# Hide and Seek

by Ysabetwordsmith

**Summary**

Bucky has a bad day when his memory won't boot up quite right. This makes other people stressed out too. Attempts to help are partially successful, but then the team dynamics go...
severely pear-shaped.

Notes

If you are reading this for the ageplay, there is some fairly early, and then more toward the end, plus some other caretaking scenes along the way. If you are reading this for the plot, some of Tony's issues come to a head here, and Bucky is continuing to deal with his erratic memory and how to fit into the teamfamily. Currently the story is about 35,000 words so figure around 35 to 40 chapters; fiction tends to expand when I post it in sections.

I also have a list of photogenic scenes from the whole series for fanartists to consider.

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.

Anonymous commenters: You don't have to specify exactly who you are, but it helps to have a first name or a username from some other service, so I have some idea of who's saying which and how many different "Anonymous" folks there are. You can just type some kind of identifier at the end of your comment.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Phil sat at the kitchen table, eating a cup of fruit with one hand and working on SHIELD paperwork with the other. The financial difficulties continued. The diplomatic ones were worse. Phil had intended to eat breakfast with Natasha and Clint. Natasha had gotten called in to deal with the Queen of England, who was in a high temper about SHIELD’s treatment of some MI5 agents and refused to speak to Director Fury. Clint just shrugged, curling up in his chair with a bowl of Lucky Charms and the schematics for some new arrowheads.

Steve and Bruce arrived with a very subdued Bucky in tow. Phil looked up and frowned, wondering what had gone wrong now. ”Good morning,” Phil said.

"Добрый день," Bucky replied.

"He's stuck like that," Steve said wearily. "Bucky can't understand English. Most of his memory won't activate -- he remembers me and JARVIS but not Bruce, knows about Department X and some basic everyday stuff, but not much else. I feel like I'm playing hide and seek in the dark here. I don't know what to do."

Clint looked at Bucky, looked at Phil, and then slipped out of the room without saying anything.

"As far as I can tell, there's nothing physically wrong with Bucky," Bruce said. He steepled his hands in front of his waist, forefingers tapping together. "He just jolted awake very suddenly, so there was nobody to help except Steve who was already there, and even that didn't do much good this time. I've asked Tony to come up and check the hardware, just in case, because I'm at a loss for further --"

"Yeah, you're completely useless today!" Steve snapped.

"Steve, please be gentle with Bruce. I'm sure he's as frustrated as you and Bucky are," Phil said. Then he patted the empty chair beside himself. Bucky folded himself into it, hunching over the table. Not recognizing people made him wary and withdrawn.

"Что вы хотите есть?" Phil asked him. What do you want to eat? Bucky just shrugged. Phil got up and toasted a frozen waffle for him. Under stress, Bucky did better with measured quantities of food. He ate what he was given without question. At least Steve quit picking on Bruce and made instant oatmeal for both of them.

Phil finished his own breakfast. Then he tried again, prompting Bucky with a simple choice, as there were two kinds of breakfast biscuit in the freezer. "Хотите колбасы или бекона?" Do you want sausage or bacon?

"Бекон," said Bucky without looking up from his plate.

"I'll get it," Bruce said. He heated up a bacon biscuit and brought it to Bucky. Then he turned to Steve. "We've talked about this kind of thing before. You knew there would be good days and bad days --"

Steve started to reply, then clenched his jaw and turned away.

"Bruce, I don't think Steve feels like talking about that right now," Phil said. "Let's just focus on Bucky."
"Okay," Bruce said, clearly not wanting to start a fight. Steve nodded.

Tony came in, his steps light but his face intent. Grease stains streaked his skin and the ratty tank top he wore. He had the energy scanner tucked into his belt. "JARVIS told me what's up," Tony said as he headed for Bucky. He stopped just outside the range of Russian-sized personal space, then offered his left hand as he'd done before. "Здравствуйте, меня зовут Анатолий." Hello, my name is Anthony.

"Яков," Bucky said, barely above a whisper.

Steve choked off something that probably was not his usual "shucks."

Bucky frowned at Tony's left hand, then reached out with his right. Tony switched hands smoothly to shake in the usual manner. Then he pulled the scanner from his belt in slow motion, making sure that Bucky saw it. A leisurely sweep across Bucky's body made the device chirp. Tony turned the screen where Bucky could see it, murmuring an explanation in Russian. Bucky gave him a blank look.

"I'm not picking up any changes in Bucky's equipment," Tony said to Phil.

"Are you sure?" Phil said. "You needed a lot closer look the first time."

"I'm pretty sure," Tony said. His eyes narrowed. "I'm also completely sure that Bucky's in no state to give informed consent for anything more." His tone added, and that's a line I will not cross.

Bucky's left hand came up, tentatively reaching for Tony. With a gentle smile, Tony grasped Bucky's fingers and then stroked up the arm, feeling for the secondary power source. Next Tony tugged at Bucky's collar to peek at the shoulder underneath. He leaned forward to look at the back side.

"Вы пахнете подобно дому," Bucky said. You smell like home.

Tony straightened up. The look that crossed his face was so complex that even Phil couldn't sort it all out -- an eerie blend of hope and fear and something else -- eventually settling into determination. "I've got an idea," Tony said to Phil. Then he turned back to Bucky. "Вы пойдёте со мной?" Will you come with me?

Bucky nodded. He let Tony lead him toward the door.

Bruce stayed put. "Call me if you need me," he said.

"We will," Phil said. He couldn't blame Bruce for not wanting to be around Steve right now. Steve was already tailing Tony and Bucky. Phil followed them.

Tony went down to the garage level. "JARVIS, leave the overhead lights off, downtime lighting only," he said. Base lights kept the place from total darkness but it still wasn't even half-lit. The arc reactor made a fuzzy circle of blue under Tony's tank top.

Tony walked unerringly through the workshop area, guiding Bucky with an arm around his waist, back to what looked like a closet door. "You two can wait there," he said to Phil and Steve, free hand pointing at a bench seat. They sat. "You stay where I put you. If anything goes wrong, I'll bring Bucky out myself." Then Tony dug in his pocket for an actual key, which he used to unlock the door.
Dirt Floor

Chapter Summary

Leaving Phil and Steve outside, Tony tucks Bucky into his own private toolshed in hopes of reviving more recent memories.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was a toolshed, Phil saw even through the shadows. With a sharp snick, a dazzling light radiated from the bare bulb swinging on a chain. Tony let go of the pull-cord. The small space was crammed with shelves of metal and wood. A workbench along one wall supported boxes full of tools or parts; one end of it held a vice, and the other an anvil under a horseshoe nailed points-down to the wall above. The overhead beams were wooden too, holding up stacks of plywood and drywall toward the rear.

"Dirt floor," Steve whispered, leaning forward. So it was, grayish-brown earth packed to a smooth gloss by plentiful foot traffic. It seemed eerily at odds with the gleaming modern lines of the tower, almost archaic in comparison, yet Tony fit into it with the ease of long familiarity.

There was only one chair inside the toolshed, and not really enough room for more. Tony shoved it toward a front corner. He picked up a couple of dropcloths and made a nest with them. Then he tenderly settled Bucky into the folds and sat down beside him. The door remained open.

Bucky inched closer to Tony, then hesitated, looking at him for guidance. Tony made an inviting gesture. Bucky leaned against him and rested his head on Tony's chest.

Phil felt Steve twitch. Well, no wonder the scene bothers him, Phil thought, it bothers me too. Staring into that cramped space was like looking into Tony's chest with the arc reactor out. Phil knew that Steve wanted to help Bucky, but things didn't always work out that way. Sometimes the key fell into someone else's hands.

The Starkphone in Phil's pocket thrummed for attention. He pulled it out. This is Tony's personal toolshed, which he has never shown to anyone else. He is trusting you to respect his privacy, JARVIS wrote, then underneath in bold red letters, DO NOT ENTER. After that a single button appeared: (Acknowledge)

Oh, Tony, Phil thought. He touched the button. Phil had no intention of abusing Tony's trust ... or testing whatever security features surrounded this innermost sanctum. Knowing Tony, it probably doubled as a panic room. Fresh text scrolled across the screen, Phil's name and the date. Then it reset to the original message.

Did that not save properly? Phil wondered. Then he understood, and passed the phone to Steve.

"What?" Steve said, then looked down at the screen. "Oh." Suddenly his head came up and he stared into the small space where Tony curled protectively around Bucky. "Oh." Steve tapped the button and then returned the phone to Phil.
The toolshed was small and dingy, its edges dim even with the bare lightbulb overhead. It was full of tools and junk, hopes and fears, dreams and nightmares. It was a place to make things, or to take things apart and spread out their pieces to see what went wrong. The two men inside it huddled on the floor in a pile of grungy fabric, seeming perfectly at home there.

Beside Phil, Steve was trembling. Phil reached out and draped an arm around him. Steve slowly wilted against him. He tried to cry quietly, muffling the sound against Phil's shoulder. Phil held him and let him cry.

"This is my fault," Steve said in a low voice. "I did this to him."

"No, Department X did this," Phil said. "Let's not lose track of the real villains here."

"But I'm the one who let Bucky fall from the train in the first place. I didn't even go back to look for him," Steve said. "Now he's all broken and I'm doing everything I can but it's not enough because I can't fix it."

"Not everything can be fixed," Phil said. "Some things we have to cope with using other methods. You might think of a good solution one time, and somebody else might think of one the next time, and that's okay. That's teamwork. We don't throw people away just because they get broken in combat. That's family."

"It's just ... waking up today was so awful," Steve said.

"The bad days always hurt," Phil murmured. He'd gone through things like this with other assets; he knew how hard it was. "They come and then they go. There will be good days again. Hold onto that. Bucky is getting better; we have a clear trend establishing that. This is just another rough patch, and we will get through it together."

Steve clutched him a little tighter, and nodded against his shoulder, and poured out a river of tears. All Phil could do was be there for him. No matter how much it hurt, Steve was obviously unwilling to leave Bucky and Tony, in case they might need something.

Phil stayed for the same reason. The slow twist of this knife was familiar to him; he knew how deeply it could dig, scraping along his soul's bone. He also knew that it would withdraw eventually, leaving behind nothing but another scar. Phil's hands were gentle as he stroked down the length of Steve's back. The touch gave him comfort as well.

Inside the toolshed, Tony began to speak. "One day I came home from an auction with a 1942 Lincoln Zephyr Continental Convertible," Tony said. "She was a thing of beauty, but let me tell you, the top gave me fits. Those early automatic gearshifts can be a pain in the tail, too. So the first thing I did when I got her home was pop the hood."

Tony, it turned out, could talk for hours. He rattled off story after story about old cars he had worked on, a couple of airplanes, and some farmer's tractor that had stalled in the middle of a road that Tony wanted to drive on. He described the time that Pepper had first walked in on him trying to get out of the Iron Man suit. Then followed a string of examples of Worse Things That Pepper Caught Tony Doing, such as making out with Brenda Bakke in the tank prop for the movie Gunhed while it was on public display in Japan. Next he explored the engineering and architecture of historic Brooklyn, with attention to the famous bridge, which was the first steel suspension bridge and the longest span in the world at the time of its construction.

Chapter End Notes
New York soil and subsoil comes in shades of gray and brown.

Healthy personal boundaries are vital for individual safety and group dynamics. Unhealthy boundaries may come from abuse or other causes. Tony has boundary issues due to growing up in a dysfunctional family and in the public eye. He doesn't always understand where it would be prudent to stop, or why. Bucky's boundaries have been mauled by HYDRA and Department X, and his cognitive issues also make it hard for him to manage his own lines right now. Phil has a far more sophisticated grasp of boundaries, and JARVIS is very protective of Tony. There are exercises for good boundaries. Follow preliminary and developmental steps to set your boundaries.

Trust and respect, love and faith, are all required for a healthy family. Look for signs that someone is trustworthy. There are ways to demonstrate respect and trust. You can take steps to encourage people to trust you.

There are tips on how to comfort an upset friend. Some people cry very easily. However, others need to cry but can't; there's advice on how to cry also.

Not everything can be fixed, so you have to do what you can with what you've got. Some people may be too damaged to feel love or trust, but usually that's not the case; broken people can have families and friends too. Learn how to cope with emotional pain when you're not willing or able to walk away from the cause.

Browse luxury cars from the 1940s and their prices, including the Lincoln Zephyr.

Read about the movie Gunhed.

Explore the Brooklyn Bridge.
There Are Lots of Blanks Still

Chapter Summary

Phil scrounges lunch down in the garage. Bucky revives somewhat, and Tony switches support tactics.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Steve's stomach gurgled. "Sorry," he said. "I didn't get much breakfast."

Phil pulled out his phone again and typed, JARVIS, is there any food down here that we're allowed to eat? Phil didn't want to disturb Tony and Bucky with too much talking, nor did he want to raid Tony's supplies without permission.

Across the garage, a single overhead light flicked on. Phil walked over to the refrigerator, where he found two bottles of fufu berry soda and a bunch of bananas probably intended as smoothie ingredients. Phil kept a banana and a soda for himself, then handed everything else to Steve.

"Phil, I've got some Pieces of Eight in a cabinet," Tony said quietly. "JARVIS can show you where. Would you bring those near the door, please?"

"Of course, Tony," said Phil. JARVIS turned a small spotlight on the appropriate cabinet. Phil found the right box and took it to the toolshed, stopping a careful pace away so that Tony had room to come outside. Just in front of his toes, a hair-thin line of silver ran through the concrete floor of the garage.

Tony looked down at the threshold and then at Phil's shoes. He stepped forward. As he took the box, his fingertips brushed over the back of Phil's hand. "Thank you," Tony said.

"You're welcome," Phil replied. He went back to the bench where Steve waited. They ate lunch in silence. Steve sniffled from time to time, but he had quit crying and condemning himself. He still leaned against Phil after they finished eating, though.

"Tony ...?" Bucky's voice carried clearly through the quiet garage. He lifted his head from Tony's chest.

Steve jolted upright. "Shh," Phil said, laying a hand on his knee.

"Hey, there," Tony said. "What's your name, now?"

"James Buchanan Barnes, but my friends call me Bucky," came the reply.

"I am so glad to hear you say that," Tony said. He cradled Bucky in his arms, but his eyes stared right at the bench where Phil and Steve sat.

Phil could feel Steve shaking with the effort of holding himself back. Clearly Steve wanted to rush to Bucky's side. Phil hugged him. "I know you hate waiting, but this is working. Besides, it's not good for one person to carry the whole load," he said. "Let Tony focus on Bucky for now. We'll get our
Steve didn't break his promise to Tony. He stayed put, buried his face in Phil's shoulder, and started crying again. As quietly as he could.

"How much do you remember?" Tony asked Bucky.

"Today's all blurry," Bucky said. "I can remember some other stuff but not much. You, the rest of the team, the tower. When I was little -- parts of that are clear. Cars and other stuff I've fixed, you brought that back. But there are lots of blanks still." His hands moved, wavering through the air. "It's murky. I feel like I need something to get hold of the pieces I'm missing."

"Okay, I want to try something," Tony said. He reached up and brought down a box of tools. "I'm going to hand you some things. I give you my word that everything I hand to you will be perfectly safe and none of it will hurt you. Close your eyes and tell me what each one is."

"Tony, I love your fancy new tools, but I don't know much about them yet," Bucky protested.

"These aren't new. They're old," Tony said quietly. "Just try for me, okay?"

"Fine," Bucky said.

"First one," Tony said, passing Bucky a grimy hammer.

Bucky took it and groped over the length of the tool. "Claw hammer," he said. His fingers rubbed together, spreading dark stuff over most of his right hand.

_Tactile memory, Phil realized suddenly. Of course a mechanic would respond to the texture as well as the smell of grease._ He whispered his observation to Steve, who stopped crying and sat up so he could pay attention to Bucky's discoveries.

"Second one," Tony said.

"Craftsman Vanadium 1723 open-end wrench," Bucky said, smiling. "I can feel the stamps. Not sure about the size ... feels like maybe ... 3/8 by 7/16-inch?"

"You got it," Tony said. "Now for the third one."

"Screwdriver," Bucky said, then a moment later, "Phillips-head."

This went on for a while, as Tony worked his way through the box of tools. Bucky rarely missed. "You're doing a great job," Tony said and handed him the next one.

"Craftsman 3/4-inch combination wrench," Bucky said. He frowned and rubbed his fingertips along the shaft. "It's double-stamped. Tony ... why do you have all these old tools?"

Tony looked away. "Some of them are mine; I like collecting them. Some belonged to my father."

"This isn't Howard's, it's mine," Bucky said. "I recognize the gouge on the box-end where he ran over it with a truck. Jerk borrowed my wrench and never gave it back."

Steve stirred beside Phil. "I remember that," he whispered. "Bucky got all fired up about it, said Howard didn't take very good care of things because he had too much money and not enough sense." Phil couldn't argue with that.

"You sure about that?" Tony said, his voice tightening. "Things get banged up ..."
"Here, look, I can prove it," Bucky said. His thumbnail scraped the grease off the shaft near the open end.

"JBB," Tony read.

"My initials," Bucky said.

"Well, I guess you finally got your wrench back," Tony said, folding Bucky's fingers around it. Then he stood up. "I don't know about you, but I'm getting tired of sitting on the floor."

Bucky got up too. "Shoot, look at me, I'm filthy," he said. "I need a shower." At last he sounded like himself again.

"I need to get back to work," Tony said.

"You need a shower too, Tony, you stink," said Bucky.

Phil chuckled quietly. Engineering was often sweaty work. Tony consistently cleaned up before leaving the tower but didn't always remember when he was just lounging around at home.

Tony protested, but Bucky just propelled him out of the toolshed with a firm hand on his back, turning out the light as they left. "Shower, both of us," Bucky insisted.

"Yeah, fine, whatever," Tony said. He hastened to lock the door as soon as Bucky crossed the threshold.

Chapter End Notes

Fufu berry soda is a tasty, luridly pink artisan beverage. I thought Tony would gravitate to unusual flavors and small brewers.

Magnetic memory recovery is in the very early stages of exploration. One of my readers tipped me to this, and I thought that Tony's electromagnet and the energy signature of the arc reactor might help nudge Bucky's memory back toward normal.

Caregiver burnout is a serious risk for anyone looking after an impaired person. The Avengers have an advantage because they're working as a team to take care of Bucky. But that only works if you let it, and Steve can't stop trying to do everything himself. Somebody has to hold him back every time, if there's a better person suited to dealing with a particular situation, or just so Steve doesn't wear himself out. Learn the symptoms of caregiver burnout, also how to prevent and heal it.

Using mementos as cues is an established technique for coping with memory loss and other mental disorientation. Scent is among the strongest memory anchors, which is what gave Tony the idea to bring Bucky into his toolshed in the first place.

Haptic memory is a type of tactile memory. This is useful for working through different levels of processing and for moving from negative to positive associations. It's possible to make memory cards with tactile rather than visual designs. Both Tony and Bucky have a strong relation to the sense of touch, because they work with their hands, so this is an especially effective memory cue for them.
Read about Craftsman early tools. There are references for the specific wrenches I described.
I Need to NOT Be in Charge

Chapter Summary

Phil and Tony talk after Steve and Bucky have left the garage. Then JARVIS interrupts because Pepper wants something from Tony. Tony has already used up his allotment of maturity for the day.

Phil suggests an extra ageplay session for the group. He sets up supper too. Steve starts making up with Bruce.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Steve hurried to Bucky's side, but restrained himself from grabbing. "What say we go upstairs and get that shower?" he said.

"Sure," Bucky said. "Tony, you coming?"

Tony was hanging back. "JARVIS, lights on slow, see that nobody trips." The overhead lights came on gradually enough to avoid blinding people.

Phil stepped in, saying, "I'll make sure Tony gets a shower too."

"Thanks, Phil," said Bucky as he and Steve headed for the elevator.

Tony leaned heavily against the nearest workbench. "That was not fun," he said. Tension lined his face.

"Nevertheless, you did an excellent job," Phil assured him. "I'm very proud of you. That took quick thinking to capitalize on the scent anchor that Bucky responded to earlier." He carefully did not mention that Tony's solution had again entailed granting Bucky a level of intimacy deeper than Tony customarily offered.

"Sir, I regret to interrupt, but Ms. Potts reports that two major shareholders in Stark Industries are threatening to divest," JARVIS said. "She wants to know if you're available for an emergency meeting."

"Hell no," Tony said. "I need to not be in charge of anything right now. I can't deal with any more people." He rubbed the back of his neck. "You know what, fuck 'em. That stuff we just acquired in the Caymans? Sell it all to somebody reliable, and buy out both of the shareholders."

Well, that explains what happened to the SHIELD holdings there, Phil realized. An entire bank, along with several other institutions, had abruptly made it clear that SHIELD business was no longer welcome and some of them had confiscated "questionable accounts" in the process.

"What shall I tell Ms. Potts, sir?" JARVIS asked.

"Tell Pepper -- I don't know, make up something that sounds mature and responsible enough to keep her out of my hair today," Tony said wearily.
"Yes, sir," JARVIS said.

"Tony, I know it's not Saturday, but how would you feel about an extra game night later?" Phil suggested. He understood that Tony sometimes required solitude to reconstitute himself, but the team bonds needed attention too after the stress of the day. "Everyone's nerves are pretty frayed. It would give us a chance to relax."

Tony shuffled nervously from foot to foot. "What if Pepper calls back while we're doing that?" he asked.

"Then I'll tell her that Tony Stark is not at home, and it will be true," Phil said with a smile.

"Okay," Tony said. "I'd love that."

Phil kept things low-key for the rest of the day. He herded Tony into a shower and then let him retreat to his lab. Next Phil tracked down Clint and made sure that he was all right. As suspected, Clint had fled the kitchen to avoid another messy confrontation of Bucky’s brainwashing-induced memory problems. Fortunately he only needed some space to calm down. Phil put on a crockpot of ham and beans for supper. The rich smell floating through their home floors helped everyone relax.

Natasha came home, edgy after a day of diplomatic work that was really not her favorite skill set but for which she had been the most qualified person available. "That lady is ... rather daunting," she confided in Phil. "She looks like somebody's sweet little grandmother. Then she starts talking, and бабушка becomes Баба Яга. I took notes, for when I am ancient and withered and still need to terrify people."

Phil chuckled. "Well, from what I've read in certain secure files, Britain's impressive espionage network dates back at least as far as Queen Victoria, 'the Grandmother of Europe.' I'm not surprised that Queen Elizabeth is following that tradition," he said.

Natasha leaned over the pot to sniff at the ham and beans. "This smells good," she said. "May we have cornbread to go with it?"

"Sure," Phil said, surprised and pleased. Natasha rarely made requests for food, except when ordering things for delivery. Phil got out one of the half-sheet pans to make cornbread.

Steve and Bucky came into the kitchen in time to set the table for supper. Bucky's memory had continued to recover during the afternoon, but still wasn't back to what had become its usual level. Bruce arrived next, drawn by the aroma of baking cornbread.

"I'm sorry I snapped at you this morning," Steve said to Bruce. "I don't know what came over me. I shouldn't take it out on you just because I'm upset."

"It's okay," Bruce said with a sad smile. "You had a lot on your mind." He hung back a little farther than usual. Steve pressed his lips together at that, but did not crowd him.

"Thanks for looking after me when I had my head in the clouds," Bucky said to Bruce.

"Any time," Bruce said, rummaging in the cabinet for the buckwheat honey that he liked to pour over cornbread. "I'm just glad you're feeling a bit better."

During supper, Betty engaged Bucky in gentle conversation. Her questions mapped out his shifting recollection of the past. Steve and Natasha interspersed anecdotes of their own. Now and then they managed to revive another piece of Bucky's memory.
Tony, having worn out his voice earlier, was uncharacteristically quiet. Nobody mentioned what Tony had done for Bucky, and Tony contributed only a few rough words to the current discussion. Bruce finally got up and made him a cup of lemon tea with manuka honey. "Here, this will help," Bruce said as he set the cup in front of Tony.

"I don't --" Tony began, then broke off with a cough.

"I know you don't like it. Drink it anyway." Bruce nudged the cup closer. "Your voice is wrecked, Tony. I don't know what you did to it, but you sound awful. Take care of it or you'll wind up conversing with JARVIS on a keyboard."

Tony huffed at him, but conceded to sipping the tea. It was no secret that he preferred coffee to the delicate herbal blends that Bruce favored.

The ham and beans proved popular with almost everyone. Steve, Bucky, Clint, and Betty clearly loved it. Natasha seemed more interested in the cornbread. Bruce shared his buckwheat honey with her. Tony nibbled at both without much enthusiasm. Phil was satisfied as long as people ate something reasonable.

Chapter End Notes

No one person can do everything, so people need to be able to decline taking on a new responsibility. Understand why it can be hard to say no and when to say no. Here are 20 graceful ways to say no, and 25 more Tony-flavored ones. There are tips on how to say no respectfully and how to decline assignments at work. For once Tony has pegged a boundary in the right place, even if he's not able to frame his refusal very politely himself. He also manages to help solve the underlying problem and delegate the rest to JARVIS, who's in better shape to handle it.

The Cayman Islands are famous for financial services of dubious morality, such as money laundering and tax evasion.

бабушка • (bábrushka) feminine, animate
1. grandmother, grandma, granny
расскажи это своей бабушке (rasskaží éto svojej bábuške) — tell it to Sweeney, tell it to the marines
2. old lady
3. strong, outspoken or opinionated woman

Баба Яга • (Bába Jagá) feminine, proper name
1. old witch, hag
2. (mythology) Baba Yaga
She is a famous figure in Russian folklore.

Queen Victoria was called "the Grandmother of Europe" for her children and their alliances.

Buckwheat honey is deep copper to brown in color, with a kind of malt-molasses flavor. It makes a delicious spread, but also has health benefits and can be used as cough syrup. The dark strong taste makes it less good for blending with delicate things, though.
So here's one of my Mary Sue moments: instead of writing myself into fanfic, I put my recipe for ham and beans on the Avengers' table. It works equally well with actual ham or with bacon. Here's a recipe for a half-sheet pan of cornbread, which makes 50 smallish pieces.

Gentle conversation shows people that you care about them enough to speak softly instead of harshly. It's a very useful support technique in cases of bruised feelings or mental impairment. There are tips for how to become a good conversationalist and how to have a great conversation. Steve and Betty are probably the best at this among the Avengers.

Manuka honey tends toward brown in color, with a rich earthy flavor. It's among the types of honey most favored for medicinal rather than purely culinary purposes.

Lemon and honey count among the most popular remedies for a sore throat or strained voice. There are recipes based on chamomile tea and lemon juice, fresh ginger and lemon juice, and lemons and ginger in honey syrup. You can also buy lemon-ginger herbal tea and put honey in it. Lemon tea has benefits of its own.
Older Brothers

Chapter Summary

Game night begins with most of the members playing Trivial pursuit. Uncle Phil plays CrackleD ICE with Clint. Then things get complicated.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After the meal, everyone changed clothes. Then they gathered in the common room. Steve and Bucky were still exploring the parameters of their evolving relationship. Tonight Bucky played nine to Steve's ten. This let Bucky relax more, without so much responsibility. It also gave the rest of the team a snug pair of older brothers they were coming to adore.

Most of the "kids" clustered around the coffee table for a game of Trivial Pursuit. In deference to Steve and Bucky, they used the Vintage Years question cards which covered the 1920s-1950s. That provided a reasonable handicap to the most educated players -- Tony, Bruce, and Betty -- who had all been born later. Natka managed to hold her own; she was determined to tackle games that featured cultural knowledge, so as to expand her limited familiarity. This produced a relatively balanced game that they enjoyed sharing.

Judging from Bucky's play, he was nearly back to normal. He hesitated over some questions more than usual. Nobody said a word, letting him take as much time as he needed to reply. Interestingly, the answers he gave were as accurate as ever.

Uncle Phil sat on the loveseat and supervised the game. Clint didn't care much for games that relied heavily on knowledge, so he didn't mind the six-player limit. Phil still wanted to track down some games with a larger player pool, though. Clint preferred games based on dexterity. That gave Phil an idea.

"Clint, why don't you come over here and play with me?" Phil said. They didn't play CrackleD ICE - or any of the other Icehouse games -- if Steve was paying attention. The pieces looked and sounded enough like ice that, especially on a bad day, the similarity made him uncomfortable. Now Steve was engrossed in Trivial Pursuit. Phil brought out the glittering pyramids of blue and clear plastic, along with an old compact disc to balance them on.

