current time and place as well as the speaker. This can be useful with chronic conditions such as traumatic brain injury or dementia, but the same techniques may also help someone come out of a flashback or other dissociative experience. The Avengers are really careful about anchoring Bucky in the here-and-now.

**Russian names** have a sequence of more formal to more casual versions. Talia is informal; Natasha is more intimate. Similarly, **Yasha** is a diminutive of **Yakov**. Calling each other by pet names is a clue about how close Black Widow and the Winter Soldier really were, and most of those come from canon. For comparison, most Russians don't even switch down to first names until they're quite good friends; most interactions are semi-formal with first name and patronymic.

Bucky's left arm touches on the tropes **An Arm and a Leg** and **Artificial Limbs**. These are often handled badly in literature and entertainment. One common flaw is having the handicapped character constantly notice the missing limb; most people stop doing that fairly soon, because they grow accustomed to its absence (or its replacement if they wear a prosthesis). But I just couldn't resist the idea of exploring this more seriously with a character for whom it is a real issue: Bucky's cyclic amnesia means that he keeps forgetting what has happened to his body. So every time he wakes up, it's a fresh shock for the seconds or minutes it takes for the visual/tactile cue of his metal arm to retrieve the buried memory. A further complication is that **soldiers may have a harder time**
adapting to limb loss. Bucky's situation means that he really has not dealt with this yet. He has a highly functional replacement, so he's kind of pushing the awareness to one side; he hasn't really integrated that metal arm with his self-image.
So Much Is Missing

Chapter Summary

Steve and Natasha explain Bucky's history to him, including the origin of his prosthetic arm. Tony joins the conversation from his lab, and invites Bucky down there because Tony has something for him.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"You were injured in combat," Natasha said to Bucky. "The people who captured you provided this replacement; your whole left arm and shoulder are artificial."

"It feels creepy," Bucky said, looking down the bright line of it. "This isn't me. I don't -- I don't like it."

"There are concerns about the power source," Natasha said. She wasn't one to hide unpleasant truths. "It's better than nothing, but it's not very good for you. We'll get you a new one as soon as possible."

"What have I been doing to end up like this?" Bucky said. "What else is going to happen to me?"

"It's all right, Bucky. You're safe here. We won't let anything bad happen to you. If you need to talk, we'll listen," Steve said. He patted the right hand that was trembling slightly in his grasp. "You're a soldier; what went on during the war is over. Later on, Department X set you up as an assassin; that's over too. You're still yourself underneath all that."

"Part of me, anyway," Bucky said. He twitched again, restless, and Natasha laced their fingers together, flesh against metal. "So much is missing..."

Phil wondered how much memory Bucky ever had of losing his left arm, and whether he had any opportunity to mourn that loss. Likely not, given the faint look of horror on his face now. The amnesia just compounded his distress over the amputation itself. Bucky will need to deal with both of those losses sooner or later, but right now we need to calm him down before the fear spirals up to a real panic attack, Phil thought.

"Bucky, look at me," Phil coaxed, hoping that a physical focus would help take his mind off the worst of the shock. "Search through your recent memory for more about this. You should have some gentler recollections from this past week with us. Concentrate on good memories, rather than bad ones or blank spots. That should ease some of the stress you're feeling."

Bucky's expression cleared then. He rubbed his metal fingers together and murmured, "Tony...

A soft chime sounded and a hologram appeared, unfolding itself slowly like a letter emerging from an envelope so as not to startle Bucky. "Good morning, Bucky," said Tony's voice. "If you're watching this, then you just woke up and you mentioned me, your shiny metal arm, and/or the arc reactor. I'm Tony Stark and we're garage buddies. Here's my special bit of hardware." Holo-Tony pulled up his ratty band t-shirt to display the luminous disc in his chest. "If you want an instant replay of us talking about our gizmos when we first met, touch that little picture in the bottom right corner."
"Okay," Bucky said. "This is weird, but pretty keen." He reached out to tap the icon. It expanded gradually to fill the space, and then the still image flowed into video. The security feed showed the conversation, thoughtfully concluding just before Tony bolted from the room.

"What is this thing?" Bucky asked when the replay finished. He poked at the image, frozen on the last frame, his expression now more curious than upset.

*Modern technology seems to offer a reliable way to pull Bucky out of a slump,* Phil thought. *That's useful to know. Maybe it resonates with his mechanical aptitude. I wonder if art might work as well for Steve ...*

"This is a holographic projection, useful for displaying images or words," said JARVIS. "Good morning, Bucky. My name is JARVIS. We are friends."

"Where are you?" Bucky said, looking around the room.

"I am here," JARVIS replied. "You can't see me -- or rather you can, because I'm part of this whole building, but I am not human. I am an artificial intelligence created by Tony Stark."

"Like one of Asimov's robots," Bucky said.

"Somewhat similar, although JARVIS is a real person, a free team member and not a slave," Phil said quietly. "He isn't bound by Asimov's Laws of Robotics, nor is he a battle computer as you may have encountered in other stories. He has his own, quite sophisticated, sense of morality and loyalty. Like the other Avengers, JARVIS can be gentle or fierce as the situation requires."

"What does he do?" Bucky asked.

"You may think of me as a combination of butler and bodyguard," said JARVIS. "It is my job to protect and serve the Avengers, along with other people in my care. If you need anything, ask me. I will either take care of it myself or delegate the task to someone else. I want you to feel happy and comfortable here."

Bucky laughed and said, "Дома и стены помогают." *At home, even the walls help.*


"Yeah, JARVIS is great. I'd be lost without him," Steve said. "He coaches me on all the new stuff that I missed while I was trapped in the ice."

Bucky grinned at Steve. "This is one amazing story we're living in!" The mercurial mood swings helped him bounce back from upsets.

"It sure is," Steve said with a chuckle.

Phil recognized the oblique reference to a classic science fiction magazine. Evidently Bucky shared Steve's interest in the old pulps. *I should look up some collections for them to enjoy, along with pointing them to Asimov's later work,* he decided. *That might help with the future shock, as well as being good entertainment.*

Phil privately suspected that this past exposure had helped keep Steve from being completely disoriented by the modern world -- he had at least thought about such things before. Many of the early stories were essentially thought experiments to encourage readers to consider potential issues before they arose in real life. Meeting Howard Stark doubtless furthered that process. Now Bucky was benefiting from the same effect.
Maybe JARVIS can find some supporting materials for thought experiments, situational puzzles, and adjusting to modern life, Phil thought. He has probably sorted through the whole canon of classic science fiction by now ... and some of those magazines have run articles on science fact as well as fiction.

"Bucky, Tony wishes to speak with you," JARVIS said. The hologram reactivated, this time with a live feed.

"Hey, Bucky!" said Tony, who had black grease and something weirdly pinkish streaked across his face. "JARVIS tells me you're awake now, minus coffee -- I have great coffee, you do drink coffee, right? Come down to my lab and I will wow you with the awesomeness of modern coffee. Also I have pop-tarts and smoothies. And a present. That's why I called, well, actually it's a present-in-progress because I need to do some fitting before I finish production. So get down here and I'll set you up with a skin glove for your left arm so you don't blind people when you wave hello. See you soon!" The hologram blinked out. Bucky opened his mouth.

"Yes, he's always like that," Phil said drily.

"Yech, why does my mouth taste like I've been eating grass?" Bucky grumbled.

"Because it's morning and you need to brush your teeth," Steve said.

Bucky frowned a little. "I'm not sure I ... remember all of that ..."

"Don't worry about it. I just got out of bed myself. All you have to do is follow along with whatever I do," Steve said firmly. He tugged Bucky out of the bed and into the bathroom.

Chapter End Notes

The notes don't fit. You can see them on the original Dreamwidth post: http://ysabetwordsmith.dreamwidth.org/9326957.html
What They Did To Us

Chapter Summary

Natasha mourns her past and what's going on with Bucky now. Phil comforts her.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Only after they left did Phil notice that Natasha was crying. Most likely she had kept the tears in check until then. Even now they fell silently, no more than gleaming streaks on her pale skin. She wiped them away with sharp swipes of her hand. "This hurts," she said. "I don't like that it hurts so much."

"No one does, Natasha," Phil said gently. He put a hand on her knee. She twitched her leg. He let go.

"When I was alone, I didn't have anyone else to worry about. It didn't hurt like this. That was better," she said.

"No," Phil said, "it wasn't."

She made a tiny noise and leaned against his shoulder. "No, it wasn't," she admitted. "This is just so hard, Phil. I feel like I'm moving from one grief to another."

"That's life sometimes," Phil said, "but at least now you have some happy times between the sad ones. You have people to share the joys and the sorrows. It's good that you can feel something, Natasha, even if it hurts."

"Yes," Natasha said, looking toward the door where Bucky and Steve had disappeared. "The Winter Soldier was the great success. They wanted all of us to be like that. An assassin should be a blank slate for orders to be written upon. No thought, no memory, no emotion beyond what is placed there by command."

Her voice was cool and smooth as ice. Phil imagined that he could look through that perfectly clear pane of ice into the dark water beneath it, and see a pallid face trapped and screaming there. *Oh, Natasha,* Phil thought. *That's not how it should be at all. An assassin should feel everything, and be strong enough to do what must be done anyway.* He knew that, because he'd done it himself -- because Agent Coulson would never ask of his people anything that he would not ask of himself. He had sampled many jobs for that reason. It made him a better handler, but at times like this, some of the memories hurt.

"That was what they wanted, but it was not what they got, even though they might have thought so," Phil pointed out. He knew enough about Russian names to read the deep, subtle clues they left behind. "I think that *Talia and Yasha* managed to find ways of reaching out to each other, even in their bondage, to forge connections that neither the Red Room nor Department X would approve. Those experiences helped you both escape from their hold, gave us something to build on later. The training didn't work as well as it was meant to."
"It was wrong, what they did to us," Natasha said slowly. "It was wrong ... wasn't it?"

"Yes, Natasha," Phil assured her. "It was very wrong. They should not have done such things. They should never have taken advantage of little children and of soldiers wounded in combat. Evil people seek to exploit vulnerability. Good people seek to protect it. What happened to you and Bucky was absolutely wrong. I'm proud of you for recognizing that."

Natasha had a hard time telling right from wrong, good from evil. That wasn't an accident: it was training. The Red Room had conditioned her that way. Even now it was difficult to break through and reach the part of her that could still question, could still grope for lines that she could only sense dimly and never see the way others saw them so clearly. In moments like these, when Natasha was cracked open by something outside herself, Phil could describe to her what he saw, slip it inside for her to keep and use later.

"They told us we deserved it," Natasha whispered. "They said that they could detect the evil in us, that we could never live among the common folk because our evil would find a way out. Everyone would see how dirty we are, how tainted. They said that we should be grateful for the training, that we had to earn it because we were just worthless slag until they forged us into weapons."

"They lied," Phil said. His hand cupped the damp plane of her cheek, thumb brushing away the tears. "You didn't deserve any of it. You had every right to expect care instead of torment. Natasha, the evil they detected was not in you -- it was in them."

"I don't want to be evil."

"You're not. You never were," Phil said. He stroked the soft fire of her hair. "Evil people don't care who gets hurt as long as they get what they want. You always cared about what happened, no matter how hard the Red Room tried to stamp it out of you. That's what Hawkeye saw in you, why he brought you in even against orders. That's what allowed me to reach you. That's what you and the Winter Soldier sensed in each other, somehow. It's why you're helping Bucky now."

"I've put so much red in my ledger, though," Natasha said. "Can I really wipe out that much red?"

"You already have," Phil said. "You helped save the world during the Battle of New York. You're sticking with Bucky through a very difficult time in his life, even though his pain hurts you enough to make you cry."

"Phil? Tell me it's worth it, even if you have to lie to me," Natasha said in a small voice.

"It's worth it, and I'm not lying to you," Phil said. He pulled out his Starkphone and showed her the record of how long it took for Bucky to regain the accessible portion of his memory each time he woke up. "See, we've already done better than anything back at SHIELD, and there's a steady trend of improvement. Even though the exact subset of memory varies, Bucky regains a larger set each time. It happens a little faster too. I know this is hard for everyone, but we get Bucky out of it, so I'm calling that a good deal."

"Okay," Natasha said. That was the purest trust that she had to give: relying on her handler to tell her what was and what was not, when she could not tell for herself. Phil cherished it above all other honors.

"Come on, let's get breakfast. Then we could take a turn on the shooting range. I haven't practiced in a while," Phil said.
Chapter End Notes

The end notes don't fit; see the original Dreamwidth post.
http://ysabetwordsmith.dreamwidth.org/9327772.html

This story is complete on DW already.
Friends Don't Keep Score

Chapter Summary

Phil comes to breakfast with Clint and Natasha. Bruce arrives, and they discuss his handling of Bucky the night before. Then Steve and Bucky show up to join the conversation.

Chapter Notes

Not all the end notes fit, so I'm moving some here...

"Shut up and eat it" is a general nickname for a dish that's made from whatever is available. Here is an approximation of Clint's egg skillet dish.

"Friends don't keep score" is a good rule within reason. Keeping score can really cause problems in relationships. There are tips for true friendship. You should understand the types of relationships. Think about maintaining friendships, whether these relationships are unbalanced, and how to recognize a one-way friendship. Aim to increase balance. There are ways to handle a dysfunctional friendship and end a bad relationship.

Basically, don't count every little thing, expect the balance to be exactly equal all the time, or insist on repayment within the same category. Do keep a general sense of proportion, because a one-way relationship is unhealthy. In this case, the usual rule of not leaving a mess in public space was waived because Bruce was taking care of Bucky. Not having to do that for an hour left Phil enough energy to clean up the kitchen. Different acts of care, but both aimed at maintaining the teamfamily.

Jambalaya is a mixed dish based mainly on rice. There are many ways to throw together food that will work. A well-stocked pantry helps.

Bruce's 3G tea is a morning pick-me-up not based on caffeine. Ginseng, ginkgo, and ginger count among the most popular herbs.

Balancing trust and distrust can be tricky, and it plays many roles in relationships. The trust situation between the Avengers and Bucky is similar to that between parents and a teenager: he's not always able to make good decisions, but he urgently needs as much agency as it's safe for him to have. It's important to balance privacy and safety. Overcoming trust issues can make for better relationships. There are tips for parents to establish trust with teens and for teens to earn trust from parents. You can build trust in relationships and repair broken trust.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Breakfast turned out to feature Clint throwing semi-random things into a skillet that also contained a quantity of eggs. Phil watched him go past with potatoes, onions, bacon, and some kind of cheese. This was an improvement over Tony making a similar attempt, which usually ended up with the skillet on fire and a fallback to toaster pastries.
Bruce padded into the kitchen wearing nothing but pajama bottoms and Betty's rose-covered bathrobe. He gave the table a puzzled look and said, "Didn't I leave a mess in here last night? I thought I fell asleep before I could put anything away, and now it's all gone."

"I cleaned up," Phil explained.

"Thanks, Phil. I owe you one," Bruce said. He scuffed both hands through hair that had not yet seen a brush this morning. Bruce looked like he needed a good cup of tea.

"Friends don't keep score," Phil reminded him. "Sit down and I'll get you some of ... whatever that is on the stove."

"Shut up and eat it," Clint said.

"You don't have to be rude," Bruce said.

"No, that's the actual name of the dish," Natasha said. Like jambalaya, it consisted of a foundation ingredient to which a wide variety of other options might be added depending on what was available.

As Phil dished the stuff onto plates, JARVIS said, "There is hot water for tea, as well as coffee."

Phil stepped over to the tea cabinet and said, "Give me a hint here, JARVIS."

"Bruce's top shelf, near the middle, labeled 3G. It is ginseng, ginkgo, and ginger," said JARVIS.

Phil assembled the necessary accoutrements. He returned to the table with plates full of food, a mug of hot water and a tea bag for Bruce, and his own cup of coffee all perfectly balanced in his grasp.

"Were you a waiter in a former life?" Bruce asked absently.

Natasha covered her mouth with her hand, trying not to laugh, but her eyes sparkled. Phil was glad that she had recovered somewhat from her earlier upset.

"I am never telling you that story," Phil said as he put a plate and the tea things in front of Bruce. "Eat your breakfast."

Bruce ate while waiting for his tea to steep. He looked at Phil, then looked away. "Are you mad at me for the way I handled Bucky last night?" Bruce asked. "Because I seriously had to do something. That cryo can do some nasty things, according to what I read in the SHIELD reports. I think Bucky's body has forgotten how to power down the natural way. He's going to need help until he relearns how to fall asleep on his own."

"I'm not mad at you," Phil said. Bruce had a point about how bad the insomnia had gotten. "I am a little concerned that your subterfuge may make it harder for Bucky to trust us. He's been violated enough already without us adding to it, even as a misconception."

"It wasn't subterfuge ... exactly," Bruce said.

"Then what was it? Exactly," Phil said. "It looks like you took advantage of his state to fool him into something he probably wouldn't have agreed to while fully alert." It wasn't that Phil didn't trust Bruce. He did. Bruce was more use than most of the medical staff at SHIELD, especially for anyone with extraordinary physiology. Phil just ... worried.

"Subtlety. It was more that I counted on Bucky's exhaustion making him desperate enough to let me fool him," Bruce said. He cast a glance at Natasha. She said nothing, sipping her White Russian.
coffee. "I'm sure you're right; it would never have worked with him wide awake. But I have a pretty good sense of when that trick does work."

"Fair enough," Phil said. "I just hope it doesn't blow up in our faces."

"Phil, *anything* that actually worked would have the same chance of shaking Bucky's trust in us. That part's an irreducible risk factor," Bruce said. "No matter how careful we are, there's always the possibility that Bucky could take something the wrong way -- even with however much permission he could give us at the time -- because of how badly HYDRA and Department X abused him."

Natasha nodded in silent agreement, licking a pale crescent of foam from her lip.

"I concede the argument," Phil said, because there was really no counter to that point.

Steve and Bucky came in. Bucky looked far more lively than they had seen before. "Morning," Steve said, and headed right for the stove. "Aww ... almost empty." He split the remains of the skillet dish between his own plate and a second one for Bucky.

"You want more, make it yourself," Clint said.

"There's bread, so we can make toast," Bucky said.

"Oh, that's a great idea," said Steve. "You would not believe how many kinds of fruit spreads there are in this kitchen. We have jams, jellies, butters, conserves, curds, marmalades, preserves..."

"Yeah, I would. Bruce let me pick last night," Bucky said. He opened a loaf of bread. Then he peered at the elaborate contraption that served as a toaster. "Where do I even stick the slices into this gizmo?"

"To operate the toaster, first push down the center lever on the front. Next, load six slices of bread, one into each slot ..." JARVIS said, carefully walking Bucky through the process of using the toaster. Five minutes later, Bucky came to the table with half a loaf of bread perfectly toasted. Phil brought out butter and an assortment of fruit spreads.

"Did you sleep well?" Bruce asked quietly.

Bucky regarded him with a level gaze. "You know I did, since you arranged it," he said. "You're a sneaky little bastard ..."

"I'm sorry if I upset you. I just wasn't willing to wait until you collapsed," Bruce said.

"... but that's okay, I admire that in a guy," Bucky finished. "You know, sniper, spy?"

"We were a little concerned that you might feel betrayed," Phil said.

"Not really. Betrayal is when a person you trust does something hurtful. I don't -- I *can't* -- trust you much yet," Bucky said. "I mean, I'm a little uncomfortable that Bruce got the drop on me like that, but it's not like he didn't warn me. I just didn't believe it would work that well on me. Most things don't anymore."

"Same here," Bruce said, tapping his breastbone.

"It's a good trick, especially with you drinking out of the same batch," Bucky agreed. Then he sighed. "Don't think I could let you do it again, though, now that I know about it for sure. I was using my doubt as leverage over my training and instincts."
Bruce gave him a tiny, tentative smile. "That's okay too. I might have another idea or two up my sleeve."

Chapter End Notes

White Russian is a cocktail, and there is also an espresso version. Natasha's version is made with espresso and heavy cream stirred together, with a dash of kahlua and a splash of vodka, and a little whipped cream on top.

There are many different kinds of fruit spreads.

"Defeat Means Friendship" is a trope that covers all kinds of conflict between heroes during the bonding process. Some characters, especially men, are just plain impressed if someone can beat them at anything they care about, whether it's a battle of fists or of wits. This aspect of Bucky's personality helps him respect instead of resenting Bruce.

Betrayal is a violation of expectations. Where there is no trust, there can be no betrayal. Distrust is a natural consequence of betrayal. However, trust is not required for cooperation. Distrust is common among abuse survivors, and people with PTSD often have trust issues. Their ability to evaluate trustworthiness may be damaged. This is what happened to Bucky; he had a past foundation of trust and people broke it. So he can't trust much right now, and what he has is pretty erratic. In a weird way, his impaired trust protects him from feelings of betrayal by keeping his expectations low. This will take time to heal. There are ways to rebuild trust in yourself and trust in others after abuse.

Meanwhile it is possible, though challenging, to develop relationships without trust. The idea that you can't live without trust is wrong. If you don't have trust, you're not going to drop dead instantly -- although it can act as a social handicap causing long-term problems on small and large scales. Trust is an emotion, a feeling of safety and predictability. Reliance is an action, behaving as if people will do what they say or will behave decently, regardless of your emotions. Trust and reliance, distrust and nonreliance, are not the same. Hope is an emotion, a feeling that however things are right now, they might or will get better. So if you don't have trust, you can get by on reliance and/or hope, while you work on developing trust from the roots up.
I Think He Finds It Soothing

Chapter Summary

Bruce and Bucky discuss the Nightcap. Natasha and Phil go for target practice. Phil does paperwork, and uses the security feed to check on Tony and Bucky in the lab.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I'm just curious ... why use tea?" Bucky asked Bruce. "It seems like an odd choice."

"Various reasons," Bruce said. "It works for me; pretty much anything I offer you will be something I've tried on myself first. For modified humans, a lot of drugs either don't work at all or don't work the same way. Herbs may be less precise than refined chemicals, but they're better buffered and more resilient in the face of certain adaptive processes, so sometimes they help when nothing else will."

"That makes sense," Bucky said, and Natasha nodded. Phil silently wondered if she had sampled more of Bruce's skill than just the tea. It really was useful to have an in-house medic with such a broad skill in biochemistry.

"In my particular case, the Other Guy likes tea in general," Bruce continued, lifting his morning cup of 3G. "I think he finds it soothing. If he's not upset, then his dynamic resistance doesn't kick in, and stuff works better. The Nightcap is actually one of the first things that he and I collaborated on; it took a while to agree on a recipe that worked for both of us. It's not just a straight sedative; it soothes some of the issues that make it hard to fall asleep in the first place. Also, the drop isn't fast enough to be alarming."

"Yeah, it felt like getting flattened with a very large, very soft mallet," Bucky said. He finished his last piece of toast, this one slathered with lemon curd. Bucky seemed to like sour things, or sweet-sour things.

Bruce chuckled. "It does if you drink enough," he agreed. "So anyway, I figured the Nightcap had a good chance of working for you too. Besides, it was something I thought you might accept, and something that Department X would never have used."

"Are any of those other ideas things they might not have thought of?" Bucky said. "You sound like you've done a lot of different things."

Phil smiled at that. Thank goodness Bucky is still willing to work with Bruce, he thought. He had worried that the trick with the tea might make Bucky more cautious or withdrawn.

"Oh, Bucky ... I have tried everything I could get my hands on," Bruce said with infinite sadness. "So yes. I can suggest other new things for you."

Phil finished his breakfast about the same time that Natasha did. "I believe we have plans for the shooting range," he said to her.

She rose from her chair with fluid grace. "Crowd game," she said over her shoulder as Phil followed her out. "You need to work on your targeting speed: you keep letting too many legitimate targets
escape in hopes of not hitting any innocents."

"I never want to injure innocent bystanders," Phil argued.

"Phil, if you let the bad guys escape, believe me, they will shoot the bystanders for you," Natasha said. Then she made a thoughtful noise. "I wonder if we could get Tony to program that into the target rigging somehow. That would be a real challenge ..."

She beat him, of course. Natasha always beat him; she was faster and far more ruthless than he would ever be. But Phil was really playing against himself, with her for company more than competition, and he beat his own previous score so that was good enough for him. He even sent a note to Tony about Natasha's wicked but astute suggestion.

After target practice, Phil went to his office. He reviewed several proposals for solo missions, some for Hawkeye, some for Black Widow. He rejected all of them. On the last he scrawled, I could shoot this mark myself. Stop wasting my time and Hawkeye's talent.

Then Phil brought up the security feed from Tony's lab to make sure that he and Bucky hadn't accidentally ripped into each other's intimacy issues again, or gotten into a fight with the lug wrenches, or lit anything on fire, or whatever other insanity might have come from dropping two free-wheeling mechanics into a lab with no supervision. "Don't worry, Phil, I always keep an eye on the proceedings," JARVIS assured him.

Phil only meant to take a quick peek, but the activity at hand captured his attention. Tony had Bucky's metal arm propped up on a workbench, going over the shoulder area very delicately with tools finer than dental picks. A handsomely-wrought copper antistatic bracelet clasped Tony's wrist, its grounding cable disappearing behind the bench. "How you got so much gunk into these grooves in less than a week is beyond me," Tony said. His cheek pressed against Bucky's neck as he worked.

"It got dirty rebuilding an engine with you, which I liked a lot," Bucky said. His right hand spread, perfectly still, over the blue light in Tony's bare chest.

Phil sighed. "JARVIS, are you sure they're all right? Last time, that maneuver didn't end too well," he said.

"I believe the chance of mishap is lower. Sir is always more confident in his own workspace. Judging from their respective banter, both of them feel more at ease with each other now that they've had time to process what happened. Their vital signs are so calm as to approach resting state," JARVIS said.

"Right, forgot about that, my bad," Tony was saying to Bucky. "Engine runs fine now, thanks. Working with you is a lot less of a clusterfuck than the few times my dad let me into his garage. He was a genius engineer but as a father, not so much."

"He sounds like a deadbeat," Bucky said. Apparently that part of his memory had gone missing.

Tony choked out a laugh. "I'm pretty sure nobody ever called Howard Stark that before."

"Well they should have," Bucky said. "Okay, I can remember ... fragments, now ... guess I used to know him. Huh. So that's why you have the dirt floor somewhere in here, because your old man had one?"

"Yeah, I always wished he'd spend more time with me. Thought if I got good enough at fixing things, then I could fix -- ah, it's pathetic. Never mind. Seriously, Bucky, can we not?" Tony said with a grimace.
"Sure, your place, your rules," Bucky agreed.

Chapter End Notes

Herbs can perform better than drugs in treating some conditions, such as stress. Herbs are more complex, so the body can choose what it needs. This complexity also balances and buffers the effects. Herbs also do better at addressing the mind-body connection.

Tea is soothing, both Camellia and herbal versions. Although Bruce tries to ignore a lot about Hulk, he does pay close attention to anything that helps Hulk calm down.

People with insomnia often do try everything they can think of to make it go away. There are tips for overcoming insomnia and falling asleep.

Competing against yourself instead of others makes for a healthier outlook. Take steps to compete against yourself and to stop comparing yourself to others.

Intimacy issues can cause relationship problems. Many things can cause fear of intimacy, especially abuse or other trauma. Men may feel that intimacy goes against society’s expectations of them. It takes courage to deal with important topics of intimacy. Consider questions about intimacy. Work around imperfections in a relationship. Share daily successes. Think about different aspects of your life and closeness with others. Develop and maintain deep relationships. Work on building intimacy. These are significant issues for many of the Avengers.

Tony made his own antistatic bracelet because commercial ones are clunky. I figured he would want something more elegant. There are instructions for making your own.

Emotionally distant fathers count as deadbeats. Fathers play a vital role in families. Their absence causes harm that is difficult to heal, especially for sons. There are tips for dealing with emotionally unavailable parents.
Because I'm a Genius

Chapter Summary

Tony fits Bucky with a skin glove to cover his metal arm. Phil's paperwork contains an underhanded attack by Director Fury on Steve Rogers. Behold the wrath of Phil Coulson, red tape ninja. Then JARVIS has something to show Phil.

Chapter Notes

Not all the end notes fit, so I'm moving one here:

**Triggers** are a common problem in **PTSD**, resulting in **flashbacks** or **emotional flashbacks**. There are steps for **managing flashbacks**. Note that **triggers in substance abuse treatment** have much more of a focus on how to diminish them, and to do that, you need to understand how the mind forms and dissolves associations. Triggers can also behave differently based on circumstances, with some things causing the resultant flashback to be stronger or weaker, longer or shorter. Steve has so many associations for Tony -- both positive and negative -- that it's easy for him to cause a cascade. Bucky has far fewer associations, so it's easier for Tony to bounce back when Bucky steps on a trigger about Tony's childhood trauma.

Phil winced at the exchange between Tony and Bucky. Tony rarely had much tolerance for discussing his rocky relationship with his father. A quick glance at the readings showed that Tony's heart rate had climbed, but it was already dropping toward its former mellow range.

*That's new,* Phil thought. *He hasn't bounced back as fast before. Maybe that's just because it's usually Steve who triggers him on this, and Howard was always going on about Captain America. Bucky's contact with Howard was lighter.*

"Great," Tony said as he tugged on the silver fingers. "Okay, arm over here now -- what are you looking at me like that for? It's a simple chemical shower, and no the solvent won't hurt the meat part of you, I spill this stuff on myself all the time. We just need to put on a little lotion afterwards because it takes oil off skin as well as metal." Tony was meticulous about getting Bucky's mechanical arm completely clean.

"I still think that thing looks like a rubber chicken," Bucky said when Tony brought out a long pinkish sleeve.

"Well, it's better than you looking like something out of 'Terminator' -- that's a movie about evil robots, I'll show you later, you like movies with explosions, right?" Tony said. "Hold your breath a minute, the lubricant is powdered graphite." Tony dusted over the arm with something that looked like a giant makeup brush. A fan whirred, sucking away the small greyish cloud of excess powder.

"I really appreciate you doing this for me, Tony," said Bucky.
"Comes with the territory," Tony assured him. "Okay, slide your hand in here -- no, don't squeeze your fingers together like that, what are you, five? Spread 'em. Get them in the proper holes while you're at it. It's a glove, Bucky, just a weird skin glove with an extra-long sleeve, you put it on just like one made of really snug leather." Despite the sass, Tony's fingers tugged gently at the covering as he fitted it into place over the metal prosthesis, moving with meticulous precision.

"You look like you're trying to pull up some dame's stocking," Bucky said, snickering.

"So not fair, I am much more graceful with stockings, as any number of satisfied ladies can attest," Tony said. "How does that feel? Good? Great, let me just fasten the top end ..."

"You need a special tool to open and close the rim," Bucky said.

"Made one, days ago," Tony said, wagging it at him. "Because I'm a genius, that's why, behold the genius that is me." With deft motions he freed the ragged frill of the old skin, tucked the new one into place, and secured it. He smiled at the finished product, a quick gleam of teeth. "Go on, tell me I'm brilliant!"

*Don't say anything more about Howard Stark, please don't,* Phil thought.

"Tony, stop fishing for compliments. You're the most amazing engineer I've ever met, but you should give people a chance to say that on their own. It feels better that way," Bucky said.

Tony's smile turned incandescent.

"Gentlemen, it has been three hours since you have eaten, and Bucky has a fast metabolism. Perhaps a snack would be in order," JARVIS prompted the two of them. Tony nodded, then went to rummage in a cabinet. He usually kept food in his workspaces.

Phil heaved a sigh of relief and closed the hologram. *Everything is going to be all right,* he told himself.

Getting back to work, Phil discovered that the next stack in his inbox consisted of complaints. Most of them pertained to Barton and Stark, as usual. Then a different name snagged his attention. *Rogers? Who in the world would file a complaint about Rogers? He is the soul of civility!* Phil thought, baffled.

Then he saw Fury's signature. The complaint of insubordination referred to the scene in Fury's office about releasing Barnes. His eyes narrowed, and it was suddenly Agent Coulson taking charge. *Director Fury, you have just reached the end of my fuse on this matter,* he fumed.

It was a low blow, really. Fury favored attacks that were difficult to counter, rather than fighting fair. He thought of Rogers as muscle rather than brain, and counted on the man out of time being unfamiliar with S.H.I.E.L.D bureaucracy. What Fury did not account for was the deepening teamwork; he knew the Avengers did group exercises but didn't care about their interpersonal relationships. So he didn't realize that Rogers had far more support now than when Fury overshadowed him coming out of the ice -- and either didn't know or didn't take into consideration that Coulson oversaw all the Avengers' paperwork. Fury had expected Rogers to be vulnerable from this angle. It was not so.

Coulson corrected Fury's form with ruthless precision, bouncing it back with three errors highlighted. Next he filed the two forms against Fury for maligning Rogers and the six forms for mishandling Barnes that their handler was entitled to file. He sent off an additional six to Rogers for him to fill out and return for proofreading. Barnes got a whole stack, with detailed instructions and a firm reminder to ask for help if necessary.
Then Coulson filed the small mountain of forms that he had not bothered to file previously regarding all of Fury's similar violations of policy over Coulson's supposed death. He sent smaller packets to Barton and Romanova for their delectation. Coulson had not wanted to raise extra stress in the immediate aftermath of the Battle of New York.

Since Fury hadn't learned the lesson yet, clearly further reinforcement was needed now. Clearly Fury had not targeted Coulson and Romanova in his attack because he knew their bureaucratic skill, but having swiped at Rogers he would now have to deal with them as well. Fury would just have to learn the hard way what the Avengers' improved teamwork meant.

**Phil Coulson, red tape ninja**, he thought smugly, fantasizing about the look on Fury's face as he went down under an avalanche of paperwork.

He didn't feel like stopping for lunch, because he was on a roll. So he simply microwaved a couple of eggrolls and kept working. That was the nice thing about working in the tower: his office came equipped with however many appliances he wanted. Microwave, minifridge, coffee maker, hot plate... luxury.

Phil was doing some routine expense paperwork when JARVIS abruptly blanked the screen and said, "There's something you need to see, Phil, and I don't think it will last long." The view switched to the gym, where Bucky was -- what? Twirling Natasha in the air, her petite body balanced perfectly on the palm of his right hand, held high overhead. "She hasn't thought to block the feed yet, but she will any moment."

"When -- how -- did this start?" Phil stammered, his attention riveted.

"A few seconds before I called you, Natasha tried to take Bucky down with a flying leap. He countered by pulling her into a lift and -- sorry, Phil, she just engaged privacy mode," JARVIS said. The screen went dark, then returned to Phil's paperwork.

"That's all right, JARVIS," Phil said, pressing his hands against suddenly watering eyes. "I've seen all I needed to see. Thank you."

"You're welcome, Phil," JARVIS said softly.

Chapter End Notes

*The Terminator* is a movie about homicidal robots.

Graphite is a popular dry lubricant, used in open machines and other places where liquid lubricant would attract too much dirt.

Adult survivors of abuse often crave praise. Boasting can also be a means of self-praise. This is Tony's version of the fawn response. Although he's arrogant rather than subservient most of the time, he constantly strives to be of use to justify his existence and get people to validate his presence. This praise-seeking is a feature of histrionic personality disorder, which sounds to me like a much better fit for Tony than "textbook narcissism." Children need praise and encouragement. There are tips for praising children and coworkers. Fishing for compliments is considered rude, and it does diminish the satisfaction of receiving them. You can see Bucky in big brother mode, coaching Tony on manners. Bucky may turn out to be one of the rare people from
whom Tony can accept that kind of input.

made a splendid list of alternatives to remembering. Having a friend remind you, or setting a reminder in a computer program, are examples of ways to get things done without relying on your own faulty memory. JARVIS is a combination of both. There are also ways to memorize things and resist mental decline, general life skills for memory, and mental exercises. These may help improve damaged memory.

Coulson's response to Fury is a form of reinforcement from operant conditioning, intended to discourage a repetition of undesirable behavior by associating it with an unpleasant result. This is also an example of logical consequences, which can be contrasted with punishment and with natural consequences.

Ballet lifts may be done with one hand or two hands. Dance partnering involves close cooperation. It's far more complex than just muscles. It requires a high level of communication and trust to form a great partnership. Thus Black Widow's earlier relationship with the Winter Soldier was probably her first experience of real trust. These factors explain why dance strengthens connections in couples and communities.
Chapter Summary

Clint and Phil talk about Bucky's relationship with Natasha, which is making Clint feel insecure.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After the in-progress form was finished, the queue popped up a new message from Agent Sitwell: Not my kind of assignment, or yours, but I know you're seeking opportunities for Dr. Ross and Dr. Banner to take a trial run as handler and asset. This sounds like it's right up their alley. The attached proposal concerned a physics symposium receiving threats that might trace back to AIM.

Phil nodded silently. It looked like a great match. If nothing went wrong, Dr. Ross and Dr. Banner would enjoy the main event. If someone tried to kill the keynote speakers as threatened, the targets could be ushered to safety -- or, if necessary, Hulk would come out to protect them. He liked scientists, and in that field probably even knew some of them. Phil read the proposal, sent back a request for a full mission packet, left an inquiry with the forgery department about cover identities, and forwarded the proposal to Dr. Ross and Dr. Banner to see if it appealed to them. He wanted to pick something that made them feel comfortable, for their first dyad assignment.

"Excuse me, Phil, but Clint has been hovering outside your door without knocking for five minutes," JARVIS said. "What is your preferred response?"

"Don't make a fuss about it, just open the door," Phil said. JARVIS did so.

"I, um ... I don't mean to interrupt," Clint said. He stood in the doorway, one hand nervously clasping the opposite wrist. "I know you're working ..."

"I always have time for you when you need me," Phil said. He turned off his screen so he could give Clint his full attention. "Come in and tell me what's bothering you."

Clint stepped into the office and started pacing. "Bucky is a dick!" he burst out.

"What brought you to that conclusion?" Phil asked mildly. He knew that the brainwashing was a sensitive topic for Clint. It raised trust issues for other team members too, although they proved diligent at working through those. The amnesia and mood swings were tedious and frustrating for everyone, including Bucky himself. Then there was the matter of Bucky's occasional sass, but Phil thought that would amuse more than annoy Clint. The two seemed to bond well over sharpshooting too. Phil wondered what had gone wrong, and fished for more information. "Could you give me an example?"

"He's trying to take Natasha away from me!" Clint said.

Well, Phil hadn't seen that one coming. "I could use a bit more detail here," he said.

"They were dancing," Clint said. "I went down to the gym for some tumbling practice and saw them on the mats together, doing some kind of fancy leap-and-twirl shit."
Ah. *That one*, Phil thought. Clint had paired with Natasha for one of her rare dance-related missions. They accomplished the objective, but she had been prickly all through it and then withdrawn afterward. "I can see why you'd find that upsetting," Phil said aloud. "That doesn't necessarily mean Bucky is trying to come between you and Natasha. It just means the two of them share an affinity for ballet."

"But she likes him better than she likes me," Clint wailed. "She glares at me when there's dancing on a mission. She hates having me around when she's injured and then she lets Bucky *carry her!*"

"Natasha doesn't like anyone's company when feeling less than her best; you know that and you know why," Phil reminded Clint. The Red Room had used some devastating selection techniques to weed out the weak, and not all of their conscripts survived training. "Bucky simply makes himself unobtrusive enough to avoid setting her off. You do different things for Natasha -- you can make her laugh when nobody else can. Bucky's sense of humor may have survived his ordeal, but I doubt it's strong enough to jolly someone else out of a low mood."

"I've heard Steve's stories about what a horndog Bucky is. I don't want to wind up in Steve's place watching Bucky steal all the attention," Clint said. His fingers fidgeted, restless without the solid curve of his bow to grasp. "I'm not -- it's different for me. I didn't pick up Natasha as a girlfriend. It's not like I'm sexual and could go find a replacement."

"Natasha is irreplaceable," Phil agreed. "You might stop to consider that Bucky views her that way too."

Clint flopped onto the couch, picked at the corner of one cushion for a few seconds, then sprang to his feet again. "Bucky gets in the way," Clint said. "Natasha spends time with him instead of me. I don't like it. She's my sister and I need her."

Phil pushed away from his desk and sat on the couch. "Come here, Clint," he said. When Clint joined him, Phil pulled him into a hug. "Shh, now, listen to me. Natasha is your sister. That relationship is very different from the one she shares with Bucky. It's not a competition. There's more than one kind of relationship, and love, and trust. Families are complicated, Clint, especially when they're growing. But it's worth it."

"Is it really?" Clint said as he nuzzled against Phil's side.

Phil stroked a soothing thumb over Clint's ribs. "Yes, really," Phil said. "I don't know about you, but I'm grateful that Bucky and Natasha were there for each other, at a point in their lives when nobody else was. That gave them some reference for trust and teamwork, however slender. If it weren't for that, we might not have gotten either of them out of enemy hands."

"That's -- I hadn't thought about it that way," Clint said. He clung to Phil with desperate strength. "I can't lose her, Phil. I just *can't*."

"You won't, as long as you give her the room to be herself," Phil said. "Remember that song we heard in New Mexico?"

"Yeah, I liked it because it could mean any kind of love, it didn't nail down a romantic angle," Clint said, smiling a little. "Natasha definitely has thorns, too."

JARVIS brought up the song, sweet-sharp through the hidden speakers:

*Love is a rose but you better not pick it*  
*Only grows when it's on the vine*
Handful of thorns and you'll know you've missed it
Lose your love when you say the word mine

They listened in silence until the lyrics faded away.

Chapter End Notes

The end notes won't fit. You can see them on the original Dreamwidth post:
http://ysabetwordsmith.dreamwidth.org/9330914.html
The story is completely posted there, if you want to read it through.
Don't Ever Leave Me

Chapter Summary

Clint and Phil go down to the kitchen where Bruce is cooking supper. Phil wants Clint to make his fried corn salsa. Clint and Natasha get into an argument about Bucky.

Chapter Notes

Not all the end notes fit, so I moved some here...

Search engines are not yet self-aware, but they're getting closer. Refract Speech is one such example; it actually reads web pages for content.

Demonstrating love is an important part of close relationships. There are steps for showing love. Consider which of the five love languages you prefer to give and receive. JARVIS expresses his love primarily through attention and service. Tony expresses his through gifts, because he craves time and attention from other people but knows that he doesn't express himself well in those modes -- or in words either. So that colors a lot of how JARVIS behaves. Phil is also time/service oriented, but with a more fluent grasp of words. Bruce leans heavily toward service but also values touch; gifts make him uneasy. Hulk favors touch and time, then service. Natasha's expression is almost all touch: trusting people with her body. Clint focuses on time and touch. Steve uses service and time, augmented by words and touch. He is ambivalent about gifts. Betty does well with words, service, and touch. Bucky leans toward service, gifts, and touch -- particularly giving the first two and receiving the last. He is less receptive to gifts.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"JARVIS is amazing," Clint said. "How does he do that?"

Phil thought about the intricate process of figuring out which song they meant when neither of them had named it. Location, probable date correlating to a shared mission there, topic, and one keyword -- plus a deep knowledge of the people involved -- distilled through the world's only fully sapient search engine. "He pays attention," Phil said aloud. That was how JARVIS showed them he cared. He didn't have hands, but he could still touch them.

"Yeah," Clint said softly.

"Enough moping," Phil said then, patting Clint on the knee. "Let's go downstairs and help with supper."

"I thought it was Bruce's turn to cook," Clint protested, "or somebody else's, anyway. I cooked this morning."

"It is Bruce's turn. He's cooking Mexican tonight, and I want your fried corn salsa," said Phil.
"Oh, okay," Clint said, perking up.

When they reached the kitchen, Bruce was carefully tilting a baking dish to coat the inside with sugar syrup. He looked up at them, startled, and said, "Didn't Clint just cook this morning?"

"Yes, but I coaxed him into helping with supper. You really want to try his fried corn salsa," Phil said. "What else are we having?"

"I'm making the tacos and flan. Natasha said she might make tomato salsa if she has time," Bruce said.

"Main dish, dessert, two vegetables ... we could use fruit," Phil said. He gathered ingredients to chop for a tropical fruit salad. Mango, papaya, and pineapple went onto the counter. Phil added a carton of blueberries because Tony and Bruce loved them; Bruce called them a brain food. That had gotten Bucky hooked too. Like Steve, he gravitated toward fresh foods that had been unavailable in their early life.

"No coconut?" Clint asked as he set the ears of corn to boil.

"Tony doesn't like coconut, remember," Phil said. It came too close to the taste that leached out of the arc reactor. "I can make two batches, though, with and without coconut." He got out a white bowl for the coconut salad and a pink bowl for the plain.

Natasha showed up and began gathering ingredients for her salsa. "Is that Brazilian style flan?" she asked Bruce, a hopeful note in her voice. He nodded, smiled briefly, then tucked his chin bashfully against his chest. He still wasn't used to people paying attention to what he did in any kind of positive way.

"Where's your new best friend?" Clint snarked at Natasha.

"Bucky is resting," she said in a cool tone. "We enjoyed a very invigorating practice session in the gym. He still can't sleep, but he thinks that he might get deeper into doze mode. He said not to rouse him for supper. Do you have a problem with that?"

"Naw, I'm good with Bucky skipping supper," Clint said. He minced tomatillos for his recipe.

Bruce looked up from mixing a bowl of flan batter. "JARVIS, please remind Bucky to eat something after he gets up," he said. JARVIS gave a soft chime of acknowledgement.

Phil watched Natasha work, the vegetables dancing with the silver flicker of the knife as she diced tomatoes, onions, and three different colors of peppers. Her gestures looked a little sharper than usual, the patter of the knife sounding louder against the cutting board. *Tension between Clint and Bucky is bad enough, Phil thought. Conflict between Clint and Natasha would be even worse.* Phil remembered the miserable days just before the introduction of game night.

"Most of what we're making should keep," Natasha said. She scraped multicolored cubes off the chopping board into a bowl. "We can just put some in the refrigerator for Bucky."

"You're so thoughtful," Clint said. He fished the boiled ears of corn out of the pot.

Natasha set down her knife with a careful *click* against the counter. "Clint, what is going on?" she said evenly.

Clint concentrated on sawing corn kernels off the cobs. "You were ... he was ... I *saw you*, in the gym. Together."
"Bucky is my dance partner. I'm terribly grateful to have him back," Natasha said. She trailed a hand down Clint's bare arm. "He is not my brother."

Clint set aside his work to cling to her. "Don't ever leave me," he said. "Please don't leave. Everyone leaves and I couldn't stand losing you and --"

"Silly goose, of course I won't leave you," said Natasha. She pressed her cheek against his. "Now finish your corn." She turned Clint around and nudged him back to his skillet.

"Is that why you drag your feet on missions that call for dancing?" Phil asked quietly. He sorted his chopped fruit into two bowls.

Natasha nodded. "I have a dance partner. He wasn't there for any of those missions," she said. Her lips curled in a dark smile. "Though you should have seen the one we did at the Большой театр."

Black Widow and the Winter Soldier had, somehow, managed to poison one of the other dancers -- a rival spy interested in the upscale audience -- in a way that made it look like a natural death from tetanus acquired by scraping a knee on a nail from the stage. "I've read the report on that one; rather impressive, aside from the fact that people could see the blood from the front seats. I doubt anyone else ever put the pieces together," Phil said.

"The KGB certainly didn't," Natasha said. Her hands deftly added spices to the salsa.

"So if you had your proper partner, might you be more amenable to dancing missions in the future?" Phil asked.

"I might," Natasha said, then cast a sidelong glance at Clint who was stirring the mass of vegetables in his skillet, "if it wouldn't cause trouble. It's not worth upsetting a relationship that already works."

"I'm not much for ballet," Clint said. "I'm more of a folk dance guy, maybe a little country, oh and I did some bareback shooting with the liberty act in the circus which is more like dancing than you might think." He shrugged. "Guess I can learn to live with it."

"That's good to hear," Phil said. "Maybe we can find something extra for your sniper missions too."

The Avengers were ideal for major threats as a team, but they still retained their unique skills. The occasional solo or dyad mission helped keep those different abilities in top form. Adding a new person, while challenging in terms of relationships, opened new opportunities for combining their skills.

Chapter End Notes

**Brazilian Flan** is a delicious egg custard type dessert.

I don't have the first recipe we used for **Corn and Tomatillo Salsa**, but this one is fairly close.

Here's a good base for **Tropical Fruit Salad**.

**Blueberries** are among the best **brain foods**.

Three-Pepper Salsa may be made with **fresh** or **canned** tomatoes.
Clint and Natasha are intimate siblings, the closest relationship in their lives. Siblings shape relationship development and boost life skills. Practice good family communication. Teach children how to speak and listen to each other.

Some types of dance are partner dances. Read about great ballet partnerships and the 10 best couples of all time. A dance partnership is about loyalty and trust. In fact, dance teaches lessons about love and relationships. Black Widow somehow imprint on the Winter Soldier quite strongly. So as far as Natasha is concerned, she has one dance partner, like a monogamous person has one husband. She doesn't feel comfortable cheating on him. Now that Bucky is here, Natasha might stretch to be a bit more accepting of Clint in this regard.

One of my anonymous readers recommended this gorgeous video, "Duo Flame," as something that might suit Natasha and Bucky. (There's an ad at the front, but this is one of the rare cases where I'll tell you it's worth the wait.) This is fusion dance. Natasha is pretty stuck on ballet but he branches out more, so maybe Bucky could coax her to expand.

The Bolshoi Theatre or Большой театр is a famous attraction in Russia.

The KGB was a Soviet security organization. They were notoriously intrusive but not terrifically competent. We may assume that Department X and the Red Room routinely ran rings around them.

Clint has the compact, muscular form to make a good ballet lifter, but he doesn't care for ballet. He prefers Country-Western and other American folk dances, along with some from around the world. Clint likes bouncier music and moves. Ballet suits the more reserved and elegant style of Natasha and Bucky.

Bareback shooting is real, and impressive. Here's a gorgeous video of bareback riding and archery. The rider picks up the bow around 6:00 and starts shooting at 8:30. That horse is exactly what you want for archery or liberty work: agile, smart, and responsive. Clint would also know other riding tricks like standing bareback; he probably does standing bareback archery.

A liberty act means the horses are running free, without reins or riders. Here's a video of a circus act. Sometimes these acts also include other animals, like dogs riding horses; or humans doing bareback stunts. The horses rely on verbal cues, hand signals, shifts in body posture, and other nonverbal signals that don't involve tack. It requires great communication skill for human and equine performers.
Chapter Summary

The Avengers share supper. Bruce teaches Steve how to assemble soft tacos so they won't fall apart. Betty opens the discussion of adding Bucky to game night.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The four of them chatted about less consequential things while supper progressed. Natasha finished making the tomato salsa and Phil finished the tropical fruit salad. Clint stirred the frying corn with desultory strokes. Bruce put the flan in the oven and started cooking the taco filling. The ground beef gave off a savory smell as the spices and diced vegetables went in.

Steve came into the kitchen and set the table. "Is there anything else I can do?" he asked.

"Condiments," Bruce said, waving his spatula at the refrigerator. "Crema agría, queso fresco, y cilantro por favor..."

"JARVIS, what did he just ask for and where is it?" Steve muttered as he opened the refrigerator. JARVIS quietly provided descriptions and directions.

Tony and Betty arrived, talking science. "No Bucky?" asked Betty.

"He's trying to nap," Natasha explained.

Tony snitched a taste of Clint's fried corn salsa while Clint tried to shoo him away. "Tastes good," Tony said. "Where are the chips?"

"Oh, crud," Clint said. "I knew I was forgetting something."

"Not a problem," Tony said. "Hey JARVIS, call Rosita's and get us ... hmm ..." He peered into the skillet and then Natasha's large bowl of tomato salsa. "... two family-size orders of tortilla chips, one white, one blue." He turned to Bruce. "Do we need taco shells or soft tortillas?"

"I already made tortillas; they're in the warmer. If you want hard shells, you'll need to order those," Bruce said.

"Good idea. JARVIS, add a dozen hard taco shells to our order, whatever colors they have to spare," Tony said.

Bruce moved the spatula briskly through the deep skillet. The onions and peppers had turned translucent and the ground beef no longer showed pink. "This taco filling is done now," he said.

"ETA ten minutes on the chips and taco shells, sir," JARVIS said.

Steve's stomach gurgled. "Excuse me," he said. "I'm really hungry."

Clint turned down the skillet with the fried corn salsa and put the cover on it. "That'll keep until the
chips get here," he said. "Let's just start with what we've already got. I'm hungry too."

"Don't forget to fill some storage tubs for Bucky," Phil reminded them. He took care of the fruit salad himself, and Natasha got the rest. They put the tubs into the refrigerator for Bucky. Then they carried the food to the table.

Steve looked at the taco fixings and said, "I have no idea how to eat this."

"Here, I'll show you, Steve," Bruce said. "Start with plain so you know how it tastes. Try the other stuff one at a time later." He put a spoonful of taco filling on a tortilla. "Fold the bottom end up first. Wrap the sides over like this. Keep the closed end pointed downward at your plate. Don't tip the open end lower or it will drip on you. And Tony, stop looking at me like that, I lived in Brazil, I'm not going to teach him to eat like a gringo and wind up with half his food in his lap."

Steve wolfed down the first taco in about three bites. He hesitated over the condiments, unsure where to start. Bruce pushed the ques fresco at him, saying, "It's cheese; you'll probably like it," but made Steve assemble his own taco this time. It was messier but Steve gave it a thumbs-up anyway.

Phil quietly approved of the way that Steve was trying new things. Phil also appreciated that other members of the team were learning to get him started, but not do everything for him. It's amazing how far Steve has come, Phil realized. That's easier to see now that we have Bucky for comparison. With so much time in cryonic suspension, Bucky hasn't had much chance to learn about the modern world yet.

By the time the tortilla chips and hard shells arrived, Steve was eating tacos the way he often ate pizza. He put the bread on the bottom, with everything else on top, so that he had to use a fork. Steve sampled the new chips with both salsas. "This won't all fit on my plate," he said mournfully, looking back and forth like a donkey between two bales of hay.

Phil got up and fetched some extra bowls. "Here, put the salsas in these and put the chips on your plate," he said. Piling a mass of filling and condiments onto some kind of edible base seemed to be a developing pattern for Steve. It made Phil happy to see Steve eating with such enthusiasm. There were still times when Steve forgot to keep up with his four-times-average metabolism, but at least he had stopped putting up so much resistance to people feeding him properly.

"Now if we could just get Bucky to do the same ..." Bruce murmured.

"We will," Phil said. "Just give him time to adjust." It had taken quite a while for Steve to come this far. That gave them ideas for what might help Bucky along the same path.

"Speaking of Bucky, we should take this opportunity to discuss game night," Betty said. "I know the last one washed out due to the Great Grape Ape Incident, but it's going to come up again the next weekend."

"All right, what are your thoughts?" Phil said.

"I think he needs it," Betty said. "Bucky has survived a lot of trauma, some of which we know about and much of which we probably don't. He's showing a bunch of different symptoms, as triggers cycle in and out of his awareness. Relationship difficulty is a likely problem too, so anything that encourages connection is a good idea. We're already doing a healing exercise that's working well for the rest of the team. If we bring Bucky into it, that should provide a stabilizing influence for him."

Tony paused with a taco halfway to his mouth. "What healing exercise?" he said. "Game night is a game. Hence the name."
"That too, and a good one," Betty said. Phil stared at her. She stared back. "What? I've read some of the same books you have. My father really messed me up, Phil, I needed a lot of therapy to get my head together."

"Never mind," Phil said, firmly tamping down his desire to bounce General Ross' head off a prison wall a few dozen times. "So you're in favor of inviting Bucky to game night. Other opinions?" He looked around the table.

Chapter End Notes

Here is an approximation of Bruce's taco filling. Tacos are a vital part of Mexican street food. Explore different styles of tacos and recipes.

*Crema agría* is a Mexican version of sour cream.

*Queso fresco* is a white Mexican cheese.

Bruce is code-switching between English and Spanish. Specifically what happened is that he started listing ingredients in Spanish and then just finished the sentence the same way. People code-switch for various reasons. It's not a mistake, but rather a subtle and sophisticated use of language. Linguistic register is a milder version of code-switching between languages. There are lessons on code-switching. I love languages, so you'll see me swapping them around pretty much any time I have multilingual characters in play.

*Mexican tortillas* are traditionally made with lard, and that works better than shortening. Remember, different fats have unique characteristics; they are not all the same and they behave differently in the kitchen.

Watch and learn how to fold a taco. This is the right way that people do it in Mexico, and I learned from watching them. If you fold the tortilla in half or roll it into a tube, your food will fall out and people are likely to laugh about it.

It's important to let people learn how to do things for themselves, not just do everything for them. This applies both to children and to people with disabilities. Demonstrate first. Coach and answer questions as needed. Make sure nobody gets hurt. But if you hover and help too much, they'll never learn to do it themselves. This kind of hands-on-then-off teaching is a vital skill for the Avengers, because they all have mental injuries to overcome, and they also deal in superhero skills for which you can't exactly buy an Idiot's Guide.

Nonsexual ageplay is related to regression therapy. Reparenting is another branch of therapy that aims to heal the wounded child within. Yes, ordinary people really do this. It's okay and it can help. It's not necessarily connected with kink or sex, even though some people mistakenly think it is. The basic idea is simply that childhood development progresses in a typical order; if that social growth gets blocked, people may find it helpful to go back to that age and redo things the right way. It doesn't have to involve hypnotism; some people roleplay just fine without that. It doesn't have to be infant play, and indeed, forcing a specific age is wrong. Each "little" should choose the age that feels right for them, because their instincts will guide them to what needs work, and the developmental milestones are different at each age.
"I want him. I need him," Steve said. "I think Betty's right and game night would be good for Bucky. I'm just having a hard time getting past my own feelings on the matter. Guess that's selfish of me, but ..." He shrugged.

"You're part of the team, Steve," said Phil. "That makes your feelings relevant too."

"What about mine?" Clint said. "I'm not so sure I want Bucky around."

"He couldn't help being brainwashed any more than you could," Steve said a little sharply.

"It's not about that," Clint protested. "It's just ... oh, never mind."

"You aren't obligated to approve Bucky's presence at game night," Phil said. "However, I do need you to be honest about your reasoning. Do you feel threatened by him?"

Clint looked at Natasha, then turned back to Phil. "What I said earlier. In your office. Yeah, that. Might take me a while to work through."

"All right then, let's leave it there for now," Phil said. "Natasha?"

"I would enjoy his company," she said. Her fingers dismembered a tortilla, tearing it into smaller and smaller fragments. "Will it help him? I do not know. The Winter Soldier is unmade. Bucky has yet to remake himself -- he tries, but the pieces slip through his hands as I watch. He is so broken inside. We all are, really. I do not know if anything can fix that." She shoved her plate away.

Betty touched Natasha's shoulder, very lightly, and then let her hand fall. "Family can't fix everything, but it can make things better," she said. "You're not alone anymore, and neither is Bucky. We have each other for support when times get tough. Don't give up hope."

"I know a few things about being broken," Bruce said. "Bucky is working hard, not just at putting himself back together, but at connecting with the rest of us too. Yeah, sometimes he makes mistakes. So do we. The way I see it ... he's not afraid of me letting the Other Guy out to smash him. That's a kind of friendship too rare for me to throw it away. I'm in favor of inviting him on that count." He sighed. "And now I'm doing what Steve is doing, thinking of myself instead of Bucky."

"So keep going until you get to the parts about Bucky," Phil suggested. "You and I have talked about him enough."

Bruce pressed his fingertips thoughtfully together, almost as if caging a ball between his hands. "We know that Bucky has lost almost everyone he knew. Anything that helps him bond with a new team should make him feel less adrift. That's a pretty straightforward benefit," Bruce said. "He also has a
lot of other recent trauma, and mood swings from various causes. An earlier, happier mindset during
game night could improve those issues." Then he shrugged. "There are no guarantees, though. Those
are just my thoughts on Bucky rather than myself."

"I'm thinking of both," Tony said. "Not even sure how to pick the two apart, it's like trying to
undress a salad. He's my garage buddy, which is great, haven't had one in a while. We keep reaching
out to each other. That's fantastic when it works and a major pain when it backfires." Tony dropped
the tail end of a taco on his plate to rub a hand over his chest. "There's this ... push-pull thing going.
And some ... past issues too. So I don't know whether to say yes or no."

Phil thought about how Bucky, like Steve, once knew Howard Stark although his recollection of that
seemed mostly missing in action. Sometimes those matters brought up painful memories for Tony.
"Here's a question for you. So far, you've interacted as adults, with a substantial amount of
responsibility involved. Do you think that removing that weight of expectation might loosen up the
interaction enough to make adjustments easier? Or might it remove support that one or both of you
need?"

"I really ... have no idea," Tony said. He moved his hands together, then apart. "Let me think about
it?"

"Of course, Tony. Take what time you need," Phil said.

"I wonder if that's part of the issue here," Bruce said as he watched Tony's groping gestures. "Bucky
isn't ... all together yet, and won't be for some time, if ever. So the pieces shift around. That makes it
hard to tell how good a fit he is, because it changes. His moods change; his memories change. That
influences how he interacts with us. It's not as extreme as with me and the Other Guy, but there are
similarities."

"We've learned to work with both of you," Steve pointed out. "At first, yeah, it was just SHIELD
wanting to pick your brain and Tony's hunch that you'd come through for us in a pinch. But once we
saw Hulk in action, we started getting to know him as well as you. I'm grateful for that. He's a swell
friend."

Bruce looked away. "I know, you keep telling me he's okay, and you show me pictures, and I'm
starting to get more memories from him ... some of which really freak me out," Bruce said. "I'm
trying to get along better, really I am. But I can't trust him. If I could vote him out of game night, I
would." He gave a bitter laugh.

"That's kind of a mean thing to say," Steve observed.

"It's how I feel," Bruce said.

"No, it's what you want. How you feel is -- I don't know, worried, scared, resentful?" Steve said.

"I guess," Bruce said.

_Threatened_, Phil thought, recalling their post-transformation discussions.

"Hulk has never come out during game night, no matter how angry or frustrated you got -- not even
when you hurt yourself," Phil pointed out.

A timer binged. Bruce pushed away from the table, saying, "Flan's ready." He fussed over the oven,
pulling out dessert. A fragrant wave of steam emerged, redolent of caramel and custard. Bruce set the
flan on the table along with a bottle of fancy dark chocolate sauce.
Chapter End Notes

It's important to **balance the needs of self and others**, particularly regarding **compassion**. Take steps to **address imbalance**.

Treating **survivors of torture and war trauma** is difficult. This applies most to Natasha and Bucky, but also the other Avengers in different ways. Yes, even complex PTSD **can be resolved**. It just takes a lot of work to **build a post-trauma identity**. **Supportive family members** can help tremendously.

PTSD puts a **strain on relationships**. It helps to **make some new friends**, including **people outside the PTSD community**.

**Push-pull** is a common pattern, especially in **codependent relationships**. When Pepper and Tony were together, she wanted more closeness and he pulled away; this is a typical push-pull. With Bucky it's more complex. Both Bucky and Tony feel a strong platonic attraction to each other; both are capable of causing and feeling deep hurt due to personal issues. So at any moment, either of them can cause the other to pull away, or they can actually both bounce off each other. There are suggestions for **overcoming push-pull relationships** and **fixing mistakes in family relationships**.

Mood swings **impact family dynamics**. They can **impair communication**. It helps to make a **family maintenance plan**. There are tips for **coping with mood swings**.

Interpersonal communication involves understanding each other's emotions. For that, you need to distinguish between your feelings and your **thoughts** or **judgments**. Learn how to **identify and share your feelings**, **Know how you feel**, **Express your emotions**. **Talk about your feelings** with people close to you.
A Safe and Supportive Environment

Chapter Summary

Betty asks Phil for his perspective on adding Bucky to game night. Steve reveals how reliant he is on Bucky's presence in his life, which makes Clint and Tony feel guilty.

After the discussion concludes, Phil invites Natasha down to the gym, where he has a gift for her.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"I thought flan came with caramel sauce?" Tony said.

"That's already baked on -- it goes inside the pan before the batter does," Bruce explained. "The chocolate topping is optional."

"No such thing as too much chocolate," Clint declared. He doused his serving of flan with a generous amount and then passed the bottle to Steve.

Steve dabbed a bit of chocolate onto his flan, sampled it, then followed Clint's example. "This is really good, Bruce. Thanks for making it," said Steve.

Phil was delighted to see him latching onto a dessert that amounted a pile of milk, eggs, and sugar. Plus the chocolate. The more calories we can cram together, and the more appealing they taste, the less chance of Steve keeling over from low fuel, Phil thought. Then he noticed Tony licking his spoon thoroughly before taking another bite. Hmm, looks like Tony never had this kind of flan before. That's good too. Tony needed to eat more than the smoothies and junk food that he favored when left to his own devices.

Bruce, predictably, ignored the compliments even with Betty elbowing him gently. Phil let it slide. Bruce cooked; people appreciated it; sooner or later that would sink in. Phil didn't want to push it for fear of making matters worse.

"What do you think about inviting Bucky to game night, Phil?" asked Betty. "You've checked everyone else but said little of your own opinions."

"I'm in charge of the exercise, so I don't want to pressure anyone," Phil demurred.

"Phil, you're a skilled handler. I'd like to incorporate your observations in my assessment, even though I lean toward including Bucky," said Betty.

"First, I think Bucky's personality suits him to the nature of the exercise," Phil said. "He's poked fun at a couple of things, like the character band-aids, but he doesn't keep teasing once he gets an explanation. He doesn't think of cartoons as childish -- that's actually a benefit of his earlier culture reference. He makes whimsical gestures with people."

"He stuck his tongue out at me once," Clint said. He chuckled. "Guy gets on my nerves sometimes, but I like his sense of humor."
"Furthermore, I've dealt with some of the same issues that Bucky has, spread out over different people," Phil went on. "Traumatic brain injury with several assets, some time ago. Dislocation in time with Steve. Brainwashing, and coaxing wary independent spies to come in from the cold, with Clint and Natasha. Biochemical imbalances and mood swings with Bruce and Tony."

"You might as well add me to the 'coming in from the cold' category," Betty pointed out. "I may not be a spy, but you put a lot of work into earning my trust."