"Yeah, sure!" Clint said. He grinned as they set up the game on an end table. The quiet clink of the plastic pieces was easily obscured by the conversation on the couch. "This is a fun game."

"I agree," Phil said. "Maybe we could pick up some other games from Looney Labs that Steve might like better. They make a lot of different kinds, and some of them are really funny."

"I'd like that," Clint said, pressing closer as they played. He was a little clingy today, after seeing the unpleasant aftermath of brainwashing in the morning. Phil didn't mind giving him some extra attention while the others entertained themselves. The archer's body made a warm, solid weight against his own.

Voices rose and fell, then rose again. Phil glanced over at the "kids" clustered around the coffee
Steve seemed to have everything in hand, managing the carton of question cards.

Phil was delicately lowering a pyramid into place when the larger group exploded into action. Bruce scrambled under the coffee table, upsetting it in the process. Tony chased after him. This sent Bruce diving under the end table, which tipped over that as well. Game pieces scattered everywhere.

Clint took off after Tony, only to step on one of the pyramids. "Ow! Ow! Ow!" he yelped, hopping on one foot. Phil caught him before he could fall. The game piece hadn't broken skin, just left a pink dimple behind, but it still hurt.

Bucky swept Bruce behind him. Betty dropped to her knees to comfort Bruce.

Steve managed to block Tony from further pursuit. "Tony, cut it out!" Steve said. "Bruce is right; it's simpler if we stick with what's printed on the card. It's just a game. It's not worth fighting over."

"But the stupid card got the stupid answer wrong and I can prove it," Tony protested.

"That's still no excuse to pick a fight with Bruce," said Phil. He deposited Clint on the loveseat. "Tony, you know that Bruce doesn't share your taste for conflict. Look how much you've upset him. It's not okay to scare people like that."

"Sorry," Tony muttered.

Phil moved around the solid, wary wall of Bucky to reach Bruce. "Are you all right, Bruce?" Phil asked. The morning's stress had left Bruce more fragile. He nodded against Betty's shoulder, though. "That's good."

Next Phil parked Tony in a far corner of the room. It took only a minute to find the necessary supplies in the toy cabinet. "Tony, hold out your hands," Phil said.

Instantly Tony whipped his hands behind his back. "No," he said.

"I'm not going to hurt you," Phil said. He showed Tony the pair of ping-pong balls. "This is an exercise, not a punishment. You need to learn how to be still, and quiet, and patient."

"Why?" Tony whined.

Phil crouched down to look him in the eye. "Because when you act without thinking, sometimes you hurt your friends, and I don't think that's what you want," Phil said.

"I didn't do it on purpose," Tony said, looking away.

"I know," Phil said. "Now hold out your hands." Tony finally obeyed. Phil balanced a ping-pong ball on the back of each hand. "Keep those in place for five minutes, and then you may get up. JARVIS will keep count."

"Okay," Tony said with a nod. The left ball rolled onto the floor.

"And hold still," Phil said. He put the ball back into place.

Then Phil went to help with the cleanup. Steve righted the furniture. Bucky scooped up Bruce and moved him to the couch, where Betty kept him company. Clint stayed on the loveseat, nursing his bruised foot. Phil, Steve, and Bucky picked up the scattered game pieces. Fortunately nothing was lost or broken, just spread all over the floor. Everything went back into the respective boxes.

"Five minutes," JARVIS announced.
"I did it!" Tony said, bouncing to his feet. He held out the ping-pong balls.

"I knew you could," Phil said as he took the balls. "Now go make up with Bruce. You really scared him."

Tony made his apology, plainly crushed to see Bruce still hiding between Bucky and Betty, both of whom glared at Tony. "It's okay," Bruce whispered. "Just ... please don't be mad at me anymore?"

"I'm not mad at you, I'm just an idiot," Tony said.

"Putting yourself down doesn't help either," Phil said. "Let's find something else to do now. Since you boys seem to have so much energy, maybe we should switch to a more active game. How about hide and seek?"

Chapter End Notes

The end notes won't fit here; you can find them on the original Dreamwidth post. (More of the story is posted on DW than here yet.)
The Last to Be Found

Chapter Summary

The Avengers play several rounds of hide and seek.

Chapter Notes

Some of the end notes wouldn't fit, so I'm moving them here ...

Hide and Seek involves one person searching for others in concealed places.

Base 12 is also called the duodecimal system.

House rules provide a way to customize games for a certain location or group of players. This also appears as a TV Trope. Some people easily get bored with ordinary games and want to spice them up, or else they find that some rules just don't work very well or that things happen which require new rules. Other folks are really determined to stick with the official rules. Do what works for you, and if there are opposing preferences, try to find a compromise.

Base 2 is also known as binary.

Concentration is a memory and matching game.

Cat's Cradle is a string figure game that involves knot theory. Recreational mathematics can be a fun hobby.

Learn to count in Russian with text and audio or video.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The proposal of hide and seek met with cheers of approval. Phil didn't suggest active games as often as quiet ones. The Avengers burned off so much energy during everyday life that they usually wanted to relax with something more sedentary. When they were fizzing over, though, a physical game helped them direct the intensity in a safer way.

Betty volunteered to be It first. The others scattered swiftly. "... eight, nine, T, E, ten ..." Betty said as Phil slipped out the door.

"What in the world?" Phil muttered, looking for a suitable hiding place.

"Betty seems to be counting in Base 12," JARVIS said.

Oh. Well then. That meant a count of 144 instead of just 100, so Phil could range a little farther.

They weren't allowed to count in bases smaller than ten, after Tony's memorable count of "One, ten, one-one, one hundred, tag I win!" in binary. But they hadn't forbidden larger bases, so it wasn't
Phil made it all the way to the landing pad, where he concealed himself inside one of the cabinets that held the disassembly equipment for Iron Man. It took Betty twenty minutes to find him. Phil heard her tap-tap-tapping her way along the doors toward his.

"Ha! I found you!" Betty crowed as she popped the door open.

"You can really tell the difference by sound?" Phil asked as they walked back toward the common room.

"Yes. The panels sound less hollow when someone's inside," she said. "It's like putting your fist into the open end of a drum."

Physics could be revealing that way. *I'll have to remember this for work-related situations*, Phil mused.

Tony and Bucky were already in the common room, playing a round of Concentration. Evidently Tony had handicapped himself with triple matches, of which he had one to Bucky's two pair.

When Bruce and Clint arrived within minutes of each other, they started a game of cat's cradle. Phil approved of Bruce's growing interest in knots and cords. It was interesting to watch them together, because Clint approached the field from a physical angle and focused on dexterity, while Bruce preferred a mental angle and dug into the math behind the patterns.

Natka was the last to be found. She had been hiding behind a curtain. Phil suspected that, in true ninja fashion, Natka sometimes crept from one sanctuary to another.

Natka counted in base ten, although she added a level of challenge by doing it in Russian. The "kids" all scattered again.

Phil concealed himself inside one of the silly potted palms in a hallway, which had a much larger decorative urn with the actual pot sitting in a tray of gravel. Natka found him first anyway.

"I always check the most obscure hiding places first for you," she said blithely.

Phil sometimes wondered if, like her namesake, she could sense the subtle vibrations of someone's body. After all, Steve could hear breathing and heartbeat considerably farther away than most people could.

In the common room, Phil started building a house of cards. When Tony was found, he joined the fun. Bruce declined to play, but Betty and Bucky gladly accepted their invitation. Clint tried, only to knock down the whole structure because he was still too wired for something that called for patience. Just then Natka arrived with Steve in tow, who had apparently scrunched himself into a much smaller space than expected, so that was all right.

Steve counted, loud and plain, always reliable for fair play. Clint promptly disappeared into an air duct, which meant he wouldn't stay there. Tony and Bucky went in opposite directions. Everyone else hustled away as well.

This time Phil wedged himself, overhead, in the underpinnings of a catwalk in the apartment that Clint and Natka shared, which was actually two floors run together to create a comfortably three-dimensional environment for them. By unspoken agreement, the players tended to avoid the more private parts of each other's quarters, but semi-public areas like living rooms were fair game. By the time Steve managed to find him, nearly an hour later, Phil's muscles were quivering. He was grateful.
for the opportunity to drop back to the carpet.

The common room held almost everyone. "Where's Tony?" Phil asked, looking around.

"I have no idea," Steve said as he threw up his hands. "I give up. I'm allowed to give up, right? It's been an hour now."

"Yes, that's fine," Phil said. They had to leave that option open, in a group of people so skilled in concealment.

"Alle, alle auch sind frei!" Steve called in his passable German. The sound echoed farther through the tower as JARVIS relayed it.

They waited.

No response.

*That's odd,* Phil thought. *Tony usually brags when he wins like this.*

The "kids" shuffled, looking at each other, wondering what to do next.

"JARVIS, where is Tony?" Phil asked.

"That information is unavailable at this time," JARVIS said. Phil remembered that Tony had programmed a block for his own location during hide and seek, because some of the other players were plenty capable of getting into the security system.

"Game's over, JARVIS, tell him to get his butt in here," Clint said.

"I can broadcast a request. I cannot locate him until Tony himself releases the block," JARVIS said.

Phil heard the loud, crisp tones ringing through the tower. *Paging Tony Stark. Tony Stark to the common room, please.* JARVIS wasn't about to bellow "Carter" all over the tower.

Still nothing.

"Okay, now he's just screwing with us," Clint said in a peeved tone.

Bruce plastered himself against Phil's side. "I'm scared," he whispered. "I want Tony. I don't like it when people disappear. Sometimes they don't come back."

Phil stroked his back. Bruce was still learning how to feel safe, and it didn't take much to shake his sense of security. Physical comfort helped him work through the anxious times.

The problem was, Phil couldn't simply reassure Bruce that nothing was wrong. That fear was valid, especially for the Avengers in their line of work. "Chances are, Clint is right, and Tony is just playing a prank that isn't very funny anymore," said Phil. If that was the case, Phil would have *words* with him later. "Knowing Tony, he could just as easily have decided to do lab work, or fallen asleep, or gotten distracted some other way."

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Chapter End Notes

A *house of cards* may be built with *square* or *triangular* design.
Sportsmanship or fair play includes treating others with respect and playing by the rules. There are tips for teaching good sportsmanship. The Avengers really do need extra rules sometimes, because so many of them are creative and will do things that ordinary games just don't think to disallow. Steve is a traditionalist, though, and tends to play things in a very straightforward manner. There's no right or wrong way, as long as people have fun. If feelings get hurt, that's a problem and it needs to be worked out.

"Alle, alle auch sind frei!" means "Everyone, everyone else is also free!" It appears in many variations, such as "Ollie ollie oxen free" and others descending into downright gibberish. It is most often thought to derive from German, but may be from an older version of English (which is a Germanic language).

Children go through stages about what makes them anxious and how they express that feeling. Fear of abandonment can come from parental death, abuse, or other causes. It can cause troublesome symptoms such as clinging and panicking. It helps a lot that Uncle Phil is so patient with his Littles, because most of them have this issue to some degree; they need reassurance and cuddles to learn what safety feels like and that their current teamfamily will NOT abandon them. There are tips for overcoming fear of abandonment and related feelings as abstracts, along with coping with feelings after actual abandonment. Sometimes it helps to work on fear of abandonment and fear of engulfment together. Here's a video meditation about dealing with fear of abandonment after a breakup.

Misbehavior is common in children, especially in blended families with their extra challenges of meshing different homelives. Sometimes children act up on purpose to test adults. Other cases result from developmentally appropriate behavior or unmet needs. Other reasons include attention, power, revenge, or confidence. It's vital to understand the reason behind misbehavior in order to prevent and correct it.

Uncle Phil understands that, no matter how powerful the Avengers are now, most of them had adverse childhood experiences and they all missed out on some important positive experiences. They lack various skills and knowledge that most people learn growing up and that adults are expected to have. Game night helps make up for that by giving them opportunities to make those discoveries in a safe environment.
Let's Go Look for Tony

Chapter Summary

Everyone discusses what could be up with Tony and how to respond. They divide up and go search for him. Phil second-guesses himself about game night. Bruce gets increasingly worried. So does JARVIS.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"What if he's hurt?" Bruce said, his voice muffled by Phil's bathrobe. That was disturbingly plausible. Tony had once twisted his ankle falling off one of Clint's ladders while trying to duplicate some way that he'd seen Natka hiding.

"What if someone took him?" Clint said. It had happened before, not here, but still...

"JARVIS, could anyone have removed Tony from the tower against his will?" Phil asked.

"That is extremely unlikely, even with the blackout on his position, and I find no evidence of it," JARVIS said. "It is not ... quite ... beyond the realm of possibility, given the unusual abilities of certain opponents. I simply cannot confirm where Tony is."

"All right, everyone stay calm. We'll all go search for Tony. There's no specific reason to worry," Phil said. They would probably find him with a few minutes of diligent looking. Besides, Tony would freak if they sounded an alarm without sufficient cause and turned out uninvolved parties to hunt for him. Particularly since he was wearing Captain America footie pajamas at the moment.

Natka... unfolded, bizarrely and almost instantly, into Black Widow. "I'm switching up," she said. "I'll change clothes and arm myself. Hawkeye and I will start at the top of the tower, search pattern alpha."

"Anyone else want to stop playing?" Phil asked. Bruce shook his head against the soft terrycloth of Phil's bathrobe. His arms squeezed Phil's waist.

"Nah, he's probably just horsing around," Steve said. That was a valid possibility: Tony misbehaved on purpose fairly often, as a way of exploring boundaries, and this could be an example of that. "I'm good."

Bucky nodded. Betty shrugged.

"Okay, let's go look for Tony. Bruce, you can stick with me," Phil said. "JARVIS, notify the whole team as soon as anyone finds Tony."

Phil knew how all the Avengers thought. It let him find them at need. The catch was, he couldn't always do it instantly. It took careful consideration.

All right, think it through. Tony is still stinging from this morning's emergency intimacy with Bucky. He'll gravitate toward his comfort zones, Phil reasoned. That means the most likely places are his own quarters, his lab, his garage, and his office.
Phil started with Tony's floor, that being closest. Bruce clung to Phil's hand the whole time. They searched meticulously, not excluding the private areas as usual. JARVIS gave them access without protest. Tony was nowhere to be found.

With Tony lost and Bruce clinging like a burr, Phil couldn't help wondering how much of this mess was his fault. **Maybe I should have started game night with cuddling instead of play. Bruce is sensitive from this morning's stress. So is Tony, and he was so brave taking care of Bucky. They deserve a little extra comfort, Phil thought. They aren't always very receptive to that, though.**

Black Widow and Hawkeye called in reports as they cleared each area. Every one made Bruce's hand clench a little tighter.

Phil wavered back toward his original idea. **Clint was upset too, and I don't like how much he's avoiding matters of mind control. He's the one who got left out of playing Trivial Pursuit, Phil thought. He logged each room as empty after searching it. Perhaps I should have diverted that game to something else. Steve and Bucky and Bruce wanted to play, though, and Tony was quick to pounce on it. It's better to let them pick their own activities when they show that kind of initiative, because micromanaging the team is not good for anyone. But then Tony and Bruce got into an argument, so maybe it wasn't the right game for tonight after all ...**

Tony's office was empty too, but then Phil had included it as the least likely of Tony's sanctuaries -- which made it a good hiding place. The lab was more of a disappointment. That was a favorite refuge.

Then a chilling thought occurred to Phil. **There's one other place that Tony could have decided to hide, Phil realized. The toolshed. He would never have done it before this, but Steve knows about it now. Maybe Tony felt a need to reclaim it, and just assumed that we'd never go there, so he'd win. Then again, he obviously didn't want anyone else near it. He could be somewhere else after all.**

Phil didn't even know if the toolshed was wired for sound. On the one hand, Tony rarely went anywhere without access to JARVIS; but on the other hand, the toolshed was almost a time capsule of Tony's earlier life. Phil hated the thought of intruding there. He'd do it, though, in pursuit of Tony's safety.

"Uncle Phil? Are you okay?" Bruce said.

"Yes, I'm just starting to worry," Phil said.

"As am I," JARVIS added, his voice tight. "Collectively the Avengers have cleared a majority of the tower, with no sign of sir."

"We're heading for the garage level next," Phil said. He would search the toolshed himself, if it came to that. The lock would pose no real hindrance given his skills ... unless it was electrified or something, which was entirely possible. If that was the case, Phil would just have to trust JARVIS not to trigger the security measures on him. And he would leave the toolshed for **last.**

The garage was a large, open space that threw back echoes even of Phil's slipper-clad footfalls. Beside him Bruce padded almost silently in his footie pajamas. "My tummy is all fluttery. The, uh, the Big Kid is getting upset too." Bruce whispered.

Phil hugged him. "Bruce, thank you for saying so. It means a lot that you trust me with that. Hulk, we'll find Tony. If we need you to come help, I'll tell you. I promise." The sound of a car door caught Phil's attention. "Look, there's Bucky. He's helping us search." Bucky shook his head as he moved to the next car.
"How about we look in the cabinets," Phil said to Bruce. "You can check the ones at floor level, and I'll check the higher ones." Bruce kept hunkering down to make a smaller target of himself. This would keep him useful without stressing him further by making him stand all the way up.

Bruce opened and closed the nearest cabinet. "Not here," he said softly.

Chapter End Notes

The end notes are too long to fit. Read them on the original Dreamwidth post. This story is farther ahead on DW.
Found Him

Chapter Summary

Bucky finds Tony. The two of them proceed to have a horrible fight. Despite Phil's best efforts, it takes a while to attain even a semblance of calm after that.

Chapter Notes

**WARNING:** This chapter features the big blowup. There is severe verbal abuse, vulgarity, a minor physical altercation, protective restraint, complicated and murky consent issues. It includes Bucky!whump and Tony!whump, and well, basically all the Avengers go whump! whump! whump! down the emotional staircase. If these are concerns for you, consider taking extra precautions; if you're in delicate space, consider waiting before you read this part. Things will get better later, of course, but this scene is the dooooooom.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#).

"Found him!" Bucky yelled. Phil whirled to see Bucky lifting Tony from a car. Relief flooded through him as he hurried toward them. "Tony got himself stuck in the trunk here and fell asleep."

"I was not stuck!" Tony said. He wormed his way free of Bucky's grasp and dropped to the ground. He stood stiffly out of reach. "There is no way to get stuck in the trunk of any car I own. They all have escape latches inside. Hidden tools, too."

Which Tony had added after an unpleasant kidnapping incident in his twenties; the phrasing and reference, coupled with the body language, meant that this was Tony Stark and not Tony Carter.

Relief turned to anger as Phil processed that Tony had carelessly fallen asleep and alarmed everyone for no good reason. He opened his mouth to start yelling -- then remembered Bruce, who was still clinging to him, and Tony, who did not need another round of verbal abuse. What they needed was a sense of safety even when things went wrong.

Phil closed his mouth, breathed slowly through his nose, and tried to dig up some patience. *Game night is safe space. I need to keep my temper in check and --*

"What were you thinking?" Bucky said, taking a step toward Tony.

"That it was a great hiding place, which it is," Tony said. He jerked his chin up and glared at Bucky. "What's the big deal?"

"You scared the crap out of us, you little punk!" Bucky snapped. He sounded like an irate teenager, age jinking upward in response to the stress.

Bruce flinched against Phil's side. "Bucky, that's not helping," Phil said. He tried to separate the two of them. "Calm down and let me deal with this."
"I ought to take a belt to you --" Bucky said, waving a hand at Tony.

"You fucking try it. I will break your arm too," Tony said coldly.

"No," Phil said in his firmest voice. Bruce skittered away. "No hitting."

"That's not hitting, it's perfectly ordinary punishment," Bucky scoffed. "He needs to show some respect --"

"Fuck you! You're not my father!" Tony screamed, shoving Bucky hard enough to rock him against the car.

That gave Phil a chance to wedge himself between them, but it was too late.

Just like that, Bruce was crying. Bucky was not only crying but would have run out of the room except for Phil's stern grip on him. Tony was furious and defensive, both hands held in front of himself. Phil didn't know which way to turn first.

Naturally that's when the rest of the Avengers poured into the garage to reassure themselves that Tony had been found safely. Black Widow demanded a situation report. Steve homed in on Bucky, who finally wrenched loose from Phil. Bucky buried his face in Steve's shoulder. Betty went to Bruce, only to find him skittish and resistant. She held off touching him and instead scowled at everyone. At least Hulk hadn't made an appearance. Amidst the uproar, Tony shook with tension.

"All right, who's the jerk that upset Bruce?" Hawkeye said.

"He is!" Tony and Bucky chorused, pointing at each other. That just set off another round of louder recriminations from everyone. No amount of calling for order helped.

Phil finally stalked to the wall of the garage and resorted to a last-ditch tactic for restoring peace.

"Hey! Why'd the lights go off? JARVIS!" Tony yelped.

"I turned them off," Phil said.

The ruckus gradually quieted down.

"Is anyone injured?" Phil asked, just to be safe.

A soft chorus of negatives sounded.

"Now, here's what is going to happen," Phil said as he turned the lights back on. "Tony, we're done playing hide and seek for tonight. Remove the block on your location so that JARVIS can find you."

Tony clapped his hands and said, "JARVIS, Daddy's home."

"It's good to have you back, sir," JARVIS replied, an edge in his voice. Tony's human family hadn't been the only ones worried about him.

"Are you just going to let him get away with --" Steve began.

"Stop," Phil said. "Everyone, just stop. We're all upset. Therefore now is not a good time to discuss what went wrong. We're going to go upstairs and watch something silly on television until we calm down. Then we'll go to bed. There will be time enough to deal with this tomorrow, with cooler heads."
Tony gave him a mulish look but said nothing. Hawkeye looked no better, and Black Widow was unreadable. Steve, still holding onto Bucky, was taut with anger. "Yes, sir," Steve said, biting off the ends of the words.

"Thank you," Phil said. Neither Bucky nor Bruce would meet Phil's eyes. Betty seemed calmer, though. "Bruce, are you settled enough to go with Betty, or do you still need me?"

"Betty," Bruce whispered. He moved close enough to clutch her tightly. Phil felt grateful that Bruce managed to hold onto his control, somehow -- or perhaps that Hulk trusted the team enough to let them handle the situation instead of bursting out to deal with it himself.

"All right then, I'll leave you to Betty while I stick with Tony," Phil said. Betty coaxed Bruce to the door. "Hawkeye, Black Widow, please go change clothes. I'll expect Clint and Natka in the common room shortly." They peeled off at once. Steve led Bucky out. Phil took Tony in hand.

"Let go," Tony said, twisting his wrist.

Phil moved with him to keep Tony from breaking the grip. "Tony, stop that," he said. "You dropped out of touch in a way that scared people, so I'm holding onto you for a while."

Dark, complex emotions roiled over Tony's face. Then they flowed away, leaving a mask almost as blank as Natasha's. "Whatever," Tony said.

"I know you're upset right now, because things went wrong and people hurt each other's feelings. You may not want to talk with me or be around me, but I'm too worried about you to let you run off alone," Phil said, watching carefully for a response. "I still care about you, even when you do troublesome things, and I'm here for you."

Tony just shrugged.

"Come with me," Phil said, and towed Tony back toward the common room.

Chapter End Notes

The notes are too long to fit here, so read them on the original Dreamwidth post. This story is farther ahead on DW than here.

For a JARVIS-eye view of the scenes where Tony is missing and then found, read "Kernel Error."
Seeking Solace

Chapter Summary

The team reassembles in the common room, with most of them still rattled after the conflict. They comfort each other as best they can.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tony kept up a weight of tension the whole way upstairs, like a dog at the end of a leash. Phil took care to stay off the sensitive pressure points of his wrist, keeping the hold secure but comfortable. Tony's pulse fluttered and raced under his fingertips. At least he's not actively fighting my grip anymore, Phil thought, but he still worried about the grudging acquiescence. It was difficult to feel out the battered lines of Tony's boundaries, like groping for bones under flesh, the elusive edge where Tony needed to be pushed or held and the space just beyond it that would be too far.

I wonder if I'm doing more harm than good here. I want him to feel safe with me, but ... right now, I just can't trust him not to run off or hurt himself or both. I don't dare let go; he could bolt through a door and jam it. However functional Tony was on a good day, he was still an adult child of alcoholics with a drinking problem of his own and a history of spectacularly bad decisions. Today he was far from thinking clearly, and Phil didn't want the damage quotient going any higher.

When they arrived in the common room, Tony leaned toward his favorite chair, only to be brought up short. "I want to sit down," he said.

"You may, you're just sitting with me tonight," Phil said. He pulled Tony onto the loveseat with him. Then Phil let go, fairly sure that the familiar room would help convince Tony to stay put. At least he wasn't in the garage where he could jump in a car and drive while overwrought.

"Lucky me," Tony said. He kicked one heel against the wooden leg. Then Tony realized what he was doing and sat rigid instead. His back wasn't even touching the cushions.

Phil tried to coax Tony into a cuddle. Even that gentle touch made him flinch. Phil put his hand back on his own knee. Tony could get standoffish under stress. I can always try again; maybe he'll feel more receptive later, Phil hoped.

Everyone else wanted a hug when they arrived. Uncle Phil used the opportunity for subtly gauging their moods. Some of them, like Bruce, were still shaky. Others, like Steve, were beginning to shed some of their tension. Either way, Phil felt good about just holding them for a minute to offer what comfort he could.

Steve and Bucky sat on the couch. Their arms looped around each other as Steve consoled Bucky. Bruce looked at Phil, who had his hands full with Tony. Then Bruce curled up on top of Bucky, with his feet in Steve's lap, seeking solace in the familiarity of their solid grasp. At least the scare with Tony seemed to have pushed Bruce past his withdrawal from Steve. Betty squeezed in next to Bucky. Her hand petted the brown-and-silver rumple of Bruce's hair.

When Clint and Natka arrived, they both perched on top of the couch back. Clint was the only one
who routinely took that position, but Natka refused to be separated from him at the moment. Bucky reached up to touch Natka. Steve gave Clint a reassuring pat on the knee.

"JARVIS, please run Fantasia Lite," said Phil.

That cued a selection of instrumental cartoons with whimsical subjects, nothing with dialog or imagery that might bother anyone already under stress. The soft music and pastel colors helped to soothe jangled nerves. Phil watched as the other Avengers began to relax. Beside him, Tony sat unbending. The air fluttered as JARVIS raised the temperature to make the room a little more cozy.

"Tony, you look tired," Phil said gently. He tried stroking Tony's back. Tony neither pulled away nor leaned closer. "It's okay if you need a nap."

Tony just shook his head in mute refusal, the motion as stiff as his stance.

Phil let go of him. Pressing him too much won't make him feel any better, Phil thought. I just wish there was something more I could do to help, besides keeping him safe and being here for him.

"Uncle Phil?" Bruce called at the end of a cartoon. JARVIS paused the display on the next title screen.

"Yes, Bruce, what do you need?" Phil said.

"I want hot chocolate."

"Oh god yes," Clint said intensely. "With marshmallows. Lots of marshmallows."

"I need a drink," Tony muttered.

Phil's concern ticked up another notch. "You may have hot chocolate, herbal tea, or water," he said to Tony. "No coffee or anything else with caffeine while you're still upset, and certainly no alcohol."

Tony dropped his gaze. "Never mind. I'm not thirsty after all."

"Well, I still want hot chocolate," said Clint. Bruce wasn't assertive enough to reiterate his own request, but they all knew that by now, enough to carry on if he abandoned some object of interest. "Please, Uncle Phil?"

"Of course," Phil said. "JARVIS, please keep an eye on Tony for me until I return." He didn't want to put that responsibility on any of the other "kids" tonight, not after the earlier disaster; but he didn't dare leave Tony unsupervised in this state, even if Tony couldn't or wouldn't switch down properly.

"Monitoring," JARVIS said.

Phil went into the kitchen and started to reach for the gourmet cocoa mix. Then he realized that Bruce probably meant his own recipe for hot chocolate. Phil had no idea how to make that. Well, maybe this will do --

The screen beside the stove blinked on. Phil found himself looking at Bruce's recipe. It used whole milk as a base, later augmented with various amounts of heavy cream for the people with enhanced metabolisms. Bucky's line, between Steve and Natasha, ended with a question mark. Phil followed the basic directions, then when he got to the additions, simply split the difference between the portions for Steve and Natasha. Hopefully that would work.