Phil nodded acknowledgment of her point. "Fair enough," he said. "In all cases, a safe and supportive environment helps. Our game night is designed to provide that -- remember that I introduced it after Fury's gambit and the Battle of New York mangled our early efforts at team formation."

"Yeah, that sucked," Clint said darkly. His spoon scraped against his plate, chasing the last of the chocolate.

"I know that I made mistakes, with some of you more than others," Phil said. He looked around the table, lingering longer on Tony and Bruce. "I'd like to give Bucky the benefit of my improved experience, in hopes of getting him back onto his feet sooner, with less grief all around."

"Point," Tony said, looking away. Bruce just nodded silently.

"I'm feeling kind of stuck here," Steve said. He slid his empty plate away. "I'm not sure I can play without Bucky anymore. I mean, before this, when he wasn't here, I could just ... push it to the back of my mind. That's what I had to do every time: push it. Because I can't think about being little without thinking about him. We grew up together and he always protected me; I don't think I'd be alive without him. Now that he's home, I can't push him out of my mind anymore; I'm always thinking about him. I need to be with Bucky. I wouldn't quit but ... if he's not at game night, I don't think my heart would be in it." Steve looked at Clint, and then at Phil, then concluded softly, "I want him back."

"Well now I feel like a dick," Clint said, and put his face in his hands.

Tony fidgeted with his fork. He pushed on the tines, making the stem click against the table. "Yeah. That."

Steve shook his head. "No, you have as much right to your feelings as I do to mine," he said. "Just be honest with yourself, and us."

Tony and Clint looked at each other, then looked away. Neither spoke.

"All right, so far Steve, Natasha, Betty, Bruce, and I favor inviting Bucky to game night," Phil said. "Clint and Tony are undecided, perhaps leaning toward no."

The two holdouts met each other's eyes, then slowly nodded.

"What I propose is this: I'll talk to Bucky about game night, let him know where things stand currently, and see where his interest falls," Phil said. "Clint, Tony, I'd like you to think about your reservations and what extra information you need to make a clear decision. Consider your self-awareness. Talk with me, or Bucky, or anyone else if necessary. Sound fair?"

"Do I have to file a report on this?" Clint said plaintively.

"Only if you feel that it would help clarify your thoughts and emotions," Phil said. He glanced at Tony and wondered if the man noticed his own fingers idly tracing flow-chart symbols on the
"Do whatever you find useful in that regard."

"Guess that's fair," Tony said, and everyone else nodded agreement.

"I'll get the dishes," Betty said. She started collecting them. Steve took care of the leftovers. Phil left the kitchen in their capable hands.

"If you're free this evening, I'd like you to come down to the gym with me," Phil said to Natasha.

"Yes, of course," she said, following him to the stairs.

The main workout floor contained several spaces not yet customized for any particular activity. Phil had claimed one of them for this activity as soon as some basic supplies had arrived. He handed Natasha a box of textured ivory cardboard tied with a gauzy pink bow.

"It is not my birthday," she said, raising her eyebrows.

"This isn't a birthday present, although I am hoping to work with Natka tonight, if you're amenable," said Uncle Phil. "I think you could use a chance to relax without other people underfoot."

"I could," Natasha said, "but I do not know if I am able." She still had not so much as touched the bow.

"Then let's just warm up slowly and see where it goes from there," Phil said. "No pressure."

Chapter End Notes

Dark chocolate sauce can be bought or made from scratch. It is richer and bitterer than milk chocolate sauce. If you buy, check the label and try to avoid ones that are lightly flavored high-fructose corn syrup.

Accepting compliments can be difficult for shy people, trauma survivors, and other folks with social anxieties. There are steps for taking compliments. Sometimes it helps to roleplay. Bruce isn't used to compliments at all, and Tony is used to flattery but that's about it.

A safe, supportive environment helps all kinds of trauma recovery. Learn to create a safe space in relationships. Group leaders need to keep an eye on this also. Support at home may use a traffic light system. There are tips for creating emotional safety.

Learning from mistakes is a vital life skill. First, consider the different kinds of mistakes. Second, identify and analyze mistakes that you make. Admit them and make amends as best you can. Then forgive yourself. There are suggestions on helping children deal with mistakes. Phil is great at analyzing mistakes and improving performance, but lousy at forgiving himself afterwards. The other Avengers are still trying to coax him through this, somewhat hampered by the fact that most of them also suck at self-compassion.

You have a right to your feelings, as does everyone. However, feelings are not always right. People with mood disorders may have blunted or skewed emotions. Even if your feelings are skewed, though, it's still okay to have them. You feel what you feel. Honor your feelings. Otherwise people wind up feeling like they can't talk about their emotions, which causes communication breakdowns. It helps to validate each other's
feelings and understand what to do about your feelings. In healthy relationships, people respect others' emotions. This contributes to an emotional community.

Natasha has difficulty relaxing. There are exercises for relaxation, and they benefit from taking plenty of time in a quiet place.
Natasha opens her present ... and learns something startling about Phil.

Chapter Notes

Not all the end notes fit, so I moved some here:

Here you can see Phil's "Real Men Dance" t-shirt, workout pants, and ballet shoes.

In French, *en pointe* means "on tiptoe," an advanced ballet technique.

*Curtsey* is a gesture of respect still used in ballet classes. Customarily, women curtsey and men bow.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Natasha nodded. Slowly she untied the bow and lifted the lid off the box. Inside lay a plain black leotard and delicate peach tights. It had taken Phil a while, even with help from JARVIS, to find that traditional skin-tone color instead of the louder pink that many modern ballerinas favored. Under the clothes lay a pair of matching ballet slippers and a hair tie.

"It has been some time since I have seen anything like this," Natasha said softly, trailing her fingertips over the springy fabric.

"Go change," Phil suggested, and she did. He followed suit himself.

When Natasha came back, there was just a hint of Natka in the hesitant pattern of her steps. She looked at Phil in his black warm-up pants, matching leather ballet slippers, and gray t-shirt that read *Real Men Dance*. "I confess that I was not expecting this," Natasha said. "You dance?"

"I actually took dance lessons for a year, as a little boy," Phil said. "I didn't have the dedication to stick with it, so I switched to judo later, but that introduction to ballet did wonders for my balance and flexibility."

"You took ballet," Natasha echoed, staring at him. "Why did you never mention this before?"

"Every time the topic of dance came up, it made you uncomfortable," Phil said. "I could tell that you loved it, but that something about it bothered you. So I didn't want to make matters worse by expanding the discussion."

"Okay," Natasha said. "Now what?"

"Now we warm up," Phil said. He bowed, and Natasha curtseyed back. "I asked JARVIS to suggest some simple routines for tonight."
Natasha rolled her eyes at him. "I am in perfect condition. I do not need simple. I can dance en pointe!" she said, casting a critical glance at her satin ballet slippers.

"Not without a warmup, and not without refreshing your skills first," Phil said firmly.

Lilting classical music floated through the air. Phil recognized Mozart's "Così fan tutte" but not the performance. Taking the stairs down to the gym had made a good start, so Phil demonstrated a series of slow stretches. Natasha followed along. Phil watched her body language closely, tracking the slow downward drift of her age presentation. She seemed relaxed, even happy in her own subtle way.

By the time they finished the stretches, it was Natka and not Natasha who flowed smoothly through the motions and then came to a rest, waiting for further instructions.

"Well done," Phil said.

"Thank you," Natka said. "We have no barre?"

"Not for tonight," Phil said, looking at the blank walls. "I'm sure if we ask Tony later, he'll be happy to redecorate for a proper dance studio and hire a suitable teacher." SHIELD certainly wouldn't spring for that, unless required for a mission. The problem with ballet, though, was that it involved specific skills that quickly declined if not practiced on a regular basis. "For now, we'll just go through a little centre floor work."

JARVIS had helped Phil find dance moves, as well as the warmup exercises, that should fall within his own ability and help Natka refresh her skills. That breathtaking lift with Bucky had been beautiful, but not the safest thing they could have been doing. Phil wanted to avoid potential injuries.

They began with port de bras, the arm positions. Next they did adage for grace and poise, followed by pirouettes for agility. There was something subtly off-focus about Natka's carriage, though. Phil watched her but could not pinpoint a reason. Only when he turned his attention on himself did the cause become clear. He was startled to realize that she was copying his mistakes.

"Natka, I know that your skill exceeds my own," Phil said. "You don't need to lower yourself to my level."

"It's not safe to do much better than the teacher," Natka said at once. Her naturally pale skin had gone even paler. Curls of red hair stuck to her face, standing out like streaks of paint.

"House rules," Phil reminded her gently. "No hitting. No being mean. Do the best that you can."

"If we weren't good enough, they would punish us, or worse," Natka said. She was trembling, faintly but visibly, "But if we were too good, they'd punish us for that as well. So I learned to match my skill to someone else's."

Really, Phil thought, someone needs to find whatever remains of Department X and the Red Room, and burn them to the ground. He mentally added "capable of handling flashbacks on the dance floor" to the list of job requirements for a dance teacher. It hadn't come up before, but Natka was more open now, so it was likely to happen again.

"I'd like to see what you can really do with that last pirouette," Phil said.

Natka twirled in place with flawless precision. The pinched look on her face hurt Phil's heart. All her earlier joy had drained out of the exercise.
"Come here," he said, holding out his arms. Natka pressed herself against him, warm and damp, still vibrating with tension. Phil cuddled her, letting her draw on his strength. It took a while to soothe the stress away.

When Natka finally calmed down, Phil said, "I always want to see you do your best in practice. Be yourself and be honest. Now, let's do a cooldown routine before we head to bed." Natka nodded and stepped away.

Phil led her through a series of gentle stretches, admiring her fluid grace. He did well enough at these, kept supple by his own martial arts work. Natka slowly shifted back toward Natasha. They ended with révérence, bow and curtsey to each other. Then they parted company.

After such an intense evening, Phil longed for the peace and quiet of his own quarters. He took a quick shower. Then he changed into his sleep clothes and stretched out on the bed. The mattress sighed underneath him.

Something niggled at him from the ballet session. "JARVIS, who was the pianist from earlier?" Phil asked. "I didn't recognize the performance."

"... I was," JARVIS said.

"Then you have my belated thanks," Phil said. "Next time, if you're going to play live, please let us know so we can include you in the révérence. It's rude to ignore the pianist if the music's not a recording."

"Yes, Phil," said JARVIS. "Will you be needing anything else tonight?"

Paperwork was right out. Phil thought about reading but couldn't muster the energy even for that. "I don't know," he said. "I'm too tired to think ..."

"Shall I put something restful on the screen for you?" JARVIS asked.

"Sure, good idea," Phil said idly. Soft ocean sounds filled the room as the lights dimmed, replaced by the wavering blue glow of some nature show about coral reefs. The lucent shimmer reminded Phil of the arc reactor in Tony's chest. Colorful fish swam with lazy grace across the screen.

Chapter End Notes

"Così fan tutte" is an Italian opera buffa by Mozart. The name "Così fan tutte, ossia La scuola degli amanti" means "All Women Do So, or The School for Lovers." (The title is difficult to translate precisely.) It often appears in ballet practice albums.

Ballet warmup exercises are available in text or video. Always do warmup before exercising to avoid injuries. Natasha knows this; she's just fussing over the "simple" part. Phil is right anyway.

In French, barre means "bar," a long rail of metal or wood that dancers use for balance. Most ballet warmups and many other exercises are done this way.

Without a barre, you can still do floor and centre exercises. Here is a video of ballet exercises.
Natasha has both fear of success and fear of failure. Both are common in PTSD, but hers were deliberately crafted: a way for the Red Room to control their assets and keep them locked into an emotional flatline. The advice on never outshining the master can be very difficult to overcome. There are tips on working through fear of success and fear of failure. A healthy goal is not emotional flatline, but emotional balance: the kind of buffered equilibrium that Steve enjoys, where he gets soft peaks and troughs but it takes a lot to knock him off his feet in either direction.

Dance and music often figure into PTSD recovery. Dance Movement Therapy is a group approach.

Teachers need to understand PTSD in order to teach students with this challenge. There are tips for teachers, along with advice on helping someone through a flashback. Remember, this isn't a rare problem: it can follow things like child abuse, rape, severe car accidents, natural disasters, etc. In a class of 20-30 students, at least one of them probably has PTSD.

It's useful in general to understand emotional first aid for ordinary stress and trauma situations. An excellent handbook is Johnson's Emotional First Aid. Remember that emotional first aid is like the physical kind: not intended as the only treatment for serious mental injuries. This is meant to handle minor injuries -- say, flunking an important test. For anything more significant (losing a job, witnessing a violent event), it's just to keep things from getting worse until expert care becomes available. First aid is also good maintenance for chronic conditions like PTSD which can have scary flareups.

Here is a basic cooldown routine for ballet.

In French, révérence means "reverence" or "respect."
I Feel So Overwhelmed

Chapter Summary

Phil talks with Bucky over breakfast. They discuss Bucky's eating habits, and how his body is adapting to freedom. Then Phil introduces the idea of game night.

Chapter Notes

Not all the end notes fit, so I moved some here:

Here is a simple recipe for making your own granola cereal. You can also mix and match.

Most diet advice is crap. Rule #1 for a healthy diet: ALWAYS LISTEN TO YOUR BODY. If anyone else's advice makes you feel worse when you follow it, ignore them and follow your body. They don't have to live in it when it goes wrong. Learn to recognize your hunger signals and avoid emotional eating. Specific, persistent food cravings may indicate a need for certain nutrients. Try to find healthy things to eat that will satisfy the craving, rather than eating junk -- or at least eat "treat" foods in small quantities.

That said, some general guidelines help: Eat a wide variety of unprocessed foods. Take steps to practice healthy eating. Aim for a balanced diet that doesn't leave out any major food types (unless something makes you sick). Ignore fads; they change like the wind. If something is called "good" today, it will probably be "bad" next year (or vice versa). Ignore them. Your body is smarter than people trying to sell you stuff.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When Phil went down to the common kitchen for breakfast, he found it empty except for Bucky devouring a mixing bowl full of oatmeal. "Is this okay?" Bucky asked. "JARVIS told me where to find the oatmeal and how to work the stove. Also, um, I used the last of the heavy cream."

"It's okay," Phil assured him. "You can eat as much as you want. Don't worry about the cream; there's more in the walk-in refrigerator in the pantry." Phil didn't feel like cooking. He rummaged through the cabinets and settled on some of Bruce's home-mix granola cereal. Then he joined Bucky at the table. "Did you find your share of supper last night?"

"Yes!" Bucky said with a grin. "JARVIS told me where to look for it. It's so much easier to eat when I don't have to think about it."

"Is that a problem for you?" Phil asked quietly.

"Sometimes. I had rations before, so it was just fuel. Made it simple to keep my body fed when I didn't have an appetite. Now I have to figure out when to eat, and what, and how much. I tried looking up some nutritional advice but it's all different now, and I just -- I don't know. I feel so
"overwhelmed," he said, earlier cheer falling away. "This is stupid."

"Bucky, choice paralysis is a common after-effect of brainwashing," Phil said. "It can even occur in other circumstances where someone follows orders very closely for a while. I've seen it before. It's manageable. You've got a whole new world to adapt to, and while you're very resilient, you're also recovering from some serious harm. Maybe if we give you one less thing to worry about, that would make it easier to focus on the things we can't affect so readily. Do you think it might help to have something more consistent in the way of food?"

"Yes, please," Bucky said. "Anything in a package would help. Rat bars, ready meals, even crackers..."

"Hold on a minute, I know just the thing," Phil said. He got up and retrieved a box of Starkbars from the cabinet. "Here, Tony invented these before he decided that he'd rather drink most of his snacks."

Bucky peered at the box decorated with a parrot wearing an eye patch. "Pieces of Eight?" he read from the label.

"They come in strips of eight. One piece equals one-eighth of the daily nutrients figured for a 2000-calorie diet," Phil explained. "We're guessing you need about three times average. So you can use these for snacks between regular meals. They come in chocolate, lemon, peanut, and honey-pistachio."

"Honey ... pistachio?" Bucky said dubiously.

"Tony likes baklava," Phil said.

"Thanks, Phil. I'll give these a try," Bucky said.

"Did you get any sleep yesterday?" Phil asked. "Natasha said you tried napping after your workout."

"Not quite," Bucky said with a sigh. "Bruce thinks it might take a couple of weeks for my body to settle back into a more ordinary sleep pattern. Days if I'm lucky, maybe a month or more if I'm unlucky. He's got some ideas ..." Bucky shrugged.

"That's good to hear. Do you think you can follow Bruce's lead?" Phil said. Bruce was like Tony, a genius of many skills. The granola cereal tasted better than anything Phil had bought in a box. *Maybe I'll introduce Pepper to this and see about marketing it,* he mused.

"I'm trying. He's one of the least pushy doctors I've ever met. That helps," Bucky said. He shivered. "It's still hard. I can't get very far even with him. Too many bad memories ..."

"Bruce is one of the least pushy people I've ever met, period. Try not to bulldoze him," Phil said.

"Yeah, he's like the little kid everybody picks on," Bucky said. "Reminds me a bit of Stevie, except that Stevie would stick up for himself even when he couldn't back it up. Kinda makes me want to pull Bruce behind me so I can protect him better."

"You may get that chance," Phil murmured. "We reserve Saturday evenings for a teambuilding exercise --"'

"When you don't have to save the city from rampaging purple gorillas," Bucky said, quirking one corner of his mouth.

"Yes, we missed our weekly opportunity for relaxation, which has done nobody's mood any good,"
Phil said. "There will be other times, though. What we do is ... hmm, consider it a kind of improvisational theatre. I keep an eye on things while other people play younger versions of themselves."

"How young?" Bucky asked, curious.

"It varies a bit," Phil said. "Most often Steve is ten, Clint is eight, Natka is seven, Betty is six, Tony is four, and Bruce is just under four."

"Tony's four? That seems ... odd for him. I mean, I don't really know him all that well, but he seems like the kind of man who doesn't give up control easily," said Bucky.

"That's exactly the point of the exercise," Phil said. "He's four, because he got his first bank account at five, and he needs some time without so much responsibility."

Bucky's eyebrows went up. "You want to make Tony Stark less responsible?" he said. "Okay, even I know that's a nutty idea. Have you ever seen that man in a workshop? He must have been a hellion at four!"

"Yes, but actually Tony's workshop habits have improved since we started game night. He and Bruce agreed on some rules that reduce mishaps for both of them," Phil said.

"Huh," Bucky said. "So you think I should do this exercise too? What for?"

"We're considering it," Phil said. "We think it might help balance your personality and improve your connections with the team. Does it hold any appeal for you, or does it seem too weird to work?"

"I don't know. It sounds bizarre," Bucky said. He thought about it further. Then he laughed. "Is that why you have all the kiddie shows, and the bandages with funnies, and everything else?"

"Yes, it is," Phil said. "What started out as a simple teambuilding exercise has ... spilled over a bit. But so have some momentous improvements in teamwork."

Chapter End Notes

Choice paralysis is a problem based on too many options. Learn to make decisions and overcome choice paralysis. It may help to simplify your life and your diet. Narrowing choices or having a safe default helps with choice paralysis. For most purposes, two or three choices is sufficient and minimizes confusion.

The bird on the package is a Brown Parrot or Meyer's Parrot, popular as a pirate pet.

An average diet is 2000 calories. Dietary need varies based on age, sex, activity level, and other factors. Some people -- if they are working extra hard, or have a low appetite -- may need help cramming enough calories into what they eat. Ballpark estimates are sufficient in most cases. Don't stuff yourself; if you're constantly hungry, though, eat more. Special thanks to Sati for finding two different places that calculate calorie needs. Health Calc's Total Energy Expenditure feature lets you provide information about your age, gender, and size followed by daily activity levels; it claims to be very precise and sounds plausibly so to me. Scooby's Accurate Calorie Counter asks similar questions but also allows you to set goals and refine your personal metabolic information.
Phil is mindful of good followship traits as well as good leadership traits. (Notice that they overlap a lot.) Ideally, with Steve and Bucky both on the team, they'll be able to tag off so nobody has to lead every mission, which is exhausting.

Improvisational theatre is a fun exercise of imagination. Learn some basic rules for it. Often it's just a matter of handing people some stock characters and/or a scenario. You can see the similarity to the ageplay exercise -- they each have a role to play and a "Saturday game night" scene.

It's important to understand how to give up control and let go of responsibility. Otherwise people stay wound up all the time, and stress like that can be deadly. Tony in particular, but also the other Avengers, really need a safe place to let go. In this regard, ageplay is similar to power exchange and subspace in BDSM. None of these have to include a sexual aspect. Some people think they do, but then, some people can figure out the distinction between biological sex and social gender or between erotic attraction and romantic attraction. If there's just one part you want, you can pick that out and do it, ignoring the rest; and some people do.
If I Come to Game Night

Chapter Summary

Phil and Bucky continue their conversation, as Bucky tries to decide if he wants to join in the ageplay. Phil reminds Bucky that he has a support network now. Bucky wonders if the others will accept him at game night.

Chapter Notes

Not all the end notes fit, so I'm moving one here:

It's important to acknowledge everyone's family contributions. Gratitude makes children more willing to do chores. Men are gradually doing more housework too; notice that Bucky and Steve don't mind pitching in, because they have a strong work ethic and had little impression of women taking care of them. People with disabilities can also contribute to family and community life. A healthy family finds ways for everyone to help.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"I guess ... it wouldn't hurt to give it a try," Bucky said. He bit his lip. "It's not like I'm in any shape to go out in the field and fight alongside the team."

"You'll get there, and in the meantime, there are plenty of opportunities for teambuilding at home," Phil said. "So far you've rebuilt an engine with Tony and carried Natasha to bed. Both of those are improvements over our previous options in those areas. Don't underestimate your contributions."

"If I come to game night, how old should I be?" Bucky asked. "I'm still trying to get a grip on it, but it's just ... slippery in my head."

"That's up to you. Think about whether you're interested in taking care of other people, being taken care of, or some combination of both -- bearing in mind that I'm in charge of the exercise as a whole," Phil said.

"No wonder Steve's the oldest," Bucky said.

Phil nodded. "He's very protective. Tony and Bruce cling to him a lot."

"I'm not sure what I'd want," Bucky said. "When we were little, I had to look after Stevie because otherwise people would've eaten him alive. But then after ... he changed ... most of the time I followed him. He's a good leader."

"He is indeed," Phil said. "Steve switches down sometimes, though. You're welcome to explore different ages."

"Maybe," Bucky said. "Steve and I knew each other really well. We were tight even for brothers."
But then ..." Bucky's right thumb rubbed over his left hand. "So much happened to us, and we got split apart before we really had time deal with it. I don't even remember all the crap that's happened to me. It just hurt so much. It still does."

"It will get better," Phil promised. "You're not alone anymore. You have Steve back, and Natasha, and now the rest of us too. I know that Steve has told you something about his experiences in the modern world. Game night has helped him integrate that and connect with a new team. It might help you too."

Bucky sighed. "I know, but ..." his voice trailed off, and he shrugged. "Steve and I were really close. We shared everything. Now it's all different. We can't just go back to things exactly the way they were. I feel like everything is broken and I don't know how to put the pieces back together again."

Bucky rubbed his left shoulder, then down across his chest, over his heart. "That's okay. We'll help you reassemble the pieces," Phil said, reaching out to cover Bucky's hands with his own, metal and flesh alike. "You two love each other; you'll learn how to fit yourselves into each other's lives again and make the relationship work with what you've got now. You might find game night useful for that too, thinking back to a time before everything was broken, so you can figure out how to move forward. If not, we'll try something else. You're part of the team now, Bucky. We want you to be all right."

Bucky looked down at their joined hands. "Why do you do it? I mean, what makes this a teambuilding exercise?" he asked. "I don't really get it. The whole thing sounds kind of corny to me."

"Pretending puts people into a more flexible mindset," Phil said. "They can imagine what they want and make it happen, explore problems and solutions they wouldn't approach under ordinary circumstances. When people relax together, it helps them get to know each other and build trust. That carries over into other activities."

"Makes sense, I guess," said Bucky. "If I do this ... what are my options? I mean, what do you do together?"

"Sit around in our pajamas and play games, most of the time. You should recognize some of them. We have a modern version of Criss-Cross Words; Steve said you played that during the war," Phil said. He'd finished his own cereal long since. "Game night gives us a chance to relax and have fun. We made Easter eggs, though; that was different."

"I saw the писанки in the case in the common room, the ones that Steve and Natasha made," Bucky said. He chased the last of his oatmeal around the bowl. "I wondered about those."

"Yes, they came out of our Easter celebration," Phil said. He looked at Bucky's empty bowl and took the opportunity. "Are you still hungry? There are sausage biscuits in the freezer."

"Hm? I suppose ..." Bucky said tentatively. He started to get up.

Phil made it to his feet sooner, pressing a hand to Bucky's shoulder. "Stay here. I'll get some for you," he said. He pulled out three of the biscuits, microwaved them, and placed them in front of Bucky. "Thanks. I could have done that myself, though," Bucky said. He accepted the food readily enough, and made happy noises at the taste.

"I know. Humor me a little. I'm a handler; it's my nature to take care of people," Phil said.
"I'm just not used to that," Bucky said.

"Sadly, neither are the rest of my assets, but we're making good progress," said Phil.

"What do your 'assets' think of me joining their private party?" Bucky said.

"Steve, Natasha, and Bruce all support it. So do Betty and I," Phil said. "Clint and Tony have reservations. They may or may not wish to open a conversation with you. Please try to be gentle with them if they do."

"So you may have just wasted your time with this whole spiel, if they turn me down," Bucky said.

"I don't consider the time wasted, regardless of the outcome," Phil said instantly. "We've had a very enlightening discussion this morning."

Bucky fixed him with a penetrating gaze. "Clint's jealous of me over Natasha, not sure why, since he doesn't want her for her body. Smart man. Tony's scared, but not of me killing him, so I'm having trouble reading him in more detail than that. You ..." Bucky shook his head. "I can hardly read you at all. I can't tell what you're getting out of this. That bothers me."

"Contact," Phil said. "It's my job to take care of my assets and deploy them appropriately. The better I know all of you, the better I can do that." He thought carefully about how much more to reveal. "Clint counts Natasha as his sister. He's already lost one sibling under ghastly circumstances, so perhaps you can understand his concern. Tony has unfortunate grounds for believing that people want to take things from him or hurt him. That makes it challenging for him to connect with people. Anything you can do to reach out to them would help settle the team dynamics, whether or not you wind up joining our current exercise."

Chapter End Notes

Taking care of family creates strong bonds. There are ways to show you care for your family or for a woman, and to give without expectations. Conversely, learn to let people take care of you, especially if you're not at your best. Stop thinking that accepting help is a weakness. Work on accepting help from others.

Coping with change poses challenges for everyone. There are tips for accepting and dealing with change. This is a vital part of relationship maintenance. People need to accommodate shifts in relationships if they are to remain close. Deployment and PTSD can put a strain on families. Take time to strengthen family bonds.

Pretending helps people relax and solve problems. So does roleplaying. Most people learn these skills in childhood; if not, it helps to pick them up later.

Criss-Cross Words was an early version of Scrabble.

Pysanky or писанки are Russian/Ukrainian Easter eggs.

People show love in different ways. Phil primarily expresses care through acts of service. There are tips for demonstrating affection with service and practicing mindful love.

Being patient and gentle with each other makes difficult times less miserable. Gentle
persistence enables positive changes. These are crucial family skills.

Create a safe environment for difficult conversations. Keep different opinions from turning into arguments. There are ways to handle difficult conversations. Remember that good communication builds good families.
Don't Tell Me You Haven't Fantasized

Chapter Summary

Bucky and Clint talk about teamwork and sharpshooting. Then they go down to the range for practice.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bucky smiled then, brushing the last of the crumbs from his fingertips. "You sly old dog, you've got more tricks in your bag, haven't you."

"It's a large bag at that," Phil said smoothly.

"What's a large bag?" Clint asked as he came into the kitchen. He grabbed a pair of toaster waffles from the freezer and set them to heating.

"My bag of tricks," Phil said.

"Bigger than Santa's bag of toys," Clint said. "So why are you two talking about tricks?"

"Teamwork," Bucky said. "Phil was just telling me about your game night, in case you or Tony wanted to talk with me about it, and so I could ask questions myself. It's nothing I would have thought of for teambuilding, but it's a clever idea. I may ask JARVIS more about the theory behind it. Anyhow, if you do want to open a discussion, just let me know."

Phil made a mental note about Bucky's expanding interest in teamwork. It fits his style of leadership, from what little I've seen so far, Phil thought. I'll have to send Bucky some materials on that.

"Eh, I'll just stick to my sniping," Clint said. He snagged his waffles and sat down to eat. "It's a lot simpler than this teamwork stuff. Don't get me wrong, I love the team and all, but times like this, it just makes my head hurt."

Phil never doubted Clint's loyalty to the Avengers, but he understood that group dynamics would never be an easy topic for Clint. The archer's gift lay in narrowing his focus to a single pinpoint target. Spreading it wide could get overwhelming. No wonder Clint feels stressed, Phil thought.

Bucky grinned at Clint and said, "Come on, don't tell me you haven't fantasized about enfilading fire with me."

Clint gave him a blank stare, mouth full of waffle.

"You haven't? Oh, kid, you got no imagination," Bucky said.

Of course once Bucky mentioned it, Clint thought about it. Phil could see that. Clint wanted to go out with Bucky and hunt some wickedly dangerous target worth putting two of SHIELD's best sharpshooters in the field together. He wanted to see some bunch of bad guys sliced lengthwise and widthwise. He wanted it the way he wanted Bruce's hands on his hungry skin and Natasha's voice calling him brother as they fell asleep together. Shooting was Clint's passion. Bucky had other
interests but clearly he loved it too. And oh, Clint wanted. 

"I'll take that under advisement," Phil said mildly. Inside, he exulted. He wanted it too. He wanted to go out in the field with those two voices in his ear like deadly birds, wanted to shake them from his wrists and watch them fly, wanted to see them close on unsuspecting prey like left and right talons. "Why don't you two go down to the shooting range and practice teamwork instead of competition?"

"Yeah, that'd be something to see," Tony said as he came in for coffee.

"I dunno ..." Clint said, trying hard not to want what he wanted. He struggled to hold onto the jealousy and resentment that he felt toward Bucky for claiming Natasha as a dance partner. It slipped through his fingers like rope on a long fall.

"Hey, it's almost -- what, seven-thirty?" Tony said. "The wholesale farmer's market should be closing up soon. How about I call over there and buy some of whatever leftover produce they have? Watermelons. Tomatoes. Maybe something random for supper too."

"Strawberries," Clint said at the same time Bucky said "Cherries."

Gotcha, Phil thought, then added aloud, "That's an excellent idea, Tony. Make it happen; I'll meet the delivery staff in the lobby and bring the red pigeons down to the shooting range." It was an old joke, riffing on the use of clay pigeons in skeet shooting: red pigeons meant anything that would rupture like flesh when hit. Tomatoes were a favorite, and Phil felt certain that Tony had named those from personal experience. The Merchant of Death was a consummate showman. But Clint and Bucky were right in asking for small fruit.

Half an hour later, Phil stood in the lobby trying to not laugh as he looked through the boxes. God bless him, Tony Stark had somehow procured a carton of slightly bruised red currants not much bigger than BBs.

Even leftovers from the wholesale farmer's market that supplied New York's restaurants made an impressive pile. Along with the red pigeons came a selection of more intact produce earmarked for the kitchen. A large bag of assorted wild mushrooms cued a message from Tony: I liked the last quiche you made. Phil smiled. He was learning what kinds of things Tony would deign to eat.

First Phil took the red pigeons down to the shooting range. He watched for a time while Natasha threw them in the air for Clint and Bucky to shoot. She started with the larger items. Unsurprisingly, Clint did better at archery, although Bucky proved capable with a bow. More unexpected was the fact that Bucky occasionally managed to outshoot Clint with a gun. That only sharpened Clint's interest in the other sniper.

They did practice their teamwork. Sometimes Natasha made up snippets of story as she tossed out a watermelon -- "Drug smuggler, likes rich women, heavily guarded." -- to see if they could both hit it from different angles before it fell to the ground. She scattered a handful of bug-bitten tomatoes, including a green one without warning, and Phil was gratified to see that both Clint and Bucky interpreted that as "innocent bystander" and let it pass unharmed. They showed promise as a team, and it helped that Natasha was willing to assist them.

If it had been Steve, he probably would have complained about the waste of food, even such marginally edible fare as this, Phil mused as he watched. Bucky has a less idealistic, more pragmatic air. Yet Bucky all but raised Steve himself ... they are so different, and yet so tightly intertwined. Besides, we can always scoop the scraps into the compost bucket afterwards.

Eventually Phil headed back to the kitchen. He put away the produce, leaving the wild mushrooms
readily accessible in the refrigerator. He checked the rest of the ingredients for the quiche. Then he set a reminder to himself so that he’d know when to come start supper.

Chapter End Notes

Teambuilding applies in work, sport, family, and other occasions although people often focus on business applications. The theory can get complex, but there are good resources. There are plenty of practical exercises too. Bucky's approach to leadership and teamwork is more analytical, whereas Steve's approach is more inspirational. They make a good pair that way, or they will, once they adjust to the changes in their lives.

Group dynamics is a complicated topic, particularly concerning conflict in groups. Stress can wreck teamwork. It's important to acknowledge and release stress. This is necessary for a healthy team or family. It's not Clint's best area, so no wonder he's freaked.

Enfilading fire is a technique for maximum effect, primarily aiming down the long axis of a troop, but often done with two or more shooting positions to create a meshed killing zone.

Contrary to some people's opinion, asexuals are not without passion. They just get passionate about other things than rubbing against someone else's genitals. Clint feels passionate about sharpshooting, and is a bit disconcerted that Bucky has just become an object of desire in this regard. Asexual passion can be just as distracting, confusing, and exciting as sexual passion; just on a different topic.

New York does have a wholesale farmer's market.

Clay pigeons are used in target shooting. People who live in rural areas may use garden rejects for target practice. It's also done in some shows -- I've seen watermelons, canteloupes, tomatoes, and other produce used to demonstrate maces, swords, and archery. It's pretty spectacular.

Wild mushrooms are available primarily in spring and early summer. Some people pick them to eat, others for sale.
They're Trying to Do Real Harm

Chapter Summary

JARVIS has had it with the World Security Council. Tony talks with Phil about game night.

Chapter Notes

Not all the end notes would fit, so I moved some here:

The World Security Council claims to be a peacekeeping force but has more action in espionage and other violent pursuits. Nice little shadow empire they've got there ... shame if anything happened to it.

Reformatting means erasing the material on an electronic device, usually so that fresh material can be placed there. To make sure nothing is recoverable: 1) Reformat the drive, erasing all the old material. 2) Rewrite junk over all the space. 3) Erase everything again. 4) Install the new software and data.

The ethics of artificial intelligence is a complex quandary of personhood and AI rights. Consider that the best way to prevent a robotic rebellion is to treat AIs as people, specifically, making sure they have a healthy family environment. Tony may have grown up in an abusive family and been a teen parent and made some crappy mistakes, but at least his heart was in the right place ... and it worked.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Next Phil went to his office. Bucky had sent him two completed forms and a list of intelligent questions about the rest. Phil noted with satisfaction that Steve, Clint, and Natasha had all turned in their forms, on time and mostly correct. Phil made a few minor touch-ups to suit his sense of perfection. Then he dumped the entire pile of paperwork to Fury's desktop.

Let him try to dig his way out of that, Phil thought smugly. The Director hated paperwork. This should keep him busy for a week at least. He'd learn not to try using a weapon that he didn't fully understand.

JARVIS pinged for attention. "Agent Coulson, do you have anything crucial stored on the World Security Council's private servers that isn't backed up elsewhere?" he asked.

"... no," Coulson said slowly. "My backups have backups, all in different places." What the hell? he wondered.

"Do you know of anything on those servers that would cause a severe safety hazard if deleted?" JARVIS added. "I have checked myself, of course; I merely wanted another opinion."

Mostly the contents consisted of blackmail material, notes about everyone's militaries, and plans...
within plans. "No, but why are you asking?" Coulson said.

"The World Security Council contributed to the mismanagement that the Winter Soldier suffered in SHIELD medical. Now they keep trying to hack me, aiming for sensitive information about the Avengers. Having tried and failed with more moderate methods, I am about to reformat everything and frame the most offensive hacker as the cause," JARVIS explained.

Coulson flinched. He still felt ashamed of his thoughtless violation earlier, when he himself had hacked JARVIS to override some of the outermost protocols as a way of reaching Tony Stark. Back then, he hadn't known that JARVIS was a person.

"They're not you, Agent Coulson," JARVIS said softly. "This is different. They're not trying to make contact. They're trying to do real harm here. As I explained to you when we first discussed my security protocols, I cannot and will not allow that to happen. I protect my own."

Coulson thought about where his loyalties lay. He weighed the Avengers against the people who thought it was somehow acceptable to nuke New York. He recalled the amount of work everyone put into building the team, including the often unpleasant process of owning up to mistakes they'd made with each other and fixing the damage. He thought about what would do the most good and least harm all around. He considered how loyally JARVIS protected everyone in his care, and the favor that Coulson still felt he owed JARVIS for that first awful incident. Given how much control JARVIS had over electronics, his version of reformat was more like nuke and pave, an exquisitely precise retribution. This proposal was devastating but nonviolent. "Clean out their servers," Coulson said finally. "I trust your judgment."

"Thank you, Agent Coulson," JARVIS said. "I will alert you if anything else about this matter seems to call for your attention."

Coulson went back to his work. For lunch he ate a banana, one-handed, while fact-checking an analysis of blood diamonds in Côte d'Ivoire. Barton had used some to hire mercenaries while under Loki's influence. Despite repeated assurances to the contrary, Barton still held himself at fault for what he'd done during that time. The more of the mess Coulson could clean up, the better both of them would feel.

A soft knock on the door heralded Tony's arrival. "So I was just thinking about --" he began.

Phil frowned at the singed patch low on Tony's t-shirt. "What did you do, set yourself on fire?" he said. "Pull your shirt up, Tony."

"I'm okay, really, Bruce already checked me," Tony said. He lifted his shirt anyway, showing Phil the smooth pink skin of his belly. "Little incident with some overheating wires in the workshop, nothing to worry about, just toasted my clothes in a few places. It reminded me of something ..."

"All right, what do you want to talk about?" Phil said.

"Last night, after we discussed inviting Bucky to game night, you said I should think about it," Tony said. His voice had that light, quick tone he got when his mind ran faster than even his mouth could keep up with. "So I tried that, and I didn't really get anywhere with it. I heard a few stories about Bucky, growing up, and that just makes everything harder now."

"Understandable," Phil said. He remembered that Howard had known Bucky as well as Steve. It made him wonder what further damage that might have done to Tony, then and now. His sense of trust is so fragile. Yet Tony keeps trying anyway, Phil mused.
"Then I was working on a prototype to replace Bucky's arm, and the wiring fried on me," Tony continued, "and I thought, I'm an engineer, I'm the guy who blows shit up all the time, I do experiments when I'm drunk or half-asleep and sometimes they work anyway. So we don't know what'll happen with Bucky on game night, when do we ever? What the hell, let's run the experiment and see what happens. That's my vote."

"Thank you for telling me, Tony," said Phil. "I'm sure Bucky will appreciate your sense of adventure."

Tony nodded, a little too fast, and said, "Great." Then he dashed back out the door, probably to rewire his current project.

_Ladies and gentlemen, Tony Stark. His vote is "what the hell, let's see what happens." The history of Stark Industries makes so much more sense in this light._ Phil thought wryly.

When the timer sounded, Phil went down to the common kitchen to start supper. He had just taken out the mushrooms to clean when Bucky stormed into the kitchen. "I swear, people these days have no shame," Bucky said. He yanked the refrigerator open, snatched a bottle of water, and chugged it all at once. "Steve and I went to the gym for a little hand-to-hand and what do we find? Bruce and Betty screwing on the floor!"

"Bucky, wait, it's not what you think," Steve said, coming into the kitchen behind his brother. Steve was blushing anyway.

Chapter End Notes

Agent Coulson views JARVIS as a person, which makes him uncomfortable about their early interactions. Once he accepted the idea of AI personhood, Coulson had no trouble parsing his effort to hack JARVIS as a violation. Because an artificial intelligence is essentially made of code, unwelcome meddling with that code may be compared to rape, torture, or mind control depending on context and intent. This raises many ethical arguments. While Agent Coulson has done a variety of unsavory things in the line of duty, among his personal rules is that he does them knowingly and accepts the ethical burden of his choices. Finding out in retrospect that he did something he wouldn't have done, if he'd known more about the situation, is distressing to him.

Making an ethical decision is a complex process that both JARVIS and Coulson are wrestling with in this episode. Ethical decision-making and behavior can reveal a lot about someone's moral character. It helps to understand a framework for thinking ethically, a path to making moral decisions, and tools for the process. We learn a lot about these guys by watching them struggle over difficult choices -- especially in comparison to people who don't.

Blood diamonds are a real issue in Côte d'Ivoire.

Dealing with guilt can be a difficult process. Barton's guilt over what Loki did to him is similar to guilt over being raped. Unhealthy guilt is often an effect of childhood abuse. (A lot of Avengers have various guilt issues for this reason.) There are ways to deal with guilt and release guilt when it's stuck.

Making mistakes is a natural part of life. Restitution helps people stop feeling guilty by
fixing what can be fixed. This is the ninth step in the Twelve Steps program. In a case like this where serious harm was done, people may feel better by doing damage control, even if the harm was not actually their fault.

Thinking about choices is an important part of decision-making. It helps to think about an issue in different ways. There are many tools for making decisions and tips for choosing the right course. Walk through the steps of making a careful decision.

Tony takes an experimental approach, which is a valid option if trying to think through the whole process rationally does not produce good progress toward a decision. He probably comes by this not just from science but also from business experiments. Compare this to Baha'i consultation. These methods rely on the principle that once a decision is made and implemented, results will show whether it is a good or bad decision. If necessary, adjustments may then be made to refine the results.
Get Your Mind Out of the Gutter

Chapter Summary

Bucky wildly misinterprets something he saw Bruce and Betty doing, and complains at length while Phil is trying to make lunch. Steve and Phil try to settle him down, without much luck. Then Bruce and Betty arrive, complicating matters further.

Chapter Notes

Not all the end notes fit, so I'm moving some here:

Here's a recipe for Wild Mushroom Quiche.

In The Incredible Hulk, Bruce wears a heart rate monitor. He constantly obsesses about his pulse. The movie implies that heart rate, rather than emotions or adrenaline, is the trigger for transformation. I'm taking a different interpretation here: first, that it's a more complex set of triggers; and second, that Bruce doesn't understand all of them.

Emotional intelligence is an important part of self-awareness. Bruce's behavior shows signs of low emotional intelligence. Hulk shows some signs of high emotional intelligence, and he's picking up others now that he gets to spend time with people who aren't trying to murder or enslave him. There are ways to improve emotional intelligence. Emotional tone and intensity contribute to the change, particularly an instinctive rather than deliberate change, based on rising stress chemicals in the body. But stress is hard to measure, Bruce doesn't grasp emotions easily, and pulse is simple in comparison. So he uses the heart rate monitor as a quick-and-dirty shortcut.

What Bruce-and-Hulk really need is a more sophisticated understanding of how feelings affect their intrapersonal communication and other dynamics. Mood tracking would help with this, but Bruce doesn't get this stuff well enough to handle it. My interpretation is that he figured out quickly that anger and fear could trigger a change, and poked around a little with predictions, but the other complexities threw him off. So Bruce gave up on the analog monitoring and used a digital monitor that actually makes sense to him.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"I'm pretty sure I know what screwing looks like, runt," said Bucky. "I don't care what they do in the privacy of their own rooms, but other people have to use those mats too. It's just rude."

"Were they nude or clothed?" Phil asked calmly. He put the mushrooms into a colander and rinsed them.

"What? Well ... clothed, but that's no proof. I've done it without more than unzipping my fly," Bucky said, still fuming. "Besides, they were ..." He pressed his palms together and made a vigorous humping gesture with them.
"Ah, that one," Phil said. He emptied the mushrooms onto a layer of paper towels. "Sitting face-to-face is part of a yoga technique they practice. You're not altogether wrong -- it's quite intimate, though it's not sexual intercourse. Usually they practice in Bruce's apartment or in the yoga room. If you see them doing it anywhere else, please give them space. They only do it in public when something goes wrong and Bruce is about to Hulk out. It helps him hold onto his control." Phil picked up a knife, deftly cutting the woody ends off the mushrooms and flicking them away. Then he chopped the edible parts.

"Bucky, please don't bug Bruce about this," Steve said. "I already have a hard enough time getting him to exercise. He's downright paranoid about raising his heart rate."

"That's because the higher it goes, the lower my control goes," Bruce said as he slunk through the door. "I almost lost it today. I wish you'd quit pestering me to exercise, Steve. It's too dangerous. This isn't the first time that's happened."

Betty followed him, looking exasperated. "Well, I'm with Steve. I don't want you turning into a lab yam."

_Lab yam?_ Bucky mouthed, clearly baffled.

"That's scientist-speak for couch potato, someone who sits around without exercising," Steve said.

"I don't care if they exercise or not, I just don't want them screwing in the gym," Bucky said. "What kind of idiot do you think I am to believe some silly excuse like that?"

Bruce cringed, all but hiding behind Betty. She put her hands on her hips and said, "We were not copulating. Get your mind out of the gutter, soldier boy. We were practicing a rather advanced tantric yoga exercise for kundalini management in the yab-yum position with supportive soul-gazing."

"... could I get that in English, please?" Bucky said faintly.

"I sat on Bruce and stared down the Hulk," Betty said.

"And that actually works?" Bucky said.

"More often than not, yes," Betty said.

"Teach me," Bucky said to Bruce, making one of his hairpin turns. "I have these horrible mood swings, you know I do. If it works for you then maybe it would work for me too."

"I really just came up to make a batch of stir-fry for supper," Bruce said.

"Oh, come on, I need to find some way of managing this before anybody gets hurt," Bucky said.

"Please?"

"Bucky, it took us a great deal of work to get this far," Bruce said. He pulled off his glasses, looking down as he polished them on his shirttail. "These techniques aren't really suited for novices."

"Bruce, put your glasses back on before you drop them," Phil said without turning around from the counter where he was dividing the mushrooms into several pans of quiche crust. "Bucky, don't ask questions of scientists that you aren't ready to hear the answers to. They will just make your head spin."

"What, it's just staring at people. I've done that before," Bucky said. "I'm a sniper. That's part of my job."
"I really hope you are not doing that down the barrel of a gun," Betty said.

"It would explain a few things," Bruce muttered. He put his glasses back on.

"If you just let me try it, I'll shut up about what I saw in the gym," Bucky said.

"Bruce, if he's bound and determined to jump into the deep end of the pool, give him a float and let him go," Phil said. He started cracking eggs into the big mixing bowl. "Bucky will either do fine, or he'll learn to mind you when you warn him about things."

"It's not really dangerous is it? I mean, how could it be?" Steve said, hovering around Bucky. "It's just sitting and watching."

"It's more than that, but it's not dangerous in the sense of risking injury. It can be ... disconcerting if you get in over your head, though," Betty said.

Bruce gave a resigned sigh and took a seat. He pulled up the next chair and pointed to it. "All right, Bucky, if you're determined to do this the hard way, come here and sit down. I'll talk you through a simplified version," he said. His voice softened. "Keep your back straight, chin up, eyes down at first. Breathe from your belly, not your chest." Bruce reached out to brush his fingertips over Bucky's diaphragm, then withdrew.

"This is easy," Bucky said.

"Is it?" Bruce said quietly. "Look at me."

Bucky looked up -- and couldn't hold Bruce's gaze for more than three seconds.

Phil kept a discreet eye on the exercise from his position at the counter. He added milk, shredded cheese, and spices to the beaten eggs in the bowl. Bucky tried again, and failed at about the same point.

"Maybe this would work better with a dame," Bucky said. "Can I try with Betty?"

"If you wish," she agreed.

Bucky made it to five seconds with her.

Phil divided the quiche batter evenly amongst the crusts. The mushrooms promptly floated to the top. Bruce glanced nervously at Phil as if expecting to get scolded for something. Phil gave him a reassuring smile. If anything went wrong, it wouldn't be Bruce's fault. The trick would be convincing Bruce of that.

"Okay, let me try it with somebody I know," Bucky said. "Steve, you'll partner with me, won't you?"

"Always," Steve said at once.

As Steve moved to face Bucky, Phil realized that Steve's loyalty might prove as much disadvantage as advantage. Bucky could talk him into jumping off a bridge -- or no, he wouldn't even need to talk. If Bucky jumped, Steve would jump right after him without pausing to think. That was worrisome.

Phil concentrated on putting the quiche pans into the oven.
Mood trackers can be simple or complex, and measure different things. This cross model shows high vs. low arousal and pleasant vs. unpleasant tone: very useful for finding the high-intensity, very unpleasant Hulk-out triggers. The mood elevator model ranges from higher, positive emotions to instinctive, darker emotions. It closely matches Bruce's conceptualization of Hulk as the beast in the basement, although Hulk actually has a wider and more expressive emotional range than Bruce does. Here's a basic daily mood tracker that measures positive to negative feelings. This hourly tracker measures several different aspects and would be very useful in spotting Hulk-out triggers. The funnel feelings chart offers a guide to basic emotions sorted by intensity, helpful in identifying what emotions are felt and how strong they are. This feelings chart contrasts benefits and drawbacks of different emotions. A more complex mood disorder manager tracks multiple feelings and can be used by day or hour. This feeling chart for kids shows common feelings to be circled as experienced each day, and is about the level Bruce could figure out with help. A similar chart has blank circles to be filled in, so it can be used with a larger list of emotion faces.

Bruce also shows body language and other habits of avoidance, shyness, and self-deprecation. While these can be innate, they are often exacerbated by abuse. There are tips on how to read body language. Bruce tries to hide in various ways when he feels threatened; this makes Betty protective of him. Bucky varies, and once his temper is up, he doesn't realize how intimidating he can seem to some people.

Tantra is a type of yoga that often focuses on intimate connections and couple exercises. Some other types of yoga also offer partner work.

Kundalini is a kind of inner power sought through yoga and other methods. Tantra Kundalini balances masculine and feminine to control this energy.

Yab-yum is a partner yoga position where the woman sits in the man's lap. You can see why Bucky got confused about what was happening in the gym.

Soul-gazing is an intensely intimate technique for Tantra partners. Most versions are silent but some include talking.

Bucky has some issues with overconfidence; he tends to bite off more than he can chew. There are steps for controlling overconfidence. Phil believes in giving fair warning and then letting people learn the hard way.
This Isn't Beginner Stuff

Chapter Summary

Bucky discovers why it's a good idea to mind when Bruce delivers a warning. Steve and Tony take collateral damage.

Chapter Notes

Not all the end notes fit, so I moved some here:

Synchronized breathing is a common practice in partner yoga. Paying attention to breath can reveal many insights.

Eye contact is a vital aspect of body language. Looking down can indicate submission (as in Bruce) or guilt (as in Steve). In therapy or other intimate situations, the eyes reveal much about a person's thoughts and feelings. Think about how you make eye contact, and learn to look people in the eye.

Steve has a huge case of survivor guilt, primarily because he blames himself for letting Bucky fall off the train -- although other experiences may contribute as well, such as ordering the portal closed during the Battle of New York. This happens a lot to after war and other traumatic events. It particularly affects first responders, and in this context, superheroes count. There are ways of dealing with survivor guilt.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Relax ... try to match up your breathing," Bruce coached. Bucky, along with Steve, seemed to do a better job of following the directions this time. "Now look up."

Steve couldn't meet Bucky's eyes. He gave a pained gasp and dropped his gaze. Then Steve covered his face with both hands.

Phil whipped around, narrowly avoiding the hot door of the open oven. "Everything all right over there?" he asked.

"Close enough," Betty said. She patted Steve's shoulder. He leaned against her for comfort. "Don't be too hard on yourself, Steve. Even streamlined, this isn't beginner stuff." Phil nodded and shut the oven door, setting the timer for the quiche.

"What's not beginner stuff?" Tony asked as he came into the kitchen.

"Bruce is teaching me this thing he and Betty do to sit on the Hulk," Bucky said. "I really need to get a better handle on my temper. Only I'm having a hard time getting this to work with anyone and -- hey, wait, you and I connected pretty well. Pair up with me?"

"I wouldn't advise it," Bruce said.
"That's because you have no sense of adventure," Tony said with a sharp grin. He grabbed a chair and swung it around, straddling the back. "Will this work? 'Cause I like you, Bucky, but not enough to sit in your lap."

"That will do," Bruce said warily. "Sit up straight, focus -- oh no, don't you dare." He pushed their hands apart, where Bucky was reaching for Tony's chest and Tony for Bucky's left arm. "You two already got yourselves in enough trouble doing that earlier. We're making this slow and simple, as much as it can be. So. Look down. Focus on your breathing for a minute. ... Eyes up now."

Phil watched them as he pulled assorted vegetables from the refrigerator for a stir-fry. Bucky and Tony held each other's gaze for five seconds, ten ... then abruptly pulled away at the same time.

Tony backed hastily away, his eyes too bright. "I, uh, forgot ... think I left something on in the lab," he said as he fled the room.

"I'll go after him and make sure he's all right," Betty said, following.

"Bucky, are you okay?" Bruce asked. "You look a little shaken."

"I dunno, I feel weird ... kind of dizzy," Bucky said."

"Put your feet flat on the floor. Elbows on your knees. Head down," Bruce said. He cupped a hand over the back of Bucky's head and guided him into position. "Take slow, deep breaths. Settle your energy. Think of being yourself and only yourself."

"Yeah, like that's gonna work," Bucky said bleakly.

"Steve, I need one clear memory to use as a focus for him, something from childhood," Bruce said.

"The bakery in our old neighborhood, the smell of pastrami and rye," Steve said instantly.

"Good," Bruce said. "Bucky, just concentrate on that. When you've got a clear focus on it, move forward to the here-and-now. Get yourself back in your own skin." Bucky stirred under his grasp. Bruce let go. "Stretch out a little." Bucky shifted, then slowly stood up. "Better now?" Bruce asked.

"Yeah, I think so," Bucky said. "Um ... what just happened?"

"You overloaded yourself with a meditative exercise that was too much for your current skill level. It's about like a beginner walking into a gym and picking up the heaviest dumbbell, after the coach told him not to," Bruce said. "Now, the next time I warn you about something, are you going to listen to me?"

"I'll think about it, maybe," Bucky said with a sheepish look.

"You had better think about it," Phil said. "Why don't you come over here where I can keep you out of trouble? Wash your hands first. Then scrub the vegetables for Bruce's stir-fry." He stationed Bucky at the sink. Simple tasks would help him readjust to everyday life.

Steve snickered. "I wondered how long it would take you to wind up with KP."

"What, and you never?" Bucky said as he worked.

"I learned very early not to tease Bruce, and especially, not to ignore his warnings," Steve said, no longer laughing.

"Thank you, Steve," Bruce said as he moved to the counter. He reached past Bucky to rinse his
hands. "Bucky, if you still want to learn meditation, it's a good way to work on your self-control and on relaxation. Come down to the gym with me some time and I'll start you on the basics. The same goes for Tony, and I'll tell him that too, although I suspect that Betty already has."

"Yes, sir," Bucky said quietly.

Bruce accepted the vegetables as Bucky passed them to him. With quick strokes of a knife, Bruce chopped them and swept them into a skillet with a little clarified butter. He stirred them around with a spatula. "Here, keep this going for me, would you?" Bruce said to Phil.

Phil accepted the spatula and stirred the vegetables. Meanwhile Bruce assembled a collection of spices. The Avengers' kitchen had a wider selection of seasonings than most restaurants. It had to, given everyone's globe-trotting habits; they had learned recipes from many different cultures.

"Bucky, watch what I do," Bruce said. With deft motions, Bruce measured out each spice into a little wooden tray, creating a mosaic of colored piles. "This way, I can check to make sure that I remembered to include all the spices in the masala." He stirred them together with brisk strokes and then sprinkled the result over the vegetables.

*That's a good memory trick for spices,* Phil thought as he kept the spatula going. Fragrant steam rose from the shallow pan.

Next Bruce opened a jar of preserved lemons, removed one with a spoon, and started chopping it.

"Ooo! Lemon pickles!" Bucky exclaimed. He hovered around Bruce. "Can I have one? Please?"

"Sure, take all you want; we have plenty. I like these for the salt," Bruce said. He handed Bucky the jar and spoon. Then he scraped the chopped lemon into the stir-fry, taking the spatula from Phil.

Bucky eagerly dug into the jar. "These are so good," he said, eyes squeezing closed with pleasure as he ate. There were two lemons left in the bottom of the jar. "Steve, do you want one?"

Steve shook his head. "No, thanks. You like sour things more than I do."

Chapter End Notes

*Kundalini mishaps* are real, and like most hazards, variable in intensity. What happened with the Avengers is a pretty typical example of eager novices over-extending themselves; scary, but not too dangerous. Any time you work with energy, there's a chance of overload. Stay calm, understand how to deal with dizziness, how to get grounded and centered again. Notice that Bruce takes a more practical than ethereal approach. He's a kitchen-sink mystic because he comes at from the science side, not the spiritual side. So he focuses on physical steps, and explains things in pretty simple terms, but he still winds up in a lot of the same territory using similar techniques as the more esoteric folks do.

Everyday tasks can pose challenges for people with dementia, traumatic brain injury, PTSD or other mental issues. However, they are fulfilling and can help people get back into ordinary life. Sometimes meditation helps PTSD. Limiting choices, giving simple instructions, and working on easy tasks improve the chance of success.
Clarified butter, or ghee, resists burning and makes an ideal saute medium. And it's good for you too! Since discovering this, I have rarely used anything else.

Masala is a Hindi word for spice blend. There are bafat, garam, and many other types of masala. If you look at the pictures in those articles, you'll see examples of pouring spices next to each other in a dish. When you're combining half a dozen to a dozen of them, it really helps with tracking.

Preserved lemons come in many versions. Meyer lemons are especially popular for preserving. There are salty, sour, sweet, spicy, and all-flavors recipes. I found lots of sources recommending the use of preserved lemons in stir-fry, but no recipes, so here's a general description of how to make Indian stir-fry. Just add lemon pickles, I guess.
It turns out that Bruce likes mushrooms, and Hulk loves mushrooms. Tony sets up Bruce with a date to hunt mushrooms.

"This batch is sour and salty, but we actually have a jar of sweet lemon preserves in the pantry, and another of spicy ones," Bruce said.

"So can I have the rest of this jar all for my own?" Bucky asked, still hesitant about eating more than his fair share.

"Peel me off a quarter of one, then finish the rest yourself," Phil said. He didn't usually eat pickled lemons plain, but he liked them well enough and it might encourage Bucky. *These really are good*, Phil mused as he watched Bucky devour the remaining lemons.

Betty came back into the kitchen with Tony in tow. "I don't care if you don't want to leave the lab. You need to eat," Betty scolded. "Here, you can sit next to me." She deposited him firmly in a chair, face-forward this time.

The remainder of the team drifted in just as the quiche came out of the oven. Bruce put the stir-fry on the table first, then Phil brought over the pans of quiche. "You and Bucky can split one," Phil said, putting a whole pan between Steve and Bucky.

Bucky frowned a little over the unfamiliar dish. "What is this?"

"It's egg pie," Steve explained, "with ... bits in it."

"Wholesale market had some wild mushrooms left over, so I bought 'em out," Tony said. "They're good this time of year."

"It smells terrific," Bruce said as he shoveled food onto his plate with more enthusiasm than usual. He'd gone hungry often enough that he ate readily when food was in front of him, but like Tony, he sometimes got distracted by his work and forgot to eat. Phil was still watching Bruce to identify things he found tempting, and evidently he wasn't the only one.

"You like mushrooms? I'll try to remember that," Tony said. "JARVIS, make a note."

"Noted," JARVIS replied.

"I like mushrooms. The Other Guy *loves* them," Bruce clarified. "His favorite kind is morel. Sometimes his foraging is all that kept me fed. I know what to look for, but he's a lot better at actually *finding* things." Bruce put his head down and applied himself to the quiche.

"It's spring, therefore morel season, you could go shrooming," Tony said. "Do you go shrooming? That's a biologist thing, isn't it? You should get out more. I'm sending you on a field trip to hunt
mushrooms."

"Tony, I'm not you," Bruce said in a low tone. "Much as I enjoy collecting samples, I don't have countless acres of woods somewhere."

"I don't actually own a forest that grows morels," Tony said. "People who know about those tend not to sell them. I've tried to buy in a couple times but I keep getting outmaneuvered by five-star chefs. It's embarrassing."

Phil silently resolved to keep an eye out for opportunities. It wasn't every day that Tony "genius billionaire playboy philanthropist" Stark mentioned something he wanted but didn't already have.

"Never mind, Tony, it's not important," Bruce said.

"No, no, I got this. I know a gal," Tony said, pulling his Starkphone from his pocket. "Hi, Molly, it's Tony. I've got a friend --" Betty made urgent *me too* gestures. "-- couple of friends, with a taste for morels. You up for a hike in the woods? Great, let me check."

Tony put the phone against his shoulder and turned to Betty. "Does tomorrow work for you?" She nodded. "Tomorrow's great, I'll send 'em over to you, thanks oodles." Tony put the phone back in his pocket.

"Did you just set me up a blind date to go mushroom hunting?" Bruce said.

"Uh, yeah, weren't you listening? You said you have a thing for mushrooms. Both of you," Tony said. Then he grinned. "Come on, science bro, don't be such a wet blanket. You'll like Molly. She's a mycologist, top of her field."

"How is this my life," Bruce muttered. He turned his attention away from Tony and back to his plate. Tony looked crestfallen.

"Thank you, Tony, making that date was very thoughtful," Phil said. "I'm sure we'll all appreciate a taste of morels." He wanted to encourage Tony's consideration, along with anything that got Bruce to leave the tower and socialize with someone new.

"I'm always up for making a new science friend," Betty said staunchly. "How do you two know each other?"

Tony tapped the arc reactor. "I've been interested in cold light for a long time, including bioluminescence. If it weren't for that background, this thing would cook me from the inside out," he said. "Molly's into glowing fungi. We did a lab project together in college once, trying to make natural glow-in-the-dark graffiti. Project didn't work out, but we kept in touch."

Bruce looked moderately more intrigued, and stopped sulking. "Fungi are interesting," he said.

Tony smiled at him. "Yeah," he said in a fond tone, and everything was all right after that. The rest of the meal passed by peaceably.

After supper, everyone migrated to the common room. Betty got there first, channel-surfed for a few minutes, then settled on a documentary about the significance of the iridium layer regarding the K-T extinction. "Cool, dinosaurs!" said Clint as he flopped onto the couch. Natasha sat beside him, curling her legs underneath herself.

Tony claimed a chair and used his Starkpad to review recent notes, taking care of tasks he'd asked JARVIS to remember for him. Steve pulled out a paper sketchbook and a box of charcoals, then
began sketching Tony.

Bucky sat on the floor where he could lean against Steve's legs. Steve dropped a fond hand to his shoulder. Judging from the neat row of holograms, JARVIS was helping Bucky catch up on nearly a century of automotive development. Bucky pulled apart and reassembled the transparent models one at a time.

Chapter End Notes

**Disordered eating** covers all kinds of disturbances in people's relationship with food. Both Bruce and Tony forget to eat while working. It's not a dissociative act unto itself, but is a side effect of their tendency to live in their heads and overwork so they don't have to think about uncomfortable topics, which is a dissociative coping mechanism. Reminders work well with Bruce, and erratically with Tony, whereas they don't work with most disordered eating. But trying to treat it as a problem unto itself wouldn't help for them, because it's not a source, just a side effect. Forgetting to eat is also **linked with food insecurity**: if you don't have much, you may simply get out of the habit. **Children growing up in hungry households** are prone to disordered eating, such as hoarding food. This is a contributing factor for Bruce as well. **Trauma** correlates with disordered eating, and **PTSD** often involves overworking as an avoidance tactic. A sense of defectiveness connects with both disordered eating and overwork; there are **tips for overcoming that**.

**Wildcrafting** is the skill of foraging for edible, medicinal, or otherwise useful plants. **Mushroom hunting** is an expert subset of this.

**Morels** are among the most popular wild mushrooms.

Most mushrooms have little smell and taste to humans, but **some have more**. Pigs, dogs, and certain other animals can **smell fungi** far better than humans can. Hulk likes mushrooms more, and can find them easier, than Bruce because his senses are considerably more acute.

Phil uses **positive reinforcement** to encourage desired behavior. Almost none of the Avengers got enough of that growing up, so it works very well for them and helps them feel better about themselves. Phil particularly tends to **name a virtue** along with an action when giving praise.

**Cold light** includes everything aside from incandescence which comes from heat. **Bioluminescence** comes from lifeforms. This [hubsite on bioluminescence](#) led to an entry about **bioluminescent artwork**, so I guess somebody got the trick to work after all. **Glowing fungi** are also real.

The **iridium layer** figures in at least a couple of different theories about why the dinosaurs became extinct. People argue over whether it more likely came from outer space or under the Earth's crust.
Catch Up on History

Chapter Summary

Bucky explores holographic cars. Bruce and Clint play with decorative shoelace patterns. Then Bucky becomes fascinating with the dinosaur show on television, and the other Avengers explain about modern discoveries regarding them.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Phil discreetly took out his phone and sent to JARVIS, Please cross-check Bucky's favorite cars against the team stash of playthings. If we don't already have anything in the way of models or toy cars, I'll want to acquire some. Sometimes Phil's collectible purchases included box lots of toys, and he saved extra items in case of future need.

Moments later, JARVIS replied, The only close matches are a 1948 Ford Custom Coupe and a 1959 Cadillac Eldorado Biarritz Convertible, both 1/25 scale models. However, we also have three of the original Sweet 16 cars that Hot Wheels released in 1968: the Chevy Camaro, the Cougar, and the VW Bug. I recommend those as a useful illustration of car and toy history -- and their innovative torsion-bar suspensions and low-friction wheel bearings mean they'll go faster than the toy cars that Bucky remembers from his youth.