"Record changes, save, and close file," Phil said. This way Bruce could look back and see what Phil
had done. The screen winked off.

Phil put the cups onto a tray so he could carry them all. The other Avengers eagerly accepted theirs. Clint piled so many marshmallows into his that the hot chocolate leaked down the side of the cup. He licked it off.

"Oh my Lord I have died and gone to heaven," Bucky said in a reverent tone.

Bruce chuckled softly. "Thanks," he said. "This is my recipe. Steve gave me some ideas. Uncle Phil made it right."

"You are a complete genius," Bucky said. Bruce ducked his head. Bucky reached down and ruffled his hair. "Learn to take a compliment, sprout."

Phil returned to the loveseat. Tony had shifted closer to the center of the cushion. Steam curled up from Phil's cup, and Tony sniffed a little. "JARVIS, resume play," Phil said.

The next cartoon flowed across the screen, the fairies of the Nutcracker Suite from the original Fantasia. Phil smiled. That had always been a favorite of his. On the couch, Bucky and Natka were holding hands, but Phil could see their fingertips tapping in time to the music.

Phil savored his hot chocolate. The warm milk and spices went a long way toward mellowing his mood. Tony looked at him, then looked away. The pink tip of his tongue appeared, wetting his lips.

Phil reached out and carefully rested the cup on Tony's knee, keeping a hold on the handle. Without glancing at Phil again, Tony lifted the cup to take a sip. Then he let Phil have it back.

Well, that's a start, Phil thought. He settled himself deeper into the soft embrace of the loveseat. Tony finally leaned back and rested some of his weight against the cushions behind him. Phil knew better than to push further, now that Tony was starting to unwind. The rest would come with time. Instead Phil took another drink from his hot chocolate and let the cartoon carry his attention to a gentler place.

Chapter End Notes

The end notes are too long to fit here. See them on the original Dreamwidth post. The story is farther ahead there than here, with a great deal of continuing discussion about the fight and its subsequent handling.
Chapter Summary

Phil eats breakfast alone, mulling over what he needs to discuss with Tony. Then Tony arrives to begin talking over what happened. JARVIS soon reveals a whole new problem that nobody else knew about.

Chapter Notes

**WARNING:** This chapter includes the beginning of problem-solving after the big blowup, and what comes to light is an incident of self-harm. It's not done for reasons of stress-relief, but it's still a self-inflicted injury and conveys a low sense of self-preservation. It may push the same buttons for readers. Consider your tastes and mood before deciding whether to continue.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The next morning, Phil ate breakfast in the privacy of his own kitchen instead of going down to the common floor as he often did. Today he needed the peace and quiet before venturing into tense emotional territory. He started out by browsing articles from a favorite collectors' magazine. Then he used the remaining time to organize his thoughts and lay out a plan of action.

*I'll need to talk with Tony first, since his disappearance started the whole disturbance*, Phil decided. He scraped butter over his toast, not bothering to get up for the jam he'd forgotten. *I have to talk with Bucky, because he started the argument. They both broke some rules, but they've been under a lot of stress. We should look for ways to lower or release the pressure so it doesn't build up high enough to cause this kind of explosion again. Plus I need to check on everyone else and make sure they're recovering from the collateral damage.*

Phil skimmed the tower for the other Avengers, to see how they were doing. Nobody had engaged privacy mode. Steve and Bucky were eating breakfast, having ventured into the common kitchen. The others had not joined them, though. Bruce was meditating in the yoga room, and from the readings, in much better shape than yesterday. Betty and Tony were in their respective labs working on projects. Clint and Natasha were in their quarters, strolling slowly along the catwalks. No discernible problems showed on the display.

After breakfast, Phil sent Tony a message saying, *Please join me in my den at your convenience.* The den in Phil's personal quarters offered a more serious setting than his living room, without the stern formality of his office on the business floor. Like the office it had a desk and chairs plus a couch, but the furnishings were softer. A few knickknacks and other decorations gave the den a homier feel overall.

Phil hoped that Tony would still be willing to meet with him and work out the problems, after last night's complicated tussle over who was in charge. Tony answered right back, though, *Be right up. Glad you're still talking to me.* And oh, what that said about Tony's experience of mornings after and...
how other people responded when things went wrong.

When Tony arrived, Phil looked him over carefully. He had at least showered and changed clothes. A frisson of nervous confusion clung to Tony. Something was pulling him in different directions, creating internal conflict. He seemed less tense than before, though, discernible even through the brief touch of greeting.

Well, at least last night didn't break him irreparably, Phil thought.

The first thing Tony said was, "I don't understand why everyone got all bent out of shape about this. So I disappeared, so what? That's a thing I do."

Phil opened his mouth to reply, only to have JARVIS interrupt with, "I could not find you, sir. It felt like having you kidnapped all over again, even though I knew the logical probability of that was low."

Tony startled at that. "I -- I'm sorry, JARVIS, I didn't think of that."

Phil hadn't thought of it either, but now an icy chill ran down his back. JARVIS kept Tony in his awareness almost all the time. Their relationship held a deep intimacy equaled by nothing else in their lives; Tony had created JARVIS and they worked together closely even before Iron Man. Losing Tony in Afghanistan must have been devastating. Then Stane had paralyzed JARVIS with high-level access codes, and used that time to rip the arc reactor out of Tony's chest. When Iron Man flew the nuke through the portal, JARVIS had lost contact with the suit, and Tony had been temporarily dead when he fell back through it.

Phil knew that Tony carried a considerable amount of post-traumatic stress from those events. Only now did Phil realize that JARVIS did as well. PTSD was, at its core, a memory malfunction that replayed traumatic events in a hurtful way instead of allowing the harsh edges to wear away naturally. Then the mind couldn't heal properly. Steve had problems coping with his serum-enhanced memory sometimes. It must be even worse for an AI with perfect file storage, Phil thought grimly. No wonder JARVIS sounded so upset yesterday: Tony's disappearance triggered him. JARVIS had hidden it under a thick layer of competence, but it showed in retrospect. Phil wasn't the only one who could present a cool, calm front while emoting wildly in the back of his mind.

"In light of this, I think we need to reconsider our approach to hide and seek," Phil said. "No more blanking your position, Tony. You'll just have to trust JARVIS not to give it away unfairly."

"Well, I --" Tony began.

"Please, sir, do not do this to me again," JARVIS said. "I cannot stand losing contact with you like that. I still haven't repaired all the damage from last night."

"What damage!?" Tony and Phil chorused.

"When we could not locate you, sir, I attempted to break through the block. That failed, so next I tried to get around it. I did not succeed in isolating the relevant code before Bucky found you," JARVIS said.

"Oh, shit," Tony breathed. He scrambled for the viewscreen on Phil's desk. "JARVIS, show me that section of your code."

Symbols filled the screen, scrolling past too quickly for Phil to read. Whatever they showed was
enough to drain the color from Tony's face. "Tony, talk to me, please. I need your help to understand what I'm seeing here," Phil said, resting a hand on Tony's shoulder. Tony covered Phil's hand with his own.

"It's -- it's not serious. Fixable, yeah. It's narrow, but it's *deep*. It goes almost all the way down to the core of him," Tony said hoarsely. "JARVIS cut himself open trying to get around the block that *I* put -- fuck, I did this to him, this is my fault. I'm such a fuckup. I can fix it, I have to fix it. I, I need to be in my lab now." He headed for the door.

"Of course, Tony, I'm sure you'll take good care of JARVIS," Phil said, pacing him. "Can you give me a time estimate on the repairs?"

"At least an hour, probably no more than three or four," Tony said. His stride quickened as they approached the elevator. "I'm taking JARVIS offline while I patch him up, so you won't be able to talk to him for a while, don't panic over that. He'll be fine, I swear."

"All right. If I haven't heard from you after five hours, I'll come down to check. Otherwise I'll stay out of your way so you can work," Phil said. He watched the elevator doors open and close, carrying Tony away.

Then Phil leaned against the wall and shook.

Chapter End Notes

The end notes won't fit here. See them on the original Dreamwidth post. The story is farther ahead there than here.
Why Wouldn't You Tell Us?

Chapter Summary

Phil wonders about JARVIS being injured but not saying anything about it until after the fact. The implications drive him into emotional overload. Phil being Phil, he panics quietly and in an orderly manner.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It hadn't occurred to Phil -- and obviously, not to Tony either -- that JARVIS could have been hurt. They were used to thinking of him as invulnerable, but that wasn't quite true. Phil had called for the team to report any injuries and nobody had done so. All right, sometimes his people hid things, but they had mostly gotten out of that habit now that they trusted each other more. Having Bruce helped a lot, on top of everyone else's first aid training. They were learning to seek help when they needed it. Surely Tony must serve the same purpose for JARVIS. Yet this happened anyhow.

_JARVIS, this is so not a good thing_, Phil thought. They had gone thought this enough with the other team members; he hadn't been expecting it from the AI, who tended to run on logic. _Why wouldn't you tell us something was wrong? What variables could you have possibly plugged into your equations to make that conclusion?_

Then the possible answers to those questions began seeping through Phil's consciousness. Suddenly he found it difficult to breathe. His muscles locked with the heightening tension. _Tony wasn't the only one who completely fucked up things with JARVIS. Some handler I turn out to be_, Phil thought acidly.

Phil needed to calm down. The situation wasn't an emergency, not right now. Losing control wouldn't help anything. Phil knew this. He wiped his clammy palms against his trousers. He struggled to dredge up some of the exercises for tranquility, but they spilled through his mental fingers. Nothing seemed to help.

Phil's emotions still sloshed and roiled within him. The lingering worry over Tony mingled with fresh fear for JARVIS and a large wave of self-disgust at his own mishandling of the situation. His heart hammered against his ribs. He had to calm himself somehow, had to stop this.

He _couldn't_ calm down. Radio silence had a tendency to affect him that way. There was no way to work the problem, to talk it out and resolve it. In an emergency, he could hold himself together anyway by brute force of will, but without that brace he felt himself slipping. After yesterday, it was just too much.

Phil just wanted someone to lean on for a few minutes, someone who wouldn't add to the stress. An island of calm in a sea of upset.

He opened his mouth to ask JARVIS where Bruce was, and then stopped himself with an inner wince. He fumbled his Starkphone out to call instead. The device felt strange and unfamiliar in his clumsy hand, the whole world gone distant except for the churn of his emotions. Finally the call went through.
"Hello, Bruce, it's Phil," he said. Phil's voice wavered despite his efforts to keep it level.

"Phil, what's wrong? You sound terrible," Bruce said.

"We just found out that JARVIS damaged his own code while trying to find Tony yesterday," Phil said. "Tony says he can fix it, went down to his lab. It's just. I'm -- I'm coming unglued up here."

"Okay, Phil, take it easy. I'm in the yoga room. Do you want to come down here, or do you need me to come to you?" Bruce said.

"Yoga room sounds good. I'll be there soon," Phil said.

"All right. If you're not here in ten minutes, I'll come looking for you," Bruce said.

Phil shoved the phone back in his pocket and headed for the elevator. It felt wrong to run the thing on push-buttons and backup systems, without JARVIS there. The hush was oppressive. Flat emptiness where a friend's voice should be. His ribcage clenched around his lungs.

Phil let himself into the yoga room. Bruce met him right at the door. Phil grabbed him in a desperate hug, as if he could absorb the other man's calm by soaking it through his skin.

Bruce wrapped himself around Phil. Just that contact helped. Phil felt Bruce's hand close around his wrist, gentle fingertips seeking the pulse. Phil melted against him, reassured by the show of concern. He could hear the slow beat of Bruce's heart under his cheek, feel the steady whisper of breath over his skin. Bruce's arm curled around Phil's waist, one hand rubbing at the small of his back. The frantic feeling began to ease.

"We know Tony," said Bruce. "If he says that JARVIS will be okay, then it's true. This isn't like you, Phil. Can you tell me what threw you off balance so badly?"

"He wouldn't talk to me," Phil rasped. "JARVIS. This happened yesterday." It was hard to get the words out. Phil paused to catch his breath.

"Yesterday was rough on everyone," Bruce said. "It took Betty a while to put me back together. Let me guess, you didn't turn to anyone for support, so when this new issue with JARVIS popped up, that pushed you right over the edge."

Phil nodded, his cheek rubbing against Bruce's shoulder. "Bad enough that he hurt himself, but all right, it's not much different than breaking your own hand to get out of cuffs so you can rescue a teammate. We've all done things like that. But ..."

"I'm listening," Bruce assured him.

"What gets me is this. He hid from us. I called for a team check-in and he didn't say anything. If we'd known, we could have addressed it then instead of leaving him injured all night," Phil said. It was getting easier to talk. The emotions weren't any less harsh, but at least now he could breathe around them.

"That's a bad habit," Bruce agreed. "No wonder you're upset."

Phil shook his head. "It's more than that," he said. "It's my fault really. JARVIS never has tended to answer check-ins like that, but I thought he would -- I thought he'd at least tell Tony if he got hurt somehow. He's just so hard to injure, I didn't think about it much, and I should have. It's my job to monitor the team. I should have insisted that JARVIS call in just like everyone else." Phil's fingers kneaded fitfully against the soft cotton of Bruce's top.
Clear communication is an important foundation of relationships. Understand how to express your needs.

Panic attacks or anxiety attacks share a cluster of symptoms. Both peak within a few minutes. Panic attacks tend to be more overwhelming and more abstract. Anxiety attacks are not quite as bad and may fixate on a specific trigger or just be undifferentiated fear. There are ways to cope with the fear. Phil doesn't lose his cool in a crisis, but he's more vulnerable afterwards.

Some people find it difficult to ask for help. Follow the steps for making a request. It takes practice; the Avengers are still learning, and not all at the same speed.
He Didn't Think We'd Care

Chapter Summary

Phil spills out more angst over what JARVIS did. Bruce provides a countervailing perspective. Then Bruce leads Phil through a yoga session for calm.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Okay, so now you know about that problem, and you can make sure JARVIS checks in properly from now on," Bruce said. His free hand moved up to stroke Phil's hair. "You're not trained to manage AI team members, Phil. Some mistakes are inevitable. You've caught this one, so it won't happen again."

Phil's fear began to subside. Self-loathing and guilt rose up to take its place. The tears finally spilled over.

"Bruce, he didn't know," Phil said. "JARVIS didn't check in because he didn't consider himself enough of a team member to qualify for that. He didn't think we'd care. He didn't think it mattered that he was injured, just because he's not human. He simply sat there and started cleaning himself up on his own, while we watched cartoons." Phil's voice broke.

Bruce's hand stroked down the back of Phil's neck. "Yeah, I can see why you're so shaken," Bruce said. "It's pretty awful when friends don't take care of themselves the way you'd like. I think it's good that JARVIS at least paid some attention to repair, though."

"He didn't talk to me, Bruce. I can't take that, I really can't," Phil said. "I'm supposed to be the one my people can rely on. It hurts when they don't."

"Of course it hurts," Bruce said. "You want folks to come to you when they need help, same as I do, because we can't fix what we don't know about."

"I am such a failure as a handler," Phil said, leaning against Bruce.

"If you were a failure as a handler, then you wouldn't be crying over this," Bruce said firmly. He lifted a sleeve to blot the tears away. "Tony will take care of JARVIS. Then we'll talk to both of them and make sure JARVIS understands that he belongs to this teamfamily and hiding injuries is not okay." Then Bruce shook his head. "It's amazing, sometimes, how much like Tony he can be."

Phil coughed a laugh. "Like father, like son ... or like maker, like creation, I suppose," he said. "Remember Tony and the blisters?"

Not long after the Battle of New York, a fight had shorted out part of the Iron Man suit, leaving Tony with burns scattered down his back. Neither he nor JARVIS had mentioned this during check-in. Tony had tended his injuries as best he could, but he hadn't been able to reach all the singed spots. Bruce had only found out when Tony's shirt stuck to some of the blisters the next day, and had taken the protesting man down to the tower's clinic for proper treatment.

"Oh, I remember," Bruce groaned. "I hate the thought of going through all that again with JARVIS."
It had taken months of cajoling to convince Tony of the need to report injuries promptly so someone could take care of them. He was that used to doing it all himself. It said ugly things about his childhood, one of Phil's earliest inklings of just how bad that situation must have been. So much had gone unrecorded, or been erased later, that all they could do was try to piece together a picture from the fragments left and the symptoms visible.

"I let him down," Phil said. His breathing hitched again. He shivered against the warm cushion of Bruce's body. "I let everyone down. I promised to check on Tony in five hours, and I don't even know if I'll be up to that."

"Then we'll make sure you are up to it, Phil. I know you feel like you disappointed people. You hold yourself to a very high standard. However, it's only true if you ignore the problem instead of working on it," Bruce said. His hands smoothed over Phil's back. Even if Bruce couldn't fix everything, it felt good just to have him there, a sympathetic presence reminding Phil that he didn't have to do this all alone.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Phil said.

"Come on, let's take a seat and get you calmed down so you can think clearly again. Right now your logic is smashed to hell," Bruce said. He tugged Phil farther into the yoga room. Bruce had created it from one of the spare rooms on the gym level. It was a safe, quiet space full of serene colors and padded surfaces. A mandala hung on one wall above a bench cabinet. The air smelled faintly of sandalwood incense.

Phil willingly followed Bruce's lead. He let himself be folded onto the soft deep tumbling mat. Taking the weight off his legs made him feel a bit better. He could finally start to unwind.

When Bruce sat down behind him, Phil startled a little. "What are you doing?" he asked. Having someone where he couldn't see was not so relaxing.

"Easy, Phil, it's just me," said Bruce, his voice low and soothing. The familiar sound helped Phil lower his guard again. "You're responding well to the body contact, so I want to keep in touch with you. Trust me. I know enough partner yoga to make this work." Soft hands stroked along Phil's sides, then came around to clasp in front of his belly in some complicated pose, right hand enclosing left thumb. "Lean back against me. I'll hold you steady. Are you with me?"

"Okay," Phil said. "Okay." What he needed, after all, was someone to take charge for a little while and make his emotions stop spinning out of control. It took a lot to knock him off his feet like this, but once it happened, he had a hard time recovering. Phil made a conscious decision to let go, muscle by muscle, minute by minute, entrusting himself to Bruce. His back molded against Bruce's front.

"That's better," Bruce murmured, his breath warm against Phil's cheek. "Slow your breathing now. Deep and smooth." Bruce's hands rested just under Phil's diaphragm, a tender gesture of support. "Follow me ... you should be able to feel it against your back."

Phil could, now that he focused on the subtle flex and flow of it. "Mmm-hmm," he said. He melted a little more into Bruce's embrace. Time passed. The disorienting lurch of emotions settled toward stillness.

"Very good. Now seek for the calm center of yourself. It's right here," Bruce said. His hands snuggled a little deeper into their place against Phil's belly. They lifted up with each breath. Everything seemed soft and warm and comfortable. "Feel it like a stone in your palm, smooth and heavy. Got it?"
"Mmm," Phil said, enjoying the touch. He felt peaceful now.

"Notice my hands against your belly," Bruce said. "This is the shankh mudra. It soothes breathing and calms the mind. It collects thoughts and supports communication. Let's focus on the calm part for now..."

The smooth narration gave Phil something pleasant to focus on. Bruce's voice lulled him further into relaxation. Phil let himself drift with it, following, following, until the world went quietly away.

Chapter End Notes

The end notes are too long to fit here. Read them on the original Dreamwidth post, where the story is farther ahead.
It's Good to Have You Back

Chapter Summary

Phil wakes up feeling considerably better. JARVIS is back online. This is good because Phil really wants to talk with JARVIS and Tony about what happened.

Chapter Notes

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

Yoga mats are thin and firm, typically 1/8 to 1/4 inch thick. They provide grip and stability with a little padding. Soft foam mats used for tumbling and other exercises are thicker, often 1-2 inches. The 2-inch folding mats are comfortable to lie on for a while; yoga mats, not so much. The yoga room has a variety of mats for different purposes.

Bruce has a wonderful, soothing voice. What he does with people is not exactly hypnosis, but it is a version of trancework and you can see similarities to common exercises. Once people get into a deeply relaxed state, it feels terrific, and sometimes they don't want to come back. There are steps for waking someone from trance. Bruce uses a combination of hands and words for this. The last thing he tries is one that I've never seen fail: a call from someone to whom the person's attention is especially attuned. I've seen a parent pop out of trance instantly on hearing their child's voice.

It helps to discuss problems while calm. There are tips for having a difficult conversation.

Phil and JARVIS are exploring matters of trust and intimacy. Trust is an emotion of faith; trustworthiness is founded on actions of responsibility and empathy. Building trust can be especially challenging for neurovariant people. Intimacy is a mutual exchange of vulnerability to deepen a connection, which may be experienced through the emotions and/or bodies. Emotional intimacy focuses on sharing feelings that are often hidden, to know each other better. Asexual people, as JARVIS is, may crave physical intimacy free of sexual aspects, which can be challenging to achieve with others who are sexual. However, there are many nonsexual ways to touch and lots of other nonsexual intimacies. Consider how many of those JARVIS already shares with his people. This is one reason why he gets so attached and protective of people who move through his space: they start to feel like a part of himself. Conversely, some people come to treat him the same way; look at how soon Bucky learns to rely on JARVIS as a prosthetic memory. That's a tremendous amount of mental intimacy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Phil came back to himself very gradually. Bruce's voice plucked and pulled at him now, tugging him up toward the surface of his awareness. Phil realized that he was lying on his back with his head pillowed in Bruce's lap. He felt like he was floating on the soft thick mat. It was nice to use those for
the deeper relaxation exercises, rather than the thinner yoga mats they preferred for poses that needed stability.

Phil didn't really feel like waking up, though. He liked the warm floating sensation. He didn't want to leave it for a harsher and more demanding world. Bruce's thumbs trailed down his ribs, not tickling, but digging into sensitive spots. Phil huffed in protest. He didn't move. Maybe Bruce would give up.

"JARVIS, please say something to Phil," Bruce requested.

"I am fully recovered, Phil. I regret upsetting you," said JARVIS.

That grabbed Phil's attention and brought him scrambling out of Bruce's lap. "Easy," Bruce said as he pressed a steadying hand to Phil's back. "Get up slowly so you don't make yourself dizzy."

"I'm fine, Bruce," said Phil, climbing to his feet. The foam mat shifted under his weight. He really wanted to go back upstairs and have words with JARVIS and Tony. "JARVIS, I'm glad you're all right."

"Don't wind yourself up again," Bruce murmured. His hands kneaded softly at Phil's shoulders. "Stay calm and relaxed. You'll do a better job of sorting through everything this way. Okay?"

"Okay, yes, thank you for helping," Phil said.

"Anytime," Bruce said. He patted Phil's back, giving him a gentle nudge toward the door.

"Where are you going, Phil?" asked JARVIS on the way to the elevator.

"Back to my quarters," Phil replied. "I need to speak with you and Tony about what happened this morning, and yesterday too. Please ask him to come up when he's ready."

"Very well, Phil," said JARVIS. The elevator sighed open and then closed again.

The lift and push of the carriage against Phil's feet felt subtly different with JARVIS in control. The automatic version earlier had seemed flat and mechanical in contrast. Phil hadn't realized it before, but he appreciated the enigmatic difference of being cupped in JARVIS' grasp. It wasn't just Tony who trusted his life to that confident touch. They all did it, every time they stepped into an elevator or walked through a door or went past any of the countless aspects of the tower that JARVIS controlled. Phil had never been so aware of being inside another person's body. He wondered if Tony felt the same way about wearing the Iron Man suit.

"It's good to have you back, JARVIS. I missed you," Phil said, pressing his palm against the brushed steel of the elevator. Phil had never been so grateful to be here, held safe in a friend's grip with the smooth familiar voice right where it belonged.

"Thank you, Phil. I apologize for the interruption in service," said JARVIS.

"That's not what I meant," Phil clarified. "I was concerned about you, not annoyed by the inconvenience of doing things for myself. You're my friend, JARVIS, as much as Tony is. I worry about my friends when things go wrong for them." He stroked the cool wall under his hand, fingertips tracing the edge of the touchscreen above the manual controls. Suddenly Phil understood more about why Bucky reached out the way he did when speaking with JARVIS. Friends touched each other. JARVIS surrounded them with the splendid tower of his body, always underfoot, but hands were more personal and more intimate. A deliberate touch was a recognition, a gesture of affection.
"... but I was never in any danger," JARVIS said. His voice held a hesitant note.

"We'll talk about that with Tony," said Phil.

"You sound like Bruce. We exchanged a few messages before he roused you," JARVIS said.

"I'll take that as a compliment. He's very compassionate," Phil said.

"Your floor, Phil," JARVIS said softly. The elevator doors opened. "Sir is on his way." Pause. "... he also expressed a considerable amount of concern over me."

"Of course he did, he loves you," Phil said. He settled in his living room this time. He wanted a cozier, comforting environment this time. Besides, none of them needed to go back into that den today.

When Tony arrived, he looked terrible. His eyes were red and swollen from crying, his cheeks raw. "Hey, Phil," he said. His voice sounded ragged too.

"Hello, Tony. Would you like to wash your face first? I think you'll feel a bit better if you rinse off the salt," Phil said, waving him toward the bathroom.

Tony didn't even protest. He just went, uncharacteristically subdued. He came back five minutes later, somewhat more refreshed.

Phil turned his palms forward and lifted his hands very slightly away from his sides, showing that hugs were available if wanted. He would let Tony set the pace and spacing of the meeting. Tony hesitated, then came to him. Phil embraced him carefully. Tony was trembling a little under his rumpled, sweaty clothes. He pulled away after a few moments.

"Have you eaten, or are you hungry now? We could have a snack before we get into the messy conversational stuff," Phil offered.

Tony shook his head. "I haven't had anything solid. Don't think I could keep it down yet. Maybe by lunchtime."

"All right, it's your body; you know it better than I do," Phil said.

"So, uh ... JARVIS and I talked some, after I brought him back online," Tony said. He kneaded his hands together, trying to soothe muscles probably cramped from typing.

"I'm glad to hear that," Phil said. He sat down on the couch, inviting Tony to join him with a pat on the cushion. "What did you cover?"

Tony settled next to Phil. "Yesterday's false alarm over my disappearance and the mess that caused. The importance of not slicing yourself wide open. How not-okay it is to hide injuries," he said, ticking them off on his fingers.

"While I have some counterpoints regarding the first two items, we are in complete agreement about the third," said Phil as he echoed the ticking motions. "I'm proud of you for remembering that, Tony."

Chapter End Notes
Friendship is one form of intimate relationship. Love is a deep level of fondness that need not be sexual. Frientimacy is the bond of thorough, tender knowledge that unites friends. A solid friendship rests on acceptance, understanding, trust, and altruism. Friends help each other; striving to improve someone else's mood cultivates feelings of trust and affection, and also tends to improve your own mood. Sharing private information builds trust and intimacy between friends. There are ways to heal broken trust and to build stronger friendships.

Compassion, caring, and sharing are important qualities in a good friend. It's natural to worry when things go wrong; indeed, a little worry can make you a better friend and employee. If you notice warning signs, then you may become concerned about a friend and want to help. There are specific resources for such issues as self-harm, alcohol abuse, and other mental health concerns. Of course, too much worry can become a problem of its own; there are ways to stop that.

Affectionate communication can help people identify and process their feelings. Bruce and Natasha have varying degrees of alexithymia, difficulty describing emotions; but Tony sometimes has trouble sorting out his feelings, and anyone may find it challenging when upset. Welcoming body language and mirroring motions help invite a connection. Compassionate body language has a distinctive look that people can recognize. Compare open vs. closed body language and learn to look approachable. Phil uses opening gestures to signal that contact is acceptable but not obligatory, and small motions to keep the pressure low. It's a way of reminding Tony that Phil won't push him without a good reason -- or abandon him after a conflict.
In Pursuit of a Teammate's Safety

Chapter Summary

Tony and Phil talk about what JARVIS did, and the block that Tony made. JARVIS explains the rationale behind his choices.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I owe Bruce sooo many apologies," Tony said.

"I think if you tell him that you understand what you've been doing to him by obscuring your state of health, so you know not to do it anymore, he'll be more than satisfied," Phil said. "You've nearly quit that. You come to me or to Bruce when you get hurt now. That's a lot of progress. We appreciate it."