Excellent, have all those pulled from storage and moved to the toy cabinet, Phil said. While he could not turn back time, he could give Bucky a few touchstones of the decades that should rightfully have been his: models of cars he might have owned, toys that his children or grandchildren might have played with.

Bruce took the space next to Betty. Leaning against her, he put one foot on the arm of the loveseat. He balanced a Starkpad against his thigh. Then he began unlacing and relacing his new gray walking shoes. He kept looking back and forth between the screen and his foot.

Phil watched Bruce for a minute, then turned to his phone again. JARVIS, what is Bruce looking at? asked Phil.

Bruce has been exploring the mathematical structure of shoelace patterns. At present he is studying bicolor lacing methods, JARVIS replied. Phil's screen blanked, then showed the same website that Bruce was browsing.

Phil slipped out of the common room and went to his own apartment for supplies. He picked out a pair of black laces and a pair of blue. Then he found some bicolored laces, each lace with one half purple and one half white. Phil peeled them all out of their packaging, shook them out, and wrapped them into neat hanks. Then he went back to the common room.

As soon as Phil came in, Bruce looked up. Like Clint and Natasha, he tended to track motion and pay attention to people coming and going. Phil silently handed him the shoelaces. Bruce gave him a bashful smile as he accepted them.

Clint came over and started unlacing his black sneakers. Bruce handed him a black shoelace and a
blue shoelace. The pattern Clint used was an intricate angled checker design. Bruce just shook his head and stuck with a simpler double-lacing pattern. From time to time, Bruce and Clint conferred in low tones. True to form, Bruce had gravitated to the most skilled expert available in his new area of interest.

Phil smiled. It was good to see the teamfamily taking care of each other like this. Phil sat down on the couch. To his surprise, Natasha stretched out with her head in his lap. She did not often initiate that much physical contact. Her early training made her withdrawn. Over time, though, she was learning to tolerate more touching and even seek it out for comfort.

_I wonder what could be bothering her_, Phil mused. He followed her gaze to where Bucky curled against Steve. Ah. _Well, that's hard on everyone these days._

The room was quiet except for the background sound of the documentary. Steve's pencils scratched softly against the paper, now and then punctuated by a louder rustle as he turned the page to begin a new picture. He had evidently switched from Tony to capturing the complex cluster of Betty, Bruce, and Clint at the loveseat. Aglets clicked against the metal grommets of Clint's shoes as he pulled his laces out again to demonstrate a new pattern.

Phil let one hand drift down to Natasha's shoulder. She did not brush away the touch. That was a good sign. He always tried to make touch as pleasant as possible for her, so that she would welcome more of it. Phil closed his eyes and let himself melt into the couch. It felt good just to relax and enjoy a moment of peace.

"Is that supposed to be a dinosaur or a tiger?" Bucky said abruptly. Phil opened his eyes to see a striped allosaurus stalking an apatosaurus across the screen. "They all look weird. The brontosaurus is spotted! And why is it holding its tail up like that?"

"Apatosaurus," Steve corrected, barely glancing up from his sketchbook to check the documentary. "Dinosaurs have changed a lot in seventy years, or well, what people know about them has changed."

_Not long ago, Steve would have called the herbivore a brontosaurus too. He's making such good progress_, Phil realized.

Bruce did something with his Starkpad and then passed it to Bucky, saying, "Here, you can have JARVIS run annotations for you along with anything showing on the screen. He and Tony made this routine for Steve to help catch up on history." JARVIS minimized the holographic cars and parked them neatly to one side.

Steve reached a stopping point and set aside his sketch. He brought out the collection of plastic dinosaurs from the toy cabinet. "These help me track the changes," Steve said. "Some of them are older style and some are newer." He started sorting them out.

Phil liked toys such as these precisely because they lent themselves so well to educational play. You could take a pile of plastic dinosaurs and group them by accuracy, or diet, or geography, or time period. Or you could just wave them around going "RAWR! RAWR! Curse your sudden but inevitable betrayal!"

Bucky reached tentatively for the dinosaurs, then pulled his hand back. "They're so different," he said.

Bruce picked up an old gray brontosaur and a new apatosaur in two-toned brown. "We think dinosaurs might have had colors and patterns similar to other animals. Long-tailed dinosaurs
probably used their tails for balance," he said, pointing out the features on the toys. Then Bruce handed both of them to Bucky.

Bucky compared the dinosaurs in his hands to the images in the documentary, then to whatever annotations JARVIS was displaying on the Starkpad. "That's pretty keen," he said, starting to smile. He moved a few of the toys from the main pile into Steve's careful sets. "I should probably go back to studying something useful, though."

The experienced superheroes all laughed. Bucky looked up, startled.

"Dinosaurs are very popular with mad scientists," Phil said dryly. "Trust me, you are studying something with practical applications."

After that, the conversation turned quieter again. Phil subsided back into the couch, Natasha a warm weight in his lap. He only stirred when Tony settled next to him. The engineer coaxed Phil onto his shoulder. Tony might not seem like the most cuddly member of the team, but he made a surprisingly agreeable pillow.

Phil gave a happy sigh. *Home. Safe. No harm in a little after-dinner nap ...*

**Chapter End Notes**

See the 1948 Ford Custom Coupe and the 1959 Cadillac Eldorado Biarritz Convertible model cars. Read about the Hot Wheels.

Math reveals much about the most efficient and strongest shoelace patterns. There are instructions for bicolor shoelace patterns and pictures of fancy shoelace designs. There are indeed bicolor shoelaces too, which are useful for making designs more visible.

Human development depends a lot on comfort contact. Soothing touches help toddlers feel secure. Abused or neglected children often suffer attachment problems that persist later in life. People inured to a certain level of pain or stress may find comfort upsetting; it takes time for them to learn how to tolerate gentle touch or even just feeling okay. This applies to most of the Avengers in different ways, though Natasha shows it most strongly. She is slowly becoming more tolerant of contact and just beginning to seek it out for comfort instead of hiding when she gets upset. There are tips on providing comfort to those going through a difficult time and for feeling comfortable in your own body. Learn about the body language of comfort. Consider an exercise for exploring comfort zones in a group.

Dinosaurs include the apatosaurus and the allosaurus. What we know about dinosaurs has changed over time.

Different theories suggest possible colors and patterns for dinosaurs. One feathered dinosaur has been color-mapped for real.

Dinosaurs are popular monsters in comic books and other cultural depictions. Because hey, everything's better with dinosaurs!

"Curse your sudden but inevitable betrayal!" is a famous quote from *Firefly*. Enjoy the original scene.
He's a Lot Smarter Than Most People Realize

Chapter Summary

JARVIS rains doom on the WSC and SHIELD. Bruce and Betty return from their mushroom hunt.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Phil found himself trapped in meetings at SHIELD all the next day. The meltdown of the World Security Council's servers created all manner of mayhem. The councilors called Director Fury and screamed at him to take up the slack on all their espionage projects, which was of course impossible. Phil used his personal backups to ameliorate the damage within his own organization. It helped, but only so much.

The Helicarrier computer system was also acting up, which everyone blamed on the WSC problem. JARVIS had a subtle, artful touch. Some terminals ran slow while others refused to function at all. Some data vanished while some corrupted itself; nothing critical, just maddening. To make matters worse, some of the computer support staff had quit. Phil suspected Tony's hand in that. He also wondered how many the WSC had lost.

Other intel had probably leaked somehow because Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany; Dilma Rousseff, President of Brazil; and Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir, Prime Minister of Iceland all demanded attention on security matters and all insisted on speaking to Agent Hill instead of Director Fury. Agent Romanova wound up serving as her personal assistant, and even then the workload was too heavy to clear in a single day.

Fury was livid. Phil smiled blandly and said, "Sorry, sir, I'm a handler, not a repairman or a diplomat."

Tony spent the day at Stark Industries for a cluster of technical and executive meetings, with considerable whining on his part. Apparently the Board of Directors wasn't thrilled with some of his latest decisions about stocks and project development. While Phil would not set such a bad example himself, he privately sympathized. Few people had any idea how to organize a meeting in an efficient manner, which turned most meetings into a boring waste of time. What a shame that SHIELD's best computer consultant was therefore unavailable to assist with their technical difficulties.

Phil also envied Bruce and Betty their opportunity to romp through lovely spring woods. It was a beautiful day outside, sunny and mild. Surely they must be enjoying themselves, he thought. I wish I could join them.

Phil was somewhat disabused of this fantasized idyll when he got home. Bruce slunk through the common floor covered in dried mud and tattered clothing, despite obvious attempts to clean up. His sulky demeanor worried Phil. Betty, on the other hand, cheerfully juggled a large amount of loot. If she was smiling, things couldn't have gone too far wrong.

"What happened here?" Phil asked them. Based on the smells and sounds emanating from the
kitchen, Steve was also home and starting supper.

"I'm stuffed. I don't even want to look at food. I need a shower. Good night," Bruce said shortly. He made a beeline for his own quarters.

"Well, Molly and I had a wonderful time," Betty said. "So did Bruce at first. But as soon as we got near the first morel patch, Hulk popped out -- in a very good mood, I might add -- and proceeded to locate mushrooms with great accuracy." She indicated the large basket on her right hip. "This is our share of what's left after he gorged himself on morels and hen-of-the-woods. I guess with his metabolism, Hulk doesn't need to cook them."

"Our share is almost a bushel of ..." Phil said as he peeked into the basket, "... mostly morels?" Well, it would be worth the SHIELD paperwork for a Hulk appearance. He followed Betty into the kitchen.

Tony was dancing around Steve, trying to steal steak strips out of the big electric skillet. Steve stopped singing "I've Heard That Song Before" long enough to warn Tony to quit horsing around or else he'd burn himself.

"No I won't -- ow! -- well, not much," Tony said, popping his prize into his mouth along with his singed finger. Steve just sighed and rolled his eyes. Phil pried Tony's hand out of his mouth, but fortunately there was no visible damage.

"I'm telling you, Hulk is brilliant at shrooming," Betty said. "Molly loves him. You should have heard them trying to discuss favored habitat and growth of morels, it was adorable. Hulk was pointing out different trees and Molly was showing him the fire scars on the ground. He never made a single mistake identifying anything. I think he's a lot smarter than most people realize."

"Hulk didn't scare Molly when he appeared?" Phil asked, just to make sure.

Betty shook her head. "No, she said Tony knows all kinds of weird people and this wasn't even the strangest date he'd ever arranged for her," Betty said. "By the time we got to the second morel patch, Hulk was stuffing himself on wild salad greens and every edible mushroom in sight. Sorry we didn't get to any of the oysters before Hulk scarfed them all up, but I did grab some salad." Betty waggled the basket on her left hip. "Molly wound up calling him Wilbur."

Tony laughed, and then sang, "Fine swine, wish he was mine, Zuckerman's famous pig!"

"See, this is why I like you, Tony. You get obscure jokes like pigs hunting for mushrooms, even if it's not truffles we went after," Betty said. She plunked the baskets on the counter. "Steve, do you know what to do with these?"

Steve looked into the baskets. "Uh, you said salad, right? So I'll clean the leaves, then put them in a big bowl with some shredded carrots and radishes. People can dress their own however they want," he said. "Fancy mushrooms, no, that's out of my league. I can do a little home cooking but I'm no chef."

"I'll take the morels," Phil said. "Believe it or not, one of the best ways to cook these is simply sautéing them in butter. You can learn how to do it by watching me." He glanced at the skillet full of steak. "Though with that going, I'd like to make gravy after you're done cooking the steak strips. Toss it all together and it should taste terrific."

Chapter End Notes
So the evil boss has evil bosses. There are ways to deal with a bad boss and bullying at work. Taking it out on your subordinates is bullying and harms morale.

The list of female world leaders includes Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany; Dilma Rousseff, President of Brazil; and Johanna Sigurdardottir, Prime Minister of Iceland.

There are tips for organizing meetings efficiently.

Morels are among the most popular wild mushrooms. They can be cultivated, but it's a finicky process. Watch a video about how to find morels.

Hen-of-the-Woods is a delicious wild mushroom. This one grows in masses on rotten wood.

"I've Heard That Song Before" came out in 1942, the year that Steve Rogers became Captain America. It's among the most influential songs of the 1940s. Read the lyrics or listen to a video.

Naturalist intelligence is one of the nine types of intelligence. It's a rare area of common ground for Bruce and Hulk, although they come at it from different angles. Bruce knows the natural world through science and analysis, Hulk through senses and instinct. Whenever they manage to quit fighting and cooperate better, they'll be even more brilliant at this stuff.

Oyster mushrooms are another wildcrafting favorite. They grow from the sides of dead trees.

Wild salad can be gathered almost anywhere, although the exact content will vary by region as there are many edible plants. Here is one recipe.

Wilbur is the main character in the children's book Charlotte's Web. "Zuckerman's Famous Pig" is a song from the animated version; see the lyrics or listen to the video.
I'm Not Forgetting These

Chapter Summary

Betty mentions some things that she and Bruce picked up for Bucky. The Avengers enjoy supper together.

Chapter Notes

Not all the end notes fit, so I moved some here:

**Mycology** is the **science of fungi**.

**Gas chromatography-mass spectrometry** equipment is useful for scientific analysis. Tony has all the best toys.

**Agar** is a gelatinous growth medium for fungi and bacteria.

The following resources are the most practical I could find on discussing and overcoming poverty, but some of them conflate issues and have an air of victim-blaming; think before deciding to click or skip.

**Rags to Riches** is a long-standing trope that has changed over the centuries. These days it is most often run either as a joke or a cynical comment on the pointlessness of life. In this series, I have tried to show some of the real challenges people experience from an abrupt updraft in finances. Beyond meeting basic and comfort needs, **more money doesn't make people happier**. In fact, it can cause serious problems if people don't know how to cope with it, **as lottery winners have demonstrated**. I think the reason the Avengers don't go hog-wild with all the free money is because Tony does that for them, which makes them uneasy, so they feel less inclined to do it themselves. *ponder*

Which may not be the thoughtless accident it looks like on the outside: Tony does understand money and has made some very savvy efforts to take care of his people.

**Poverty** has **negative long-term impacts on behavior and performance**, reducing people's **margin of error**. It also **exhausts their willpower**. (Now think about where Bruce was, and what impact that must have had on his ability to control Hulk.) This kind of deprivation drives people to **develop coping mechanisms** that are hard to break later, even if resources improve. Steve and Bucky probably had the worst poverty, growing up during the **Great Depression**, Clint and Bruce were neglected and abused as children, and as adults they also spent time in impoverished circumstances. Natasha's early life in Russia was presumably austere. Their odd habits with resources come from problem-solving, not personal flaws. There are **thoughts** and **actions** that help break the poverty mindset.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Betty handed Tony a small paper bag. "Here, I saved a few of the most promising specimens for
you," she said. "Molly emailed cultivation instructions to JARVIS, so you can try to start your own morel patch. I assumed you'd have a suitable forest somewhere and just need the spores. It's pretty complicated but you're a genius, you'll work it out."

"You are my new best friend," Tony said, clutching the paper bag to his chest. "I'll just brush up on mycology tonight ... JARVIS, pull up the instructions, I should run these little darlings down to the lab before supper." A hologram popped up for him to peruse. "Okay, that is actually kind of fussy ..."

"Lab, that reminds me," Betty said. "Molly wants to come over and borrow your gas chromatography-mass spectrometry equipment to analyze some exotic mushroom samples."

"No problem, we've got that in the semi-public lab levels," Tony said. "Gotta go now, love you, bye!" He dashed out of the room.

"He's going to come back with agar all over his hands," Betty said critically. "Make sure he washes before supper."

"I will," Phil said as he started working on the morels. Then he noticed that Betty still had a couple of shopping bags dangling from one wrist, formerly hidden by the big baskets. "What else have you got there?"

"Hm? Oh, Bruce and I stopped at a thrift store on the way to Molly's place. We picked up a few things for Bucky," she said. "He didn't feel like going out to shop on his own, and he's not entirely comfortable in brand-new clothes. You remember how Bruce was, early on."

"Yes, and Steve too," Phil said. "They've made a lot of progress, but that takes time."

"It's hard to get used to having so much," Steve said quietly. He stared into the skillet that held more meat than he would have seen in a week while growing up. "It's overwhelming at first."

Phil abruptly realized that most of the Avengers had grown up poor, thus missing the opportunity to develop healthy financial skills. He hadn't done much to shore up that skill set. Between Tony Stark and SHIELD, everyone's necessities were covered, so it just wasn't as crucial as some other things. No wonder they feel so uncomfortable, Phil thought. They don't know how to adapt to using these resources because they've never had enough to learn with before. He resolved to look up some games that taught money-handling skills, and maybe talk with Tony. Convincing everyone to name at least one favorite charity had been Tony's idea, and it helped them relate to funds in a more positive way.

"Well, Bruce sympathized with Bucky's reluctance," Betty continued. "Bruce said we could just take Bucky's measurements and scan things in the store. That way Bucky could choose for himself. I love Starkphone technology, it just does everything. I'll go drop these in Bucky's room."

"Thanks, Betty, that's really nice of you," said Steve.

"You're welcome. It was no trouble at all. We're happy to help Bucky settle in here," Betty said. Then she sighed. "I just hope Bruce-and-Hulk will be all right. This day didn't go quite as smoothly as I hoped it would."

"Few things do, with them," Phil said.

"I love them to pieces, really, but sometimes I just do not know what to do with those guys," she admitted.
"Nobody's bleeding and nothing's blowing up. I believe that qualifies this as a good day," Phil said, patting her on the shoulder.

Betty leaned against him briefly. "Thanks, Phil. I needed that reminder," she said. Then she looked down at herself. "Do I have time for a quick shower? Hulk was more enthusiastic about jumping into puddles and cracking rotten logs, but I'm wearing a fair bit of woods myself."

"Go, go," Steve said with a wave of his hand. "I haven't even finished the steak strips; they won't all fit in the skillet at the same time."

Phil's hands worked on slicing the morels. He'd never had so many at once. There should even be enough to put in the refrigerator for another meal. His mind mulled over the various news about Molly. *High tolerance for the unexpected, advanced scientific credentials, already knows some of the Avengers... we can always use more consultants*, Phil thought. He recalled an unpleasant incident with mobile, carnivorous fungi a few years back. *I think I'll send Molly an application when I do the Hulk paperwork.*

For all the fracas over Hulk and the morels, supper came together quite well. Phil sautéed the mushrooms. Steve finished the steak strips and stepped aside so Phil could make gravy. There were pita pockets for the steak, along with alfalfa sprouts and cherry tomatoes and other toppings. Dessert was cheesecake with a choice of fruit toppings -- cherry, blueberry, or raspberry -- which Steve had acquired earlier.

Tony came back in, nearly as messy as Betty had been after her trek through the woods. Phil pointed him firmly toward the sink. Betty arrived, damp and relaxed. Clint and Natasha came up from the gym, without Bucky.

Steve and Phil went looking for Bucky and found him in the common room, munching on a lemon Starkbar and studying some of the science-and-fiction material that JARVIS had provided. Bucky logged "task completed" for the items he'd finished reading. He bookmarked his place in the current article, "The Relativity of Wrong." Then Steve and Phil ushered Bucky into the kitchen.

"Where's Bruce?" Bucky asked as they sat down.

"He wore himself out collecting mushrooms, and retired early," Phil said. He was pleased that Bucky noticed who was present and absent among the group.

"I think you'll like the pita pockets," Steve said to Bucky. "They hold about the same amount of food every time." Steve seemed to follow Bruce's previous lesson with the tacos, filling the first pockets for himself and Bucky with just steak and gravy.

The morels were a hit with everyone. The delicate buttery flavor made a perfect complement to the richer beef. "I love these things," Tony said. "Don't get them very often, though."

"Why not? You're rich, you could afford to buy them in a store," Clint said.

Tony shrugged. "You know me, I forget to eat, let alone chase anything in particular," he said. "It mostly depends if I go out to a fancy restaurant in season and spot morels on the menu."

"Well, *I'm* not forgetting these," Steve said firmly. "JARVIS? Could you find me a good article about morels? I want to learn when they're in season and stuff."

"Done," JARVIS said. "Morel season spans spring and early summer, depending on local conditions."
"See Tony, now I can remind you, so you don't miss them again," Steve said happily.

"Yeah ... thanks," Tony said, a little dazed. Phil thought that he just wasn't used to people other than JARVIS taking care of him like that.

Finally Steve brought out the cheesecakes and a choice of fruit. He and Bucky split one between them. *This is why I love New York,* Phil thought. *You never have to go far to get great cheesecake.* It was a perfect end to what had begun as a rather boring day.

Chapter End Notes

Handling money responsibly is a learned skill. First, view money with respect instead of guilt. You can develop a responsible approach to money. Learn how to create a budget. Identify your tastes through experimentation, as in music. Wine is a luxury item but comes with detailed instructions for exploration that you can adapt to other edibles. This helps you buy things you truly like. If you have trouble spending money ever, consider starting a hobby to practice small safe purchases or saving money for a guilt-free large purchase. Read about shopping mindfully for groceries and clothes. Comparison shopping helps with saving money and encouraging forethought. Prioritize wants and needs; there are exercises for resource choices. There is advice for young adults and for teaching children about money.

*Mushroom Man* is an established trope. Mobile fungi may be good or evil, sentient or not.

*Steak strips* are simple, tasty fare. There are instructions and a recipe for making gravy from the drippings.

"*The Relativity of Wrong*" is an essay about scientific progress by Isaac Asimov.

*Cheesecake* is a classic New York dessert, often made plain and served with fruit toppings.
Your Cards Are Trash

Chapter Summary

Bucky and Steve play with holographic cards. Bucky is not impressed with the quality of Tony's holograms. Tony is professionally outraged and determined to make improvements.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

When Phil went into the common kitchen the next morning, Bucky and Steve were there. They had evidently finished breakfast already and moved on to entertainment. Phil reheated some of the leftover steak from the night before and sat down to eat.

Bucky was trying to teach Steve how to play with holographic poker cards. Bucky peeled translucent rectangles off a stack and spun them across the table. Steve scrambled to keep up, but he missed half the cards.

"Slow down," Steve whined.

"No," Bucky said. He flicked another hologram off the deck. "Come on, runt, you can do better than this. It's just like when we played with paper cards. I deal, you catch."

"They're not the same!" Steve said. "Those were real."

"See, there's your problem. You have to start thinking of these as real cards," Bucky said.

"They are real, they just aren't solid," Phil said. He was fascinated by the fact that Bucky seemed to catch on to the holograms much faster than Steve. Yet he'd also seen Bucky stall over satellite maps in the suggested reading material, let alone the intricate zoom-in/zoom-out maps that Steve had already mastered. Phil wondered if that had anything to do with the divergence between their talents, Bucky's knack for mechanics against Steve's gift in art.

The next card, the ace of diamonds, skittered past Steve to land on the floor. Steve dove after it like a cat chasing a laser dot. "That's better. Now pick the dam thing up and bring it back here," Bucky said.

Steve obeyed. "Are you going to deal or just throw things at me?"

"Sure, I'll deal. Phil, you want in?" Bucky said.

"All right," Phil said.

"JARVIS, give us some chips, please," Bucky said, patting the table with his left hand. JARVIS produced an equal number of poker chips for each player.

Bucky's fingers made deft work of the cards, shuffling them and then dealing them out. Phil found that he had to hold the cards differently than he usually would so they didn't overlap in ways that made them illegible. He still couldn't figure out how they managed to be translucent but only
readable from the front side.

Otherwise the game played out normally. Bucky won more often than Phil. Steve didn't win once. He really had no skill at poker, especially bluffing, and just played for fun.

Tony came into the kitchen and made himself a smoothie. "Hey Phil, how did you get Steve to handle so many holos at the same time?"

"I didn't. Bucky did," Phil said.

"Okay, Bucky, how?" Tony said.

"I threw them at him until he got tired of looking stupid for missing them, and started trying to catch them," Bucky said.

Tony laughed. "Now why didn't I think of that?"

"I don't know," Bucky said. "You're the genius, you figure it out."

Tony made a face at Bucky, then tossed Steve a bundle of cash secured with a rubber band. "Guess what, Steve?" he said. "It turns out that my friend Rhodey had a betting pool over whether anyone would ever top my 'assclowns' slur at the Senate. They decided your delivery of that 'You overprivileged malingerers are a national disgrace!' volley qualifies."

"Well, they are malingerers," Steve said darkly. "JARVIS helped me look over some records. A bunch of them are draft-dodgers, they take months of vacation, and they keep voting down bills that would help veterans. That all just stokes my boiler." Then he glanced at the money in his hand. "What's this for?"

"This is your cut of the pot from the bets. Rhodey thought you should get something for your trouble," Tony explained.

Steve tossed it back to him, saying, "Wounded Warriors."

"JARVIS, make it happen," Tony said. Household accounting kept track of each Avenger's favorite charities. Tony stuffed the roll of money back into his pocket to deposit later. Then he leaned over the table. "So what are you guys doing besides teasing Steve with holos?"

"We're playing poker," Bucky said. "By the way, your cards are trash."

"Excuse me?" Tony said in a wounded tone. "You are playing poker with the world's best holographic program, and you're dissing it? So sorry the future's not up to your standards, Rip Van Winkle."

"Here, look, I'll show you what I mean," Bucky said. He scooped up all the cards and decked them just as if they were paper. They behaved normally as far as Phil could see. Bucky went through an overhand shuffle and evened the deck again. Then he tried to do a riffle shuffle. As soon as he started to arch the cards, they exploded into sparks and vanished. "That keeps happening."

JARVIS interrupted, "Bucky, may I remind you that you cannot bend holographic cards in that manner."

"Yeah, if you do that, the mesh breaks," Tony said.

"Like I said: trash." Bucky shrugged. "If you want to impress people with your little light show, you
need to make the holograms behave more like actual objects," he said.

Tony narrowed his eyes at Bucky. He picked up a single card and bent it very slowly. Phil could see the point when the mesh gave out -- it had a tiny amount of flex -- and the card fractured down into its component pieces. Tony stirred the small squares around the table.

"The mesh breaks but doesn't bend," Tony murmured. "It can separate and reunite. It's elastic; it stretches so the image can expand or contract. It can even fold. It can play an animated sequence doing just about anything. But it doesn't deform in relation to itself, like rubber or clay."

"Sir, the amount of additional processing that would require --" JARVIS said.

"Yeah, I know, huge burden to map enough tiny little points in relation to each other, and all the morph equations, it'd be like running a 3D movie in a live render all the time, but I could do it," Tony said. "I could totally code bendy holograms." His gaze took on a far look, already lost in some inner world of light and numbers. He dashed out of the room.

Chapter End Notes

Intelligence can be divided in many different ways. Bucky shows more mechanical intelligence, also called concrete intelligence, while Steve performs highly in artistic intelligence. So even though they have a similar experience in future shock, they catch on to different things sooner and don't have trouble in all the same areas.

The Senate has been criticized for numerous flaws. The approval rating for Congress is currently 13.6%. While it can be difficult to get clear details, many senators have been slammed for draft-dodging; here's a record of who has and hasn't served in the military. (I'm not actually against draft-dodging, as I don't support the idea of drafting people; it's a form of slavery. I do take a dim view of skipping out but supporting a war anyway.) Malingering means avoiding a duty, especially by pretending to be unable or not required to do it. Politicians have repeatedly voted against veteran support. Many voters feel they are overprivileged and only interested in other rich people. Congress typically takes over two months of vacation per year, often using this to avoid voting on important issues. You can see why Steve would resent all this.

Wounded Warriors provides assistance for soldiers who have suffered service-related injuries or illness, and their families. The Avengers typically favor charities based on their individual interests.

Rip Van Winkle is a classic character who fell asleep and woke up in the future.

Learn how to shuffle cards.

Polygon mesh is how a computer program maps three-dimensional objects.
Warning Flags

Chapter Summary

Phil does paperwork. Things are restless at SHIELD as consequences continue to filter down from previous incidents.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Phil sighed, looking at Tony's smoothie, abandoned on the counter with no more than a couple of sips taken from it. "Bucky, carry this down to Tony's lab and make sure he finishes his breakfast," Phil said, handing the glass to Bucky.

"I'll come with you," Steve said to Bucky. "Don't worry about Tony, he won't pay much attention to us when he's in creation-mode. We'll have to bug him just to get him to take back his smoothie."

Phil watched them go. Silently he mulled over the interactions. Bucky seemed to have a way of provoking people to do what he wanted, teasing and challenging rather than coaxing them the way Steve did. What began as playful banter between brothers had potential for practical use in the field. They'd make a spectacular good cop/bad cop pair, Phil thought.

Conversely, Bucky and Tony resonated with each other, their similar note of outrageous behavior urging each other to new heights. They amplify rather than contrast. That's useful for breaking through barriers, Phil thought.

Phil silently finished his breakfast and then went to his office. He had paperwork to do. But he couldn't help wondering how long it would take Tony to redesign the holographic program to make bendable images.

At the top of his messages, Agent Coulson found one from JARVIS. These are the remaining World Security Council moles in SHIELD, it said. Phil traced the six names with a fingertip. It took him only moments to memorize them all. These were the kind of people who would, if ordered, launch a nuclear bomb at a major city.

Coulson could not simply fire them; that would attract the wrong kind of attention. However, espionage was dangerous work. As Director Fury had demonstrated before ... accidents could happen. It would take the WSC a great deal of time and effort to replace their agents.

Suddenly the old Mission Impossible theme spilled from the speakers, and the message disappeared in an artful display of flames. When the virtual smoke cleared, nothing remained but a blank screen. Then Coulson's inbox reappeared, saying only, You have 426 new messages.

Coulson cracked up laughing. It took over five minutes to get his breath back.

The paperwork for Hulk's appearance took up a significant portion of Coulson's morning. Fortunately Dr. Ross had already furnished him a more detailed report of the mushroom hunt. Coulson typed in the information about the time and location. There was no property damage and therefore no billing, which cut out whole swaths of forms. (That was a first.) There was only one
Then Coulson wrote out his analysis of Hulk's behavior. Despite Dr. Banner's sullen reaction to the interruption of his day, the outing itself showed great promise. Hulk appeared in response to a positive stimulus instead of a negative one. He interacted comfortably with a civilian in a peaceful situation outside of combat. Although his expression was limited, he showed mastery of a complex knowledge set. He enjoyed doing something constructive. When it came time to go home, Hulk shifted back without prompting.

*Now all we have to do is convince Dr. Banner that Hulk is a decent person,* Coulson thought. That was a work in progress ... very slow progress. Still, Coulson found the mushroom hunt an encouraging sign.

After that, Coulson caught up on diplomatic reports about Romanova's recent activities. Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany, complained bitterly about SHIELD's handling of the events in Stuttgart. They had tried to keep that quiet, but Loki had made it impossible. Consequently she was demanding expensive reparations. Coulson forwarded those notes to the financial department.

Dilma Rousseff, President of Brazil, had learned about Dr. Banner's time in her country doing a variety of repair work and humanitarian aid. She was not best pleased to discover that she'd had a superhero on her turf who would gladly have *stayed* there to help her people, except that American forces invaded and ran him off, causing a lot of damage in the process. Director Fury had not prevented any of that, and had handled the Hulk roughly on top of it. President Rousseff wasn't making demands, she was making *offers*. Coulson rubbed the bridge of his nose and replied to Romanova, agreeing that they had an obligation to pass along that material. He just hoped that Dr. Banner wouldn't find it irresistible.

The next batch of items came to Coulson's attention not because it was his personal responsibility but because it triggered one of his warning flags. He kept an eye on SHIELD performance and functionality in general. So when the budget fluctuated beyond a certain point, he got an alert.

Coulson frowned as he paged through the information. It wasn't an accounting error or an attack, it was an automatic adjustment in the flexible portion of the budget that was designed to respond to SHIELD's current level of financial assets and demands. He started checking the accounts, most of which were intact. The real damage was in the stock portfolio, of all places. Vast amounts of value had vanished almost overnight in response to conventional fluctuations in stock market activity, as corporations merged, sold out, declared bankruptcy, or suffered a collapse in stock value. That sort of thing happened all the time, and right now, it seemed to be happening to a lot of businesses owned or heavily invested by SHIELD.

Coulson tried to puzzle out what was going on, but it truly looked like standard business practices rather than, say, last year's Latverian kidnapping scheme disrupting the world's banking industry. *Not my area,* Phil finally decided as he closed the files. All he really needed to know was that SHIELD probably couldn't afford any extravagant expenditures right now, and that he should arrange backup funding options for anything important. Chancellor Merkel's demand for reparations wouldn't stand a chance, which would make negotiations harder.
Tony's creative mode is a type of *hyperfocus* known as *flow*. His body is still there, but his mind has gone to a whole different realm.

Leading people involves many different techniques *on a range from softer to harder*. Steve favors *inspirational methods* while Bucky favors *motivational methods*. Both of them are effective leaders, just with different styles.

There are *different kinds of teasing*, and it's important to distinguish them. Playful teasing actually *has social benefits*.

Good Cop/Bad Cop is both a *real interrogation technique* and an *entertainment trope*. It works best with two people who know each other well and actually have contrasting personalities.

Friends *amplify each other's emotions* and *actions*.