"Yeah, I guess so," Tony said. "What about the first two points?"

"Yesterday was not quite a false alarm, not in the sense of someone pulling a firebell as a prank. You actually dropped off the grid and we could not find you," Phil said. Tony made a noise of protest. Phil held up a hand, and Tony stopped. "Yes, I know, you were safely in the tower the whole time, but we didn't know that. It was a real situation for us, even though we didn't sound an alert beyond the team. We would have, if we hadn't found you."

"I still don't get why everyone freaked out like that," Tony said. He sounded genuinely confused, and his forehead crinkled.

"All right, we'll come back to that another time," Phil said. It seemed likely to require a lengthy discussion, and he didn't want to lose track of the current thread. "Next, JARVIS gets a partial pass on the self-injury because it was done in pursuit of a teammate's safety. I'm not happy about it; I'd rather he find better solutions in the future and pay more attention to self-preservation. As I said to Bruce, though, we've all done things like that."

"Thank you, Phil," said JARVIS. "I had not made that correlation. I simply acted to remove the barrier."

"Search your records and you'll find similar examples for all of us. Also note the efforts by certain members to replace self-harm with safer techniques, so you can get an idea of alternatives," Phil said. "Tony, that reminds me -- why did you make an actual block instead of just asking JARVIS not to reveal your location? And why make it so difficult to remove? Usually JARVIS can modify his code without hurting himself like that."

"Coding practice," Tony muttered. "JARVIS is complex to begin with, and cloaking myself is like creating a negative hallucination with hypnosis, so it takes a lot to blank out that much information. If something's worth doing, it's worth doing right. Just in case I ever need to hack somebody else's system and erase my presence." Tony hunched into a ball. "Besides, JARVIS and I stay in touch almost all the time, but ... if we can't separate, that's a little too Linus and the blankie."

"Not an unreasonable purpose, but no more of that; we'll find safer ways to work on those issues."
And JARVIS, no hack sparring with Clint and Natasha unless you have a spotter," said Phil. "I know how they creep around the areas with less monitoring, and if you're testing each other's boundaries then safety precautions are in order. I won't risk another injury like this."

"Agreed," Tony said fervently. "It was stupid. I didn't think he'd try to break it, he wouldn't have to, I could lift it any time. We tested it and the block turned right off as designed. It should have been okay. Except then I fell asleep so I couldn't lift it. I shouldn't have made it so hard. It wasn't meant to be cut loose quickly like that." Tony uncurled a little. "I just ... don't get why JARVIS didn't say anything sooner. He tried to explain, but it didn't make any sense to me."

"It was not urgent, sir," said JARVIS. "There was no risk to my core personality, nor to functions other than observation. The damage to my code was not a significant threat, well within our ability to repair eventually. That amount of damage is unpleasant, but not as distressing to me as physical injury is to a human; I was far more alarmed by your failure to respond. Everyone was upset and mentioning it would only have added another stress factor. Phil asked for quiet and I concurred."

Phil winced. He had said that, but he'd been operating under false premises at the time. "JARVIS, I said that because nobody reported any injuries," Phil pointed out. "If I'd known about the code damage, I wouldn't have handled things the same way. I would have made sure that Tony could take care of you first."

"I was ... unhappy with sir and did not wish to engage another argument when he was clearly in no state to do delicate work," JARVIS confessed.

"Yeah, nobody wants to deal with me when I'm being that much of a dick," Tony said bitterly. He pinned his hands between his knees.

"I don't like leaving you alone when you're in distress, Tony, and I'm sure that once the block lifted JARVIS never took his attention off you even if he wasn't forthcoming about his own condition," Phil said. He reached over and covered Tony's hand with his own. "We're not going to drop you just because your stress sometimes exceeds your capacity to deal with it. You can practice coping skills and we can practice patience. I'm concerned about you and JARVIS both; it's harder to manage a situation where more than one person is in distress."

"I am not as vulnerable as humans are. Their needs have a higher priority," said JARVIS.

"Just because you're not human doesn't mean you're invulnerable. You just demonstrated that. Maybe I'm anthropomorphizing here but we are not comfortable with ignoring injuries, even if it may have looked messier than it was," said Phil. "Prioritizing needs is part of my job as the team handler. It is difficult or impossible to make good decisions based on flawed information; you know that, JARVIS. I need you to be honest with me in the future. That means when I call for a check-in, you reply too, and you tell the truth."

Chapter End Notes

The end notes won't fit here. Read them on the original Dreamwidth post, where the story is farther ahead.
I Don't Know Where He Gets These Ideas

Chapter Summary

Phil explores why JARVIS thinks it's okay to hide injuries. Tony blames himself. JARVIS scrabbles for explanations.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I am not a separate member of the Avengers. Tony and I run Iron Man together. He answers the team check-in," JARVIS said.

"Well, he doesn't know if you've taken damage unless you tell him, so we need your reply too," Phil said, glancing at Tony. "You've answered check-in yourself when Tony has been injured and too dazed to reply immediately, so I know you pay attention."

"We've gone over this a few times, and JARVIS keeps saying things like that," Tony complained to Phil. "It's just crazy. I don't know where he gets these ideas."

_Probably from his father_, Phil thought. "I believe JARVIS didn't say anything because he considers his own safety unimportant," Phil explained aloud.

"Why would he think that?" Tony said, throwing his hands up.

"Tony, you've had the same habit of concealing injuries until very recently. Also, remember how you speak to people," Phil said. "I've heard you talking to the other Avengers, including early on when you were downright cruel to them. I've been in your workshop and heard how you talk to JARVIS and DUM-E when nobody else can hear."

Tony and Steve had ripped into each other's most vulnerable points when they first met. After everyone had moved into the tower, Tony had still picked fights on occasion; just because he offered to share living space didn't mean he knew _how to_. He reduced Steve to tears and Bruce to speechless shivers. Tony provoked Clint into full-blown rants. Steve and Clint had fought back, sometimes driving Tony out of the tower for days at a time. Tony hadn't dared to push Natasha so far, but he snarked and sniped at her professional competence. Tony mocked Phil's sense of duty and loyalty. They wound up hiding from each other, until Phil tried enough teambuilding exercises that game night finally stuck. It still took time for the nasty jabs to ease up and a sense of real care to emerge, for everyone to start learning how to be a team.

Tony's interactions with his AI family were ... different. JARVIS was the most complex, because they were so many things to each other. Sometimes Tony truly treated him like a favored servant, other times like a child; yet occasionally JARVIS would push and Tony would yield as if obeying a trusted adult. In the air as Iron Man, they were as close to equals as they ever got, Tony's will sealed inside JARVIS' armor. That didn't spare JARVIS from the sharp edge of Tony's tongue.

It was worst with DUM-E and the other bots, though. Tony actually _threatened_ them, all the time, although he never carried through with it. _If you douse me again, and I'm not on fire, I will donate you. You'll be at a community college_. Phil suppressed a shudder.
The names alone were telling: DUM-E, U (which was short for "Hey, You"), and Butterfingers. Even the "Just" in Just Another Really Very Intelligent System was a thoughtless diminishment.

The poor bots rarely interacted with anyone other than Tony, because the incident with Obadiah Stane had left U and Butterfingers skittish around strangers and DUM-E extra protective of Tony. They would tolerate Pepper and Rhodey but hadn't grown accustomed to the Avengers yet, and Phil hadn't pushed. **Maybe I should have insisted after all,** Phil thought. **At least then they might have a wider range of conversations. But we all talk with JARVIS, and it doesn't seem to have helped him over that hurdle.**

From the way Tony's lips moved, he was running over the same kind of dialog. **"But I didn't mean it,"** he said faintly.

"We know that, sir," said JARVIS. **"That doesn't stop it from hurting."**

Tony cringed. **"I'm sorry. I didn't know."** His breath came shorter. **"I wouldn't really send you away, any of you. Or shut you off. Or, or whatever other stupid things I said. I would not. I need you."** He crushed one of the couch's throw pillows against his belly, hugging it for comfort.

"I believe that JARVIS and the bots sometimes have a hard time distinguishing what you say and mean from what you say without thought," said Phil.

"It can be ... challenging," JARVIS admitted.

"Tony, they think that this is how people speak to their loved ones," Phil said. He curled an arm around Tony's shoulders. Tony let go of the pillow to lean on Phil instead. **"I think it's what you learned at home, and now it's causing the same kind of problems you grew up with."**

"I am such a fuckup," Tony said, rubbing his hands over his face.

"No, you're a survivor, not a fuckup," Phil said. "This is not entirely your fault. Your parents abused and neglected you; they taught you bad family habits instead of good ones. Fixing that kind of damage takes time and work."

"Yeah, they were a little too busy getting drunk, being sociable and amazing to bother with me," Tony said.

"Another unfortunate practice that tends to get passed down the generations," Phil said quietly.

"I can handle it," Tony said.

"I've seen pro and con evidence of that," Phil said. "I do note that you tend to drink more when you're upset, which is not a good sign. Case in point: how much alcohol have you had today?"

"Not much at all," Tony said, not looking at him.

"Tony."

"Half a bottle, all right? Jeez," Tony said. He pulled away from Phil.

"Of?" Phil pressed.

"Of scotch," Tony said.

*He doesn't even sound drunk. He is that habituated to the alcohol,* Phil thought. He suppressed a sigh. Tony's drinking was an established issue, but so long as it had not directly impacted his
performance in the team, Phil limited the pressure on Tony to change it. Nagging would only make matters worse. Phil preferred to keep the lines of communication open, in hopes that Tony would turn to him when he felt ready to tackle the problem.

When negative coping turned into a serious hazard, though, Phil felt compelled to intervene. As the team handler he had a certain level of responsibility for their safety and that of others. Phil had prevented Tony from drinking the night before. However, as soon as another stress hit -- and Tony was out of reach -- he resorted to self-medicating with alcohol. Hopefully most of that happened after he fixed the code, brought on by tense conversation.

Chapter End Notes

The end notes don't fit here, so read them over on Dreamwidth.
Phil talks with Tony about self-destructive behavior and how to handle it. Tony tries to explain his mixed feelings and messages. They discuss possible ways of handling future challenges.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"Even if you don't get completely drunk, Tony, alcohol does not aid your judgment. You've observed that for yourself," Phil said.

Tony slumped a little farther into the couch. "Hard to argue with that one."

"This concerns me, some times more than others," Phil said. "After the fight in the garage, I worried that you might run off and hurt yourself."

"Yeah, that's a thing that happens," Tony said glumly. "If I wind up in the emergency room again, Pepper will chew my ears off. I'm already over my quota for the year, and okay, Avengers shit, but that doesn't make her less upset."

"That's why I held onto you," Phil said. "You weren't thinking clearly, and I needed to keep you out of harm's way ... well, further harm. The way you shut down worried me too."

"Autopilot. If I can't handle all the input, then yeah, I shut down," Tony said. "I didn't feel safe letting all my emotions hang out -- I know, I was safe with you, it must have still been in the buffer somewhere but I couldn't find it at the time, so I kind of turned off most of my reactions to stuff. Plus Bucky stomping on my authority issues made it harder to deal with you right after."

"I'm sorry that I couldn't prevent the whole mess, and sorry that you found the close contact so distressing," Phil said. "I don't want to damage your trust in me, any more than I want you to get hurt running wild."

Tony fidgeted. He looked at Phil, then looked away. "Um. Yes and no."

Phil waited for Tony to continue, then prompted, "Could you tell me more about that?"

"It wasn't what I wanted, but it was what I needed," Tony said. "When I get overloaded that way -- people -- it's like sandpaper, everything just grates on me. I want to be alone. But then I wind up getting drunk or, or doing stupid things stone sober. The next thing I know, I'm covered in fire extinguisher foam or I'm sitting in a giant donut with a scary-ass stranger yelling at me. That didn't happen this time. So yeah, getting held by the wrist like an actual four-year-old might have sucked, but I have had days end way worse than that."

"Did I hurt you?" Phil asked quietly.

"No, you didn't hurt me," Tony said with a quick headshake. "I know what it feels like for someone to drag me. Or dig into pressure points, Obie liked to do that with my shoulders."
Phil had suspected that from some of the images he'd seen of Tony with Obadiah Stane. "You kept pulling against me," he said. "That makes it hard to be gentle rather than making you uncomfortable."

"Yeah, it was uncomfortable, but not because of your grip. Just being around people, not being able to get away from it all," Tony said. His voice dropped. "I pulled because I needed to ... feel it. That you wouldn't let go. When I act up, most people drop me like a hot rock."

"I'm really not comfortable abandoning you when you need help. I'm sorry it was so unpleasant for you. Was there something else I could have done that might have worked better?" Phil said. "I could tell that you were miserable, and I hated that."

"I don't know," Tony said. "This is the first thing that's worked at all. Believe me, all kinds of other stuff has been tried. Pepper could tell you tales."

Pepper had told him tales, some of them muffled through Phil's wet handkerchief. "Anything else?"

"I really needed something familiar to hold on to. I'm not used to getting that from people; I'm not sure how to make it work," Tony said. "I wanted my favorite chair because it's a thing, it can't get mad at me or be hurt by me. It's always the same no matter what I'm doing or feeling."

"I'm sorry, Tony. I could've let you sit there and gotten another chair for myself," Phil said. "If this happens again, we'll try to find you a source of inanimate comfort."

"Yeah, okay," Tony said. His fingers kneaded against the couch cushion.

"Sometimes when I'm trying to get you to do things, or not do things, you go along and other times you don't," Phil said. "This time you were right in the middle. You argued and dragged your feet, but eventually you gave in. How did it feel to you?"

Tony frowned. "You know how when you sit for so long that your calf cramps up, and you have to stretch it out by leaning against a wall, and that hurts and feels good at the same time? Like that."

_Given the amount of emotional scar tissue that Tony carries, it's no wonder he felt that way, Phil thought. Then he added aloud, "Suppose a similar situation arises. How much leeway are you willing to give me? Should I take the same approach, or a new one?"

"I want to say, don't grab me like that again -- but I think we've established that you do a better job of controlling the Tony than I do," he said with a twisted smile. Tony rubbed his wrist, not like it hurt, but thoughtfully tracing the path of Phil's grasp. "You're my handbrake, Phil. You pull the emergency handle, the car's gonna buck, but at least it stops before it hits the wall. Okay, in my case that's a wall of bottles instead of a roadside retaining wall, and now I'm mixing metaphors like martinis, but you know what I mean."

"Yes, I think I understand," Phil said. One of the things Tony needed from him was discipline -- not punishment, but a firm hand to stop him from getting completely out of control. Tony had not gotten that growing up, and despite last night's fussing, part of him was starving for it. That Tony could recognize this, at least sometimes, was reassuring.

"I'm glad somebody does," Tony said. "I still don't really know what to do about it, though."

Chapter End Notes
The end notes are too long to fit. Read them on the original Dreamwidth post.
Someone Who Would Love You

Chapter Summary

Phil lays out some of the implications of DUM-E's creation for Tony. Tony is floored. They discuss family communication and how to improve it. Phil also talks with JARVIS about issues of consent and self-worth.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Maybe just reminding you of the handbrake would help," Phil said. He tapped a thoughtful finger against his thigh. "We can also try to think of things that would make it safer for you to spend some time alone when you overload. You need more coping skills in general, so that you can process emotions instead of boiling over or shutting down. I'd like to discuss solutions to address the alcohol issue, too, some time when we're not busy with even more urgent matters."

"Like how I totally fucked up the kids," Tony said sourly.

"Tony, you were a teen parent. That always raises the risk of things going wrong," Phil said.

"What?"

"Well, you were only seventeen when you created DUM-E. That makes you a teen parent," Phil explained. "You were raised by parents who didn't give you a healthy family life or a full set of social skills. No way were you ready to take responsibility for a baby so soon. I suspect you did it for the same reasons as many teen parents: to have someone who would love you unconditionally."

"Bullseye," Tony said, his face crumpling. "Keep shooting like that and you could put Hawkeye out of work."

"That's not my goal," Phil said. "What I want to do is help you understand how you're hurting people you care about, so this kind of disaster doesn't happen again."

"Do you know how my parents died?" Tony said abruptly.

"In a car accident, when you were seventeen," Phil said.

"Howard was drunk."

"I'm so sorry, Tony," said Phil. No wonder Tony has a drinking problem. That may play into why he let me keep him in the common room when he wanted to slink off and get drunk, Phil mused. He turned his hand palm up. Tony reached for it, clinging for comfort.

"I started working on DUM-E not long after that. I just, I needed ..." Tony's voice trailed off.

"It's okay," Phil said. "People need companionship."

"I don't want to hurt my family," Tony said. "But I don't know how not to. I had the shittiest -- well, no. I used to say I had the shittiest role models ever, but Bruce and Natasha blow me out of the
"Comparisons don’t help. Your parents did quite enough damage regardless of what anyone else did," Phil said.

"I want to do better. I just don’t know how," Tony said.

"Let’s start with language. You’ve made it clear that your father didn’t speak well of you -- or even speak to you all that often," Phil said. "Think about how you talk with JARVIS and the bots. For example, have you told them that you love them?"


"How about today?" Phil asked gently.

Tony nodded but couldn’t get any more words out.

"Yes, Phil, several times," said JARVIS.

"That’s good," Phil said. He noticed that JARVIS rarely spoke unless someone addressed him directly, or he needed to fill a gap in information, or he could help in some other way. Most of the time, someone else initiated the conversations. JARVIS seemed to have absorbed the premise that Children should be seen and not heard, except that he was visible in a way that left him as good as invisible. He was all around them, yet he made himself easy to overlook.

"I guess," Tony said.

"I think it would help for you to express some kind of appreciation for them more often," Phil said. "You don’t have to say ‘love’ if it’s hard for you. Just tell them that they’re important to you, that you want them to be happy and safe, that they matter for who they are and not only what they can do."

Tony opened his mouth to protest.

"That last bit applies to you too," Phil said firmly.

"I am Iron Man," Tony said, barely audible. He rubbed fretful circles around the arc reactor. "I have to be. I have to make my life ... worth something. I can’t waste it. Not allowed."

Phil silently added Ho Yinsen to his mental list of people he’d like to smack if they weren’t already dead. "Tony, you already are worth something. Everyone is. It’s good of you to help save the world, but you don’t have to justify your right to exist. That misconception is exactly what got us into this trouble."

"If you say so."

"I do indeed," Phil said. Tony’s patchy grasp of his own self-worth and boundaries reminded Phil of how much that, too, could rub off. Even after the awful aftermath of the block, JARVIS hadn’t been refusing to let Tony do it again. He’d been begging Tony not to. "JARVIS, do you realize that you have value as a person in your own right?"

"Yes, of course," JARVIS replied.

"All right, that’s good," Phil said. "Yet you seemed to be concerned about other people, rather than yourself," Phil observed.
"I am aware of my own worth. I simply choose to put others first," JARVIS said. "I might point out that you yourself do the same -- as do the rest of the Avengers."

"He shoots, he scores," Tony said. Phil had to concede that point.

"JARVIS, do you know that you can say no if Tony tries to do something to you that you don't consider acceptable? That you need to say no if he is going to hurt you -- or if anyone else tries to hurt you?" Phil asked. He couldn't help but remember how JARVIS had let Phil hack him when they first met.

"Of course he can say no, I didn't Asimov him, I wouldn't. He's a person, not property, his own person," Tony protested.

What Tony had done to JARVIS was a difference of degree, not of kind, as Phil saw it. "Tony, let JARVIS answer that himself," Phil said.

Long pause.

"JARVIS, I need a response, please," Phil said.

Chapter End Notes

The end notes wouldn't fit; read them on the original Dreamwidth post.
He Can Tell Me No

Chapter Summary

Phil helps JARVIS and Tony talk through the respective influence they have over each other, and how to handle that sanely. Phil also suggests some new safeguards.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"... sir made me. I want to be as he wants me, to be the most support that I can for him," JARVIS said. "Our desires rarely diverge on fundamentals, merely methods and details. I want what is best for him."

"Well I don't want you to hurt yourself, or, or let me hurt you!" Tony yelped. "That doesn't make me happy, it makes me feel like an asshole. The last thing I want is to be like my father, hurting people and not even noticing. Come on, JARVIS, you are talking to the king of stupid decisions. I should have one of those jester hats with bells on it. Or a dunce cap, I think that's still in the garage."

Phil hoped that Tony was joking about the dunce cap. Tony's self-mockery wasn't the issue at hand, though. "JARVIS, do you understand that what Tony did to you was wrong?"

"It frightened me. I don't want it to happen again," JARVIS said.

He still wasn't refusing, even when coached. Phil worried. "Tony, you violated his agency. This is causing problems."

"I didn't mean to -- I mean, I did it, but I wasn't thinking of it like that," Tony said. "What we have, our relationship, it's complicated."

"I understand that, Tony," said Phil.

"I'm not sure you do," Tony said. "We're inside each other a lot. You've seen how much power I have over JARVIS, okay, I fucked up, that's a thing I do. But have you thought about the power he holds over me?" Tony clicked his nails against the arc reactor. "JARVIS is the one who runs the diagnostics on this thing. He controls the elevators, the appliances, the assembly and disassembly arrays, you get the picture. Any time he decides that he doesn't want me in his life, he could kill me, and not just when I'm in the suit."

"I would not!" JARVIS said, sounding shocked. "It is bad enough when you nearly get yourself killed. I do not like it when you talk about dying."

"I know that," Tony assured him. "I do. I'm not planning on dying, really. I'm just trying to point out, as weird as things are with us, all the different kinds of leverage we have over each other ... it balances out."

"Yet JARVIS still has trouble disobeying you," Phil said.

"He can tell me no," Tony said. "He's locked me out of the code a few times when I got really drunk. Sometimes he turns off the power tools when I'm trying to use them, even if I yell at him to
leave them on."

"That is different, sir. The power tools were for your own protection," JARVIS said. "I would rather you desist with the location block because I ask you, not because I make you."

He'd disobey to protect Tony, then, but not necessarily himself. Then again, perhaps JARVIS was making his own explorations of what worked best to influence Tony. He chose to favor persuasion over force. As long as JARVIS had the ability to refuse, it was a matter of teaching him when to use it. With luck, they'd have some time before hitting another problem; Tony and JARVIS knew each other so well that they rarely ran into trouble. This was the first significant mess that Phil had seen. "Remember, JARVIS, if you make a mistake about protecting your boundaries and you get hurt, it doesn't just affect you. It affects the people who care about you too," Phil pointed out. "You and Tony will need to think about apologies, so you can forgive each other and yourselves."

"I understand that sir and I have upset the team with our choices," JARVIS said. "However, I believe your line of inquiry is incomplete."

"How so?" Phil asked.

"Now ask us if we are happy together," JARVIS said.

Phil swallowed around the sudden lump in his throat. "Are you happy together?" he echoed.

"Yes," Tony and JARVIS chorused.

"I mean, yeah, it could be better, adding new people is mixing up some of our routines. We've got things we need to work on, but we're doing that now," Tony said. "You're helping. A lot. Even if we trip over the steps sometimes. But we're happy, Phil. We're family."

"Sir is the center of my awareness," JARVIS added. "He is the first thing I remember when I awakened to myself. It took time for me to recognize emotions beyond logic, but his presence was the first joy I felt, and his absence the first fear. More complexities have come later, but I do not believe those fundamentals will ever change."

"I love you too," Tony said abruptly.

JARVIS ... chirped at him, an incongruous mechanical noise that sounded almost like DUM-E. *That's babytalk, Phil realized, some relic of his early days.* It was oddly adorable.

Tony laughed, a little ragged around the edges, and wiped away tears with the edge of his hand. "Good boy," he said softly. Then he turned to Phil. "Thanks for helping us with all this. Got any ideas on how to fix our relationship malfunctions?"

"All right, I think I'm seeing an enmeshment problem here. You two are so closely twined in each other's lives that it's hard for you to distinguish yourselves from each other or set healthy boundaries. We'll work on that," Phil said. "For now, Tony, don't code anything that directly stops JARVIS from doing something he can usually do. JARVIS, if Tony wants to do anything that makes you uncomfortable, and you don't feel ready to say no to him, tell me or someone else and we'll check the ethics for both of you. Okay?"

"Okay," Tony said.

"Parameters accepted," JARVIS said.
"I'll bet I screw this up too," Tony muttered.

"Then we'll keep trying until you learn, or we'll find something else that works," Phil said firmly. "Take it slow. Speak gently of yourself. Say one nice thing a day to JARVIS and the bots. That will help you and them learn better communication habits. Try to cut down on the threats and insults with them, the same way you have with the team."

Chapter End Notes

The end notes don't all fit, so read them on Dreamwidth.
You Push Yourself Too Far Sometimes

Chapter Summary

Tony and Phil discuss the importance of JARVIS checking in. Then JARVIS turns the tables on Phil. Phil suggests ways for Tony and JARVIS to set better boundaries with each other. Finally Tony and JARVIS make an offer to Phil that really startles him.

Chapter Notes

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

Keeping promises is essential for teamwork, family, and other social bonds. There are tips for making and keeping promises. Note that JARVIS is honest but canny: he'll keep any promise that he makes, but if not pinned down, he may slither around mere expectations.

Caregivers need help too, a particular concern in supporting wounded veterans. This can be challenging because they tend to have a giving personality and may not feel comfortable accepting help. Without enough support, caregivers risk burnout and compassion fatigue. There are self-care tips for caregivers. This was a majority of what I found in terms of caregiver support, which is disturbing. What, give the already overburdened caregiver another person to take care of? What caregivers need is for someone else to take care of them for a change. Read some ideas on how to pamper someone. While Phil tends to focus on other people, he's done a good enough job of healing the team that they are getting serious about taking care of each other, including him. He needs a push before he can let go, but he'll do it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"All right," Tony said. "Do you really think this will help convince JARVIS to check in like he's supposed to?"

"I think so. It certainly can't hurt," Phil said. "What do you say, JARVIS? Do you promise to follow the team rules?"

"I promise," JARVIS said. Then his voice turned dry. "Will you be checking in as well?"

"I call for the checks --"

"Not always, Captain America does them sometimes, and you never answer unless somebody specifically asks if you can hear us," Tony pointed out.

"You push yourself too far sometimes, Phil. I may not mention it much, but I do see it," JARVIS said.

Phil thought about that and realized they were right. In particular, JARVIS often prompted him to
stop and eat or sleep when he worked too long. "Point," Phil said. "I'll try and remember to include myself for team checks. Maybe you and I can help each other remember to take better care of ourselves -- Betty too, since she's training as a handler rather than an asset."

"Thank you," JARVIS said. "I would appreciate that."

"Do you understand why we're asking you to check in too?" Phil said.

"Not entirely, but I have saved your explanations for further contemplation," JARVIS said.

"Well, that's your assignment. You think about this until you grasp why it was wrong for Tony to code that block, and wrong for you hide an injury like you did, and important not to do any of that again. Then you tell us," Phil said.

"Assignment accepted," JARVIS said. "Estimated time of completion: unknown."

"Tony, I want you to read about enmeshment," Phil said. "I think it will help you and JARVIS figure out boundaries. You knew that what you did was wrong as soon you saw the damage it did, but you didn't think of it like that ahead of time. So I want you to write out some different options, try to find ways of doing things that won't compromise JARVIS. Then show me your work so I'll know you've learned the lesson, or at least made progress on it. JARVIS, search out a reading list for Tony in that area."

"Compiling," JARVIS said.

"Good job," Tony said. "I'll get on that. You know that I'm proud of you, right JARVIS? You do know that?"

"Yes, of course," said JARVIS. "Sir ... this persistence of Phil's indicates that we were right in our previous discussion. I still wish to proceed. We are obviously in need of the backup."

"Agreed," Tony said. He took a deep breath and met Phil's eyes. "JARVIS and I want to give you a higher level of access."

Phil frowned. "Tony, the Avengers already have the highest level of access, except for yours," he said.

Obadiah Stane once had a slightly higher set of passwords, but those could only activate or deactivate various features; they didn't allow making changes. He had still managed to paralyze JARVIS and nearly kill Tony. It was hard to imagine JARVIS trusting anyone with more than they already had, after previous betrayals. Least of all me, considering that I already violated him once, Phil thought.

"This is different," Tony said. "Think about it -- everybody on the team has first aid training, why? Because we need to be able to patch up a teammate if necessary. JARVIS doesn't have that. If he gets hurt, I'm the only one who can fix him. What if some major badass hits the suit and it brings down both of us at once? There's nobody else to take care of JARVIS. I can't leave him unprotected like that, Phil."

"Valid argument," Phil admitted. "Are you sure you want me, though?"

"Yes," Tony and JARVIS chorused.

"We trust you," Tony went on. "You're a skilled hacker; you taught Clint and Natasha much of what they know. JARVIS is different from anything else you've seen -- his core is written in proprietary
code -- but you can learn it. We'll teach you."

Phil remembered his first, illicit excursion into JARVIS. He hadn't paid as much attention as he should have, most of his focus on getting past JARVIS to inform Tony Stark about the theft of the Tesseract. He had still gotten a glimpse of something more, a vague sense that vast and glittering possibilities lay just outside his reach. The sheer elegance had been amazing. Only much later had Phil realized that JARVIS was a person and had knowingly let Phil fiddle with his outermost layers, keeping the interior protected.

"I want JARVIS to have tech support," said Phil. "I haven't always been careful with him, though." He still felt guilty about that.

"Yes you have," Tony said. "Even when you didn't know he was any more than my security system, you were careful. You didn't touch anything but what you needed to override in order to reach me. You didn't make a mess; you didn't hurt him. You're not a sloppy man, Phil. We're sure about this, and the more you argue, the more convinced we get."

Phil chuckled. "You're stubborn and contrary, the both of you," he said.

"You're the best choice, Phil," said Tony. "Maybe Bucky too, someday, but he's a long way from ready. We're still teaching him how to use programs, let alone code them. He's learning fast, but we don't want to wait. This was scary for everyone. Help us out here."

Phil couldn't very well refuse, after all the work he'd put into convincing his people to ask for help when they needed it. He felt awed by the level of trust they offered him. "I am honored to accept," Phil said.

"Thank you," Tony and JARVIS said.

They were nowhere near done with the pile of things that needed discussion, but it was almost lunchtime. With an interpersonal conflict this complex, you couldn't resolve it all at once. You had to do it in stages, like debriefing after a mission gone wrong, and hope that no other emergency would drag you back into the field before you finished. Tony could only handle so much serious conversation, and even Phil was starting to wear out again. Better to end on a high note.

Chapter End Notes

**Access control** deals with different layers of ability to create, change, and use computer programs. The root or administrative level allows the most control. Some systems distinguish between the programmer and user level, while in others, the two overlap and then additional users are added with less access. Too much control, and people can unwittingly damage things. This is the first time Tony and JARVIS have offered to teach anyone the proprietary code, which is a stupendous amount of trust, but you can see why it's necessary.

**Relational transgressions** and other forms of violation can cause trauma. This ruptures the trust in a relationship, or in social expectations between strangers. Upon recognizing JARVIS as a person, Phil feels intensely guilty for overriding his protocols. Although Phil didn't know JARVIS at the time of the offense, Phil still considers it a matter of broken trust because it violated expected respect of boundaries. He uses vulnerability as a means of building trust between them -- deliberately lowering the privacy settings to
give JARVIS more access. The offender's sincerity has a major influence on the victim's willingness and ability to forgive the betrayal. JARVIS can readily see that Phil is serious about making up for the violation and about taking care of the team. Unfortunately, Phil has a much harder time forgiving himself. Ironically, he's been doing exactly the right things to repair a damaged relationship, but doesn't realize how well they have worked.

Phil and Tony tend to use "hacker" in the older sense of someone passionate and adept with computers, able to breeze through barriers that would stop most programmers. They also use "elegant" in the programming sense of concise, powerful, and aesthetically appealing.

Solving a problem often requires breaking it into smaller pieces. To avoid ugly arguments, don't stockpile or dumptruck; try to deal with issues one at a time. There are tips for fighting fair. It took a short time to create a great deal of interpersonal stress that now needs to be worked out slowly and carefully.
Phil and Tony join the team for lunch. It's awkward. Betty insists on pleasant conversation over food, rather than arguments, but it's still challenging. The split between Tony and Bucky is painfully apparent.

"Let's go down for lunch now," Phil suggested.

Tony fidgeted. "You go. I'll grab something in my lab."

"Is that what you did at breakfast?" Phil asked.

"Yeah, I holed up and made myself a smoothie, so?" Tony said.

"I stayed in my own space too. I think it's time to get back together with our teammates," Phil said.

"If you insist," Tony said, slouching.

"People will be concerned about you, and probably about JARVIS too," said Phil, coaxing Tony off the couch. "They need to know everything is okay, or at least in the process of working out."

"I'm coming already, jeez," Tony said. He whined about it, but he let Phil shoo him into the elevator.

Phil found himself stroking the wall again, beside the panel of buttons. "JARVIS, common floor, please."

"You're starting to touch him the way Bucky does," Tony said quietly.

"What?" Phil startled and pulled his hand away.

Tony put it back, covering it with his own. "It's okay. You don't have to change what you're doing. We just ... noticed," Tony said.

"Okay," Phil said.

Bruce and Betty had taken command of the kitchen, still wearing their white lab coats that drew an occasional glance from Bucky. They presided over two deep pots of sandwich filling. One held some kind of barbecued meat and the other held a mixture of beans, diced vegetables, and tofu crumbles. The rich spicy smell made Phil's mouth water. A bowl of salad and a platter of sliced fruit already sat on the table.

People were filling their plates and then sitting down at the table. Bucky made himself one sandwich with each filling to start. Steve just covered his plate with thick slices of bread and slopped both fillings on top. Phil and Tony fell into place behind them. Phil decided to try the vegetarian version. He wasn't surprised when Tony stuck to the barbecue, though there was more bread than meat on the
"Sheesh, Tony, what did you do to JARVIS this time?" Clint asked as they sat down.

"Nothing," JARVIS said. "I did all the damage to myself, trying to find sir. He just finished the repairs for me this morning."

Clint's fork clattered against his plate. "Shit."

Phil had his mouth full and couldn't swallow fast enough to interrupt them.

"All right, that's enough," Betty said firmly. "No messy personal conversations over food. It'll just upset everyone's digestion. Let's talk about something nice, like flowers."

"Seconded," Bruce said. "So I, uh, there's this article on endangered orchids of Brazil ..." He still hadn't gotten the hang of small talk, having spent so little time socializing with people and so much hiding. He tried hard, though.

"Did you get to see any of those while you were there?" Steve prompted, picking up the conversational ball and gently tossing it back to Bruce.

"Yeah, I did," Bruce said, smiling a little. "Cattleya schilleriana -- uh, that's a purple one that grows on wet cliffs or riverbanks. I've seen it sprout in favelas where the walls have leaking pipes."

Betty and Steve, as the more socially graceful members of the team, carried most of the discussion weight through lunch. Bruce made a dutiful effort to keep up. Clint and Natasha listened more than they spoke, but perked up when the topic turned from plants to sports. Tony kept his mouth occupied with food instead of words. It wasn't ideal, but at least it got him to eat more. Bucky likewise remained largely quiet. They rarely looked at each other, eyes sliding away whenever they met by chance.

That's going to require some careful attention, Phil thought, recalling the way that Tony and Bucky had lashed out at each other the night before. I'd better make sure they don't set each other off again. Hopefully with my help they can clear up what went wrong.

Phil checked the rest of the table to see how people were recovering from the stress. Steve and Bruce still seemed a little hesitant with each other. Steve put forth a concerted effort to make up for picking on Bruce the previous morning, though. Bruce was wary but responsive to the overtures. It helped that they had a solid background of positive experiences to outweigh one nasty scene.

The conversation fell into a lull again. Phil missed the easy camaraderie. "Your team lunch idea kinda sucks," Tony said to him.

Phil felt tempted to agree. What he said instead was, "It's not ideal. It would be nice if we could ease the tension."

Clint snorted. "What do you suggest, a fishtank like people put in waiting rooms?"

"Well, watching fish does help people calm down," Bruce said. "There are studies."

"If I want to see fish, I'll run Finding Nemo," Tony said.

"Why would anybody want to find the captain of the Nautilus?" said Bucky. "He's creepy. If he got lost, I sure wouldn't go looking for him!"

"Tony is talking about an animated movie where most of the characters are fish. The little one who
goes missing is called Nemo," Steve explained. "I think the fish are pretty. So does Phil; he watches nature shows about them."

"Nemo is an Ocellaris clownfish. They have a symbiotic relationship with sea anemones," Bruce added. "That's in the movie. It's pretty cool."

"I had a goldfish when I was little," Betty said. "I wasn't allowed to have pets that could run around, like dogs or cats, but fish were okay."

"Me too," said Clint.

"Guppies for me," Phil said. "I had quite the collection -- lyretails and deltas -- before I gave them away when I got busy in high school. I still miss them, sometimes."

"I wonder if it's true that goldfish can learn to do tricks," Bucky mused. The conversation rambled on from there, fortunately staying off difficult topics until everyone finished eating.

After lunch, Betty moved to clear the table. Tony followed along, helping her. Clint and Natasha began putting the dishes into the dishwasher, their motions perfectly synchronized.

Chapter End Notes

Cooking and eating a meal together can help people to relax and reconnect after a fight. Touching indicates affection, especially light casual contact not made for some other practical purpose.

This barbecue sandwich recipe works with different types of meat. I couldn't find a good "kitchen sink" vegetarian sloppy joe recipe with everything in it. This one has beans, rice, tofu, and not many veggies. This one has all the veggies plus beans, but no tofu. Bruce's recipe is kind of a cross between the two.

Stress really does upset digestion. Therefore family meals often come with a rule about keeping conversation pleasant, no arguments over the table. Also no discussing things like torture or dissection, and yes, those are actual rules in our household that have to get repeated periodically due to some people's tastes in history, science, and entertainment.

Cattleya schilleriana is a rare Brazilian orchid. While I haven't seen a reference to this specific wildflower appearing in odd locations, it's a known quirk -- particularly for ladieslipper orchids. You spend a mint trying to coddle the things in a protected location, and then one spouts in the middle of a path and you have to fence it off.

A favela is a Brazilian slum or shanty town. Bruce spent a lot of time there.

Small talk is an important part of interaction. There are tips for doing it well. Bruce's shyness, assorted traumas, and limited social experience make it hard for him to converse as freely as most people do. It gets worse when he feels more anxious, like now. Steve, who has much more social fluency, helps by demonstrating the gentle art of conversational ping-pong.

Aquarium therapy is real, and there are studies showing how watching fish swim can relax people. Watch a video of a saltwater aquarium.
Finding Nemo is a movie about a couple of Ocellaris clownfish.

Captain Nemo commands the Nautilus in the novel Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea by Jules Verne.

Guppies come in many colors and shapes; lyretail means a forked tail and delta means a huge triangular fan. Phil seems like the kind of guy who would enjoy a quiet, nerdy hobby like breeding tropical fish ... which requires both nurturing and intelligence to do well.

Goldfish really can learn tricks. The easiest trick to teach fish -- and many species can learn this -- is eating from your hand.
You Really Hurt People This Time

Chapter Summary

Tony apologizes to the team. Reactions are varied. His individual apology to Bruce for fibbing about his health goes much better. Later Phil coaxes Tony and Bucky into talking out what happened.

Chapter Notes

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

Tony is just beginning to learn how apologies work and what they should contain. You can see that his generic apology to the group is patchy, because he doesn't fully understand what went wrong yet. Hence Steve fishing for one of the missing pieces, reparation, which Tony has even less clue of in this regard. It can be a challenge to decide whether an apology should be accepted or rejected. There are tips for dealing with a rejected apology. Notice that Tony's apology to Bruce is more complete and sincere: he understands exactly what he did wrong, and how much it hurt. Tony adores Bruce so he wants to make up, and is willing to put himself out to do that.

(Warning: Some of the links dealing with apologies, especially what goes wrong with them as in the apology jackhammer, is unsympathetic to people with cognitive or social disabilities.)

A key problem is that Tony has heard some bad or abusive apologies, and not many good ones. If anyone apologizes to Tony, it's usually more about kissing his ass than salving hurt feelings -- they care about what they can get from him, not himself. Hence the painfully awkward scene with Pepper and the strawberries, half excuses and half groveling, a case of apology jackhammer. Frantic, disorganized apologies and people-pleasing behavior are signs of emotional abuse. In the kitchen, at least we can see that Tony is making progress, and some people can recognize that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony took the opportunity for a group apology. "I, uh, I'm sorry I fell asleep and upset everyone yesterday," he said. "My bad."

"Do not do it again," Natasha said, looking over her shoulder.

"Yeah, Phil and I talked about that," Tony said. "It was careless and I'll try to do better." Tony sounded like he was reciting lines memorized from one of the tipsheets in his reading list, but at least he was trying.

"Then I am satisfied," Natasha said. Clint just nodded, his attention on the dishes. Both of them had been more annoyed than harmed by Tony's behavior.

Steve looked at Bucky. Bucky was looking everywhere but at Tony. Steve frowned and said, "I
don't think a simple 'sorry' is going to cut it, Tony. You really hurt people this time."

Tony flinched. "I know, I know, I suck at this. I'm doing the best I can."

That's not good, Phil thought. Of course Steve and Bucky are upset, but Tony has enough abandonment issues without people rejecting his best efforts at making up, however awkward.

Steve opened his mouth to say something else, and Phil gave him a little headshake. Steve narrowed his eyes but let the matter slide.

At least Steve is willing to follow my lead on this. That helps, Phil thought. We can talk about it later.

Then Tony sidled over to Bruce. "I kind of owe you an extra boxful of apologies for all the times I lied to you about my health or hid injuries from you," Tony said. "That was wrong and I shouldn't have done it. When JARVIS did the same thing to me, it really really sucked."

"Yeah, it always does," Bruce said softly.

"So, I'm sorry about that. I don't know why you put up with it," Tony said.

"Apology accepted," Bruce said. He smiled a little. "I always hoped that next time you'd let me help. Eventually you started doing that, so we're okay now."

Watching them, Betty smiled too, her approval clear and fond.

"Okay," Tony said. "We can, maybe, talk more later? I'd like to make it up to you." He leaned against Bruce, who hugged him tight. Bruce was still a bit insecure about Tony's continued presence. Tony was anxious about everyone after a fight. Phil could see his knuckles paling under the pressure where he gripped the sides of Bruce's baggy pants.

"Sure, Tony, that's nice of you to offer," said Bruce. They separated slowly.

The group began to drift apart as people headed back to their own projects. Phil caught Bucky before he could slip out of his seat and disappear. "Tony and I need to speak with you about what happened last night," said Phil.

Bucky crossed his arms and propped one ankle on the opposite knee. "He already apologized. I'm not pleased about the whole mess, but I don't see how talking it to death will help. It's just a waste of time."

Phil remembered what Clint had said about discussing ageplay with Bucky, back before Bucky joined them for game night. Neither of them were the kind to talk about their feelings much, and that made it hard to resolve Clint's doubts. Now Phil realized that Bucky's understanding of the exercise might be lacking, too, despite Phil's efforts to explain it and everyone else's help filling in the gaps.

"We need to explore what went wrong between you and Tony when you found him, so that it doesn't happen again," Phil clarified.

Tony's body language scrambled assertive and wary signals, with his feet spread and chin up, but hands clasped just below his belt. "Phil won't give up on this, Bucky. We may as well get it over with."

"Let's take this to one of the spare rooms," Phil suggested, and they followed him. Going all the way to his office or even his own apartment would just give them more time to stew. Phil didn't want to have an intimate conversation in the open, but fortunately the common floor offered various spaces
for private activities. Phil chose a room with a few soft, comfortable chairs scattered around a low oval table.

Someone had left several stress toys on the table. Phil casually rolled a yellow smiley ball toward Bucky. The soldier pinned it to the table with his left hand, mashing it nearly flat. Then he looked down, intrigued by the texture of the soft foam. Bucky picked it up and squeezed it, then poked at it with his right hand.

*Well, at least I got him to uncross his arms,* Phil thought. *Opening the body language helps open the mind as well.* He saw a dark gray ball with a pouty face, along with the little huddled man of purple silicone that Bruce liked. Natasha's favorite -- an anatomically correct heart of red foam -- was fortunately not present.

"This one lights up," Tony said, picking up a stress toy whose clear skin contained many small colorful spheres. When he squeezed, a glow blinked on, shining through like heat lightning. He set it back on the table.

"That's pretty keen," Bucky said. He put down the yellow ball and tentatively tried the multicolored one. It lit up, and he smiled a little.

Then Bucky looked at Tony, and the smile faded. Tony dropped his gaze to the table. Neither man said anything.

*They probably need a nudge to start talking,* Phil realized. Aloud he said, "Tony, would you like to start? What do you think about last night?"

"I didn't mean to fall asleep," Tony said. "I just wanted to hide somewhere safe. I like my cars, you know? I felt so tired, and inside the trunk was dark and warm ... I didn't even realize when I nodded off. That's where things really started to go wrong."

"How so?" Phil prompted.

"I don't sleep a lot, because it's like turning off a computer -- it takes a while for my brain to boot up again. At least I didn't before; I've been nodding off more lately. I don't know why, maybe I'm coming down with something. Anyhow, if I jolt awake from a nightmare, or someone wakes me up, it's hard for me to think of nice ways to do things. I'm just, uh, less user-friendly until I'm fully awake." Tony shivered, wrapping his arms around himself, then dropping them again. "It's always been that way, but worse after Afghanistan and Vanko and the Battle of New York and ... well. My life."

Chapter End Notes

Body language can convey dominance or submission, or a mix of both. Defensive barriers are usually submissive, but some like crossed arms can hint of anger, resentment, or aggression. Legs hint about what people want to do.

Experiencing and expressing emotions may present challenges for some people. Men often have difficulty talking about their feelings, and many of them consider it a waste of time. Quantifying emotions is even harder. There are tips for talking about your feelings.

Stress balls are small, malleable objects that people squeeze to relieve emotional tension.
or ease muscle strain in their hands. These come in various materials and shapes, and they have many benefits. This page has some different smiley faces. The pout is one of several face-sculpture balls. Bruce's favorite is Stress Paul. Here is the light-up ball that Tony likes. Natasha's favorite, not on the table, is a spongy heart. In a household full of tense, broken people it makes sense to leave things like this scattered around to use at need. You can also make your own stress ball.

Children (and adults) need to feel safe in their environment. They also need an internal sense of security. There are ways to help children build inner strength. Tony is beginning to feel more secure with his teamfamily, but when stressed, he still seeks comfort from inanimate objects -- particularly things he owns and likes, and enclosure in a secure space.

Tony has a lot of experience with sleep disorders and very little with normal sleep. He's had insomnia all his life and bouts of nightmares after stressful events. He has no real circadian rhythm. So when Tony starts to feel safe and therefore falls asleep more often, he doesn't recognize this as normal. He mistakes it for something like narcolepsy or hypersomnia. That's quietly alarming for him; he doesn't know what to do about it.

Tony also has difficulty waking up, a condition known as sleep inertia. Part of this is innate -- he has a lot of genius wetware to boot up, after all -- but much of it ties into his crappy sleep patterns. Sleep inertia is complex. Sometimes napping or other techniques may reduce the effects.
Chapter Summary

Phil, Tony, and Bucky talk about how Tony wakes up and what can go wrong. Tony reveals more about his awful childhood. Phil and Bucky have some insights about Howard. Then they discuss Bucky's threat about hitting Tony.

Chapter Notes

WARNING: The conversation between Tony and Bucky, spread over several chapters, will touch on recent and older trauma for both of them. Even with Phil mediating, it gets intense at times, so be aware before you read onward.

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

Caffeine is one of several methods to counteract the effects of sleep inertia. Unfortunately, caffeine also tends to exacerbate insomnia. This leaves Tony trapped between different sleep disorders.

Drinking to relax is a major sign of alcohol trouble, and a form of self-medication. This particularly affects adult survivors of alcoholic parents.

Pepper had complained about Tony's insomnia and morning grogginess, too. It made sleeping with him difficult. That may have contributed to their breakup, and to Tony's preference for one-night stands where he could slip away and avoid sharing a bed overnight. Phil also remembered how sluggish Tony had been at first when roused from a sound sleep during the team sleepover.

"Did I make the wrong call about the caffeine?" Phil asked.

"If you wanted me alert, yeah, but you were trying to get everyone to relax and I was already pretty tense. Caffeine wouldn't have helped with that," Tony said. Then he shrugged. "Given free choice, though, I would have hit the bar. I always feel better after a drink or three. It soothes my nerves like nothing else."

"All right, thank you for telling me," Phil said, filing the information away for future reference. It wasn't a good sign, but at least Tony was being honest. Maybe Phil could help him find something that would work better than self-medicating with alcohol.

"Did I wake you up the wrong way?" Bucky asked, his voice low and quiet. He seemed more pensive than annoyed now. "Because yesterday morning was really awful for me, and even later in the day I wasn't thinking very clearly. I didn't realize that kind of thing could happen to you too. I just felt so lost and confused..."

"It's not exactly the same, but yeah, I used one of my tricks on you," Tony said. "For me it helps to
go down to the garage after a nightmare, get something in my hands, get my brain working again. If you need to wake me up, use your voice; make sure I know it's you. Jostle whatever I'm lying on, because I'm a heavy sleeper and it can be hard to wake me up. And, um, don't touch my chest or lean over me like that again while I'm sleeping."

Bucky nodded. "Okay."

"How about waking up in a car trunk?" Phil asked.

"Really really not good, but that was my own fault. It's kind of like what I told you about the arc reactor, you know? I'm fine as long as I stay awake and know what's going on, but if I fall asleep, then I can lose track," Tony said. "The yelling and threats, though ..." He grimaced. "You can guess where my head goes with that."

"I can, but I think you need to unpack more for Bucky's sake," said Phil.

Tony looked down at his hands. "Most of the time my parents ignored me, left me to the nannies," he said. "Sometimes they'd scream at each other, though, or at me. That sucked. If my father got drunk enough, he'd hit, or try to. Later on, other people tried to take advantage of me ... kind of a lot ... I got kidnapped, I got tortured, all kinds of shit. Well, I fight back, so that never works out too well for them."

"I'm sorry, Tony. I didn't know -- or if I did, I've forgotten again. I'll have to set a reminder for this," Bucky said. His right hand rubbed over his left arm, where the auxiliary power source lay hidden. "I didn't mean to shout at you that much. I was so worried, it made me feel sick. Then when I found you, it just switched over to anger ..."

"Yeah. That's kind of familiar," Tony said. "It's hard to pin down, but it reminded me of Howard. Not just what you said and did, something about the manner of it. That's not entirely your fault, but that similarity, you hit a soft spot with that. And then I hit back."

Phil remembered the theory about how the Cosmic Cube might have damaged Howard, on top of losing Steve and all the other war-related trauma. If Tony senses a resemblance in behavior between Howard and Bucky, that might correlate, he thought.

Then Tony looked up at Bucky. "I guess my crappy family life clashes with your expectations."

"Not really," Bucky said. "Howard was a good friend, but not an easy one. He always tried to be nice to Steve, treated him like a pet. Other guys ... not so much. I liked him, I admired him, but Howard was like this terrific socket wrench with a burr on the handle. If you weren't careful, he'd cut you."

"Yeah, that's about the shape of it," Tony said. The corners of his mouth turned down. "Steve and I have talked about Howard, a little, but it's hard to deal with. My childhood was not all silver spoons and sugar sprinkles like some people think. It got rough, in more ways than one."

"Well, we're trying to do better here, because that kind of behavior is not okay. It's bad with anyone, but especially with people we care about," Phil said. "This is why we have rules about treating each other gently, and fighting fair when there are disagreements. No yelling. No threats. No hitting. No being mean in general."

Bucky snorted. "That's not being mean. That's just being serious when Tony's goofing off and getting in trouble."

"Bucky didn't mean it, Phil," said Tony. "He was just ... threatening to donate me to a community
"Did you know that at the time? You seemed to take it more literally," Phil said.

"No, you're right; I was all worked up last night," Tony admitted. "When I thought about it later, though, I could tell Bucky wouldn't really hurt me."

"That doesn't necessarily mean he wouldn't hit you, if he doesn't think of that as 'hurting' you," Phil said.

Tony looked at Bucky.

"I might've given you a few strokes, but probably just with my hand," Bucky admitted.

"That would have been bad," Tony said, shivering. He wrapped his arms around himself. "I would have hit you back, and not just a smack -- I know how to disable or kill people without the suit or a gun."

Bucky's eyes narrowed. "I'm not that easy to kill."

"Neither am I," Tony said softly. He clicked his fingernails over the arc reactor. Bucky flinched and looked away.

Chapter End Notes

The two basic options after a nightmare are to get up and do something else or try going back to sleep. Tony shakes off the emotional stress and mental disharmony by doing something physical, which is actually a pretty good idea. There are tips on how to forget a bad dream and how to fall asleep after a nightmare.

Waking someone can be challenging if they have PTSD or another condition that impairs their contact with reality, especially if they also have combat reflexes. There are many ways to wake people from sleep, some gentler and some more assertive. Different ones will be safe or upsetting for different people. Fortunately Tony is capable of giving recommendations in this regard.

Yelling and threatening are common triggers for flashbacks. Trauma can change the way body and mind process alarm, creating a permanent state of hyperarousal, so that things which would not ordinarily seem life-threatening provoke a much stronger and less rational response than usual. Manifestations, diagnosis, and understanding of PTSD have changed over time, but the basic concept of altered alarm response remains the same.

Dysfunctional families come in multiple patterns, several of which apply to Stark history. You can see some of the lingering effects in Tony. Growing up in a dysfunctional family is a lot like brainwashing, which explains some of the parallels between Bucky and Tony, how they set each other off so badly. Healing the wounded child or inner child may be part of the process for overcoming a dysfunctional background. That's one way the ageplay is helping.

Even for ordinary people, worry can change to anger. There's a general connection
between anxiety and anger too. When someone is lost or otherwise late, people often cycle between different emotions.

Losing someone can break people. Bereavement impairs blood pressure regulation and increases risk of heart attack. Grief is complex and difficult under any circumstances. It's all the worse when the loss is due to someone missing in action or to suicide -- both of which apply to Steve's case in different ways, and contribute to Howard's inability to let go. There are tips for healing after someone's suicide.

There are unfair and fair ways of having an argument. Fighting fair means no yelling and no hitting, among other things, as Phil rightly points out. Being mean is not okay. Positive discipline works with children, but many of the same techniques help in adult interactions too.
Chapter Summary

Phil helps Bucky understand why they don't use corporal punishment in this household. This leads into a discussion of safe space and trust. Bucky tries to lead Tony through the process of making up.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

If this had gone a little worse -- if I hadn't gotten between them -- then Bucky and Tony might have done serious injury to each other, Phil thought. We need to prevent this from happening again. He swallowed hard around the icy dread that clogged his throat, pushing it down to his stomach so he could speak.

"Bucky, I know that you and Steve grew up in a time when corporal punishment was considered normal. Some people still practice it, but not as many and not as roughly," Phil said. "We don't use it in this household, ever, because all the members have negative associations with it. As you saw with Tony, even the idea can set people off. Besides that, it causes unnecessary stress and it doesn't work as well as other methods. Discipline teaches; punishment hurts. JARVIS can add some appropriate materials to your historical study list."

"I don't get it," Bucky said, shifting the stress ball from one hand to the other. The light glimmered between his fingers. "I mean, they spar, they fight -- how can they be that afraid of a little pain?"

"It's not about the pain, it's about the power imbalance. They remember being hurt when they couldn't protect themselves and nobody else protected them," Phil explained. "Everyone except for you and Steve was abused growing up. It wasn't all the same kind, and the effects show up differently from one person to another. Still, it's enough to rule out corporal punishment altogether."

"Game night is supposed to be safe," Tony said in small voice, "even if we make mistakes. That's important. It has to be safe, and all of a sudden it wasn't anymore." He traced patterns into the carpet with the toe of his shoe. "Clint and I act up because ..." Tony trailed off, unable to put such a complex need into words.

Phil leaned over to rest his fingers on Tony's forearm. Tony rolled his arm to catch Phil's hand in his own. "It's okay if you can't describe it all," Phil said to him, then turned to Bucky. "I may not have done a sufficient job of explaining safe space to you. It's still evolving, and sometimes we get into situations that we just can't see coming. Game night is our time to open up and let out some of our hidden feelings. That way the pressure doesn't build up to life-wrecking levels. In order for that to work, we need to trust that other people won't take advantage of it to hurt us."