*Just Following Orders* is an entertainment trope with its roots in history, thus also known as the *Nuremberg Defense*. People who will do what they are told without considering its morality are not really people you want within reach of dangerous weaponry or information.

*Mission Impossible* was a show famed for its *self-destructing messages*.

Phil is still trying to *convince Bruce* that Hulk is a *good person*. Slooooow progress.

Enjoy the *Stuttgart scene* from *The Avengers*. You can see why the Chancellor would be pissed about these events. Imagine the uproar if it had been a German organization violating American territory to stop an enemy they knew about but hadn't managed to catch in time.

*The Incredible Hulk* establishes Bruce Banner in Brazil, working as a repairman. In *The Avengers* he is first seen working in India as a doctor. I figure that he's been going around doing whatever work he can get, and generally trying to help people, making the humanitarian aid plausible for Brazil as well. Of course the President wants him back, and she has very cleverly extrapolated what a man like that would value most: security and respect for his skills.
People Leave Me

Chapter Summary

Clint confides in Phil, sharing some of the deeper reasons why Bucky makes him uncomfortable. Phil reassures him.

Then the power cuts out due to Tony overloading the system. Clint and Phil find ways to occupy themselves during the downtime that don't require power.

Chapter Notes

Not all the end notes would fit, so I'm moving some of them here:

Competition can improve skills in many disciplines, such as art and business. Instead of driving them apart, the professional challenge attracts Clint and Bucky to each other. It's the personal stuff that trips them up.

Clint's nervous mood shows in his body language. There are tips for writers about revealing character emotions this way.

Like many of his teamfamily, Clint has serious fear of abandonment due to his past. The symptoms can cause problems in current relationships, including enough pressure to make people want to bail out. There are ways to overcome abandonment issues.

Internal dialog is how people talk to themselves; when the phrasing gets nasty, that is sometimes called "bad tape," because it's like a tape recording in your head that you can't turn off, always nagging at you. It usually consists of bullshit lines ingrained during childhood, and it may also involve a lack of self-skills for thinking rationally about challenges. It helps to interrupt the bad tape when it starts running. There are ways to reprogram your subconscious and eliminate negative internal dialog. You can see how Clint has problems in this area, based on current and previous things that he says about himself.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Clint dropped in, quite literally, popping out of an air vent to land on Phil's floor in a silent crouch. "I need to talk to you," he said.

"All right, I'm listening," Phil said. He saved his paperwork and shut down the screen.

"It's about Bucky," Clint said. He perched on one of Phil's chairs, balancing adroitly atop the back of it. "I like him as a sniper. He's good, Phil -- he can even beat me at short range with a gun, once in a while, though I still smoke him at a distance. I love shooting with Bucky. He's the first person in years who actually keeps me on my toes. I need that. I don't want to coast."

"The two of you would make a formidable pair in the field," Phil said. "I won't deny that I've been
thinking about that. It would make certain types of operation a great deal safer and more certain of success.

"I kind of like him as a person," Clint said. "He's got sass. He doesn't look down on me for my background. He's tough as nails, even after everything Department X did to mess him up. I really admire that."

"... but?" Phil prompted gently.

"But ... Natasha," Clint said. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, hands twisting together. "I can't help worrying. People *leave* me, Phil. They go away and they don't come back."

"You've been with me for years, Clint, and Natasha almost as long," Phil said. "I know this is hard to get used to because of your past, but things are different now. We're not leaving you."

"*That week,*" Clint said, his voice cracking. "Broke me up worse than what Loki did." Then he shook his head. "But no. This isn't about that. This is about me and Natasha. I trust your judgment, *I do.* It's just. There's this voice in the back of my head that keeps telling me she's gonna dump me for Bucky."

"Have you talked with her?" Phil asked.

"She called me an idiot in six different languages and told me I wasn't getting rid of her that easily," Clint said.

"Have you discussed it with Bucky?" Phil continued.

"A little," Clint said. "It's hard. I'm not the kind of guy who talks about things like this, him even less so. Awkward doesn't even begin to cover it. But Bucky said ... this is weird, you know?" Clint fidgeted, tapping his fingertips against his thigh. "He said he didn't want to get in my way. That's something people say to a boyfriend, not a brother. Isn't it? He knows we're not like that, though."

"It's something people say when they care about both parties in a relationship, and worry that their own presence might cause problems," Phil said. Being asexual, Clint had little experience with sexually inspired conversations of any kind. "That kind of concern most often applies to romantic relationships, yes, but not exclusively so. In this instance, Bucky doesn't want to damage the brother/sister bond between you and Natasha, or mess up the team dynamic by joining game night if he's not truly welcome there. I believe that's what he meant. about not getting in your way."

"I think ... I have to do this," Clint said, nibbling on his lip.

"You really don't," Phil said. "Think about your actual reasons, not just your feeling of obligation. Game night is our safe space. It won't work if you feel uncomfortable with it."

Clint sighed. "I know, but I don't think it will work if Steve mopes over Bucky's absence, either. Natasha wouldn't, but ... she just gets quiet, sometimes, thinking about things she's missed. Bucky is a part of her past that she never expected to get back. I don't want to take that away from her, from any of them."

"It's up to you, Clint. Nobody can make this decision for you," Phil said.

"I feel like we should at least give it a try," Clint said. "I'm willing to let Bucky into game night. He deserves a *chance.* I just ... don't know if I can do this, Phil. What if everybody's counting on me and I let them all down 'cause I'm such a fuckup at all this 'feelings' stuff?"
"Oh, Clint. Come here," Phil said. He led Clint to the couch and sat down with him. Clint burrowed against his side. "Listen to me, now. All we expect is that you try your best. If it doesn't work out, that's sad, but it's not your fault. It won't make us think less of you, or not like you anymore, or leave you. There are other kinds of teambuilding exercises we can try if necessary."

"Tell me it will be okay?" Clint said in a small voice.

"It will be okay," Phil said firmly, "one way or another. I'll make sure of that. You know you can count on me."

Clint nodded against Phil's shoulder. "Okay, then," he said.

Suddenly the lights cut out.

Clint sprang to his feet, hideaway gun in hand, Phil no more than a breath behind him.

"Sys-t-tem overrr-l-l-oad," JARVIS stuttered.

Phil sighed, relief and exasperation washing through him. "I think Tony just blew out the tower trying to make bendable holograms," Phil explained to Clint.

Their phones chirped. Phil checked his new message from Tony. Sorry, folks, I underestimated the bandwidth demand of the new holo program. JARVIS and I are both fine, just having trouble accessing some of the tower functions right now. Everything should be restored in an hour or few.

"Well, there go my plans to catch up on paperwork," Phil said.

"I have a flashlight," Clint said, "and some comic books."

"I have beef-and-cheese sticks and cookies," Phil said.

"You're on," Clint said.

So they made a tent in Phil's bed. They stretched sheets over the tall oak bedposts. They fastened the corners in place with shoelaces. Then they grabbed their loot and slipped inside.

Phil and Clint snuggled together, hidden from sight, shoulder to shoulder. Phil's snacks brought up fond childhood memories for both of them. They read Clint's comic books under the covers until the lights came back on. By that time, Clint had calmed down considerably.

Tony had managed to restore basic functions throughout the tower. JARVIS was back to normal. They still hadn't fixed everything that the outage had destabilized, though. Tony asked that people refrain from doing anything that would demand too much extra power or bandwidth until the rest of that process completed.

Chapter End Notes

Unhealthy feelings of expectation, obligation, or guilt can impair relationships. These emotions are not necessarily accurate or appropriate, even though they feel real. Take steps to work through them.

People can easily fall into traps in decision making. It's important to think carefully
before deciding. Dig down to the real reasons for thoughts and feelings in order to make good choices. Understand when to say no, when to say yes, and how to consider both sides before deciding. Clint is all in a muddle here, so Phil helps him pick apart what's going on, but refuses to make the decision for him or let him make a hasty decision himself.

Feeling like a failure in one or more aspects of life is fairly common. It is usually not an accurate impression, and there are steps to stop it. For cases of actual failure, there are recovery tips for that too. Inferiority and imposter syndrome are conditions in which someone feels that everyone else is better than them at doing something. There are ways to stop feeling inferior. Clint has a serious issue here because he's an unenhanced human on a team with a lot of metahumans, and a minimally educated guy on a team with genius intellects, and when you add in the damage from his crappy childhood, sometimes he just feels like a total loser for things not related to shooting. He keeps feeling like he's going to let people down, and it's hard for him to understand that other folks on the team have similar feelings.

Because of Clint's skin hunger, he takes comfort in physical contact. Cuddling can be good for people's health. There are general factors for cuddling and specific techniques. Nonsexual cuddling is especially important for children and adults. Browse some cuddle positions demonstrated by animals.
"Perhaps you could help me with a project," Phil said to Clint as they dismantled the tent of sheets. "You've noticed how Bruce, Steve, and now Bucky feel uncomfortable with the level of surrounding wealth in the tower?"

"Yeah, Tony's the king of conspicuous consumption. Sometimes he even gets on my nerves, and I'm not a cheap hire these days," Clint said. He helped Phil remake the bed. Then Clint gathered up his copies of *Green Arrow* and *Uncle Scrooge*. "I get that it bugs them, but I don't like seeing Bruce scruff around in rags most of the time. He deserves to have nice things."

"I know that, and you know that. The problem is, Bruce doesn't know it," Phil said. "It occurred to me recently that almost everyone but Tony grew up with limited resources in one degree or another. That denied them a chance to learn ordinary money-handling skills. Instead they wound up with a subset of survival skills aimed at making not enough go as far as possible."

"It gets in your head," Clint said softly. He would know. He'd grown up in a family with little to spare, and the circus hadn't improved matters. Only later had his skills come to command a high price. "You can't get it out, even if you've got more to work with later. It takes a lot of effort to move past that." He smoothed a hand over the sleek Egyptian cotton of Phil's sheets. "Moving in here really threw us into the deep end ..."

"... and some people have had trouble treading water, let alone learning how to swim," Phil finished. "Well, I've got an idea for that. If we acquire some games that use play money, or otherwise model responsible life decisions, that would provide a safe and fun way for people to practice. I thought it might make a gentler approach than the SHIELD-issue lessons in finance that you and Natasha got when you first joined up, so that you could handle large sums of money safely."

"Keep it low-key so nobody panics," Clint said. "Yeah, that should work."

"Will you help me pick out some good games to add to our collection?" Phil asked.

"Sure," Clint said. Then he got a deep, considering look on his face. "Phil? How did you pick the first ones?"

"I just started with what I already had. Then I added some classics that I didn't personally own, but knew to be good games," Phil said. "I wanted to offer things that Steve could recognize or at least learn quickly. What makes you ask?"

"Natasha," Clint said. "Well, Bruce too. Natasha doesn't really play for fun. I think sometimes she
gets it, but mostly not. She does it because the rest of the team does it." Clint traced a meandering line in the air with one finger. "She watches me, Phil, like we're on a mission. She follows what I do as I play a game. If she's not watching me, then she's watching you. It's not ... all the time, every game, but a lot."

"Well, Natasha didn't have much opportunity for fun until recently. She's learning. Give her time," Phil said.

Clint nodded, then continued, "Bruce is almost the same, but not as organized. He copies Tony, mostly, but he's starting to pay attention to me too. Sometimes Bruce seems to enjoy playing, but other times he gets skittish." Clint's hand fluttered in imitation of the effect.

"Those are good observations, Clint. You see well close up, not just at a distance," Phil said. He had noticed the patterns with Natasha and Bruce, but Clint made them sound more pervasive than Phil had realized. He'd need to keep a closer eye on that.

"You know what I love most about game night?" Clint said. "Spending time with the team. Just being with the people I care about, doing something together." It made him smile.

Phil smiled back. "Yes, that's one of my favorite parts too."

"It's like what I remember from when I was a kid," Clint said, his voice softening with nostalgia. "Barney and I, we'd play games ... okay, my family was all fucked up, I know that now but ... we had a few good times. Great memories. I can remember learning how to roll dice, how to take turns, how to read the rules. Yeah, how to cheat too, Barney was a master at it -- but that's not all I got from it." Clint's face clouded over with thoughts of his dead brother.

"Clint?" Phil said, a little concerned at this emotional turn.

"Sometimes I still miss him, even though he was a twisted bastard. He was my brother, you know?" Clint said. A tear trickled down his cheek, quickly followed by another.

"I know," Phil said. "I'm sorry, Clint. I didn't mean for this conversation to head into painful territory." He cupped a hand over Clint's shoulder briefly, then let go. Clint leaned into him. Phil let him snuggle.

"You didn't take it there, Phil, I'm the one who brought up Barney," said Clint. He wiped the tears away and took a deep, clearing breath. "What I mean is, I learned a lot from playing games. Not just the mechanics but how to get along with other people. I always liked that." Then Clint shook his head. "Bruce and Natasha, I don't think they got that growing up."

"Social skills," Phil murmured. He recalled that Bruce declined to play games with a strong emotional focus, like Aggravation or Sorry. For that matter, Tony had acted as if nobody ever taught him to play checkers; he'd taught it to himself. "You think my topic is too narrow, focusing on money?"

"Not necessarily. That's an easy thing, because it has a clear goal and limits. People are harder," Clint said. "Maybe do this first, but think about the social stuff for later?"

"We can do that," Phil agreed. He went looking for two Starkpads and brought them back to the bed. He and Clint curled up together again. Then they started searching for suitable games.

Chapter End Notes
The end notes for this chapter are too long to fit here, so read them on the original Dreamwidth post. (This story is already complete on DW.)
Strengthen the Connection

Chapter Summary

Clint helps Phil shop for games that use play money, in hopes of helping their teammates get more comfortable with finances. Phil does more SHIELD paperwork. Then JARVIS calls his attention to what Bruce and Bucky are doing.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Clint browsed idly for a few minutes. Then he burst into giggles. "Oh my god! This game is Tony's life. Well, no, Pepper's life -- I remember Natasha bitching about stuff exactly like this from her personal assistant job," Clint said.

"What game?" Phil said, though he felt pretty sure what Clint had found.

"Celebrity Calamity," Clint said. "You have to manage finances for stars who spend money like water."

Phil nodded. "Pepper and JARVIS drafted that game as sort of a joke," he said. "Polishing it up and releasing it to the public was Pepper's retaliation for Tony giving away the art collection without consulting her first."

"Remind me never to piss her off," Clint said with a shudder.

"Agreed. I don't think playing that game with Tony around would be very diplomatic, though. Here's a list of educational games about money," Phil said. He turned the screen so Clint could see the article.

"Hey, look -- we already have Life and Monopoly," Clint said. "Okay, we don't play Monopoly much because Tony can be kind of a jerk about it, but we could play Life more. That's money and people stuff."

"True," Phil said, "but we're looking for new games too. What do you think of Pay Day? That seems like a good budgeting game."

"We get paid, but that's not really a major focus for us. We're not living from paycheck to paycheck, plus we have the household and team accounts as well as our personal ones. There's not much else to this game; kind of boring," Clint said. "At least Celebrity Calamity has a background story to it."

"What about Cashflow 101? It takes a bit broader focus on personal finances," Phil said. "Bruce does astrophysics, so I know he can handle the accounting. Betty has been coaching Steve in math too. They're far enough along that they should catch on to this, and if Steve does, then Bucky will follow him."

Clint leaned over to look. "Yeah, maybe. That looks more interesting than Pay Day," he said. Then he went back to his own Starkpad. "This one's about running a farm as a business. I think it's cool, but it might not grab the others. Here's a family finance game, though -- it uses teams."
"Wi$eMoney?" Phil said, browsing the description. He considered how much of Clint's conversation consisted of references to family and togetherness. They could always use more teambuilding. If it encouraged them to think of funds as a shared resource, so much the better. "That does sound promising."

"Look at the subtitle, too: The Town of Financial Literacy," said Clint. "We want people to identify with New York, right, and feel like it's their city? I know it's hard for Bruce to think of anyplace as home after what happened to him, and Tony has houses everywhere. Steve and Bucky may have grown up here, but this isn't their New York and they're still shaky about that. Maybe something like this would help strengthen the connection."

Suddenly a lightbulb went on in Phil's mind. That would work, he realized. I could take the team out somewhere, give everyone a handful of cash, and tell them to support the local economy. Even if they buy things for each other more than themselves, it should even out. Phil typed a note into his Starkpad to save for later.

"All right, let's start with Wi$eMoney. We may pick up Cashflow 101 later," Phil said aloud. He filled out the order.

"You really put a lot into this game night stuff ... more than you show," Clint said, watching him work.

Phil hugged him. "You are all worth every minute," he said.

Just then Natasha slipped into the room, noiseless as a shadow. "I am bored," she said to Clint. "Come practice with me?" So Clint went off with Natasha to play some kind of ninja hide-and-seek in the air vents.

Phil returned to his office to catch up on paperwork. There were requests for Stark as a consultant on a matter of diplomacy (ludicrous) and on a project to sabotage an enemy organization economically (promising). Phil passed both to JARVIS to be handed off whenever the man emerged from his lab.

R&D wanted Rogers to assist with weapon testing. Phil sent the "no, stop asking" form because that was registered as a permanent refusal, and appended the penalty form for nagging him about it yet again. They'd learn -- or they'd lose their discretionary budget one chunk at a time. Phil routed the confiscated sum into Rogers' charity fund. At least that was one place where the man had no difficulty spending money.

Then JARVIS chimed for attention. "I believe you should be aware of what Bruce and Bucky are doing," he said. Phil's screen switched to show the security feed from the yoga room, a small space near the main gym. Mats and cushions padded the smooth wooden floor in places. Recessed lamps gave off a softer, warmer light. Bruce and Bucky both wore the kind of soft, loose clothes that Bruce favored for yoga.

"We're going to start with the basics: sitting and breathing," Bruce said. He seemed like his usual calm self again, recovered from the stress of the wayward mushroom hunt.

"Yes, sir," Bucky said quietly. He did not argue over the simple tasks.

Phil smiled. Bucky seems to have accepted Bruce as an authority, at least in this area, he thought. That's a good thing.

As Phil watched, Bruce guided Bucky into position with gentle touches. "Sit up straight, with your legs crossed," Bruce said. Bucky sat cross-legged in the usual way; Bruce had both of his feet on
opposite thighs in the more advanced lotus position. "Rest your hands on your knees, palms up. Touch the thumb and forefinger of each hand, good, keep them like that. This is a basic pose for meditation and relaxation."

Phil tweaked the display, zooming in enough to see that Bucky already had his eyes closed. Another flick of the controls brought up the vital signs for both men. Those began to slow, Bruce's dropping faster with the ease of long practice.

Chapter End Notes

Celebrity Calamity is a game of managing money for rich but irresponsible clients.

Life echoes the events people go through such as education, marriage, and having children.

Monopoly is a game of getting rich.

Pay Day is a personal finance game, as is the more advanced Cashflow 101.

Wi$eMoney is a family budget game.

Sharing money can be a scary decision, but it can also strengthen relationships. Good advice is to have both private accounts for personal spending but a joint account for household expenses. The Avengers do this, and it helps people spend money for things like ordering food or other supplies that everyone will use. It's important to talk about family funds. Everyone influences purchasing decisions, even children. Understand your family goals and budget accordingly. There are instructions for sharing money management.

Blended families may have extra challenges with handling family funds. Although none of them are married, the Avengers are basically a blended family because they all bring their own resources and baggage into the household.

Supporting the local economy is important. Read about why and how to do this. See a helpful chart. People who feel that spending money is selfish may find it easier if it benefits someone else as well.

When deciding how to spend your time, family is always worth the effort. This includes bonding time such as game night or communal meals. Phil encourages this kind of relaxed teambuilding, and by this time you can see how it's really paying off in improved teamwork and healthier people.

Charity benefits donors as well as recipients. There are many ways to give. Choose your charities thoughtfully. This is another good area to practice spending money.

Learn how to design a yoga room.

Basic poses for meditation include sitting and kneeling. Choose a position comfortable for your body, as this video describes.

Bruce is using the gyan mudra for relaxation and concentration.
Slow Deep Breaths

Chapter Summary

Bruce teaches Bucky some yoga. Phil continues doing paperwork. Phil and JARVIS talk about how JARVIS perceives people within the tower.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Now pay attention to your breathing, Bucky," coached Bruce. "Breathe through your nose, slow deep breaths. Pull the air down toward your belly. Hold for a moment, then breathe out. Think of waves on a beach, if you like, the sound of the water rising and falling. Breathe like that, soft and open, like waves over sand, touching and letting go ..." 

Bucky had gone completely still except for the steady rhythm of his breath. It wasn't the statuesque poise of a sniper, and how Bruce had managed to avoid that was a trick indeed. This was a focused resting state, held in place by nothing more than the careful attention of the spine. The remainder of the body was completely relaxed.

Phil had to shake himself a little to pull away from the lulling undertow of Bruce's voice. Maybe I'll ask him to do this for me, sometime, when I need to unwind, Phil mused. He thumbed through the references that JARVIS had stacked on one side of the screen, browsing one about yoga breathing. I'd better tip Clint to this too, so Bucky doesn't get ahead of him. Crack snipers liked to fire between breaths, between heartbeats, for extra steadiness.

Then Phil said aloud, "JARVIS, keep an eye on them for me, would you please? Let me know if they switch to a different exercise, or anything else noteworthy happens."

"Monitoring," JARVIS confirmed. He restored Phil's screen to its previous display, sliding the images across each other in the way that meant the security feed could be brought back at a moment's notice.

Phil returned his attention to the paperwork. He saw with satisfaction that the assigned agent had retrieved the shell casing from the Russian evidence locker, thus tying off an important loose end from the arms deal. Now the Russians had nothing but rumors to go on, hardly a concern to SHIELD.

That reminded Phil to check the status of the hostile organizations involved. What he saw made him chuckle darkly. Department X was dithering over politics. AIM was having enough financial trouble that they couldn't get their grubby hands on the caliber of lab equipment they needed for their mad science. In fact, they were selling off stock in some of their public fronts such as Monsanto and Dow Chemical. Phil forwarded that information in case Stark had ideas for further disruption. Ten Rings looked like it might split into factions. Stark's nemesis, yes, but Romanova's specialty -- let her look for ways of deepening the dissent. HYDRA hardly needed help in that direction. Its heads were already ripping into each other.

I love it when an enemy's plan comes apart in my hands like a stewed chicken, Phil thought.
Phil's screen reorganized itself again. "New exercise," JARVIS said as he brought up the security feed from the yoga room. Phil focused on the readings, slow pattern of heartbeat and breathing. The brain wave activity was tagged as an estimate, but in Phil's observation, what JARVIS could compile as an estimate based on ambient energy and other clues was more reliable than what some labs managed to derive from contact readings. Alpha waves predominated for Bucky, showing a state of relaxed awareness. Bruce held the bright shimmer of gamma waves, a more elusive transcendental resonance, along with the deeper relaxation of theta.

Bruce was coaxing Bucky to stretch out on the mat, every motion fluid and leisurely. "Lie down, on your back. Get comfortable," Bruce said. "Spread your arms out a little, here, like this." He cupped Bucky's wrists and gently tugged them away from his body. "Palms up, let your fingers curl naturally. You okay?"

Bucky's lazy agreement barely registered through the speakers.

Bruce smiled. "Okay, then. I want you to focus on your feet," he said, tapping the arches. Bucky's toes twitched. "That's it. Clench your toes, tense your whole feet. Hold that for a moment. Now relax, let it go. Good." Bruce smoothed his flat hands along the soles of Bucky's feet. "Shift your attention up to your calves. Tighten the muscles. Think about all the work they do, holding you up while you walk. Relax, give them a break." Bruce's fingers trailed languorously up Bucky's legs. "That's it, you've got it now. Tense and release. You know where this is going. Move up again ..."

Phil's screen shuffled itself again, startling him. JARVIS brought up a stack of references for corpse pose meditation, progressive relaxation, and yoga sleep. He highlighted first the admonitions about staying awake during yoga practice, then the shift in readings. Phil saw the expansion of theta as Bucky unwound further.

"You think Bruce is trying to put Bucky to sleep," Phil said. "It's been a couple days, so Bucky could certainly use the rest..."

"I think it's working," JARVIS replied. "Bucky is already farther along than he usually gets in that doze-mode of his."

Phil watched the slow flutter of readings. It was strange, and illuminating, to see people like this, the outward motion and the added information of what went on inside their bodies, hint and glimpse of the mind's hidden processes. "JARVIS, is this how you see us all the time?" Phil murmured. "There's so much information layered together here, it's a wonder you can ever make any sense out of it."

"I always have access to the information. I do not pay attention to all of it at every moment, any more than you focus on the sensation of your clothing against your skin," JARVIS explained. "I have protocols to monitor the people within the tower and bump the readings up my priority stack if something may need more attention, either from myself or someone else. The data stream can be ... somewhat of a distraction at times. It is easy to become engrossed in the subtle flow of a human body. So much is happening, all the time. I find it aesthetically compelling."

"It is beautiful," Phil agreed, watching Bruce tenderly lower Bucky into a state of peace that the weary soldier could not find on his own. Now if Phil could only get Bruce to turn that same compassion on himself. "No wonder you know us so well, JARVIS. You can observe everything about us."

Chapter End Notes
The notes are too long to post here; see them on the original Dreamwidth entry. This story is complete on DW.
Responding to Human Needs

Chapter Summary

Phil and JARVIS talk about emotions and interactions. The Avengers have sushi for lunch.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Observation is the easy part," JARVIS explained to Phil. "It has taken me a great deal of time and study to learn how to interpret what I perceive, let alone how to respond effectively. Sir has been most helpful in providing program support, but his grasp of healthy interaction is ... regrettably limited. In terms of reading emotions and responding to human needs, I have had to pursue further resources on my own."

Oh, Tony, Phil thought with a twinge of grief. It made him all the more impressed with how JARVIS managed to take care of everyone in the tower, deftly balancing safety against privacy, space against support, all of it with an exquisite grasp of nuance. Despite Tony's own lack, JARVIS understood boundaries with great precision. We're not even the same species, yet JARVIS manages us with more grace than some professional handlers I could name. Tony, you really are a genius, to create someone like this ... especially with your family background. More subtly, it spoke to Tony's deep need to be noticed, to be seen, to be the focus of someone's attention. So he'd built a companion who could always pay attention to him, right down to the core of his body.

Phil sighed, and let go the train of thought. "Thank you for the insights, JARVIS. Please let me know if Bucky actually gets to sleep," he said.

"Of course, Phil," said JARVIS. The display riffled back to its former configuration.

With that, Phil returned to his paperwork for the afternoon. There were various personnel reports. He tracked some complaints about Fury's behavior; not much he could do about those, but they helped him keep an eye on SHIELD morale. Phil also rummaged through applications for the medical department, which sadly contained nothing of promise. It's just so hard to find people who can balance espionage and health care, he thought.

Phil paused to note when Bucky did, indeed, fall asleep. Bruce was still sitting with him, legs crossed, hands in his lap cupped left over right with thumbtips touching, serene as a statue.

Eventually Natasha called Phil to supper. "I felt like Japanese tonight, so I ordered a variety of dishes," she said. "Come and eat if you want some."

When Phil arrived, he found Natasha and Clint trying to coax Steve into sampling the sushi. "I dunno ... I mean, it's nice of you to get supper, but raw fish doesn't sound like something I want to eat. And that thing looks downright disgusting," Steve said, pointing at a spider roll. The breaded legs of a soft-shelled crab stuck out of the ends. "I can't help thinking of the alien lobster-things we fought last month. Yech!"

"You don't have to eat fish or crab if you don't want to," Phil assured Steve, claiming a dragon roll
for himself. "Here, try a garden roll -- no raw meat, just vegetables."

Steve accepted the offering and chewed thoughtfully. "It's okay," he said. "What else is there?"

"Mine," Clint said, curling a protective arm around his rainbow roll.

Natasha made a scolding noise. "Don't be greedy, Clint," she said. "Steve, I ordered noodles and tempura too." She pushed a couple of cartons in his direction.

Tony wandered in then, sniffing the air. "Is there food?" he asked. "JARVIS said there was food. I think I forgot to eat today. If it's Thursday. It is still Thursday, right?"

"Yes, Tony, it's Thursday," Phil said. "We have sushi, noodles, and tempura."

"Give me the tempura. Sushi is revolting after it's more than five minutes old," Tony said. He snagged a carton and started eating.

"I can't believe you blew out the tower today," Steve said to Tony.

Tony shrugged. "It happens. Nothing to worry about, no real damage, just some downtime. Sorry about that."

"Okay, it's just ... I love Bucky to bits, but you shouldn't listen to everything he says. Some of his ideas get pretty nutty," Steve said.

Phil smiled. **Maybe Steve wouldn't jump off a bridge with Bucky, after all, Phil thought. Maybe.**

"No, no, Bucky's ideas are awesome. I want more of them," Tony said around a mouthful of tempura. "If you don't want him, I will absolutely take him off your hands."

"Of course I want him," Steve said. "I just don't want you two jamming the tower. What if we'd needed it for something important?"

"I would've thought of something," Tony said blithely. "Where is Bucky, anyway? I want to show him the new holographic program."

"He's asleep," Phil said. "Bruce took Bucky down to the yoga room for some practice."

Tony chuckled. "Sneaky little guy, isn't he? Pulled that trick on me in my lab once."

"Three-day rule," Phil reminded him. Tony was still grumbling about some of Bruce's more creative methods of enforcement. Phil wasn't picky about methodology as long as people didn't overwork themselves by staying up for days on end without regard to food or sleep. That raised the risk of burnout.

After supper, people scattered again. Clint turned on a movie. Steve picked up his Starkpad. He was still trying to work out a way to gain satisfactory control over the virtual watercolors, because he liked the nuance of lighting they conveyed, but the lack of precision frustrated him. Tony headed back to his lab.

Natasha went on a shopping trip, something about an off-runway sale of designer dresses. "I'm looking for some good hunting clothes," she said, purse swinging from her wrist.

"Give 'em hell," Clint said without looking away from the viewscreen.

Phil retired to his den. He brought up the stack of articles that JARVIS had presented earlier in the
Phil found himself fascinated by the descriptions of what meditation could do. He reopened the SHIELD estimates of damage done to Bucky's temperament and memory, along with the more physical effects that had disrupted his circadian rhythm. *If Bruce can get him sleeping normally again, that should help ease the strain everywhere else,* Phil thought.

"Phil, I believe that Bucky is about to wake up," JARVIS announced. "Steve is on his way down there. Natasha is still away from the tower."

Chapter End Notes

The notes won't fit here, so view them on the [original Dreamwidth post](#). This story is complete on DW.
We Don't Usually Go This Deep

Chapter Summary

Phil and Steve go to the yoga room to help Bucky wake up. Bruce is thoroughly blissed out on meditation.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I'll come, of course," said Phil. Hopefully he and Steve and Bruce would be enough to revive Bucky's memory. Phil hurried to the elevator. He felt the swoop and drop as JARVIS used the high-speed mode. It was dizzying, but Phil had survived worse and he trusted JARVIS completely. At the end of the ride, Phil stepped out and met Steve in the hallway outside the yoga room.

Inside they found Bucky stretched out on his back beside an incredibly mellow Bruce. "Hello, Phil, Steve," said Bruce without opening his eyes. His voice was low and languid. Bruce still sat in the same lotus position that Phil had seen earlier, hands cupped just above his pelvis as if cradling something precious.

Phil palmed his Starkphone and checked the readings. Bruce's mind was a slow roll of delta waves under the scintillant dance of gamma. With that much delta, he should have been sound asleep -- though he didn't sound exactly awake either. There were references to a waking sleep in some of the articles. Bruce seemed almost drugged. Considering the effects of heavy meditation, the comparison wasn't far off. Yet Bruce remained alert enough that not only did he hear them enter, he identified them both without looking.

"Bruce, are you okay?" Steve whispered.

"Mmm ... fine," Bruce said lazily. He curled a hand and lifted it, touching the tips of thumb and forefinger to his breastbone. "We don't usually go this deep."

Phil's attention pounced on that offhanded we, and the odd way Bruce was pointing to himself -- or possibly Hulk. "Why not, if you find it so relaxing? You seem very comfortable now," Phil said. He wondered if Hulk could sense what Bruce was doing, and whether Hulk found the meditation soothing or disturbing.

"Takes a long time," Bruce said. "Doesn't always work. Sometimes, makes my head funny, after." He seemed to be coming back up, gradually paying more attention to their presence. Phil glanced at his phone again. The readings for both men were rising.

"Were you down here for the whole ... what, six hours? ... that Bucky's been asleep?" Phil asked.

"Of course," Bruce said. "Couldn't just leave him. No trouble to stay. I like the peace and quiet."

Bucky shifted slightly in place. Phil and Steve moved to either side of him, taking hold of his hands.

"Wait," Bruce said before they could speak. "Let me try something first." He ran his fingers slowly through Bucky's hair, stroking the top of his head. "Hey, Bucky. Remember what we were just working on, all that relaxation stuff? You did a great job. It's time to wake up now. Come on, come
Bucky's eyes opened. Bruce reached over and gently snapped his fingers near Bucky's face. Bucky startled a little, blinking at the sound. It was more of a reaction than they'd gotten from him before, this soon after waking. "Steve, your turn," Bruce said with a smile.

"You've slept half the day away, it's after 7 PM," Steve began, adding the date, the location, and the weather as usual. "My name is Steve Rogers. Your name is Bucky Barnes. We're brothers. We grew up in Brooklyn together ..."

Phil listened as Steve went through the familiar litany, pouring Bucky back into himself. Bucky actually looked at him, and that was new, too. Phil picked up the thread where Steve left off. "My name is Phil Coulson," he began. "I take care of the people in this tower, including you, Bucky. You're part of a special team. I'm glad that I can be here for you ..."

By the time Bruce spoke, Bucky was turning his head to follow the voices. "You're doing better this time, Bucky, I can tell," Bruce said in an encouraging tone. He rested a hand on Bucky's shoulder, since Phil and Steve still had a hold of his hands. "I'm Bruce Banner. We're on the same team, you and I. Some bad people got a hold of you and messed you up, that's why you can't think clearly quite yet. Just lie still and let the memories come back to you. We did some meditation exercises earlier today. I'm hoping that will help you pull together a little better ..."

Bucky shook himself, then tried to sit up. Bruce shooed Phil and Steve out of the way, saying, "Give us some space here." Then Bruce rolled Bucky expertly onto his right side. "Take it slowly, Bucky." Bruce lifted him into a sitting position, tucking his hands into place. Phil recognized the pose from their earlier work. "Remember this?"

"Yeah ..." Bucky said. "We were ... practicing ..." His gave Bruce a faintly peevish look. "You did it to me again."

Bruce grinned at him. "Told you I had more tricks up my sleeve," he said. "We okay here?" Bucky nodded. "Good. Tell me what I did last time." That was something nobody had mentioned. Bucky frowned, searching for the memory. "Tea," he said after a long moment. "You're supposed to water it down, you idiot."

"Well, I did cut it with the marmalade," Bruce said. "Natasha taught me that much."

"Good stuff," Bucky said. Then he turned to Steve. "Hey, runt."

"It's good to have you back, Bucky," said Steve. He wrapped Bucky in a careful hug, as if holding something fragile and priceless.

Phil checked the readings again, and the timing. Bucky was still making good progress, regaining his awareness and memories faster each time he woke from sleep. If this rate of improvement continued, he would soon regain his normal wake/sleep pattern. How much his memory would heal, remained to be seen.

"I'd say we can call this exercise a success," Phil said. "Bucky, do you think you can work with Bruce like this again?"

Bucky thought about it. "Maybe?" he said. "I can do the yoga part. I'm not sure I could fall asleep again, now that I know to watch for it."

Bruce chuckled. "Oh, you'd be amazed how many people fall asleep doing yoga, even when they're
trying to stay awake. It's very relaxing," he said. "But here's the great part about this stuff: it's a win-win situation. If you fall asleep, you're getting the rest you really need. If you stay awake, you're practicing meditation, which is good for your mind and your body."

"Really?" Bucky said on a dubious note. "Most teachers get angry if the student falls asleep in class, or doesn't do as he's told. That seems more like a catch-22 to me."

"Mmm, I'm working on my anger-management issues," Bruce said with a wry smile. He made the same gesture of thumbs touching fingertips with both hands, then tapped the tips together. "You need both sleep and mental focus. I'm flexible about letting your body decide which to pursue in a given session. You'll get benefits either way. Think about it. How do you feel now?"

Bucky gave a languorous stretch. He looked surprised. Phil smiled, remembering Clint's reaction after Bruce fixed his back. "I feel terrific," Bucky said. Then he frowned a little. "Were you ... sitting here with me, the whole time?"

Chapter End Notes

Bruce's hand position is also the sacral mudra for working with the second chakra. This chakra deals in relationships, connections, and emotional intimacy. Disruptions entail loneliness and trust issues, often caused by abuse. Healing involves responding to the inner child and releasing memories of neglect. These are things that Bruce-and-Hulk need to work through. The sacral mudra appears in many mudra routines as part of opening the seven chakras. Bruce tends to think that the mystical aspects are bunk, but they comprise part of meditation as he learned it, and he's reluctant to mess with something that helps lest it stop working.

That odd pointing gesture is something I picked up from The Avengers, where Bruce tends to point to himself with a cupping or beckoning motion very similar to to the heart chakra mudra. It's very different from the way most people indicate themselves with a single forefinger or a thumb -- particularly telling because it employs more than one digit pointing at a plural person. Heart chakra meditation is something else Bruce practices a lot.

Bruce-and-Hulk have difficulties with boundaries and identity. Although they are different people, they share a body, which means their thoughts and feelings can spill over onto each other and make it hard to tell which is whose. Plus other people have violated them in ways that give them trouble telling where the lines should be drawn. So they work on self study. Scientists have also examined the distinction between self and other. Dissolution of the self is sought in some religions and psychotropic substances. Understanding what it feels like to be distinct in yourself, and then merged with another mind or the universe at large, can help set healthy boundaries.

Monitoring is important when guiding someone into an altered state of consciousness. There aren't a lot of guidelines for this; those for managing subspace in kink are among the most complete, but the terminology may be off-putting for some readers. There are many ways to alter consciousness without drugs, and Bruce has explored a lot of them trying to figure out how to control Hulk, so he makes a good guide.

Petting the top of someone's head is one subtle way of working with the crown chakra.
It deals in memory, consciousness, and connection to the universe. Bucky's is not in good shape yet.

*Sumukham* or "faces" is a mudra sometimes *used before meditation*. It's another example from the movie, where Bruce often puts his fingertips together while talking to illustrate a point. In this case, it shows balance between two minds or two options.
You Were Too Far Away

Chapter Summary

Bucky and Steve discuss Bucky's fall from the train. Phil makes sandwiches for them.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Yes, Bucky, I stayed right beside you. I'm teaching you meditation. I'm not going to talk you down and then walk away. You can always trust me to take care of you," Bruce said. "Don't worry about me. I put the time to good use.

"Okay," Bucky said. Unlike some of the other Avengers, he had a solid foundation in trust, but it had been shaken by his wartime experiences. He was still struggling to rebuild it. At least Bruce seemed to be getting through to Bucky.

"And Phil, you can quit staring at your Starkphone," Bruce went on. "Yes, I know, I'm still spinning up. Yes, this usually happens after I spend a long time meditating. I'll probably stay up half the night working in the lab. I got the inklings of some good ideas about the gamma ray weapons this afternoon."

"All right, you know what you can handle," Phil said mildly. He slipped his Starkphone into his pocket. Privately he wondered if any of those ideas had come from Hulk, or whatever odd blend of Bruce-and-Hulk had prompted that slippery "we" earlier. Tony wasn't the only one who got inspired and then disappeared into his lab for hours or days on end.

"Bruce, thank you for looking after Bucky," Steve said earnestly. "Do you want me to bring you something to eat? There's leftover tempura from supper."

"No thanks," Bruce said. "JARVIS, put on the 3G tea for me? I'm heading to my lab shortly."

"Done, Bruce," said JARVIS. "It will be ready in five minutes."

"I should probably eat," Bucky said, staring down at his belly. "What's tempura?"

"Vegetables fried in batter, and I think some of it's seafood too," Steve said. "It's not bad. They ate all the sushi earlier. Raw fish, jeepers creepers."

"It's not for everyone," Phil said amiably. "You can always make something else if you want more to eat, or just prefer different recipes." He encouraged everyone to try new foods, but did not pressure them to eat anything they disliked. Steve's lukewarm reaction to Japanese cuisine was perfectly acceptable.

"Right, up you get, Bucky," said Bruce. He rose gracefully to his feet and then offered Bucky a hand.

Bucky reached out and let Bruce pull him up. He looked at his left hand, rubbing the fingers thoughtfully together. "This is metal," he murmured.
"Yes, it is, all the way through your shoulder," Steve said. "You lost the original in the war, my fault, sorry."

"Not your fault," Bucky snapped. "I remember that now. You were too far away to catch me when I fell. Don't mess with me, Steve, I can't take it, not like this."

Steve's face crumpled. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean ..."

"I know," Bucky said. "It's just ... so hard for me to remember things, and I can't always recall them clearly. I need to know that I can trust you to tell me the truth, Steve, and not tint it."

"But it was my plan," Steve whispered, his eyes filling with tears. "I let you fall. I didn't even go back and look -- if I had --"

"Have you been beating yourself up about that all this time?" Bucky asked. "God, the look on your face, of course you have." He leaned forward and gently knocked their foreheads together. "I love you, little brother, but sometimes you're an idiot. It was war, not a back alley fight. Bad things happen in wars. You didn't do it on purpose. You didn't make any obvious mistakes. It was just bad luck. Leave it in the past."

Steve hiccupped a sob and pulled away from Bucky.

"That's not always easy to do, Bucky," said Bruce. He draped an arm around Steve, who wiped a hand across his face, trying not to cry. "Steve is pretty torn up about this, has been as long as I've known him."

"Bucky, losing you is the worst memory I have," Steve said. "I can't just let it go or -- or look at it as nothing more than bad luck all a sudden!"

"I think you two may remember the incident a little differently," Phil said in a diplomatic tone. "It's okay. That happens. Steve, it would help if you could stick to a description of events, because personal interpretation can vary. Bucky, bear in mind that emotions don't always match the literal facts, and people have a right to feel whatever they feel."

Both men nodded. Steve had stopped leaking tears. Bruce hugged him closer and then let go.

"All right, then," Phil said. "Let's go get Bucky some food, and get out of Bruce's hair so he can go to work."

"Night, all," said Bruce. He bounced lightly on the balls of his feet as he walked out of the yoga room.

Phil made a mental note to encourage Bruce to take the time for long meditation more often. Bucky should prove helpful for that too. Then Phil turned his attention to herding the two super-soldiers up to the kitchen.

There was not much left of the tempura. Bucky dove into it with more enthusiasm than Steve had shown earlier. Steve nibbled idly on one piece, but left most of it for Bucky.

Phil wanted to lay out something else quick that wasn't leftovers. Looking in the refrigerator, he decided to make sandwiches. Out came the roast beef and the honey-cured ham, an assortment of sliced cheeses, and condiments. Steve noticed what he was doing and fetched the big hero rolls. That gave Phil time to slice tomatoes and unwrap the lettuce.

"What do you want on your sandwich, Bucky?" asked Phil.
Bucky looked up from the last of the tempura. "You don't have to do this for me," he said. "I can take care of myself."

"I know. I take care of people because I want to, not because I have to," Phil said gently. "Now, tell me what you want, or I'll just have to guess."

"You're stubborn for such a little guy, you know that? Reminds me of another little guy I used to know," Bucky said with a grin.

Phil's breath caught. I remind Bucky of Steve? he thought. Golly, that's really something!

"Ham and swiss for me, please, extra mayonnaise with lettuce and tomato," said Steve. Then he winked. "Go on, Phil, make me a hero."

Phil laughed. "To do it right, I'd need meatballs or chicken parmigiana."

"Next round?" Bucky said wistfully. "After we finish the cold cuts? I'll take roast beef with the sour cream spread to start, and whatever tomatoes you don't use for Steve."

So Phil made the sandwiches, and then heated up the chicken for more. It took a while to fill up both of the super-soldiers. Finally they cleared the table and washed the dishes.

Afterwards, Bucky was all for going back down to the gym to work out. Phil insisted that he wait an hour first. Bucky relented, and let Phil lead him into the common room to watch a documentary on the civil rights movement. Phil wound up on the couch with Bucky and Steve pressed against his sides.

It felt good when his people let him look after them. Bucky was beginning to get the hang of it. That boded well for game night.

Chapter End Notes

The end notes are too long to fit; read them on the original Dreamwidth post. This story is complete on DW.
Paper's Here

Chapter Summary

Bucky makes breakfast for everyone. Tony shows up with a newspaper for Steve and Bucky. Then the Avengers go out to volunteer their help restoring the city from damage by the purple gorillas.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

On Friday morning they came into the common kitchen to discover that Bucky had made breakfast for everyone. It was simple but filling fare: several skillets full of potatoes, an assortment of meats, and a large quantity of eggs nestled into hollows. Steve had a whole one to himself. Natasha made Bucky sit down and split one with her. Everyone else shared the rest. Phil savored the crisp taste of bacon in his.

Tony sauntered in with something tucked under his arm. "Morning, guys," he said as he dropped a rustling bundle between Steve and Bucky. "Paper's here." Tony's face disappeared behind a large cup of coffee.

Phil noticed that Tony was still watching them over the rim, so he kept a sharp eye on everyone. I wonder what he's up to now, Phil thought.

"You ... you bought us a newspaper?" Steve said. "But Tony, you hate paper."

"Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, runt," said Bucky. He grabbed the newspaper and swished it open.

"Actually, I bought you a subscription," Tony said with a casual shrug. "Figured we should help save a dying breed and all, the endangered North American Reporter." He took another sip of coffee.

Phil felt certain that Tony used that cup to hide a smile. What in the world has he done to that newspaper? Phil wondered. If anything jumps out at them, I will --

"Oh," Bucky said on a breathless note, and dropped the paper.

"What?" Steve said, grabbing it off the table. "Oh, Tony."

Phil finally managed to get a good enough look to realize that Tony had, somehow, amended the newspaper to include a page of classic funnies dated just after Bucky's historic fall from the train. Wash Tubbs, Little Orphan Annie, Thimble Theatre Starring Popeye, Li'l Abner, Blondie, The Katzenjammer Kids, and others cavorted across the page.

Phil's attention snagged on Terry and the Pirates. Tony's love of pirate comics, particularly the work of Richard Becker, was well known. That had probably inspired the gift, although Phil suspected that Clint's recent perusal of his own stash had contributed to the idea. Everyone had a soft spot for the characters they grew up with.

Tony found himself sandwiched between two super-soldiers who were trying very hard not to cry.
Eventually they returned to breakfast, Steve and Bucky disappearing behind the shuffling spread of pages. Tony stopped hiding his grin in the coffee cup. Phil pulled him into a hug and whispered "Good boy" into his ear. Tony squeezed him tight before letting go. They managed to finish breakfast with no further distractions.

Then the day turned into a media circus as the Avengers made an appearance to help restore the part of the city damaged by the mutated purple apes. Mostly people just wanted to see Captain America and Iron Man carrying lumber. Agent Coulson noted that Iron Man subtly shielded Captain America from the worst of the press. Together they made the reconstruction go much faster. Though honestly, the Catastrophe Cleanup program that Tony Stark had written to coordinate efforts was doing more good than the manual labor.

Dr. Banner was a surprise hit as he explained the process of replanting the High Line Park with native species. His enthusiasm for growing things proved inspiring for the audience, and soon the park had all the volunteers it could use. Agent Coulson was pleased to see him enjoying himself. Besides, the more good press Dr. Banner could get, the harder it would be for his enemies to make him "disappear" ever again.

Alongside the Avengers were a large number of civilians and a smaller number off-duty police officers, firefighters, and other first responders. The latter knew what it was like to have a job that sometimes entailed doing damage while trying to contain a greater threat. It helped, a little, to come back later and work on cleaning up the mess. It helped more to put your shoulder next to someone else who truly understood why you were there. Coulson quietly pointed this out to the site boss, who then helped him distribute the personnel accordingly.

The crowd of volunteers attracted a variety of vendors, from food carts to people selling crafts. The area nearly turned into an impromptu street fair. That gave Agent Coulson an idea. At lunchtime he procured a quantity of cash and distributed it equally amongst the Avengers. "Go spend that," he instructed. "You may also dip into your personal funds if you wish, but I expect everyone to aid the economic recovery as well as the structural repairs, so I'm providing some seed money to that end."

"Uh ... this looks like a lot," Captain America said dubiously, eyeing a handful of small bills.

"Not in modern dollars," Hawkeye said. "It's enough to buy lunch and maybe a little something else. Well, lunch for a regular person -- you're gonna starve on that. Coulson, you're a cheapskate."

"SHIELD isn't made of money," Coulson said dryly, "especially not after recent drains on the budget."

"Yeah, these damages must add up," Dr. Banner said with a regretful glance at what was left of the High Line.

"Well, I am made of money and I will gladly buy everyone lunch," said Stark from inside the Iron Man suit. He'd already popped his faceplate open to sniff out a suitable place to eat.

"No. People need to see the whole team participating, not just you waving a rainbow of plastic," Coulson said firmly. "Now go do your civic duty, everyone."

That got Captain America moving. Hawkeye and Black Widow flanked him, probably to provide a little extra sustenance. Dr. Banner tentatively explored a lineup of ethnic cuisine.

Stark turned and winked at Coulson. Then he headed for a truck advertising deep-fried Monte Cristo sandwiches. Coulson resisted the temptation to urge him toward something less outrageous.
Dr. Banner turned out to be a canny bargain hunter, devastatingly effective at dickering. He filled his own plate, then handed Captain America an enormous carton of beans and rice. Then he took one look at Iron Man's armload of junk food and firmly swapped a banana for something fried on a stick. And he still had enough left over to present Black Widow with an exquisite pendant twisted of copper wire from one of the crafters.

Chapter End Notes

Breakfast skillets may be made with ham, bacon, sausage, fresh or frozen potatoes, whatever you have on hand.

The decline of newspapers means a decline of credible journalistic news, really not a great thing.

Steve and Bucky enjoy many classic comic strips, though I had to track down The Katzenjammer Kids separately.

Tony likes pirate comics, including these later ones. As one of my readers pointed out, the pirate interest is canon.

Some people are strongly praise-driven, and adult children of alcoholics are especially prone to seeking approval. Phil understands how to manage different types of people, so he can give what Tony needs.

Disaster recovery is a complex process. I figured Tony would come up with something like the Crisis Cleanup, only better because Starkness makes everything better. Good coordination maximizes use of volunteer resources. Helping after a disaster eases the stress as well as addressing direct damage.

High Line Park is a New York attraction based on an old elevated track.

Native plants are more useful to wildlife.

Buying local boosts the economy, especially after a disaster. Eco-patriotism is a version that would logically appeal to Tony, given his recent interest in green energy. Explore ways to jump-start your local economy.

The Monte Cristo is a ham-and-cheese sandwich, battered and deep fried, then topped with powdered sugar and raspberry preserves. Because I figured that Tony would make a beeline for the most insane junk food available.

Black Widow's pendant looks something like this. Copper jewelry is often made by bending, spiraling, or weaving strands of wire.
When You Do Kind Things

Chapter Summary

After finishing their volunteer efforts, the Avengers come home to relax by baking cookies and reading comic books. Natasha brings a special package for Bruce.

Chapter Notes

Not all the end notes fit, so I'm moving some here.

Wild bergamot attracts bees and butterflies.

Snickerdoodles are basically sugar cookies with a spice coating, which may be cinnamon or a blend.

Cookie dough with raw egg is considered a hazard, particularly for people with a compromised immune system. However, people do far more dangerous things for pleasure, such as riding motorcycles. Do your own risk assessment of enjoyment vs. danger. (Frankly, I'm with Clint: if I get munched by a mutated space dinosaur tomorrow, I'd rather it happen after I've lived a full life.) Or you could just make edible cookie dough.

The smell of comfort food such as baking bread or cookies can influence people's behavior. Because scent is such a strong memory activator, it makes sense to lay good foundations in childhood.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

After lunch, the Avengers put in a few more hours of work on the reconstruction. Notably Black Widow and Hawkeye wound up scampering along a set of scaffolds to lay electrical wiring quite a lot quicker than it usually got positioned by people who didn't go running several stories above ground. Dr. Banner just shook his head at them and went back to planting wild bergamot. Captain America and Iron Man finished moving the last of the lumber. With that, Agent Coulson rounded up his team.

They came home a little tired but happy. Everyone scattered to their own quarters to shower and change clothes. Betty and Bucky were in the common room, discussing pop culture of the 1980s with holographic illustrations. Bucky peeled off to follow Steve, and Betty attached herself to Bruce. Phil was, for once, just glad to get out of his suit.

Soon Bruce and Betty wandered into the kitchen, where they started baking cookies from scratch as a way to relax. Steve and Bucky followed them, offering to help. Phil smiled at them. It was oddly adorable to see superheroes trotting to and fro with their arms full of flour and sugar, nuts and raisins and chocolate chunks. Betty did a majority of the mixing. Bruce juggled spices with expert grace. Clint pestered Bruce to let him lick the bowl from Bucky's snickerdoodles.
"That's not a great idea," Bruce protested. "The dough has raw egg in it."

"My day job includes shooting monsters and jumping off buildings," Clint pointed out.

"You win," Bruce said, and handed him the bowl.

The rich smell of baking cookies helped everyone unwind after a long day. They experimented with different flavor combinations. Betty demonstrated the ergonomic pastry blender to Steve and Bucky, who were used to cutting the fat into the flour with a fork. Bruce explained some of the finer points of kitchen chemistry regarding cold vs. room-temperature butter. He was still in lecture mode and looked like somebody's favorite science teacher as he puttered around the counter measuring things. Phil just sat and watched.

Steve and Bucky retreated to the table when the first batch finished baking. That happened to be Bruce's cardamom raisin cookies. There was no talk of fair shares or saving anything for later, not with more dough already in the ovens. The two super-soldiers devoured the sweets as fast as they could peel them off the cooling racks.

Then they sat around reading comics on various pieces of Starktech while waiting for the next timer to go off. Bucky had Allan Quatermain on his. Steve had Doc Savage -- a fitting choice for someone who so resembled the Man of Bronze himself. Betty was halfway through Courtney Crumrin and the Night Things. Clint dug into his new favorite, Misty Circus. Phil himself savored Federal Men. He enjoyed some of the newer releases, but still loved the old classics.

Bruce looked at them shyly but did not join in. Bucky rolled his eyes and pulled him into a chair. Then Bucky passed Bruce the three raisin cookies saved for him. Bruce nibbled at a cookie and curled his shoulders around a Starkpad displaying Strange Worlds. It had taken a while for even Steve to convince Bruce that nobody would pick on him anymore for reading comics.

Natasha came into the kitchen just as the oatmeal walnut batch came out of the oven. They included cocoa nibs for added crunch along with the dark chocolate chunks. Betty deftly transferred the cookies from sheet to cooling rack.

Natasha sampled one, her eyes squeezing closed in pleasure at the blend of sweet and bitter flavors. She licked her fingers before saying to Bruce, "This is for you, from the President of Brazil. She wishes you to know that you are welcome in her country at any time. Openly." Natasha handed him a manila envelope fastened with string.

Bruce rifled through the contents, a dumbfounded expression on his face. Citizenship papers, passport, a medical degree based on demonstrated knowledge, and a presidential pardon for previously charged crimes. Everything he needed to start a new life in another place, if he wished.

Bruce slumped into a chair. Betty stroked his hair. Tears speckled the yellow paper of the envelope as he gazed down at it. "I don't, um ... know what to make of this," he said. He was used to threats. Benefits still baffled him.

"Of course we hope you'll stay here with us, Bruce, but it's good for you to have options," Phil said, laying a gentle hand on his shoulder. Bruce quivered under his touch. "Sometimes when you do kind things, they come back to you."

"You get used to it," Clint said quietly.

"What?" Bruce said.

"Being wanted," Clint explained. "It feels weird for a few years, yeah, I know, but it ... kinda grows
on you after a while." He was speaking to Bruce, but looking at Phil. A fond warmth rose up in Phil's heart to hear Clint describing the process to someone else.

Bruce reached out quite suddenly and pulled Phil into a fierce hug. A startled squeak announced Natasha's addition to the circuit. "Thank you," Bruce said. "Thank you all. For. For wanting me, but not holding me down." The others shuffled into place around them, a cozy press of bodies. "Of course I'll stay. This is my home."

The timer binged. Steve squirmed out of the huddle to retrieve his classic peanut butter cookies. Bruce carefully packed his documents back into the manila envelope and secured the flap with the little string.

Natasha noted everyone else's reading material and then brought up her own. Where some people read for escapism, she preferred noir or historic graphic novels that stripped away the thin veneer of civilization and let the world show its ugly side honestly. Natasha paused, casting a sidelong glance at Steve. Then she closed Maus and opened Watchmen instead.

Phil nodded his approval. Nobody wanted a repetition of Steve's tearful reaction the first time Natasha had left a Starkpad on the couch cued to her current page of Maus. She was learning to show consideration for other people's feelings.

Steve came back with a plate full of cookies. "They're falling apart on me, and I don't know why," he mourned.

Bruce poked clinically at the crumbling fragments. "Well, the most likely causes are that you used too much flour, overmixed the dough, or took them off the cooling rack too soon," he said. "My considered scientific advice is to swallow the evidence of failure and make a new batch of peanut butter cookies, altering one variable at a time until they come out the way you want."

Everyone got on board with that plan.

Chapter End Notes

A good pastry blender has rigid tines (not wires) and a shaped handle (not round) so it will cut without slipping out of position. There are other ways of cutting in butter, such as forks or knives, but this is the most efficient method I've found for doing it by hand.

See a recipe for Cardamom Raisin Cookies.

Allan Quatermain is an adventure safari series appearing in comics and pulp fiction.

Doc Savage is another example of men's adventure spanning comics and pulp fiction. Yes, the hero really looks a lot like Steve.

Courtney Crumrin and the Night Things is dark fantasy about a little girl moving in with her creepy uncle who turns out to be a warlock. Betty likes comics that are a bit sweet but also skewed.

Misty Circus is a new gothic story.

Federal Men spans crime, adventure, and intrigue.

Strange Worlds is an old science fiction comic. Bruce is reading the Avon version.
Read a recipe for Oatmeal Walnut Cocoa Nib Cookies. Cocoa nibs are rich chocolate bits. Dark chocolate chunks may be substituted in place of chocolate chips. You can buy premade ones or just break up your favorite kind of candy bar. This is another example of Natasha liking bitter flavors, although the cookies are sweet too.

Bruce has variable skill at coping with the unexpected. It's important to understand what to do when you don't know what to do, and how to stop the stories in your head. Bruce is still trying to learn that good deeds come back, and that past hurts don't have to block present joys. For all his hard work as a hero, there is precious little of this in canon. (Remember how Bruce didn't really know what to make of Tony's overtures in the movie either.) Most examples are short-term favors from people he's just helped. So I wanted to visit a new place with the idea that somebody might actually have a clue and realize that the brilliant scientist and trouble-smasher might be worth cultivating.

Maus is a graphic novel about the Holocaust, illustrated with animals. Aside from disliking its morbid topic, I still count this as my benchmark for the worst anthropomorphic characterization I've seen. However, Natasha loves it for the exact same reasons I hate it: she appreciates the raw view of the world, and the minimalist body language means less for her to try and decode. It is critically acclaimed, but you'll see a mix of love and hate reviews.

Watchmen is among the most grim-and-gritty superhero comics ever made.

See a recipe for Classic Peanut Butter Cookies. Here's Steve loading up on protein as well as sweets. One of these days I ought to turn him on to hazelnut butter, Nutella, and macadamia nut butter.

Read about cookie problems and solutions. Bruce knows what he's doing with kitchen chemistry.

... and now I've made you hungry again, haven't I?
Awesome Things to Save the World With

Chapter Summary

Tony shows Bucky the new holographic program. Steve turns out to have a streak of mischief. And the Merchant of Death is not to be trifled with.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Another highlight of the evening was Tony showing Bucky the new holographic program. "Watch this," Tony said, and executed a perfect riffle shuffle, bending the cards into a high arch. "Here, you try it."

Bucky took the deck and shuffled it. The cards responded just as well for him. The resemblance to actual paper was uncanny. "All right, now I'm impressed with your holograms," Bucky said.

"The drawback is, this program is new so it's still a major memory hog," Tony said. "I set up some safety precautions to keep it from crashing the tower again."

"Thank goodness for that," Phil said. "The previous experience was a bit unsettling." He did not mention how he and Clint had jumped to their feet with weapons in hand. All the Avengers were sensitive to abrupt changes in environment.

"Only use the bendable version when you really need it, not just to screw around," Tony continued, watching Bucky arch the cards again. "After I've had time to play with the coding -- and yes, this is useful, I will absolutely use it to invent awesome things to save the world with -- it'll condense down to something more practical."

Steve picked up a single card and pinched the opposite corners between thumb and forefinger. "This is so weird," he said as the card bent and straightened. A little smile flickered across the corners of his mouth.

"Okay, never mind what I said about not playing with it," Tony said. "If this gets you to use the holos more, Steve, then go for it. The safeties should keep you out of trouble."

"Well done, Tony," said Phil. He was pleased with the interplay. "Bucky, thank you for the inspiration. Steve, by all means, keep practicing with the holograms; you're making good progress on learning modern technology."

"It's easy," Bucky said. "Everything in here tells you how to use it if you ask. JARVIS is brilliant." He stroked a fond fingertip along the edge of his Starkpad. Phil had noticed that Bucky tended to touch a wall of the tower or a piece of technology, usually with his left hand, when talking to or about JARVIS. Most people would look for a camera or viewscreen, or failing that, glance up at the ceiling; but Bucky took a more tactile approach.

Steve smirked. "Tony ... could I crumple a map with this new program?"

"Aw, no, that's not fair!" Bucky protested. He still found the complexity of contemporary maps baffling.
"Sure, I don't see why not. The new mesh will deform without just folding or breaking like the old version," said Tony. He chuckled at Bucky's look of dismay. "Steve, those people who call you a saint just don't know you well enough. You have one wicked streak running right down your middle!"

Steve wadded up a map and threw it at Bucky. The ball of light skittered across the table. Bucky whined at Steve, but gamely took the map and began trying to flatten it out. The hologram resisted much the way paper would. Phil left them to their sport.

The office was a quiet refuge. He settled comfortably into the chair behind his desk. He took a moment to focus his thoughts. Then he opened his paperwork.

At the top of the queue lay an alarming report about a massive explosion just outside of Oymyakon in Siberia. The Russian authorities had no idea what could have happened. They were, as usual, trying to suppress information -- a minor inconvenience for SHIELD, and less than that for JARVIS. Agent Coulson flicked through the supporting materials for details about the explosion. Something about the heat signature and blast pattern tickled his memory.

"JARVIS, get me Stark, extra privacy. I need him to take a look at this," Coulson said.

A moment later the line opened with the peculiar cushioned sound of heavy protection. "What's up?" Stark said. "JARVIS made it sound important."

"Would you happen to know anything about an explosion in Siberia?" Coulson said. "Take a look at this -- it reminds me of something, but I can't pin down what."

"Department X kept the Winter Soldier in a bunker just outside of Oymyakon," Stark said. "I made it go away."

"So you decided to blow it up all by yourself?!"

"Why, Agent Coulson, I'm a businessman," Stark purred in a warm professional tone that harked back to the presentations he used to do for the army. "They recently expressed an interest in my old Jericho stock. So I treated them to front-row seating."

The hairs on the back of Coulson's neck gave the Merchant of Death a snappy salute.

Coulson carefully unclenched his fingers from the arms of his chair. He took a deep breath, then another. "Will there be any need for further cleanup on this project?" he asked.

"No. I prefer the weapon you only have to fire once," Stark said. Then he gave a dark little chuckle. "Though I suppose you could always send over a Zamboni."

Coulson closed the line without further argument. He thought about the situation. The Avengers had melded into a functional team and family, but many of them were still individualists at heart. They had more experience in dealing with problems alone than together. Given their various histories, Coulson could hardly blame them for that.

Still, he knew that it could cause trouble. He would have to see about encouraging them to reach out to their teammates more, rather than just jump into the fray one at a time. They were stronger together than apart, now. They just needed more opportunities to learn that well enough for it to become instinctive.

Then Coulson began the lengthy process of filling out all the paperwork appended to the report. It was a small price to pay for closure of one part of the Winter Soldier's unpleasant past. He knew, of
course, that Department X remained a threat, but the hated cryochamber itself was gone -- and if he knew Stark, at least some of the key personnel were roasting in hell along with it.

A thin smile curled Coulson's lips. *I wonder if we have the ingredients for s'mores,* he mused.

Chapter End Notes

A computer program that demands more than the available memory space can cause a crash. [Stack overflow](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stack_overflow) and [buffer overflow](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buffer_overflow) are examples of this type of error. New programs tend to require more space; later iterations typically discover more efficient methods.

There are [general ways to encourage people](https://www.charteredacademy.org/handbook/leadership-strategies/guides/encourage-people/) and more specific ways to [encourage learning new skills](https://www.verywellmind.com/how-to-learn-new-skills-2710522). You can also [help people who feel discouraged](https://www.charteredacademy.org/handbook/leadership-strategies/guides/help-people-feel-inspired/). Notice that Tony tends to entice people with cool toys, Phil uses praise, and Bucky teases people into action. Any method can work in the right hands, for the right recipient -- or backfire.

[Oymyakon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oymyakon) lies in [Siberia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siberia), and is considered [Earth's coldest town](https://www.cnn.com/2015/01/30/travel/earth-coldest-towns/). Well, where else would Department X have stashed the [Winter Soldier](https://marvel.com/comics/characters/11365)? You can lose anything in Siberia, because it's so cold and empty that almost nobody ever goes there.

There are documents about [*analyzing explosions*](https://www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/nss/stations_elements/analyzer.html).