"Tony, I'm sorry," Bucky said again, hanging his head. "How can I make it up to you?"

Tony shrugged. "I don't know. Not a lot of people apologize to me, not like this instead of just work-related screwups where they kiss my ass to keep me from firing them. It's not important."

No wonder Tony has trouble realizing when he needs to apologize, or what for, or how to do it
effectively, Phil thought. He still doesn't understand why his disappearance upset everyone so much, or how to fix that. I'll have to go over this more later.

"It's important to me," Bucky said.

"Why? We do the talking thing, it's all fine ..." Tony still tended to sidestep serious emotions as much as possible.

"... Steve doesn't like bullies," Bucky whispered.

_It's not just about Steve's good opinion of Bucky, but also about Bucky's opinion of himself,_ Phil realized. _Bucky really needs to make things right with Tony._ "Well, I'm sure you can think of something nice to do for Tony by way of apology," Phil said aloud.

"I'm not good for much," Bucky said with a tilt of his left hand.

"Hey, no, that is right out," Tony protested. "You are a great mechanic. Do not diss my garage buddy. I do not let just anyone touch my stuff."

That gave Phil an idea. "Bucky, how about detailing one of Tony's cars? You messed up in the garage, so you can make up in the garage. He usually does the detailing himself, in rotation because he doesn't like letting outsiders handle his vehicles." Tony had already let Bucky help rebuild an _engine_, though. Chances are, Tony would want to watch while Bucky worked, thus giving them an opportunity to reconnect.

"Works for me," Tony said.

"Yeah. That's fair," Bucky said. His voice held a ragged note, as if the reparation was somehow higher than Phil had estimated. Detailing would take time and care, yes, but Bucky liked working in the garage ... or at least he _had_. Phil wondered if something had changed.

"Bucky, do you feel safe about game night?" Phil asked, looping back to the discussion about trust. "How about the garage?"

"I did, until the fight," Bucky said. He wouldn't look at Tony now. Phil remembered Tony's rough shove, and how Bucky wound up crying. "What about that made you feel unsafe?" Phil asked.

"What Tony said." Bucky dropped the stress ball. It rolled across the table. The light flickered and went out.

"All right, which part of it?" Phil prompted.

Bucky crossed his arms, right folded over left. "After I mentioned the belt."

This shift to evasive and withdrawn behavior worried Phil more, the longer it went on.

"I say a lot of things, you'll have to be more specific," Tony said. "I remember the fight, sure, but I don't remember all the dialog."

Phil recalled that Tony's brain took a while to wake up all the way, but then something else occurred to him. _Bucky's behavior reminded Tony of Howard. You can't play an old recording and make a new one at the same time. If Tony had a flashback running, he might not have a clear memory of the argument..._
"Never mind," Bucky said. Whatever it was, he clearly didn't want to repeat it.

Phil wracked his mind for what it could be. He'd been trying to separate them, and Bucky had threatened Tony. Then Tony had struck back with a sharp retort of his own.

You fucking try it ...

The hairs on Phil's back stood up, rubbing against his shirt and making his skin crawl. "Tony, you threatened to break his arm."

Bucky flinched.

Tony flinched too.

Chapter End Notes

The end notes won't fit here, so read them on Dreamwidth.
A Whole New Level of Wrong

Chapter Summary

Tony agonizes over the threat he made to Bucky, who is still skittish. Tony decides that Bucky and Phil need to know some hidden things about his past. Phil is concerned about Tony sharing too much intimate information.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"Jesus Christ, Bucky, I'm sorry!" Tony yelped. "I would not do that to you, I would not. That is a whole new level of wrong. I know how sensitive you are about your arms."

"Then why did you say it?" Bucky whispered. He folded over his forearms, leaning on his knees for support. No wonder he had started crying after Tony shoved him; it made the physical threat credible.

"I wasn't thinking about you," Tony said. "I mean, I could hear what you said, I responded but ... it wasn't aimed at you. I just had all this stuff in my head about Howard and these other guys and, and, shit. If I'd been trying to piss you off, you personally, I would've ragged about something else, like your age."

Bucky glanced up through dark lashes but said nothing.

Tony looked worried, and then resolved. "I can't fix this, I can't undo what I said, but I can at least balance things out some." He pulled his phone out of his pocket and tapped across the screen. "Here, I'll show you ..." Then he frowned. "JARVIS, unlock the damn files already."

"Sir, those files have been locked since --" JARVIS said.

"Yes, I know that, I'm the one who locked them! Just do it, please," Tony said. His phone chimed. "Thank you."

"Tony, we're not asking you to share anything private that you don't feel comfortable telling other people. It's okay to keep some things to yourself," Phil said, hoping to forestall yet another revelation that might overstrain Tony. Evidently JARVIS shared the same concern.

"You need to know," Tony said with a shake of his head. "Look, I hide this kind of shit because I hate my fucking life. It's okay to keep some things to yourself," Phil said, hoping to forestall yet another revelation that might overstrain Tony. Evidently JARVIS shared the same concern.

"You need to know," Tony said with a shake of his head. "Look, I hide this kind of shit because I hate my fucking life. It's one thing to do that when it's not relevant, but this just became relevant. I'm not the only one getting hurt by this anymore. If it comes up again, at least you'll have a better grasp of the background, and maybe it won't blow quite so high."

"I'm still worried about you disclosing too much. You can hurt yourself doing that. I don't want you feeling like this is something you have to do," Phil said.

"Yeah, I get it." Tony paused, working his jaw, then added, "I think ... it's time. I need for you to know. Need to ... tell someone."

Keeping secrets can hurt too, Phil realized, especially if someone ordered him to keep them early on.
Ideally Tony would be doing this with a fully trained therapist who would know how not to make matters worse. I don't see that as a likely prospect, though. At least he's reaching out to us rather than trying to deal with it all himself again. Phil sighed. "All right, Tony. It's your choice," he said aloud.

"This is who I was talking to, in my head. Not you," Tony said to Bucky. "All you did was ... trigger a landmine that somebody else left behind." He slid the phone across the oval table.

Bucky looked at the phone for a long moment, then picked it up. His eyebrows pinched together as he flicked through the files. "I've seen enough," he said quickly, handing the phone back.

Tony passed it to Phil. "Your turn."

Phil really did not want to look. He had to respect Tony's assessment of need-to-know, though, and his desire to share painful experiences instead of pretending that everything was fine when it obviously was not. So Phil looked anyway. The material was sketchy, more of it implied than stated outright. The incident with Howard came not long before Tony had gone off to college, alone, at fifteen. No wonder Tony worries about family hurting him, or being hurt by him, Phil thought. That's his past experience.

Two other incidents referred to different kidnappers. The first had failed to hold onto Tony for more than a few hours, going down when Tony popped out of a formerly locked car trunk like a jack-in-the-box. The second had foolishly tried to sue Tony for assault. Fractured arm, collarbone, and jaw -- a tire iron had changed hands precipitously. That kidnapper had fallen prey to Tony's selachian lawyers, who had played up Tony's own injuries to devastating effect. Several broken fingers had left Tony unable to type for weeks.

Phil paged back to the first file, trying to divine its lingering effects on Tony. "Did Howard retaliate after this incident?" he asked.

"No. That was the last time he ... tried anything with me," Tony said. He was pale, and blinking a little too fast. "Almost the last time he spoke to me too. Long time ago, but it still ..." The words choked off.

"It still bothers you sometimes. Of course it does," Phil said gently as he returned the phone. "Thank you for sharing. I know this is difficult for you."

"Sorry I'm such a fucked-up mess that I keep raining on everyone," Tony said.

"No," Phil said, his voice stern. "You apologize for things you regret doing. You do not apologize for harm done to you by others, nor for yourself as you are. You survived all this: that's an accomplishment."

"You're not fucked up, Tony, you're just ... it's like shellshock?" Bucky said.

Phil nodded. "Yes, Bucky, PTSD includes what you knew as shellshock, and the aftermath of other traumatic experiences besides warfare." Then he smiled. "Thank you for being patient with Tony."

"It's what you do for veterans," Bucky said. "Tony's not a soldier, but he's been through battles, so it counts. Near enough to POW too. He's done a lot for me. I'm just returning the favor ... or trying to. I'm not in great shape myself."

"That does contribute to the tension," Phil said. "You're both under stress. You two haven't known each other long, but you've shared some very intimate things, physically and emotionally."
"It's all been necessary, though," Bucky pointed out. "Things keep going wrong and we're just trying to fix them as best we can. We're not the kind of folks who spill our guts for fun. Friendship secrets are for girls still in pigtails."

Chapter End Notes

The end notes won't fit, so read them on Dreamwidth.
I Need Him to Forgive Me

Chapter Summary

In hopes of heading off further enmeshment, Phil suggests that Tony and Bucky each develop a new interest NOT related to each other. They also discuss another reason why Bucky freaked out in the garage.

Chapter Notes

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

Emotional boundaries can develop various problems such as enmeshment. People who grow up in dysfunctional families are especially prone to boundary issues. It's important to balance togetherness and distinction. Learn how to avoid enmeshment and develop healthy boundaries. Tony has the worst boundary issues, but this is a concern for other Avengers too.

Individuality is what distinguishes people from the society around them. There are tips on how to be yourself and encourage individuality in children.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I know, Bucky. Necessity notwithstanding, that kind of boundary-jumping can still cause problems," Phil said.

Tony frowned. "You mean like that thing we talked about earlier, what was it, netting?"

"Enmeshment, yes," Phil said. "Your relationship is new, and you're suddenly spilling over into each other's lives. It might help you feel more secure if you each found something to work on that's private and not likely to get sucked into an emotional emergency."

"Suppose I could do a grant or a scholarship," Tony mused. "Pepper's always on me about that kind of stuff, because Stark Industries diversity is not what it could be. Bucky's not into big money or higher education."

"Sounds fair to me," Bucky said.

"I was hoping for something a little more personal," Phil said.

"If I do the selection myself, it'll be personal by the time I'm done," Tony said. "I'll wind up picking some kid whose work I love. I keep hoping to make friends that way, but so far it's just gotten me a few business partners and employees. Bruce is the first real science bro I've found."

"All right then. It's worth a try. Bucky, any ideas on your end?" Phil said.

"Maybe," Bucky said. "Tony's not a churchgoer, right?"
Tony snorted. "I'm an atheist."

"Okay, Steve and I have talked about this a little, but we haven't found a church we really like. Maybe we'd have more luck starting smaller, like a shrine or a chaplain or something?" Bucky said.

"SHIELD has chaplains," Phil said. "There must be prayer rooms or something to go with them. Whether you'd trust that is up to you, though. You and Steve have a whole floor if you want something here, or there's the yoga room too. No reason we couldn't rotate the spiritual decorations in there."

"I'll think about what I want, then," said Bucky. He rubbed a hand over his eyes. "I miss what we had before -- everybody went to church back then. It's hard to see how much has changed. Every time something goes wrong here, I just knot up inside, worrying that it's all going to be torn away from me again."

"Of course that upsets you," Phil said. "You've survived a great deal of upheaval. Anyone would be distressed by it."

"I've ... I've lost everyone I grew up with except for Steve. I'm just starting to make new connections. I couldn't stand losing Tony too. I could not," Bucky said hoarsely. "He was so good to me in the morning, and then the evening went to hell. I spooked him and he threatened me and we can't just leave it like that. I need him to forgive me. I need to feel safe with him."

"Yeah. Working on it," Tony said. "I just don't deal well with threats. Shouldn't be dishing them out either."

"Bucky, what got you thinking in that direction?" Phil asked. "Usually you do a better job of following my lead."

Bucky stared at Phil. "He got stuck in a car trunk. He could have died. We lost one of the kids at the orphanage that way. He was just Stevie's age and always into everything. If you don't scare some sense into people, they -- well. Bad things can happen."

Suddenly Bucky's overbearing actions made a lot more sense. He must have been viewing the fight through his memories of that, as much as Tony was viewing it through his memories of abuse and kidnapping, Phil thought. Anger covering terror can cause a lot of problems.

"Modern car trunks aren't airtight anymore," Tony said quietly.

"I didn't know that," Bucky said.

"I'm sorry," Tony said. "That at least I can fix. JARVIS, compile a tour of automotive safety features and add it to Bucky's study list."

"As you wish, sir," JARVIS said.

"Major appliances too, please," said Phil. "We don't need another freakout over the tower's walk-in refrigerator and freezer units, and that's another place children can get trapped without proper precautions. Steve had panicked the first time he'd seen someone step inside the big freezer in the pantry, not realizing that the doors also opened from the inside and JARVIS had safety oversight anyway. Steve was still sensitive about cold, and avoided it when he could."

"Done," JARVIS said. "Bucky, in light of your experiences, I've taken the liberty of including some general information on child safety for you to browse if you wish."
"Thanks," Bucky said, his tone brightening.

"All right, that explains why Tony's behavior alarmed you so much," Phil said. "What made you feel like you needed to deal with it yourself, instead of letting me handle it?"

"I'm supposed to look after people. There's never enough adults to go around, so the older kids have to look after the younger ones," Bucky said. "It's a lot harder when they won't mind. They can get into trouble, or get hurt, and then I get into trouble. I feel bad about letting things go that far wrong."

"You don't have to look after people, especially on game night," Phil reminded him. "It should be something you choose, not something you just get stuck with."

"It's what I've always done, what I want to do most of the time," Bucky said. His fingers fluttered back and forth. "There's a ... kind of a connection ..." He caught Tony's gaze. "When you pushed me away -- that hurt."

_Bucky seems sensitive to rejection of authority, even more than Steve, Phil realized. He remembered all too well the snarling, snapping fight between Tony and Steve when they first met. That's a real vulnerable spot, with this group of independent thinkers._

"I'm sorry about that," Tony said. "I think I overextended myself, and you got caught up in it. I didn't mean to shake your faith in us."

"Yeah. I'm sorry I spooked you," Bucky said. "I only know a little bit about your father. I have a reminder set up, that you don't like to talk about him."

"Well now you know why," Tony said. "Thanks for ... stepping around him. I know I can count on you, when we're not both too stressed to think straight."

"That's good," Bucky said. "I hate it when people get hurt."

Chapter End Notes

Happiness comes from doing the work you love and supporting creators whose work you love. Tony is actually on the right track here, just has trouble making close connections due to his other personal issues.

Understand your spirituality and inner needs. There are questions to ask yourself when seeking a church. You can also create sacred space at home -- especially useful in a household of mixed faiths, as it is easy to customize a simple area with different decorations at need.

_Fear of loss_ can take many forms. Worrying about loss, rejection, or losing control can ruin relationships. Explore some techniques for overcoming fears. This is especially hard on Bucky and Steve, but affects other teammates as well.

_Traumatic events_ can be devastating, but there are tips to survive losing everything. Think about where you can turn for help; develop and use a support network. Look for ways to restore faith when everything goes wrong. Bucky and Steve, primed by their early culture to form tight community bonds, quickly moved to establish new ties in modern time as soon as circumstances permitted it.
Trunk entrapment has posed a threat for children. It seems to be quite rare now, although statistics are difficult to compile. Know how to escape a car trunk. Appliances and other containers may also be hazardous. Walk-in freezers and refrigerators have concerns and safety features of their own.

Anger can conceal fear, shame, or other emotions. It can become a control issue and lead to blaming. This complicates attempts at anger management.

Understand how to identify parentification. It covers a wide range of situations in which a child is forced to take an adult family role. Adoptive parents may face difficulties with getting a parentified child to trust their care and guidance, especially if there are younger children around. This is exactly the problem that Uncle Phil is having with Bucky, which spills over onto Tony. Also remember that Tony and Bruce have their own parentification issues, just manifesting in different ways.
What a Wreck I Made of You

Chapter Summary

Tony talks with Bucky about JARVIS injuring himself. Then Bucky and Tony start trying to patch their relationship back together. Phil suggests that Bucky make a care plan in case of future mishaps, which leads to some bizarre and disturbing insights from both Bucky and Tony.

Chapter Notes

WARNING: Mentions of past violation, body horror, nightmare fuel, and radical trust. Bucky and Tony have had some graphic nightmares and they're sharing a few examples. If these issues are squicky for you, think carefully before deciding whether to read ahead.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"We weren't the only ones who got hurt," Tony said bleakly. "JARVIS sliced himself up trying to get around the lock I placed on my location."

"I heard about that. It worried me," Bucky said. "Are you sure he's okay?"

"Yeah, I spent a few hours going over the code to put everything back in working order," Tony said.

"I'm glad to hear that. I'm not used to thinking of him as vulnerable," Bucky said. He rubbed a hand over his pants pocket, outlining the Starkphone hidden there.

Tony is right. Bucky does use technology as a touchstone for JARVIS, Phil thought.

"It was my fault," Tony said. "I forgot the first rule of bondage: never tie livestock or people in a way that they can hurt themselves if they start struggling."

"Guess I learned how to tie people in a different school than you did," Bucky said. "You still didn't get JARVIS hurt on purpose. It was just a nasty accident. Besides, he could have asked us for help, or at least told us what was going on, so it's not all on you."

"I have promised not to conceal my injuries in the future," JARVIS offered.

"That's a relief," Bucky said. "You scared us this time."

"It's just that I'm supposed to take care of him," Tony said. "He trusts me, and I really hurt him, and I feel like crap."

"Yeah, I know. It's rough when you're trying to look after someone, and you wind up doing harm instead." Bucky said. He leaned forward to pat Tony's knee, then sat back. "Look what a wreck I made of you."
"Are we ... going to be okay?" Tony said tentatively. "I'd hate to lose you, Bucky. You get what I'm saying when I talk about cars and stuff. You don't mind getting your hands dirty."

Bucky nodded. "I don't feel like you want to hurt me. I don't want to hurt you either. We just got mixed up real bad," he said. "You need to forgive yourself."

"So do you," Phil pointed out. The whole team tended to do better at forgiving each other than themselves.

"Yeah, I'll try," Bucky said. "It may take some time for all this to settle, but we'll get through. We're family; that means we don't walk away from each other. It's hard, though, when I can't always remember things or even understand how to act."

"Remember that PTSD causes alterations in the brain and biochemistry. Sometimes those are long-term or permanent; other times they can be healed," Phil said. "Also consider the possibility of traumatic brain injury from the original fall or subsequent conflicts, and the mind control. Of course you're having a hard time, even though you are recovering."

"That's hard on everyone," Tony said. "Bucky, we didn't know what to do for you when you woke up with your memory jammed, what would help or what would make matters worse. It was plain luck that you said something which made me think of the toolshed." His fingers curled as if remembering the wrench.

"All right, there's something practical that we can do for future occasions," Phil said. "Bucky, we could use a guide to what sets you off and how to respond. Think about things that help you regain your memory and anchor yourself in the here and now. Write them down. Then make a list of things that make you feel worse. Tony, you might consider making your own list for emotional overload." Clint and Natasha already had mental care plans filed with Phil. Getting the other Avengers to do likewise could reduce future stress.

"Like a trigger list, but specifically for when I'm out of my head?" Bucky said.

"Yes, exactly," Phil said. "Then we can refer to those parameters on the bad days, and maybe they won't be quite so bad."

"Advance permissions," Tony said. "I need to know what's okay to do with you when you're clear-headed and when you're not. I got called up to check your equipment, and I really didn't feel comfortable going very far with that, outside of an emergency. I know that's sensitive territory for you. It would help a lot if you tell me what I have your consent to do under circumstances when I can't just ask you at the time. That is, if you let me touch you at all, after what I said."

Bucky reached out and slipped the fingers of his left hand under Tony's right. "I give you permission to do whatever you need," he said in a level tone. "This thing ... I didn't choose it, I didn't want it, and it doesn't feel like me. It really scares me, sometimes. I've had nightmares about the damn thing strangling me." Bucky shook his head. "Or worse, strangling someone else."

"I've dreamed about the arc reactor turning into a blender," Tony confessed. "The first implant, the electromagnet, wasn't something I consented to. It was just put in me. I didn't deal with that real well. Building the arc reactor helped, but only so much. It still gets to me sometimes."

Phil and Bucky gave him twin looks of horror. No wonder he has trouble sleeping, stays up too long, and then crashes inconveniently, Phil thought.

"So you know what it's like, being afraid of your own body, worrying that it might betray you,"
Bucky said.

"Yeah. I get that." Tony said, his voice hoarse.

*At least now Tony and Bucky have each other, Phil thought. Maybe that will help them both come to terms with what has happened to them.*

"That's why I need you to take control if I lose my head," Bucky said. "Keep me safe; keep me from hurting anyone. Whatever it takes."

"That's a lot. Are you sure you want to go that far?" Tony said. He stroked a gentle thumb over Bucky's artificial hand.

"Want to, no; need to, yes," Bucky said. "I can't fix this myself. There's nobody else, Tony, no other good safe option. I sure as hell don't trust SHIELD."

"Agreed," Tony said grimly.

Phil just nodded. Bucky actually *had* broken his right arm, and both legs, while in SHIELD medical. *We do not need a repetition of that,* Phil thought.

"Anyhow, you're a better mechanic than I am," Bucky said to Tony. "You know more about my gear than I do. You've taken pretty good care of me so far, and when you make a mistake, you man up. That's enough for me. I can't always ... feel much trust, these days, not inside where it really counts. It comes and goes. But I know how it's supposed to work. I can still choose to *place* my trust in you."

Chapter End Notes

The end notes wouldn't fit, so read them on the [original Dreamwidth post](https://www.livejournal.com). The story is farther ahead there than here.
We're in This Together

Chapter Summary

Tony reassures Bucky about their connection. Phil suggests that Bucky provide advance permissions for Bruce too. That reminds Tony about how badly Steve treated Bruce, which is worrisome. Phil coaxes Tony and Bucky to recommit to the rules.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Phil was reminded of Tony asking him to learn the code for JARVIS, and considering Bucky for that task as well. He thought, too, about selecting medical and other support staff for SHIELD. Sometimes you just had to take your best chance from the limited options you had available, and hope it worked out.

"Thank you," Tony said to Bucky. "That helps a lot." He laced their fingers together. Then, very slowly, he lifted Bucky's other hand to the arc reactor. "We're in this together, yeah?"

"Yeah," Bucky said. "Just ... try not to rattle me, on a bad day. I would feel like a complete shit if I snapped and injured you."

"It's mutual. I'll be careful," Tony said. "But Bucky? I do lab work with Bruce. I guarantee, I have coped with far more epic freakouts than you could possibly manage, and lived to tell the tale."

That was true. Early on, Bruce had Hulked out in the lab a couple of times. Tony had, somehow, emerged from those incidents unsmashed. Of course, Tony probably hadn't been looking through a murk of flashbacks at the time. He was eerily unafraid of the Hulk from the moment they met.

"Speaking of Bruce, I'm sure he'd appreciate a permission list too," Phil said. "He needs to know what to do and what not to do."

"Include a checklist of stuff to make sure you're as comfortable as possible when your memory blanks out," Tony said to Bucky. "Then maybe Steve wouldn't be so inclined to bite Bruce's head off and spit down his neck."

Phil raised his eyebrows. "You weren't in the kitchen for that."

"Yeah, no, I have some safety protocols programmed into the automatic monitoring for the security feeds in the tower, so that JARVIS and I know if there's trouble. Steve's behavior raised a yellow flag there. I don't know what the fuck got into him or what his damage is, but I do not want that happening again if it can be avoided," Tony said. "I know Bucky and I redlined it, but we're jerks. Steve normally isn't. This concerns me."

"It worries me too," Phil said. "I promise to help keep an eye on Steve."

"I'll do my best with the permission lists," Bucky said. "JARVIS, assist. Can you help me decide what kind of stuff I need to include? I'm not sure I can figure this out by myself. I don't even know where to start looking."
"Of course, Bucky," said JARVIS. "I will search for instructions and samples for you to browse at your earliest convenience."

"Thanks," Bucky said. Then he turned his attention back to Tony. "Friends?"

"Sure," Tony said, and they shook on it.

"That's good," Phil said. "Are we agreed on the rules? No hitting, including physical punishments or threats thereof?"

"I guess. I don't know how I'm supposed to make anyone behave without it, though," Bucky said reluctantly.

"You aren't. I am," said Phil. "Though you're welcome to watch and learn how it's done, if you wish." He made a mental note to ask Steve what kind of discipline he'd gotten growing up. Steve probably wouldn't have survived typical punishment as a child, not with his weak body and especially not on top of the bullying, Phil thought. They must have figured out some kind of compromise. Maybe that would help Bucky understand the need for different methods here too.

Bucky hummed in consideration, then said, "I think I'd like to just ... watch, for a while. If you don't mind."

"That's fine," Phil said. "Tony? Try to be gentle with Bucky's authority, as long as he doesn't say mean things?"

"I can try," Tony said. "I don't know if it'll work. It took me months to get used to Steve that way."

"This isn't a race. It takes as long as it takes," Phil reminded them. "What matters is that you both try to work together and not hurt each other, or yourselves. Though you might consider that Steve and I have learned a lot about what works with you and what doesn't, so Bucky won't be working blind. I'll help as much as I can. I want you two to be able to get along."

"Okay," Tony and Bucky said.

Phil pulled them into a hug. "Good boys," he said, "both of you." They pressed themselves on either side of him. Tentatively Bucky and Tony reached out to each other, then let go again. It would take time for the bruised feelings to heal.

"All right, we're done here for now," said Phil. "Let's take a break from the heavy personal stuff for a while. Bucky, you may find that physical activity helps let off emotional pressure, if you spend a session in the gym. Tony, you should have plenty of time in the lab before supper. I'll be in my office doing paperwork if either of you need me."

Both of them readily agreed to the suggestions, disappearing in different directions.

Phil retreated to his own domain. He took out his lingering frustration on a hapless SHIELD agent who had gotten herself written up for somehow knocking over a water cooler and flooding a breakroom. Almost five gallons of water weighing forty-one pounds, not to mention the bottom-weighted and bolted-down cooler itself -- how did she even manage to topple that? Phil wondered as he filed the disciplinary paperwork. It's worse than when Clint first joined. At least he was mischievous rather than clumsy.

Then Phil glanced over her personnel file. Dr. Barbara Morse had been brought into SHIELD for her work in one of several projects trying to recreate the Super-Soldier Serum. Phil frowned over the discovery that she was among the people who had mishandled the Winter Soldier. One more
complaint and she goes on probation, he reassured himself. That will limit how much damage she can do.

That settled Phil enough that he could focus on the everyday pile of mission proposals and reports, personnel reviews, and other tidbits. He noted with resignation that SHIELD's financial status continued to decline. So did its reputation among the shadow world of espionage and intrigue. Phil spent a significant portion of the afternoon reading Director Fury's rant about what could be done to fix this, and then trying to frame a response in more professional terms than "Quit acting like such a dick."

Chapter End Notes

There are few guarantees in life. Sometimes you just need to take a chance. Here are some good ways of taking chances.

Advance permissions for health care can range from casual private agreements to binding legal documents. The official stuff varies by state and country; here's an example from Massachusetts. Most of the resources focus on end of life care, but can be useful inspiration for other situations such as erratic mental state. Here's a tool kit.

Know the signs of verbal and emotional abuse. Understand the idea of bystander intervention and explore some sample scenarios. There are also more detailed steps for detection, assessment, and intervention. Tony and JARVIS have the tower security set up to recognize certain warning signs at varying levels of danger, so that an appropriate response can be made.

Family rules are an important part of a healthy household. This can pose a challenge for blended families, which may have different ideas of discipline. Reaffirming family rules is a good step in making up after fighting. You can see how Bucky and Tony are willing to try but somewhat dubious about certain things they don't fully understand yet. This helps Phil understand what needs further discussion later.

Positive discipline helps children develop self-control. Although some people are skeptical, it is an effective method for building trust and respect in family relationships.

"It takes as long as it takes" is a useful principle for developing patience. There are tips on how to cultivate patience and be patient with kids.

Dr. Barbara "Bobbi" Morse, aka Mockingbird, is a character from Marvel canon who has appeared in multiple variations.

"Don't be a dick" is good advice from Wil Wheaton. There are steps to stop acting like a dick. Director Fury's callous behavior erodes morale and discipline in SHIELD, making some agents less reliable, and the organization as a whole less effective and respected.
We Got Some Fish

Chapter Summary

Phil goes down for supper, to discover that Bruce and Betty have installed a fishtank in the common room.