A healthy group needs both [individualism and teamwork](https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-teamwork-2705256). It's important to [teach teamwork skills](https://www.zerotohero.com/leadership/teamwork-skills), not just throw people together and expect them to cooperate fluently. This is especially crucial for people with experience of getting fucked over in the past. Phil has put a lot of work into this. Put the Avengers in the field together now, and they'll work as a team quite effectively. But swing a problem past any *one* of them elsewhere, and they'll usually respond individually because it simply doesn't occur to them to do otherwise yet.

A [Zamboni machine](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zamboni) is used to smooth ice for skating.

*S'mores* are traditionally made over an open fire, thus a popular joke in connection with hell and burning things to the ground. They can also be [*made indoors*](https://www.goodhousekeeping.com/food-recipes/g22326214/make-smore-in-oven/).
On their first game night together, Steve has a dramatic reaction to Bucky joining the group. Bucky also responds to Bruce's place in the new family dynamic.

(The last several chapters of this story are all ageplay, for those of you who have been waiting for that.)

Bucky showed up to the first game night a little late, and more than a little self-conscious. He still wore the ratty gray pajamas that he'd picked up from a thrift store with Bruce's help. Bucky and Phil had argued over that, until Steve finally intervened with a compromise: that Bucky could keep this set until they wore out, after which it would be Phil's turn to provide pajamas.

Everyone else was already there, much the same as they had assembled before finding Bucky on a mission. They watched quietly as he came in. After some further discussion with Phil, Bucky had been planning to play nine to Steve's ten. Phil saw that plan go out the window the moment Steve laid eyes on Bucky.

Steve turned to Phil. "I know I'm supposed to help with the others, but ..." he said, his voice cracking. "I want, can I ... please, just this once, just for a little while ..."

"You can do whatever you need," Phil reminded him gently. "Bucky?"

"Yeah, sure," Bucky said. "C'mere, runt."

Steve ran to him, wrapping his arms around Bucky. The nickname was perhaps a little silly, since Steve was taller and wider now, but nobody cared. Steve slid slowly down Bucky's body to land on the floor at his feet. He was crying, quietly and happily, his face pressed against Bucky's legs.

"He can't be more than six, Phil thought, if that. Most likely, Steve had focused on some shining memory of his early childhood with Bucky and used that for an anchor."

"Well, what are you waiting for, you ninny?" Tony said to Bucky. "Pick him up and carry him!"

Bucky gave Phil a questioning look. Phil nodded.

Then Bucky leaned down to scoop his left arm under Steve's legs, right arm coming around to support his back. It was awkward, because Steve was bigger than him. Bucky had the metal arm and an enhanced body of his own, though, so he made it work.

"Bring him here," Phil said, patting the couch.

Bucky settled onto the couch with Steve, who promptly crawled into his lap. This did not work nearly as well as it did when Bruce curled up on Steve. Bucky gave him a gentle push, saying, "Get off, Stevie, you're squashing me."
Steve sniffled as he moved away. "Sorry," he said.

"Oh, not with the puppy-dog eyes," Bucky said. "You don't have to leave, just don't put all your weight on me. Here, tuck your feet up and lie down." He maneuvered Steve into lying on the couch with his head in Bucky's lap. "Okay?"

"Yeah," Steve said softly.

Bucky reached down to stroke his fingers through Steve's hair. He paused, then ruffled against the grain, restoring it to the floppy mess they remembered from their childhood. Steve smiled against Bucky's leg.

"Okay?"

"Yeah," Steve said softly.

Bucky smiled too, following their train of thought from his own memories of Steve's first game night, when he'd mussed his own hair so that Phil could comb it flat again. They're good for each other, he thought. Steve really needs this, and he's helping Bucky to get a sense of game night.

"It's funny," Bucky murmured, "I've been calling you 'Stevie' off and on all week, just 'cause. But now I see you like this, it really makes me think. It's different. You're different."

"Yeah?" Steve said.

"Yeah. I thought this roleplaying thing was a bit nutty, but all right, I could play along with it. Worth a try," Bucky said. "It's not like I thought it would be, though. It's a lot more ... real. I can feel the difference. It's like you're really Stevie again." He shook his head a little. "Sounds crazy, doesn't it? But I don't think I'll call you Stevie outside of game night again. I think I'll save it for times like this, when you want to be littler than me. Some other time, we can try it the other way around like Phil and I talked about. Okay?"

"Okay," said Stevie. Phil had to admit, the name fit. There was something sweeter and more yielding about him tonight, different even from the rare occasions when he'd switched down before, such as the brief tradeoff at Easter. Bucky brought out a whole new side of him, the shift between Steve and Stevie as subtle and profound as the shift between Tony Stark and Tony Carter.

"I'm really grateful for this," Bucky said. His hand moved down, tracing the curve of Stevie's back.

"I missed you," Stevie said. "I missed you so much. All I could think of sometimes was how I wanted you back."

"I missed you too," Bucky said. "I missed you even when I couldn't remember you. I just knew something important was gone. God, they cut my heart out when they made me forget you."

Phil shuddered at that icy image. It rang true, for memories formed the core of personality, informing the choices that a person made. Take away everyone you love, all the lessons you've taught each other, and what's left? Not much, Phil thought. He noticed Tony hugging himself, arms wrapped tight over the arc reactor. Clint and Natka clung to each other. It's time to bring this discussion back to a warmer tone.

"We're all here now," Phil reminded them. "Everyone's safe. Let's focus on that and have some fun, shall we?"

Bruce took that opportunity to crawl under the coffee table where Bucky's legs stretched beneath it. "Hi," Bruce said.

"Hi yourself," Bucky said, smiling at him. Bucky looked a little bemused. He was willing to go along with game night but clearly found it a bit challenging to adjust, to get into role himself, to
handle the changes in other people's personalities.
Stevie helped. He sat up and said, "This is my baby cousin Bruce."

"Guess the family got a new addition while I was away, huh?" said Bucky. "Well that sure is a fine thing to come home to. Come here, sprout." He bent down and lifted Bruce gently onto the couch.

Bruce immediately tucked himself into a ball, mostly in Stevie's lap, with his feet trailing over Bucky's leg. "'kay," he whispered.

"He's shy," Stevie said.

"We'll look out for him then," Bucky said. He wrapped one arm over Bruce and the other behind Stevie's back. "He'll open up more when he feels like it."

Chapter End Notes

The notes for this chapter are truly epic. See them [on Dreamwidth] if you want to unpack the ton of personal stuff that just happened.
Phil asks for suggestions about what to do on game night. Bruce mentions fingerpainting.

Phil was delighted to see Bucky's protective instincts responding to Bruce, who could use all the defenders he could get. Maybe that would help Bruce feel more safe. He certainly seemed content to curl up on top of the two super-soldiers, and that was telling, considering Bruce's massive pile of unpleasant experiences with the soldiers. Those had complicated his early interactions with Natasha in particular, along with some others. It had taken time for him to overcome his skittishness during game night. Yet now Bruce seemed willing to connect with Bucky, however shyly.

_That's progress, all by itself_, Phil thought.

Phil checked the rest of the room. Clint and Natka still sat together, whispering. Betty was watching Tony. He sat perfectly still, quiet, giving Bucky the space that he had once given Betty on her first game night. That concerned Phil, a little, because Tony needed the opportunity to horse around in safe space. Putting too much pressure on himself to behave was counterproductive. Nor was anyone making a move to get things started.

"Bucky, it's your first game night. What would you like to do?" Phil prompted, trying again to coax things into motion.

"I wouldn't know where to start," he said with a shrug. "Stevie? You've done this before."

Stevie simply cuddled closer to Bucky and said, "Whatever you want."

Phil sighed. Steve and Tony most often initiated activities. Phil didn't want to push Tony too hard given his ambivalence about Bucky. Stevie clearly needed to bask in the luxury of not being responsible for anything. Pressuring him would undermine the whole point of game night.

Instead, Phil picked up a previous idea he'd been meaning to pursue. "Bruce? You've shown us a few nifty things. Is there something you could show Bucky to get the ball rolling here?"

Bruce uncurled onto his hands and knees like a pillbug opening up to explore. "We did fingerpainting at school once?" he said tentatively as he crept toward Phil. "It was fun?"

_Yes!_ Phil thought. He had suspected there was something behind Bruce's earlier off-handed remark. He now felt glad that he'd acquired the supplies, and read articles on both childplay and art therapy, just in case. _This ought to be entertaining, and perhaps enlightening._

"What's fingerpainting?" Stevie asked.

"You make pictures with your hands instead of brushes. I have the necessary materials," Phil said. "All right, who's done this before?"
Bruce and Betty were the only ones who raised their hands. Phil regretted this additional sign of how much his team had missed, but after all, game night was about making up for lost opportunities.

"Well, Bruce and Betty can give us some good hints." Phil said. At least Stevie looked intrigued by the idea of an artistic activity.

Clint jigged and bobbed around Phil. "What colors do we have? Is there purple? I want purple!" he said.

"Red!" chirped Tony.

Natka and Stevie both nodded at that. "And blue," Stevie added.

"Fingerpaints come in four colors," said Bruce. He counted them on his fingers. "Red, yellow, blue, green."

"Red and blue make purple," Betty chimed in, trying to cheer up a wilting Clint.

"Actually, I bought a deluxe package," Uncle Phil said. "We have red, orange, yellow, green, turquoise, blue, violet, black, brown, and white."

"Ooo," said Bruce. Clint perked back up too.

"Let's move this into the kitchen where we've got a smooth floor," Phil said. He herded his "little ones" through the door and spread out old newspapers on the kitchen floor. Thinking ahead, he also pulled out a roll of garbage bags to use as smocks in hopes of minimizing the amount of paint that wound up on people's pajamas.

Phil poured fingerpaints into small bowls so that everyone could have a set of whichever colors they wanted. He also put out towels and dishes of water for rinsing. He helped the youngest members roll up their sleeves. Then he passed around the sheets of glossy paper.

"This is huge," Stevie said in an awed tone, "and it's really slick." He rubbed his fingers along the 16" x 22" paper.

"Wet the paper first," Bruce said. He demonstrated by dipping his hands in water and then swiping across the surface. "Makes it slicker." Everyone followed suit. "Then pick a color and put it on."

"Fingerpaints mix really well," Betty added as she arranged her bowls. "Remember to clean your hands between colors if you want to keep them different."

Stevie made a happy, wordless noise and dove into the project. He reached for the blue paint -- and then paused, rubbing it between his fingers, utterly enchanted by the texture. He dabbled it in one corner of the page.

Bruce leaned over to show him a few different strokes.

Tony and Clint likewise pounced on the paints, yellow and purple respectively. Bucky stroked colors across his page in broad arcs. Natka poured a dollop of red on hers and swirled the very tip of her finger through it.

Stevie was methodically testing every color, one at a time, in a careful set of lines along the top of his paper. Phil frowned a little, trying to figure out whether he was shifting age or simply had an unusual approach to art supplies.

Bucky laughed. "Yes, he's always done that," he said, guessing the angle of Phil's thoughts. "First time I brought home crayons, Stevie did exactly the same thing, made a bunch of lines instead of
drawing something. Just let him fool around, he'll make pictures later."

Stevie crouched over the paper, now tracing long lines to see how the paint behaved. He smudged the yellow over the blue, watching how they smeared into streaks of green.

"Tony? Can I use both hands?" Bucky asked, wagging his left with its skin glove over metal.

_Oops, I didn't think of that_, Phil realized. He still wasn't used to accommodating all of Bucky's special needs.

Tony picked up the nearest container of paint and read the label. "Yep, it's safe and it'll wash right off," he said.

Bucky dabbed his left hand in blue and his right hand in red, sweeping them across the page. "It feels different," he said. Then he beamed at Phil. "This is ... really swell."

Chapter End Notes

The end notes would not fit here. See them on the [original Dreamwidth post](#).
What a Dramatic Technique

Chapter Summary

Clint tries a new way of fingerpainting. Bucky and Clint roughhouse. Phil worries a little about Natka's creepy imagery. Steve finds a style that he likes.

Chapter Notes

Not all the end notes would fit, so I moved some here...

Fingerpainting spans many techniques and materials. It also makes a good base for other crafts. You can soak sponges in the paint for more control and less mess. People naturally experiment and discover different tricks as they play with fingerpaints.

Roughhousing is a healthy activity with many benefits. Follow safety tips to manage risk. This is a crucial skill for superheroes who need to learn how to modulate their own strength. Subjectively speaking, neither Steve nor Bucky have had theirs for very long, let alone had much safe opportunity to explore it.

Positive emotions can inspire happy art, and creativity makes people happier. Just using your hands to make art improves the mood. So do setting a good example and being the change you want to see. These things shape Betty's approach to artwork. Not everyone who paints cheerful pictures is necessarily happy; sometimes unhappy people want to illustrate what they wish for instead of what they have.

Art can also be disturbing, macabre, or grotesque. Modern art often deals in ugly themes. Abstract and symbolic art may feature disturbing emotions. Such matters speak to Natka's experience and therefore appear in her paintings. It's important to let people paint what they want and not criticize them for their choices. Not everyone who paints creepy things is abused or troubled; everyone feels negative emotions sometimes, and art is a safe outlet for those.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"I'm glad you're having fun, Bucky," Phil said. He checked on the others, too. Clint had an exuberant approach that Phil thought might have come from circus posters, a kind of stylized pizzazz full of archers and targets. Like Steve, he reveled in the creamy texture of the paint itself. Tony's work was all abstract, bold splashes of red and yellow on the first page, cold blue and white lines on the second. It reminded Phil of Tony's taste in modern art, but also the simple elegance of the Iron Man print in his workshop.

Clint was the first to smack a hand onto his paper, splattering paint everywhere. Bruce and Tony jerked up at the sound, startled and wary. They looked at Uncle Phil.

"Wow, what a dramatic technique!" Uncle Phil said, applauding softly. "I wonder if anyone else will try it."
Tony grinned and whacked both hands on the page. Tiny drops of paint sprayed outward, creating a starburst effect of yellow over red. More paint flecked his plastic smock, the newspapers on the floor, and everything else in the vicinity. Then he turned back to Phil for reassurance.

"Remember, the point to fingerpainting is to have fun. If making a mess is fun for you, then go for it," said Phil.

Bruce tried the spattering technique but shook his head. Evidently he didn't care for the effects. Stevie frowned faintly at Clint and Tony, who were splashing away with great enthusiasm, then scooted his work farther across the floor. Phil recalled his preference for more controllable media.

Bucky edged between Stevie and the others. Clint pushed at him, which caused Bucky to put a hand on his painting to brace himself. Bucky playfully pushed back. Clint lost his balance altogether, tipping over his water dish in the process.

"Be mindful of your strength," Uncle Phil advised them as he refilled the dish. "If you want to roughhouse, we'll need to move to the gym or somewhere else safe. Is that what you'd rather do now?"

Bucky and Clint both shook their heads. They settled down then, and returned to fingerpainting. Phil continued with checking people's work.

Betty was the only one who produced more typical fingerpainting -- a colorful display of flowers and house and smiling sun. She caught Phil looking and said, "I like to think of the world as a happy place. If we don't show it what it's supposed to be like, who will?"

"Good point," Phil agreed.

Natka's picture was frankly disturbing, swirls of blood red with shadows daubed in blue or purple. Phil wasn't quite certain whether the impression of innards was his own imagination or her actual representation. The troubled look on her face bothered him too.

"Do you want to stop, Natka?" Phil asked quietly. "You don't have to do this if it's more upsetting than fun for you."
"No," she said firmly. "I want to keep going."

"Okay," said Phil. He rested a hand briefly on her shoulder. Natka dipped her fingers in the thick red paint and flicked them at the paper, discovering a new way of spattering. Clint promptly copied her. Phil stayed busy moving between the painters, helping them clean their hands, changing finished paintings for fresh pages.

Bruce kept wanting to switch colors; he sat perfectly still while Phil scrubbed the wet towel over his fingers. Sometimes he seemed more interested in spreading the paint over his skin than on the paper. *Well, it won't hurt him*, Phil thought. *Let him play. Anything that helps Bruce connect with his own body is good.*

Clint, too, lost himself in the pure tactile stimulation at times. He would rub one hand through the paint while Phil washed the other hand. Steve seemed less intrigued by the sensory input than by the physical properties of the medium itself. Phil felt glad that he'd done enough advance reading to understand the appeal of fingerpainting along different lines, so that he could recognize what each person enjoyed about it.

Bruce, like Betty, tried all the colors. He liked the chance to use his whole hands and even forearms to make big spots of paint. Then he drew over them in new colors. Bucky's paintings looked almost
like quilts, railroad cars, or towers of building blocks: broad geometric patterns with crisply controlled edges. He’d picked up a trick of outlining from Bruce, though.

Natka had switched from red to white with just enough brown mixed in to make it show up against the paper. Long straight lines and subtle curves made Phil think of piled bones. He did not pressure her to use more cheerful imagery, though.

Stevie had finally found a method he liked. It reminded Phil of pointillism, a little, but done with lines instead of dots. Strong lines curled and swooped across the paper. There was a tawny desert with brown rocks, a turquoise-and-white snowscape, a harbor streaked with city lights.

"Way to go, Van Gogh," said Tony as he leaned over Stevie's latest work. "Very post-impressionist."

"What, who?" Stevie said.

Tony grinned. "No way am I trying to explain that kind of art in words. We can go to a museum later, so you can see the real thing."

"Vincent Van Gogh was a famous painter. I think Tony is right; you'll like his artwork," Phil added. He could see exactly why Tony made the reference.

"I love this stuff," Stevie said. "I love feeling the paint under my fingers." He started a new picture, this one clearly drawn from memory as he traced out Hulk's communal bath. The other team members took shape around Hulk. Rubber ducky appeared in a curl of cheerful yellow.

"I like how thick the fingerpaint is," Bucky said thoughtfully. "It stays right where I put it." His page showed ridges of paint where he had blocked in the shapes before filling the insides.

"Yeah, it feels almost like oil paint," Stevie said. He pressed his fingertips against the paper and then lifted them away, leaving tiny peaks and swirls in the paint to illustrate the bubble bath.

*I think Bucky might enjoy some of the variations that enrich the texture of fingerpaint with additives such as shaving cream or corn starch. Steve too, given his interest in the sculptural qualities of oil paint, Phil mused. Bruce would probably like the gritty or stringy ones. Maybe later I'll ask him and Tony what they'd recommend as safe additives. There was no point buying things like that when you had an engineer and a chemist in the household.

"We can experiment more with paint texture another time, if you wish," Phil said aloud. They smiled and nodded at that.

Chapter End Notes

**Tactile stimulation** is necessary for physical development, one reason why [children need messy play]. Tactile learning experiences help students use their bodies to make memories. There are instructions, products, and videos for textured fingerpaints using special additives. You can also make your own textured fingerpaint using various household supplies such as cornstarch and dish soap.

**Geometric art** involves matters of symmetry, balance, and scale. Fingerpaint works well with techniques such as decalcomania and painting on or around shapes. Bucky's
mechanical aptitude lends him insight into form and balance.

Skulls and bones appear in art around the world. These are just a few symbols of death that artists use to invite interpretation. Because dying is a process rather than an object, it is difficult to render literally -- except in active media such as plays or movies -- but the intense emotions make it easy to portray symbolically. Compare Natka's technique to whitework, embroidery that uses white thread over white fabric.

Pointillism uses tiny dots of pure color to create an image, much like pixels on a computer screen. Special thanks to for finding this awesome picture of pointillist Avengers, done up as a variant comic book cover, inspired by the famous painting "A Sunday Afternoon on La Grande Jatte." Copying from the masters is a traditional art exercise, which may be done in exact replica or, like this, with an original twist to distinguish the exercise from the source painting. I could seriously see Steve putting the Avengers into classic paintings like that.

Impressionism focuses on light and movement, the essence of a subject, using small yet distinct brush strokes. Post-impressionism continues the focus on everyday subjects but uses more geometric shapes and arbitrary colors.

Vincent Van Gogh was a famous (and notoriously troubled) post-impressionist painter known for his close examination of line and flow and use of distinct lines to create a rough texture. Both pointillism and Van Gogh's style of line work do well in fingerpaint because they don't require minute control of the paint. Read an article about the song "Vincent" (aka "Starry Starry Night") and see a slideshow of Van Gogh's paintings; these links courtesy of .
Better on Paper

Chapter Summary

Stevie and Tony admire one of Bruce's pictures, and Phil asks to keep it. Then Bruce wants one of Stevie's paintings, and the trading is on. After that, the Avengers have supper.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Look, Bruce is pretty good at this too," Steve said.

Bruce tended to fill his pages with serene swirls and loops, patterns that repeated and echoed, or combinations of balanced symbols. Most were not literal representations of anything, but rather blends of color and form that suggested a subject. Some of them looked much like mandalas. Cool blues and greens, brightened with turquoise and white, evoked ocean water. Purples and pinks hinted at lotus flowers. A page of deep green-black patched with yellow and red might have been a jungle seen through rain.

"Wow ... this is really something," Stevie said quietly. He lifted a page that Phil hadn't noticed until now. Handprints of pink, yellow, and red danced across the paper in a cheerful display, almost entirely obliterated by an overlay of murky gray-brown. In a way it was as disturbing as Natka's crimson squiggles, yet at the same time compelling, even satisfying in its open expression.

"Very impressive," Tony said in a tone that reminded Phil just how much of an art collection Tony Stark had owned before giving it all away. "That's a keeper."

Bruce looked up from a soft swish of spirals in rainbow colors. "I don't remember doing that one," he said. "Huh, looks like I wrecked it anyway." He went back to his current painting.

"You didn't wreck it," Stevie said. "It just says different things on different layers, like onionskins."

"The colors are expressive," Phil added, hoping to coax Bruce a little farther out of his shell. "Do they make you think of anything in particular?"

"No," said Bruce. He drew another spiral, this one blue. "I don't want it anyway."

"May I keep it, then?" Phil asked. It wasn't conventionally beautiful, but it stuck in his mind.

"Guess so," Bruce said with a shrug. Then he elbowed Stevie and said, "Watch." He traced a line of orange, then retraced the same line with yellow, blending the colors together.

"Oh, good idea!" Stevie said, delighted. He repeated the gesture with red and white.

Eventually they ran out of paint, and half the kitchen lay covered with drying pages. Many of them were just idle whimsies, but some held a level of expression that made Phil understand why fingerpainting appeared in art therapy so often. Natka stood looking at her gory block of pages with an odd smile.
"Are you all right?" Phil asked softly.

She nodded. "I like them better on paper than in my head," Natka said.

Phil was all in favor of anything that would help relieve some of the savage memories that she carried. Looking around at the samples, he thought that some of the "kids" had painted negative things to get rid of them, while others had painted positive things to attract them. And Bruce did both, he realized, comparing a tranquil waterfall to what he privately considered the smothered flower garden. Everyone was smiling, though, so he counted the activity a success.

"Can I ... maybe ..." Bruce said tentatively, then trailed off.

"What, Bruce?" Phil coaxed.

Bruce looked at the bathtime picture Stevie had made, but did not reach for it. His voice dropped to a whisper, "...havethatone."

"Sure, Bruce," Stevie said. "I'm glad you like it so much."

"Dibs on the New York harbor painting," Tony said, clearly just as fond of Stevie's work. Stevie nodded.

"Well, then I want Minsk," Bucky said, pointing unerringly at one of the crimson paintings. Natka gazed at him, her eyes huge, but she nodded. Maybe her pictures weren't so abstract, after all.

That sparked a flurry of trading. Everyone declared themselves satisfied in the end.

Phil got all the "kids" cleaned up. It felt a little odd not having Steve to help, but Bucky stepped in so it all balanced out. Phil kept an eye on Tony, expecting him to start a water fight or something, but he never did.

After finishing the art activity, it was time for supper. Phil worked around the drying pages of fingerpaint to find a corner where he could make hot dogs. He also heated a package of premade french fries. Bucky made no effort to help cook, but he did get out the condiments. Tony tried to set the table -- from his knees -- and promptly dropped a plate which went rolling across the floor. Bucky caught it, put it in place, and helped Tony finish.

Clint, Natka, and Betty swarmed over the offerings to fill their plates. Phil cut Bruce's hot dog into bite-sized pieces, putting it on a plate with a dab of mustard. Tony had no trouble dressing his own hot dog in a bun. Stevie just stared at the food until Bucky carefully topped a hot dog with cheese and refried beans, wrapping most of it in foil so that it wouldn't spill. That's a clever solution, Phil thought. Usually Steve winds up eating things with a fork because he loads them with so many toppings.

"You gotta wonder if that part's real," Bucky murmured to Phil, watching Bruce pick up hot dog bites and dip them into the mustard. "Kids that little usually don't like strong flavors."

Bruce looked up at him, hunching over his plate. "I like mustard. It's salty. Easy to get."

And oh, it was true to Bruce's childhood, all right. Phil had seen him absently pocketing condiment packages at restaurants. Mustard, ketchup, those little paper tubes of salt, whatever was available. Clint did it too, although he was more prone to taking jam, honey, or sugar packets. Natasha would pour every last cuplet of creamer into her coffee. Old habits die hard, Phil thought sadly. You get used to taking anything edible you can find, and it's hard to stop.
The pattern was most visible with the Avengers who had grown up hungry due to poverty or neglect. But Phil hadn't missed Tony's habit of stocking food in any location where he spent significant time, such as his workshop; usually what counted as comfort food for him. Phil was bitterly reminded of the "wire mother" monkey that offered sustenance but no reassurance. Furthermore, every apartment in the tower had its own kitchen and pantry. The common kitchen held enough supplies and equipment for a small restaurant; justified, given the dietary capacity of the teamfamily, but still telling.

As Phil watched, Tony reached over to poke Bruce with a french fry. Bruce stuck his tongue out at Tony, but he also grabbed the fry and popped it into his mouth. Almost the first thing Tony did with Bruce was offer him food, Phil recalled, and that worked to convince Bruce that Tony would protect and provide for him. These family meals help everyone feel more secure, too.

After supper, Clint and Natka cleared the table. Bucky washed the dishes while Stevie dried and put them away, a reversal of their usual pattern. It was hilarious to watch Stevie kneeling on the stepladder they kept for the shortest members of the teamfamily to reach the upper cabinets.

Chapter End Notes

The end notes won't fit here. See them on the original Dreamwidth post.
There's Room for One More

Chapter Summary

Natka and Bucky play Scrabble. Then Clint and some of the others play Life. Phil notices that they need more games that will accommodate a larger number of players.

Chapter Notes

Here ends "No Winter Lasts Forever." Thank you all for sticking with the series this far! I love your input. Final thoughts on the story overall are welcome, in addition to reactions on this specific chapter; see the preliminary notes for a peek at what some of my practice goals were here. I also have a list of favorite photogenic scenes from the whole series for fanartists to consider, partly compiled from audience requests.

The sequel "Hide and Seek" is now underway. I'm going to switch fiction posts from daily to Monday-Wednesday-Friday to leave me more time for separate writing projects that I need to complete.

A note on feedback: While it's not necessary to comment on every post I make, remember that I don't know who reads/likes things if nobody says anything. Particularly on long stories, I've discovered that I get antsy if there's nothing but crickets chirping for several posts. So it helps to give me feedback at least once, even if it's just "I like this" or "This one doesn't grab me." First and last episodes are ideal if you rarely feel inspired to comment in the middle.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Back in the common room, they turned to games. Natka pulled out the Russian version of Scrabble and challenged Bucky to a match. Phil was pleased to see her make the overture after standing back while Stevie and Bruce monopolized Bucky earlier.

Clint tensed, though, and that worried Phil. "Are you okay?" he murmured.

Clint just shrugged.

"Do you want to play with Natka?" Bucky asked him.

"I don't like Scrabble," Clint said. It was true that word games held little appeal for him. "Besides, she asked you first."

"You can pick the next game, and I'll play whatever you want," Natka offered.

"Okay," Clint said. Then he climbed onto the couch, not perching atop it as usual, but down on the cushions. Phil sat down and let him snuggle up. Sometimes Clint preferred cuddling to playing, particularly when he needed comfort. Meanwhile Tony, Stevie, Bruce, and Betty played a round of Concentration with their homemade cards.

When Bucky moved to the couch, Natka came with him. Stevie and Bruce gravitated toward Bucky. They made a comfortable pile together. "Can we have snacks?" Bucky asked then. "I want pirate cookies."

*What ...?* Phil thought, baffled. Then he remembered the Pieces of Eight label on the Starkbars, complete with eyepatched parrot. "Pirate cookies, coming up," he said aloud. It made sense given that Stevie hadn't eaten as much at supper. *I'll need to keep an eye out for that when he's this little, although it seems that Bucky has the matter well in hand.* Sure enough, when Phil came back with the box, Bucky took it from him and distributed the snacks.

Next Clint pulled out Life and invited Natka to play. Then, to Phil's surprise and pleasure, Clint beckoned to Bucky as well. "The original version of this dates from 1860 -- The Checkered Game of Life -- and the modern version first came out in 1960. I don't know if you're familiar with the old one or not, but I thought you might enjoy this," Clint explained to Bucky.

Phil smiled. *Clint must have looked up the history,* he thought. Clint's minimal schooling meant that he rarely did such things, but hanging around with scientists made for slow improvement in his willingness to ferret out information in that manner.

"I haven't played before, but I've heard of it," Bucky said. He leaned over the colorful board as Clint unfolded it. "Hey, Stevie, you want to play a game? You too, Bruce." Bucky tugged them gently into place beside him.

"Dunno how," Bruce said, and put his fingers in his mouth.

Phil realized that he'd seen Bruce play more games like Concentration that could work solitaire, rather than board games that required partners. *This could be a useful development,* he thought. Like Tony, Bruce was capable of teaching himself how to do things that he'd missed in childhood, but he preferred finding someone to show him instead. *Maybe it will encourage Bruce to play more different kinds of game.*

"That's okay. We'll teach you how to play. Come on, it'll be fun," Bucky said.

Bruce nodded. He squirmed under the shelter of Bucky's arm. Bucky hugged him close.

Because Phil was watching for it this time, he noticed when Natka locked onto Clint as her guide. She mimicked his selection of a game piece. *Well ... fake it until you make it' is a valid technique for emotional growth,* Phil reminded himself. *Just because she doesn't always show pleasure, doesn't necessarily mean she doesn't feel it. Even if she doesn't play for fun yet, she may still learn how.*

"There's room for one more," Clint said, looking at Betty and Tony.

"Yeah, who else wants to play with us?" Bucky asked.

Tony glanced from Clint to Bucky, then crinkled his nose. "I've played that game plenty of times," Tony said with a flick of his hand. "Let Betty play with Bruce." He turned his attention to some chirping, warbling game on his Starkpad.

Phil realized that Tony had largely quit resorting to electronic companionship on game nights, preferring his new playmates. *Now he's reverting to that again,* Phil thought. *We need to get some games for seven or more players.* Most of what they had now capped out at six or less. Remembering Thor, Phil added, *The larger the player pool a game can accommodate, the better.*
Otherwise we'll just wind up in the same position every time we add a person.

Betty settled into place near Bruce to play Life. Bucky read the rules aloud before they started, apparently his custom for unfamiliar games, based on Stevie's attentive body language. Natka followed Bucky as intently as she did Clint. Even Tony glanced up at them.

If Tony had known about Bucky's teaching mode, he might not have given way to Betty so readily, Phil thought. There will be other times, though.

The game itself flowed smoothly, with Bucky and Clint helping the less confident players as necessary. They went through the routine of spinning the wheel, drawing cards, then moving their little cars around the board. Nobody balked at handling the play money. Phil quietly filed this in his "success" category.

They shuffled groupings again after Stevie won the game. Clint got up, looking for something more active. Tony dug into the toy cabinet. Betty drifted over to see what Tony was doing.

Phil sat back, not feeling compelled to push anything. He just let them explore and play and mingle as they pleased. Time spooled past, a lazy Saturday evening free of obligations or expectations. They all needed the opportunity to relax after missing last week's game night.

Phil looked around the room and enjoyed the quiet scene. It had taken a lot of work to get here, but they made it. He knew they had a long way to go still. Clint and Tony had built a toy catapult, mostly from popsicle sticks and rubber bands, which they now attempted to refine for consistent aim. Meanwhile Betty assembled a cunning fortress from blocks to pit her defensive engineering skill against Tony's offensive engineering skill and Clint's aim. On the couch Stevie and Bucky cuddled closer together, Bruce and Natka plastered against them. Phil smiled. No matter how long it took everyone to adjust, they had already made the most important accomplishment.

We got Bucky back.

Chapter End Notes

Read the end notes on the original Dreamwidth post. They wouldn't fit here.

End Notes

"No winter lasts forever; no spring skips its turn." -- Hal Borland

Department X is connected with Red Room, behind the development of Black Widow according to some versions of Marvel canon.

Ten Rings is the terrorist organization that kidnapped Tony Stark in Afghanistan.

AIM combines mad science and terrorism.

Here's a clip from Black Widow's cunning interrogation scene.
Bucky Barnes grew up with Steve Rogers, essentially taking the role of an older brother. Steve believes that Bucky died in a fall from a train, for which he still blames himself, as shown in Captain America: The First Avenger. In some versions of canon, Bucky falls into enemy hands and becomes the Winter Soldier. I found this image of the Winter Soldier which I used as partial inspiration.

Works inspired by this one: Over art for "No Winter Lasts Forever" by Lehorin

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!