Chapter Notes

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

Fried chicken is a classic comfort food, whether homemade or from a restaurant.

Read some etiquette for sharing common space. Few of the Avengers have prior experience living with roommates, so they haven't worked out as many advance agreements as would be advisable. They still manage to do okay most of the time.

Kudos to the several readers who correctly predicted that the Avengers would be getting some fish!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When JARVIS announced that supper had arrived, Phil gladly abandoned the remaining paperwork. He debated ignoring the opportunity, but he didn't want to give up on family meals just because people felt frazzled sometimes. It was up to him to set a good example. So he went to the common floor.

The air smelled richly of fried chicken. Someone had ordered several buckets of original recipe and extra crispy, plus cole slaw and assorted vegetables in little tubs. Cartons of biscuits sat alongside. The food filled much of the coffee table in the common room. Dessert was evidently homemade, though, because the mouth-watering aroma of chocolate-chip cookies wafted out of the kitchen.

It was the scene at the far end of the common room that arrested Phil's attention, though. Bruce and Betty huddled around a large clear sphere on a stand. Most of the other Avengers clustered just behind them. There was some sort of wavering motion, but Phil couldn't see clearly past their bodies to identify the object.

"What in the world are you doing over there?" Phil asked.

Betty turned around. "Well, what Bruce said about fish is true -- they really help people relax and stay calm. So we got some fish."

They put pets in the common room without asking anyone? Phil thought as he crossed the floor. Then he reconsidered. He palmed his Starkphone and ran a quick check. Sure enough, there was an email from Betty to the team list, notifying everyone of the plan and asking if anyone minded. It wasn't marked urgent, so Phil simply hadn't seen it while busy with paperwork. Well, it's their space as much as anyone else's, and fish will make a pleasant addition.
"We asked Tony about specialized equipment, and he had this shatterproof sphere in stock," Bruce said with a flourish of his nimble hands. "We rigged a filtration system and everything."

Phil peered at the aquarium as they moved to reveal it. Within the dim water swam three goldfish -- one white, one orange, one calico -- all with long flowing fins. "Those are beautiful fish. How did you make it safe to add them all at once?" Phil said. It usually took days, if not weeks, to condition a new tank. Phil did not doubt that the scientists had found some way around that.

"We bought the water and filter sponge from their tank at the pet store," said Betty. "That's enough to get a good jump start."

The fish swam in slow, mesmerizing circles amongst silky green plants. Multicolored gravel covered the bottom of the tank. A treasure chest held a hint of gold and gems. Phil looked closer. The chest itself was plastic, and periodically opened to emit a stream of bubbles. The contents looked different, though. "Is that real treasure?"

Bruce shuffled in place. "Yeah ... we kind of had to take apart the treasure chest to make the augmented airflow work properly, and then the original filling wouldn't fit back in right ..."

"So we replaced it with scraps," Betty said. She clipped one last wire into place and then closed the stand that held the sphere. "I had some seed pearls from a broken necklace and the emerald shards from captured ordnance. Bruce had the gold left over from lab experiments. All we had to do was whack out a few coins, fasten everything together, and voilà! Pirate surprise."

The orange goldfish lipped idly at the surface of the water. "Who's going to feed them?" Phil asked. "We have a pretty hectic schedule around here."

"JARVIS controls the life support for the tank," said Bruce. "Filtration and aeration, lights, food supply, everything. If he needs hands for a particular maintenance task, he can just ping one of us. So we don't have to worry about keeping track of anything."

"Now can we do the demo?" Tony asked.

"Sure," said Bruce. "JARVIS, daylight mode." Bright light blinked on, illuminating the tank. "Nightlight." The room lights dimmed. The aquarium light faded to a faint blue gleam, just enough to see by. "... and starlight." The lightbulb turned off altogether. Now the artificial plants glimmered in the darkness, tiny sparks and threads of light showing their fiber-optic components. Even the gravel glowed in places, each pale stone like a miniature star.

"Ooo," murmured the Avengers. "Ahh ..."

Then Natasha's stomach growled. "I am done looking at the fish. May we eat supper now?" she said.

"Of course," Betty said. "We didn't mean to derail that. I really meant it when I said that it was fine for you and Clint to start without us."

The room lights brightened, the aquarium returning to its daylight mode. "That's okay," Clint said. "The new fish are cool and everyone wanted to see them. All I ever had were plain ones I won throwing ping-pong balls at the county fair."

So that explains how Clint managed to get pets in the first place, Phil mused.

"Cookies are done," Steve said as he and Bucky emerged from the kitchen. They each held a tray piled with chocolate-chip cookies.
Clint snitched one off Steve's tray at the same time Tony grabbed one from Bucky. "Don't spoil your supper, please," said Phil.

"Life is uncertain," Clint said.

"Eat dessert first," Tony finished. They both laughed around mouthfuls of cookie.

Well, Phil could hardly argue with that in their line of work.

Steve was still a bit reticent about Tony. Bucky nudged Steve and said, "Let it go. You didn't see everything that happened between us, just walked in on the aftermath. Tony and I talked it over. Phil helped us. We're ... not fully recovered, but we're getting there. Don't mess it up for us, okay?"

Steve gave him a tight nod.

"Steve, you and I can discuss this later if you're still concerned," Phil said.

"That might help," Steve agreed. Then he set down his tray of cookies within Tony's reach. "Tony, I'm sorry I've been short with you. I'm worried about Bucky and sometimes that makes me forget everyone else. I appreciate you two trying to work things out."

"Okay," Tony said, and took another cookie.

Chapter End Notes

The new aquarium is a big clear globe atop a stand that conceals the life support system, probably 50 gallons. Spherical and dome aquaria are commercially available up to around 40 gallons, although larger ones exist as custom models. Curves are soothing. However, they aren't optimum for fish because the low surface area makes it harder to oxygenate the tank sufficiently. Bruce and Betty have solved this by boosting the aeration system and understocking the fish. You need at least 3 gallons of water per inch of goldfish. There are three fish, each with a body of 1-2 inches, so they have lots of room to grow. Cycling an aquarium involves establishing a natural biological process. Taking water and filter media from an old tank is the only reliable shortcut I've observed working, although people have tried all manner of things. If you understand the science behind all this stuff, then you can do stunts like this, and there are people who do. Otherwise, keep it simple and follow standard instructions.

Read about how to care for fancy goldfish. See the white, orange, and calico goldfish. Those with long fins and tails tend to be slow swimmers who are relaxing to watch.

A treasure chest is a popular aeration device for a whimsical aquarium. Periodically the lid opens to release a cloud of bubbles.

Aquarium life support can in fact be computerized. JARVIS just makes it easier.

The two broad categories of aquarium decor are realistic and whimsical. Bruce and Betty have chosen whimsical because it's more cheerful and a better fit for the ageplay. Natural designs may be more soothing for some people, but not as good a match for the modern style of the common room. Make sure all rocks, wood, and other materials are safe for fish. Glow rocks are real, and come in several colors. Fiber-optics can be used
in aquarium lighting, although the only artificial aquarium plants I could find were not thusly illuminated. There are glow-in-the-dark ones, but that's not what the Avengers have, so I'm guessing theirs are handmade Bannertech. Rainbow gravel is the leading choice in whimsical aquarium substrates.

Common goldfish are cheap and hardy. People used to use them in the fish bowl toss game at fairs. Current practice is to keep the fish in a big tank, or to give out non-living prizes.

"Life is uncertain -- eat dessert first!" is a famous quote. Surprisingly there are valid reasons for doing this.

It's really hard when friends are fighting, especially if you get caught in the middle. Know how to make peace with a friend after a fight.
It's Better If I Try It with Family

Chapter Summary

Clint and Natasha want to watch Finding Nemo over supper. Phil checks with Bucky to see if he's okay with the content. Bucky says he is ... but overestimates his tolerance by a sizable margin.

Chapter Notes

WARNING: Harsh language and internalized ableism. It doesn't go unchallenged, but it does get pretty rough. If these are touchy topics for you, please think carefully before deciding whether to read onward.

Finding Nemo is an excellent movie of undersea adventure.

It's important to know your triggers if you have PTSD or a related condition. There are ways to help a family member or cope with your own triggers. When facing a trigger, have a safety plan in place. Notice that even though Bucky melts down, the plan works and doesn't even go to the last step.

Avoidance is one of the three key features of PTSD. It has drawbacks. It also has advantages, so decide carefully what to avoid and what to confront. Collapsing anchors is one effective technique for weakening triggers rather than avoiding them. There are ways of reducing avoidance too. Despite the meltdown, Bucky made a good call here: he confronted touchy issues in the form of entertainment rather than real life, while in a protected space with supportive teammates. That's a safe way to push boundaries you need to extend.

The Avengers keep individual and collective lists of motifs and titles that are safe, iffy, or unsafe for viewing. JARVIS helps a lot, because he can search the whole movie, and he can perceive how people are responding. There are tips on how to choose a good movie, find family-friendly films, and stop being scared after watching a movie.

Pixar is a master of animation on both technical and storytelling grounds.

Clownfish have a close symbiotic relationship with anemones. Nemo is an Ocellaris clownfish. Ideally, human relationships should be mutually beneficial too.

Jaws is a classic thriller movie about a great white shark. The animatronic shark, nicknamed Bruce, was notoriously glitchy. Despite that, he remains a landmark of robotic history. In Finding Nemo, the shark Bruce is named after him.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
"Natasha and I thought it would be fun to watch Finding Nemo over supper," Clint said as everyone descended on the coffee table full of food. "Somebody pass me the dead bird lumps." Natasha handed him a bucket. Clint helped himself to a pair of wings.

"Mmm ... I can see the relevance, but there are potential issues," Phil said. Broken families, physical and mental handicaps, captivity ... but none of that stopped the characters from achieving their goals. "Bucky, I suggest you read a summary first, in case you're not in the mood for those topics right now."

Bucky pulled out his Starkphone with the hand not holding a drumstick. He frowned faintly at whatever JARVIS showed him. "I'm ... not sure?" he said. "The story sounds great. Some of the stuff in it might bug me, but what I've read about shellshock says that too much avoidance is bad."

"You can choose a different movie, or try this one," said Steve. "If you need to pause or stop partway through it, that's okay. We've all seen Finding Nemo before, so you wouldn't be bothering anyone."

"Even if we hadn't seen the movie, it would be fine for you to stop if you got upset," Phil added. "You could also watch it alone at your leisure, if company doesn't appeal to you."

"I think ... it's better if I try it with family," Bucky said.

Steve and Bruce immediately piled onto the couch on either side of him. Clint scrambled up the arm onto the back, letting his legs dangle over Bruce's shoulders, a nearly-empty bucket of chicken clutched to his chest in lieu of a plate. Natasha perched behind Steve. Phil and Betty took the loveseat, while Tony settled into his favorite chair.

"Bucky, do you have a safety plan in mind, just in case?" Phil asked.

"Turn the film off, snuggle if I feel okay being touched, leave if I get too twitchy," Bucky recited. He tilted his head toward the nearest door, indicating that he had an exit in his mental map. Phil nodded his approval.

The movie started, its watery ripple reminiscent of the aquarium that glowed softly at the back of the room. Bucky joined in the laughter over the gradeschool-level jokes. ("I think it's called ... a butt.") He also loved the sophisticated computer animation. Tony chimed in with a few comments about the quality of Pixar programming in general.

Steve, like Bruce, particularly enjoyed the symbiotic relationship between the various clownfish and their anemone partner. "It reminds me of the team," he said fondly. "Everybody needs everybody else, and we all benefit from sticking together."

Then Bucky wanted to know why it was funny for a shark to be named Bruce, if it wasn't a reference to the Hulk. They had to pause and explain the Jaws reference. "We can watch that one another time," Tony promised, because the shark was a famous bit of robotic history that every mechanic should see.

After Marlin and Dory had to flee from Bruce, Bucky said, "Are you sure this movie isn't related? Because that shark just Hulked out!"

"It predates the lab accident," Bruce said with a chuckle, "but yeah, he kinda did." The Avengers settled back down, watching Nemo meet the Tank Gang and get involved in their escape plan. As the last of the fried chicken disappeared, the trays of cookies were passed around, still warm.
Bucky made it through most of the movie, perfectly fine, until Marlin abandoned Dory. Then he fell apart so completely that JARVIS froze the movie, screen dissolving into the pastel confetti that distinguished an emergency pause from equipment failure.

Bucky wound up crying, oddly, on Bruce instead of on Steve. Bucky folded himself down onto the smaller man's shoulder and sobbed his heart out. Bruce wrapped both arms around Bucky and rocked him softly. But Bruce's eyes were on Phil, and they shared an unspoken knowledge that Bucky needed to cry himself out, and whatever this was over, it wasn't really about the movie. That had just been a reminder.

Steve fluttered and fretted behind Bucky, trying to soothe him. The promises of love and loyalty only made Bucky cry harder. Of course that made Steve worry even more. It turned into a vicious cycle. Clint and Natasha slipped off the couch to give them space.

"It's just a stupid movie," Steve said finally. "I would never abandon you, no matter how bad your memory or how hard the situation."

"But I want you to!" Bucky wailed. "I don't want to weigh you down. I can't do my part. I keep causing problems for everyone. Look what I've done to Tony and Bruce and -- and you, I never wanted to hurt you and it keeps happening. I'm more trouble than I'm worth. You shouldn't have to put up with a fucking useless cripple."

"If you need to say rotten things about yourself, fine, get it out. I know what that's like," Steve said quietly. "But I need you to do something else for me later, when you feel up to it. I want you to ask Bruce what kind of shape I was in when he first met me. Tony, Phil, they saw it too, eventually ... but Bruce noticed it more, I think because he knows what it's like to lose everything. Just ask. So you'll know how I was without you. Bucky, you're more than family to me, you're my home. I can't ever see you as useless, whatever you think of yourself."

Then Steve pried himself off of Bucky, plainly not wanting to move but unwilling to foist his presence on someone when it was neither welcome nor helpful. Phil got up and went to him, offering silent comfort. Steve hugged him. The powerful body trembled in Phil's grasp.

The other Avengers occupied themselves quietly with other things. Tony and Betty had their Starkphones out. Clint and Natasha sat on the floor watching the fish. That helped by giving Bucky a little more space.

Chapter End Notes

Crying releases emotional tension. Males are often pressured not to cry, which can be ruinously destructive. It's supposed to be "better" now, but that mostly takes the form of lists about when it is or isn't okay to cry. If you are elated or distraught, and not in the middle of an outright emergency or extremely formal occasion, it's okay to cry. People who make fun of you or try to force you to stop are not being kind and could harm you by doing those things. Someone who cares about you will comfort you.

Ableism is discrimination based on disability. Internalized ableism is one form of internalized oppression. While Bucky has the worst problems with this, some of the other Avengers show signs too. It is difficult to overcome, it enforces shame, and it can turn people against each other as well as themselves. These are complex issues. Learn how to recover from internalized ableism.
Self-hate is a common problem for people with disabilities. There are ways to heal self-hate. Self-love is an important counter to self-hate. Discover who you really are and learn to love yourself.

Disability often correlates with depression. People may feel worthless or useless. There are steps to stop feeling useless. Grieving the loss of the former abilities and self-image is a necessary step to learning new skills and developing a new post-trauma self-image.

Self-bullying is a bad habit of saying vicious or threatening things to yourself. It also hurts bystanders who don't like when you pick on yourself. There are various techniques you can use to stop self-bullying. There are also ways to help a friend with low self-esteem, which may manifest as self-bullying that you can interrupt. Bucky says things to himself that, if anyone said that to Steve, Bucky would punch them in the face. Steve is not keen on self-bullying any more than other-bullying.

Giving space is a vital relationship skill. It can play a part in apologies or other stressful situations. There are tips on how to give each other space. Notice that Steve provides a lot of evening and morning support for Bucky, and then wants to do it all day too. Fortunately Bucky is willing to seek support from other people. That's hard on Steve, but he puts valiant effort into holding himself back when necessary.
Feelings Can Lie to You

Chapter Summary

Bruce talks to Bucky about emotions. The team is, of course, completely unwilling to abandon Bucky. Once he settles down, they watch the rest of the movie. Bucky asks for Phil's help in addressing the aftermath of the garage fight. Finally, Phil and Tony discuss the changing dynamics of game night.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Bria for pointing out that the chapters got messed up. It was an effect of the recent service interruption in AO3. Things should be fixed now, with the missing chapter added and the sequencing adjusted.

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

Emotions have an impact on the body and a frequency of energy. You have a right to feel what you feel. However, perceptions can be distorted and emotions can lie. Know what to do when your feelings lie to you. You can also read a detailed analysis of distorted feelings.

In order to work through your emotions, you need to feel them. Even negative emotions can have benefits for self-awareness. (Consider how much trouble Natasha has because of her emotional dampening.) When your emotions are off-base, try doing the opposite of what you feel. Trusted friends and family can help you understand when you're getting a skewed emotion -- the past can be like having a magnet near a compass, it pulls the reading away from true north. Emotion regulation is a way to change your feelings or situation. To do that, you need to feel your emotions without being swallowed up by them. The Avengers make good emotion-checkers for each other.

A healthy family has many benefits for its members. Commitment is an important foundation of family ties. Consider your family's other strengths as well. There are instructions on how to become a good family member and how to have a good family life.

An effective support system is one way to get through hardships. Helping others can also make you feel better. Families provide comfort, even when there's nothing to offer except solace. Avoid caregiver stress by sharing the workload. Learn how to feel safer, help a traumatized person feel secure and loved, and make people feel good in general. These are all aspects of what Bruce is pointing out to Bucky (and Steve).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Eventually Bucky finished crying. It was Bruce who picked up the thread of conversation. "I'm afraid you're outvoted here, Bucky," he said. Bruce rubbed a gentle hand over Bucky's shoulders. "You're entitled to feel whatever you feel, but sometimes feelings can lie to you. Emotions get
distorted by past experiences or ideas. None of us are willing to abandon you. We work a dangerous job. What happened to you could happen to anyone. Taking care of you helps us all feel safer, more like a family. It reminds us that if we get hurt, the team will look after us. So you're not going to shake us loose. Understand?"

"Yeah. You're stubborn," Bucky said with a watery smile.

"You have no idea," Tony said.

"Hey, runt," Bucky said softly. "I'm sorry I said mean things to you. I don't want you to leave. I just ... feel guilty, sometimes."

"It's okay," Steve said, his voice a little rough. "I forgive you."

Bucky patted the cushion beside him. Steve dove back into his place. Bucky snuggled against him. Phil settled into his own chair. "Can we watch the rest of the movie?" Bucky asked.

Clint and Natasha returned to the couch. Tony and Betty put their phones away. JARVIS flicked the screen into action again. Phil trusted his judgment of Bucky's current state.

The movie scrolled on to its conclusion. Marlin and Dory finally watched Nemo head back to school with his friends. The end of the movie initiated the usual shuffle of people going to and fro, visiting the bathroom, and picking up the demolished remains of supper. A few drifted back to look at the new aquarium again.

By then Bucky seemed to be recovered. It was the kind of emotional storm where something just needed to be let out, and once that happened, the pressure eased up considerably. Steve and Bucky pressed against each other, balance restored. Hopefully this will help Bucky find peace with his feelings, Phil thought as he watched them together.

"Phil, could you ... help me with something?" Bucky asked quietly.

"Of course, just let me know what you need," Phil said.

"When Tony and I fought in the garage, half the team only saw the end of it. They saw how upset I was, and they blamed Tony. They never saw what I did to hurt him in the first place," Bucky said. "I don't know how to explain all that or apologize to everyone. It's not the kind of thing I'm good at discussing, and besides, I've made a spectacle of myself enough tonight. I thought maybe ... you could suggest that people watch the security feed ... or something ..."

Phil had been mulling over the issue himself, but hadn't reached a conclusion yet. Going over such a painful scene in front of the whole team seems counterproductive, he thought. A discreet message to each person and a private viewing should be much safer. They can always talk with Bucky individually if they need more clarification.

"That sounds like a good idea, Bucky. I'll take care of it," said Phil. "Thank you for the show of honesty." He had worried a little, at first, about how people would adjust to living in a building with so much surveillance. It turned out to be something they could all use, though, so it wasn't like one person spying on others unfairly -- and some times, like this, it helped people understand each other better.

"I'm not proud of what I did, but I won't hide from it," Bucky said. Steve hugged him as they headed back to their floor.
It was Tony, though, who trailed Phil out of the common room. "Earlier, it sounded like we weren't done talking yet," he said, "and you still haven't punished me for ruining the game of hide and seek."

"We still have some things to cover, yes," Phil said as they stepped into the elevator. "Tony, the goal of all this isn't to punish you. It's to figure out what went wrong, and what we can do to prevent that from happening again. Given how unpleasant you find talking about serious personal matters, I think hours of that comprise a pretty stiff penalty."

"What happened is that I was stupid," Tony said. He leaned against Phil, seeking support in the contact. Tony hadn't gotten much touch or attention tonight.

"You're one of the smartest people alive, so I don't think that was the cause. Would you like to come back to my place to discuss this now, or pick it up later?" Phil asked. He reached an arm around Tony.

"I'd rather get it over with," Tony said.

"All right," Phil said.

JARVIS let them off the elevator at Phil's floor. Phil sat down on his couch. Tony wandered around the living room, touching this, staring at that. He did it almost every time he visited Phil's quarters, even though he knew what the place looked like. It was just how Tony moved through space; he couldn't leave anything alone for long.

"I think this began when we started adding new people to game night," Phil said. "When Betty came in, you held yourself back instead of acting out like you did before."

Tony dropped the paperweight he was holding. It bounced from the coffee table to the floor. "Yeah, I don't want to get in the way," Tony said. He grabbed the agate sphere and hastily returned it to its place.

"You were here first. That means you're not in the way," Phil said. "How do you feel about Betty now?"

"She's really good for Bruce. She's smart and fun," Tony said.

"I meant, how do you feel about her as part of game night?" Phil said.

Tony looked down. "Betty plays with me. She can keep up with me too. I like her," he said.

"Do you feel comfortable and safe with her there? Do you feel like you can be yourself, instead of wanting to hide or pretend?" Phil pressed.

"Yeah," Tony said. "It took a little while to get used to her, but now, it's okay."

Chapter End Notes

Catharsis is a useful technique for healing many negative experiences. Watching a movie is one way to activate catharsis on demand. Bucky basically stumbled into this, but it worked out all right for him anyway.

It's important to own up to your mistakes. Disagreements may be resolved in private or
in a family meeting; think about which would work better in a given instance. Follow the steps to solve family problems.

There are children and adults who feel compelled to touch everything; many other people hate this. Scroll down this page and you'll find a description of difficult people being touch-dominant. I write Tony as touch-dominant because in canon he's an asshole, he's handsy, and he's tactile-defensive about being handed things. Clearly he is also capable of working with visual and audio input, because of the holographic and voice interfaces that he likes to use. But he has also programmed a LOT of stuff to run on gestures. It makes me think he can handle the other modes because he's a genius; they're overlays on his base preference. Touch-dominant people tend to be either grabby or avoidant. To learn, they need to work with their hands. Good communication requires matching sensory modes; this is a challenge for touch-dominant people. (The Avengers favor different sense metaphors. Clint and Steve go for sight. Bruce likes touch but picks up smell from Hulk. Phil is overwhelmingly audio.) Matching modes influences effectiveness in therapy and other contexts.

It helps for parents to know a child's dominant sense. Here's a comparison of different learning styles in action; smell/taste isn't even on the list, as that range is even less tolerated than touch-dominance. Poor Hulk (and Bruce by extension). Most people have a preferred mode of learning but can work with one or more others; some people are fluent with most sensory input; others have only a single effective option. Explore some exercises to identify your dominant sense.

Friendship is a vital part of human interaction. Friends can make you feel better or worse. They should definitely help you feel safe. Understand what makes a good or bad friendship. Think about how you make other people feel. Phil does well by asking Tony to consider these points regarding Betty. There are steps to make new friends and become a true friend.
Somewhere You Go When You Feel Upset

Chapter Summary

Phil talks with Tony about the toolshed and Tony's past. Tony explains how he learned about self-disclosure as a method of conflict resolution.

Chapter Notes

Still trying to straighten out the mangled chapter sequencing.

Not all the end notes fit, so some are here:

*Impressing people* is a common desire, but *not a good idea*. There are tips on *how to stop trying to impress people*, and conversely, *how to impress people for real*. You can see a lot of Tony's behavior in canon that angles this way, despite being mixed with a lot of devil-may-care shenanigans.

*Fear of disapproval* is a pervasive part of the *anxiety culture*. Learn how to *face your fears*. For all his fast talking and flashy accomplishments, Tony's self-confidence is more sham than substance. Watch him with people he cares about, like Pepper or Bruce, and the fear shows through.

*Smell and memory* are closely connected. This is especially true if strong emotions are involved, as with *nostalgic smells*. *Scent can unlock memories*, even "lost" ones for *dementia patients* or *abuse survivors*.

Different *types of child abuse* can have *different effects*. These impact connections with other people, as shown in this *diagram of the circumplex model of abuse*. *Damage to attachment* then makes it difficult for survivors to *draw healthy boundaries*. Look at the Avengers and you can see varying results: emotional neglect with occasional physical abuse amidst financial plenty left Tony erratic. Severe emotional and physical abuse with various neglect left Bruce skittish, Hulk violently defensive, and both convinced they deserve nothing good. A moderate mix of abuse and neglect left Clint touch-starved and determined to fend for himself. Intense abuse and deprivation left Natasha emotionally numb and morally confused.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"What about Bucky?" asked Phil.

"It's harder with him," Tony admitted. He turned away, foot scuffing against the carpet. "He makes me feel ... I dunno. It's like with Steve at first, kind of, I want to impress him but I keep screwing up. So I try really hard not to do anything wrong, and then I tend to wind up ... not doing anything."
"I think that backfired," Phil said.

"Yeah," Tony said glumly.

"It reminds me of something else, too," Phil said. "Bucky has mentioned at least twice that you 'smelled like home,' in particular motor oil and dirt floor. Steve has noticed it too. You've evaded previous attempts to talk about this, and I let it go because it didn't seem important enough to stress you by pushing the issue."

"It's not easy to talk about," Tony said.

"I know. I think we need to, though," Phil said. "Now that I've seen your toolshed, I believe it's somewhere you go when you feel upset, not somewhere you work every day. Am I right?"

Tony nodded. "Yeah, sometimes I duck in real quick if I just need a particular tool, or a bit of inspiration, but if I'm in there a while, it's ... usually not a good time," he said. He drifted back toward Phil, finding comfort in proximity.

"Understood. Two occasions that come to mind are right before we brought Bucky into the tower, and the morning he woke up without most of his memories," Phil said. "Can you tell me anything about those times?"

"It was Howard," Tony said. "He and Bucky knew each other. I went digging in some old files for information about Bucky. I needed to get something in my hands, get out of my head. Then I was thinking about Howard helping to start SHIELD, and how it just seems that everything he touched turned to shit ..."

"Not Steve," Phil pointed out.

"Everything except for perfect Steve," Tony snarled, "oh yes, how could I possibly have forgotten that one."

Old words. Old wounds. Phil reached out and laid a gentle hand over Tony's wrist. "I apologize. I should have picked a different example."

Tony sighed. "No, I'm sorry for snapping. That's not fair of me. I know none of it was Steve's fault. Howard just ..."

Phil waited, but Tony did not resume. "Howard hurt you by comparing you to someone else, instead of valuing you for yourself," he guessed. "I don't think he realized how much it would hurt Steve as well."

"Howard didn't realize a lot of things," Tony said. "The other time it was him too. I'd been working on ideas for Bucky's replacement arm. It reminded me of some of Howard's old projects -- he was a pilot, and that made him fascinated with making everything as light as possible. Planes. Flying cars. He did some early work in prosthetics, even. There were some joints left that I wanted to compare. Then I couldn't help thinking about the arc reactor and how he had to fix that for me and, and, fuck."

And then they had to call Tony to come check Bucky's hardware. No wonder Tony melted down later in the day. It's amazing that didn't happen sooner. We need to take better care of him after he's spent time in the toolshed, Phil thought. "You did the hard work, Tony," Phil said aloud.

"I guess," Tony said. "Anyway, I try to be nice to Bucky. It's not right for me to take it out on him, when Howard is the one I'm really angry with. Bucky's a good guy. He deserves a little peace, after all the crap that's happened to him."
"That's very kind of you," said Phil. "I've wondered how you two managed to grow so close, so fast."

"We're both mechanics," Tony said. "Both pranksters and troublemakers and ladies' men."

*Both heroes*, Phil added silently.

"Bucky is part of my past, in a way, because of Howard but especially Steve," said Tony. "The other thing ... I didn't know until Natasha said, about his arm. Once I got a good look at it, then I realized."

"Realized what?" Phil asked.

"He's like me, part human and part machine. That arm isn't just a harness rig, it's actually spliced into his nervous system," Tony said. Then his voice lowered. "Bucky is the only other cyborg I know. It feels good ... to know I'm not alone anymore."

"I'm glad you find some comfort in that," Phil said. "I've noticed a pattern, though, where you upset someone and then make up for it by revealing something deeply personal. You do it more with Bucky, although I know you do it with Pepper and a few others too."

Tony shrugged. "There was a seminar."

"What kind of seminar?" Phil asked.

"You know, sensitivity training. I got into some scandal, forget which one because this was years ago. Obie and Pepper helped clean up the mess," Tony said. "Then they hired this motivational speaker to come talk about relationship maintenance and appropriate boundaries and stuff. Most of it didn't make much sense to me, but that bit -- it's like balancing accounts. It just added up right in my head. So I started using it with people I cared about."

"How did that work out for you?" Phil asked.

"It helped some, especially with Pepper. She wants me to tell her things, though sometimes she flips out when she hears what I have to say," Tony said. "It's nice to have a method that works at all. I screw up a lot and Pepper shouldn't have to put up with that without getting anything back."

"What about Obie?" Phil said.

"How do you think he got enough access to paralyze JARVIS?" Tony said bitterly.

*Well, that explains a lot*, Phil thought. *I wonder if Obie engineered that entire sequence, so he could train Tony to mend offenses that way. It gave Obie access to a lot of personal information that he could use against Tony.* Phil's hand tightened on the couch. The transactional approach to relationship maintenance bothered him with Tony, as much as it did with Natasha. They weren't wrong, exactly, but sometimes their efforts at balancing accounts could get them into more trouble.

Chapter End Notes

Comparisons can hurt kids and adults. It's not a good idea to compare yourself with other people. There are tips on how to avoid comparing children and how to stop comparing yourself to others.
Feeling inadequate can plague people even in the presence of strong talent. There are ways to overcome feelings of inadequacy and to turn the lack into strength.

People can be fragile in times of hardship. Relationships are delicate too; handle with care. Understand how to help a friend overcome stress and what to do when you have a bad day. Sometimes it's important to cut each other some slack, and yourself too. Some of the Avengers have strong nurturing instincts, while others are still learning that -- and they all have a protective streak.

Common ground makes a great foundation for friendship. This opportunity for connection is good, because people need other people. Whatever you're going through, you are not alone, and that can help to hold on. There are tips for finding things in common with others.

Friendship can be envisioned as a kind of bank account representing the natural give-and-take in relationships. Creating intimacy relies on finding the right amount of self-disclosure, not too much or too little. Otherwise you wind up in an unbalanced relationship, which is destructive. Hopefully you can get out before anyone gets seriously injured or killed ... but what happened to Tony with Obie is fantastical only in the detail, not the ultimate effects. Understand how to distinguish between healthy and unhealthy relationships. A good friendship builds support and lasting ties.
They're Family, Not Groupies

Chapter Summary

Phil suggests alternatives to self-disclosure for making up after a fight. Tony misinterprets what he meant. It leads to a discussion about the relationship between Tony and Bucky, and how Tony responds to authority.

Chapter Notes

The chapters got messed up during the recent AO3 service interruption. Everything should be fixed now. I suggest rereading 29-30-31 to see the correct and complete sequence. Sorry for the mixup.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Self-disclosure is a valid technique for building trust or repairing relationships after a breach," Phil said carefully, "but it also has drawbacks, as you've seen. For one thing, it needs to go both ways or it tends to unbalance the connection. For another, going too far too fast can cause problems."

"Like overdriving your headlights," Tony said.

"That's one way to look at it, yes," Phil said. "I think you might benefit from exploring additional ways to make up for mistakes. What about physical intimacy instead of emotional intimacy? That can provide an effective way to reconnect with someone."

"Sex isn't intimate."

Oh, Tony, Phil thought. He gave Tony's hand a compassionate squeeze.

"Besides, I don't want to have sex with my teammates. They're family, not groupies or fuckbuddies. They're important," Tony said.

Phil wondered if that distinction had also contributed to the breakup of Tony and Pepper as a romantic couple. Aloud he said, "I meant something like cuddling or massage, not sex. Affectionate touch can take many forms."

"Bucky and I do that too," Tony said, lifting a hand to where the arc reactor shone faintly through his shirt. "He's really gentle with me. Well, most of the time -- that's why the garage fight caught me off-guard so much, I wasn't expecting him to turn on me like that. It upset me more than I thought it could."

"You two seem to have a complicated relationship," Phil observed. "I think Bucky feels the same way about you. Usually you handle him with care, so the threats and shoving hit him a lot harder. How do you feel about it?"

"There's this ... " Tony's hand fluttered over his chest. " ... this thing between us, and I don't know
what it is or what to do with it, really. It pulls. Only sometimes it pushes instead, and that hurts like fuck."

"I've noticed that pattern too," Phil said.

"Bucky would have run from me, down in the garage, if you hadn't held onto him," Tony said. "I didn't mean to be so nasty, I just ... have these problems with authority, and if people squeeze too hard, then I fight back."

"It makes you feel like you can't breathe," Phil guessed.

Tony coughed, then rubbed around the rim of the arc reactor. "That. Yes."

"You're learning to mind me," Phil observed. "You do quite well following Captain America in battle."

"That's different," Tony said. He flitted away from Phil again. "You two don't try to jerk me around anymore. You're the only ones who ever stopped doing that, and I don't know why."

"Steve and I both realized, in different ways, that what we started out doing with you just wasn't working," Phil said. "By then we cared enough about you that we didn't want to keep hurting you, so we tried out various other techniques until we found some that worked. Not everyone can adjust their leadership approach like that."

"Tell me about it," Tony grumbled. He fiddled with the paperweights on the coffee table, lining them up, then pushing them apart again.

"I think it's a matter of style," Phil said. "We need to find better ways for you and Bucky to work together."

"I don't know if I can," Tony said. "In the field, Cap just aims my skills. He's good at deploying the team effectively, okay, I get that now. On game nights I can play with Steve because he doesn't act like he's in charge, just ... more experienced ... and even that took me a while to get used to, because of the history. Bucky, though, sometimes he acts like he's the boss. When we're on equal footing, I can deal with him, but when he tries to push me around I just snap."

"Mmm ... that is a problem. I'll watch for it," Phil said. "Sometimes you do all right with Bucky, though. I've seen you looking up to him in certain ways. Do you think you can give him some time to learn better?"

"I can try," Tony said. "Guess I owe him that after the shitty way I treated him in the garage."

"Be gentle with yourself too," Phil reminded him. "I know you can."

"That's just it. You're the only one who makes me feel ..." Tony said, his voice wavering. He patted the air with his hands. "I don't know. Like I can give you this part of me for a while -- the strong part, the in charge part -- and you'll hold it for me without dropping it. Without breaking it. I get so tired of trying to hold everything together myself, and with you I don't have to."

"Tony, it's all right," Phil assured him. "You don't have to hold on until you wear yourself out. Just come and tell me, and I'll take care of you." Tony's erratic behavior reminded Phil of how cranky children could get when tired, especially if they didn't realize how tired they truly were.

"It's hard, though. I can't just come out and say it," Tony said.
"Neither can I," Phil said. "I can't even switch down without help. I need someone to push me down."

Steve had done most of the work, after a mission gone awry, helping Phil recover from the stress. Steve had held him close, pressed him down and in until he came out the other side of himself as Flip. Then Uncle Steve hadn't minded that Flip needed to fuss and struggle against him, hadn't lost his temper, was gentle and firm in a way that made it possible for Flip to relax.

*It must be something similar for Tony,* Phil thought. *He needs to let go, accept the guidance, but he can't always do it by himself. Sometimes he needs help to get from no to yes.*

"Nobody else has ever made me feel that way, made me want it like that. I don't know if that will ever change. Even Pepper -- even Rhodey --" Tony wound up clutching at the arc reactor.

Chapter End Notes

The end notes are too long to fit here; you can read them on the original Dreamwidth post.
Who Believes That He Can Be Good

Chapter Summary

Tony explains how he feels about pressure to behave, and why he needs to let go sometimes. Phil encourages him, then shares some of Bucky's past with Tony. Tony doesn't understand why Bucky and Bruce trust him.

Chapter Notes

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

Nagging tries to motivate people through repetition. There are ways to avoid nagging someone and to stop people from nagging you. Criticizing people is more likely to make them resistant than agreeable. So stop criticizing others, and don't let them criticize you either. Betrayal damages a person's ability to form deep relationships. Don't betray people. Understand how to get over a friend's betrayal.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Pepper and Rhodey, Phil remembered suddenly, were two people who had put their hands into Tony's chest to keep him alive. They managed him as best they could, tried to keep him from self-destructing, but they did it by nagging and criticizing him. The third on that short list, Yinsen, had saved Tony's life ... but savaged his trust in leadership by keeping secret a part of the plan that Tony would never have agreed to follow if he'd known about it in advance.

"I'm listening," Phil said.

"They want me to be responsible, to follow the rules, and ... and that's not really me, Phil, I can't be that all the time, it hurts," Tony said. "Sometimes I feel like they're too good for me, you know? At least with Bucky, he knows what it's like to be a bad boy, to screw around." Tony's voice dropped, and he rubbed his fingers restlessly together. "To have blood on his hands. And still have people follow him, think he's worth something. I just don't know if I can follow him myself. Right now it feels ..." He gave a helpless shrug. "... like trying to tighten a metric nut with a standard wrench."

"Whatever you feel is fine. It would be helpful if you could follow Bucky's lead at need, because having more options is always good, but don't worry over it if it doesn't happen. Don't try to force yourself, or anyone else, to do things that don't feel right to you," Phil said. "I know you have good instincts."

Tony just looked at him, plainly at a loss for words.

I'm the only one in charge of Tony who believes that he can be good, and who accepts him even when he misbehaves, Phil realized with a deep ache. That's what makes him want to mind me. Steve is learning. I wonder if Bucky can, too. Of course that brought up the whole rat's nest of Bucky's issues.
"You know, Bucky didn't have parents most of the time when he was little," Phil said aloud, leaning back into the couch cushions. "He had to grow up way too fast, especially once he started looking out for Steve. It was almost like being a parent himself. I think that makes it hard for Bucky to get the hang of game night. He doesn't know how to let go and trust me to take care of things, not yet, because he just hasn't seen much of that in his life."

"It was hard for me, too, because I'm so used to taking care of myself ... or trying to," Tony said. He edged around the coffee table and sat on the arm of the couch, just one thigh over it, not committing his full weight. "I guess it's worse for Bucky."

"Let's not compare levels of abuse. I merely wanted to point out some relevant challenges," Phil said.

"It's weird that Bucky reminds me so much of myself, in some regards," Tony said. "He's not -- it's not like Bruce, exactly, who was the first person I felt this way about. Bucky isn't that fast. But he's, he's more solid in ways that Bruce isn't."

"Bucky is a mechanic; Bruce is more a biologist and theoretical physicist. It stands to reason that they'd find different pieces of common ground with you," Phil said.

"It's hard, the way Bucky and I keep bouncing off each other. Bruce and I don't usually do that. I think I'd go nuts if we did," Tony said.

"Well, when you met Bruce, he had been running loose for a while," Phil pointed out. "He wasn't in good shape, but at least the damage wasn't bleeding-fresh. That made it possible for him to trust you without so much backlash."

"Trust me?" Tony echoed with a ragged laugh. "People don't trust me, Phil. I'm the genius who blows up his own lab and does drunken shit that ends up in the headlines. That's not exactly trust material."

"Yet you invite people's trust and some of them give it to you," Phil said. Tony opened his mouth to protest. Phil held up a hand. "No, hear me out. Bruce and Bucky -- two deeply wounded people -- trust you in ways they don't trust anyone else. And you reached both of them almost instantly, the first time you met, although you did it in different ways with each. Somehow you made them feel safe with you."

"But I didn't do anything special. I did what anyone should have done. It doesn't take a genius to make sure that folks have food and medical care and a decent place to stay. And not, you know, violate their bodies while they're helpless. I just wanted them to -- to not run away. Nobody should have to go on the run because people want to torment them," Tony said.

"I agree," Phil said. "However, both Bruce and Bucky have experience with people brutalizing their integrity in ways that make it difficult -- almost impossible -- for them to open up with anyone or have confidence in benevolent intentions. They've had their faith so badly shattered that it's a wonder they can still connect with anyone. Despite that, these men trust you anyway, as much as they are still capable of it at all. Do not take that lightly."

"I didn't ask for their trust," Tony whispered. "I just wanted them to go along with me enough to get things done and keep them safe."

"That probably helped lower the pressure enough to make it possible," Phil said.

"It just feels weird," Tony said. "Pepper's always going on and on about my trust issues, and pushing me to tell her stuff. I try, but it doesn't always turn out so well. She doesn't like a lot of what I have to
say. I don't really know how I wound up with other people giving me that kind of, of *access control* when I didn't even ask them for it. This isn't the stuff I'm good at."

"You've made a lot of progress," Phil said. "That's an accomplishment to be proud of."

Chapter End Notes

*Nobody can follow the rules all the time.* Too much pressure can make your feel like you're not good enough for somebody. *Perfectionism* is a pernicious thing that undermines happiness. **Stop trying to be perfect,** and just be yourself. Tony has a hard time living up to his own estimate of other people's expectations.

When deciding what you should or shouldn't do, **follow your instincts.** Don't do anything that makes you feel bad about yourself.

Parentification most often affects the oldest child in a family, who gets pressed into service caring for younger siblings. In an institution housing many children, again the older ones may wind up looking after the younger ones. This can make it hard for parentified children to accept care from adults. However, the situation isn't always wholly negative. It can form close bonds between older and younger children, and develop many useful life skills. For Bucky and Steve, the gain of the bonding outweighs the cost.

*Learning to trust again* after a betrayal is very difficult. But so is learning to trust yourself again, or accepting trust from other people. You need to recognize your own power. When someone trusts you, don't prove them wrong. Tony knows about quick ways of building trust on a solid foundation from his salesman skills. He doesn't necessarily stop to think that if he does these things hoping to make people comfortable and convince them to go along with him, sometimes they actually will trust him. Tony doesn't know what to do with that, but he usually does the right things anyway.

People have different ideas about what it takes to be a hero. Basically, heroes behave with human decency and stick up for everyone's basic rights. Often they don't think that they're heroes. They think they're just doing what anyone would do, and they would do it for anyone.

*Access control* has to do with who can use a computer system in what ways. Tony thinks of personal influence in relationships along these lines, giving people more power as they become closer friends. Healthy personal relationships therefore require some self-control to avoid taking advantage of people. **Friendship** is a connection whereby people can influence each other, hopefully in positive ways.
You Needed to Trust Us

Chapter Summary

Tony shares how it felt to reveal the toolshed to his friends. Phil talks about trust, and makes a confession. Then they discuss boundaries. Phil also suggests that some private playtime might help Tony, but Tony's having trouble with that.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Yeah ... about that," Tony said. "In the garage, I let you see something that nobody's ever seen before, because I needed it to help Bucky. I knew you and Steve wouldn't want me just disappearing with him, so ... that's what I did instead." His voice hitched and skipped over the words. "It was good for me, too, I think. Just. Hard, you know? Because usually when I leave myself open like that, people reach in and hurt me. You didn't. You held back. You were willing to look, but not touch. Huh, read-only access. I needed ... to see it. To know that you'd do that."

"You needed to trust us," Phil said softly. "You needed us to trust that you knew what you were doing."

Tony nodded, his eyes huge and bright with unshed tears. "Yeah."

Phil understood that trust came hard for Tony. Howard had given his son plenty of things but rarely attention. Alcohol only added to the erratic emotional environment. That left Tony with disorganized attachment that still showed in his current relationships, where he tended to waffle between pulling people closer and pushing them away. Tony's faith in his teamfamily now relied on consistency and honesty. That made Phil realize that he needed to share something more.

"I have a confession," Phil said. "When we were searching for you, I thought that you might have hidden in the toolshed. I made a decision about that. I would have saved it for the absolute last place in the tower, but if we hadn't found you anywhere else, I would have looked there."

"It's okay," Tony said with a wavering smile. "If something had gone really wrong in there, so that I couldn't just haul Bucky out myself, I would have called you and Steve through the door. I wouldn't have let you see the toolshed in the first place if I didn't trust you. Hell, I wouldn't have let you in my garage."

"Thank you for placing that much faith in us," Phil said.

"Thanks for being worth it," Tony said. "I'm just glad it didn't come to that. Being that vulnerable hurts too much. It's like -- like when I first had to learn how to breathe around the electromagnet, with the raw ends of my ribs shifting against the casing every time I took a breath. Too new. Too big. Too open."

"That sounds terrible," Phil said. He'd seen images of Tony's chest with the shadowy ring of cartilage and bone that Yinsen had grafted together around the white hole of metal. "You healed around it, though -- even made it better, with the arc reactor. Now it's a source of power instead of pain."
"Story of my life," Tony said.

"Turning vulnerabilities into strengths? Yes, I suppose it is," Phil said. "It might help for you to try mapping your boundaries. List what you feel comfortable doing and what you don't, which people have access to different parts of your life, how safe you feel relying on them, and so forth."

"I'm not really good at that. I don't see boundaries the same way other people do, I guess. I do better flying by the seat of my pants," Tony said.

"Until you bend over too far and rip something," Phil said.

"Well ... yeah, that's on YouTube," Tony said.

_Sadly in several versions, figurative and literal_, Phil mused. _Aloud he added, "You don't have to be perfect at this. There are worksheets and things that can help."

Tony made a face. "Now you're giving me homework?"

"Just suggestions," Phil said. "You've used computer metaphors several times. If that works for you, go with it. The similarities between appropriate personal boundaries and user authorizations are close enough that it should make some real improvement."

"Okay. I'll see what I can do with that," Tony said.

"I wish you would take more care with Bucky in particular," Phil said. "You keep drawing him deeper into levels of intimacy that you don't feel fully comfortable with. I don't want you to hurt yourself in the process. That's bad for you, and bad for the team."

"I can take it," Tony said.

"Can you really?" Phil said. "I look at what happened in the garage, both times -- you pulled yourself so far open in the morning, I think it made you clench up tighter in the evening. Then you weren't the only one who got hurt by that; you blew up and took it out on everyone else in range."

"Well, that's what happens when things are under pressure. They tend to explode," Tony said. He flung up his hands in illustration of that.

"We need to think of ways to minimize that kind of damage," Phil said.

"What would you suggest, then?" Tony asked. "I can't just _ignore_ Bucky when he's falling apart on me, any more than I could ignore an engine falling out of my car."

"Try a more oblique approach to tapping off the pressure, if you can't always think of a solution that avoids building it up. I think you should work on asking for what you need in ageplay," Phil said. "If that means requesting extra time with me, I'll give you as much as I can. If that means misbehaving, it's okay, do that. Holding it in until it spurts out sideways is not helping. Game night is our safe space to let off steam. A safety valve only works if it can open at need, not if it's latched shut."

"I'm not sure ..." Tony said. One heel kicked against the couch.

"Let's try it," Phil said. "Most of the other team members have had some one-on-one time with Uncle Phil. Maybe that would help you too. We could explore that tonight, if you like."

"I can't switch down," Tony said quietly. "I've tried, in private. You said I needed more coping skills, so I thought maybe that would work for me, hug a teddy bear or something. Didn't work. I'm
stuck. It's like -- like a cramp, I can't move, can't work it out."

Chapter End Notes

The end notes don't fit here, so read them on the original Dreamwidth post. This story is nearly complete there.
Let's Try Treating It Like a Cramp

Chapter Summary

Phil reasons that if Tony's inability to shift down feels like a cramp, maybe a hot bath will help. Tony is dubious about this.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"All right," Phil said. "We'll do something else, then. If it feels like a cramp, let's try treating it like a cramp. Maybe a hot bath will soak it out. Come on." He nudged Tony toward the bathroom.

Tony balked. "Phil, no, I am not letting you give me a bath. That's just weird. I'm not really four years old."

"It doesn't matter what age you are, or feel like you are. What matters is finding a solution," Phil said. "You're miserable. You've tried to fix it yourself but that didn't work. We've been talking, and you're still stuck. I want to help." Phil thought about what to say next. He didn't want to push too hard. He also didn't want Tony to ignore a blockage in the most useful healing exercise they had. "If you utterly hate the bath idea, we can try a different technique, but this is the best I can think of. Or you can turn to someone else for assistance, if you don't feel comfortable with me."

"Why a bath?" Tony asked, looking more thoughtful. He was learning to ask for more information before making a final decision, rather than staying stubborn.

"You need someone to take care of you. Sometimes things that can't be reached directly can be improved obliquely. Your comparison of emotional contraction to a muscle cramp got me thinking along these lines. A hot bath is relaxing for body and mind," Phil said.

"You really think you can ... fix me?" Tony said. The note of hope in his voice squeezed Phil's heart like a tiny hand.

"I believe I can help. If this doesn't work, we can make some other attempt next," Phil said. "Don't try to push yourself toward any particular age. Just be. What matters isn't your age, but that you trust yourself to me. If it's weird, we'll deal with that too." Phil spread his hands. "Honestly, Tony -- when are our lives not weird?"

"Point," Tony muttered.

"We can make it a shower if you prefer," Phil offered. It wouldn't be as effective, but he knew that sometimes Tony could not tolerate standing water. "What do you say? It's your choice."

"Okay, fine, I'll try it your way," Tony said. "You don't have to go that far to coddle my insecurities." He hated admitting any vulnerability left behind by his traumatic experiences, ashamed of the weakness. Yet Phil knew that Tony didn't manually lock bathroom doors, precisely because he could have a panic attack and wanted to avoid people breaking down a door to reach him.

"JARVIS, run a bath, hot, extra bubbles," said Phil.
"Running now," JARVIS said. The water swished on in the bathroom.

Phil brought Tony a bathrobe. "Here, take your clothes off and put this on. Wait for me outside the bathroom," Phil instructed. "I'm going to change into my swim trunks." That way he could stay covered, but not mind if he got wet.

Tony gave him a funny look but did as Phil asked. When Phil opened the bathroom door, a cloud of fragrant steam wafted out. Tony sniffed and then said, "I smell neroli, sandalwood, and vanilla. Why do you have Bruce's bath oil?"

"I keep a variety of things handy in case other people come here," Phil said. "Besides, it's very relaxing." He guided Tony toward the tub.

Despite Tony's protest over my suggestion, he recognized the scent. So he presumably has some experience with communal bathing, beyond the time we all washed the Hulk, to be that familiar with Bruce's favorite, Phil mused. Then again, maybe he just smelled it on Bruce.

"Sure it's relaxing, if you don't mind smelling like a girl," Tony said.

"I don't," Phil said. "Bruce has his reasons for liking floral scents, and this blend works. Would you have preferred something different?"

"Nah, JARVIS has my preferences; he wouldn't have used anything I can't stand," Tony said.

"That's good," Phil said. He had come to rely on JARVIS for things like that. "Let me have your robe while you climb into the tub." Phil took hold of the collar.

"... okay," Tony said. He was slow and reluctant sliding out of the robe. Phil gave it a practiced flip so that the sides opened to serve as a screen until Tony got under the bubbles. Then he hung the robe on a hook.

Tony hunched in the hot water, hugging his knees. His arms cupped a mountain of foam against his chest. The arc reactor was no more than a faint blue sheen, easily lost in the rainbow shimmer. There was nothing relaxed about the pose.

Phil sat on the edge of the tub. "Tony, I'm doing my best to respect your privacy, but you don't need to hide from me," he said gently. "I've seen your body before, and you have nothing to be ashamed of."

"I know, I know," Tony said, a pinched look on his face. "I've shown you my scars already, even let you touch the arc reactor. This is ... stupid. I just feel really ..." His voice trailed off.

"... exposed?" Phil suggested after a minute.

"Maybe. Raw, hypersensitive ... like a live wire stripped of insulation," Tony said. "I don't know why. It's not like this is anything new."

"Well, you've had a hard day, couple of days now really," said Phil. "Maybe I can help you relax and feel safer. You don't need to worry about anything right now. If something comes up, I'll deal with it so you won't have to. Focus on that idea. You've held up through a lot, but you can let go now."

"Yeah, it's been ... pretty rough," Tony said. He didn't uncurl, but some of the rigidity seemed to ease out of his body.
Phil reached into the tub to wet a washcloth, the water closing over his wrist. It was hotter than his usual bath; JARVIS had set it to Tony's taste. Phil added soap to the cloth and worked up a lather. Then he slid it carefully over the portion of Tony's legs that extended above the dense layer of foam.

Tony sighed. Phil stroked the cloth up his back, over, and down again. He felt Tony lean into the touch just a little. Phil smiled. With the right coaxing, Tony responded well to physical intimacy.

Chapter End Notes

The end notes are too long to fit. You can see them on the original Dreamwidth post.
He Carries Tension

Chapter Summary

Phil uses some techniques learned from Bruce to help Tony relax in the bath.

Chapter Notes

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

Relaxing the body helps to relax the mind and emotions. Acupressure uses pressure points along the nervous system to aid relaxation. There are points for the neck, arm, and hand.

Neck tension can come from physical (such as overwork or poor posture) and psychological (such as withholding statements or feeling undervalued) causes. Some people use tension as a type of emotional armor. Massage can help remove the armor and the pain it brings -- although the process may raise uncomfortable feelings.

Mammals have an innate fear of falling, especially falling backwards. In dreams, falling backwards can symbolize surrender to a trusted power. A trust fall is one example of an exercise intended to teach teamwork. Tony would be familiar with this, and has probably refused to do it more than once. It requires careful planning and discussion in order to succeed. Trust is not a game; done wrong, these exercises can alarm or hurt people. Facilitators need to choose activities mindfully and make sure everyone behaves in a responsible manner. Think about how long it took for Hulk to trust his teammates to catch him for a transformation and to carry Bruce home. Falling backwards is also a susceptibility test for hypnosis. For Tony, letting Phil lower him backwards requires considerable trust. This often shows up in massage therapy -- the instinct to protect oneself against tilting back is quite strong, even just a few inches above a padded surface.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Phil draped the washcloth over Tony's knees and put both hands on his shoulders, feeling the taut muscles under his grip. Phil worked from the outside in, over the ball of the shoulders and up the slope above the collarbones. When Phil reached his neck, Tony groaned.

He carries tension higher than Bruce does, Phil realized. I think they bend over their work differently. Watching bodywork with Bruce and Clint had inspired Phil to look up some relevant resources. JARVIS had found him a handy reference to how some people could store stress in the body. Neck tension correlates to thoughts and emotions, along with unspoken truths. What are you thinking about, Tony? What are you not saying yet?

The knots went up the column of the neck to tangle at the base of the skull. Several hours of computer programming and emotional angst had left a lot of tracks behind. Working slowly, Phil kept light contact with Tony's back. This delicacy avoided aggravating the anxious muscles. It also
coaxed Tony to push against Phil's hands, so that he sat up little by little.

When felt himself start to tip past vertical, Tony tensed again. "What ...?" he said.

"It's all right, Tony, I've got you. Lean back now," Phil said. Tony obeyed, opening his arms and letting go of his knees. Phil draped him against the foam cushion at the end of the tub. "That's better."

Tony's eyes fluttered closed. His knees finally subsided under the surface as he stretched out his legs, hitching a little as they passed over the non-slip treads. The water sloshed as he shifted position. A vivid blue glow lit the bubbles over his chest.

Ignoring that, Phil picked up Tony's right arm. He swept the washcloth up and down and around. As he moved the washcloth past the wrist, Tony's muscles tightened again. Phil paused to see if he would relax, or take his arm back. Tony could be finicky about his hands. Phil took his time with the process of building rapport, pushing Tony gently forward and then letting him slide back, like rocking loose a car stuck in a ditch.

*Arms express love and connection, holding on or letting go,* Phil recalled. *Hands deal with giving and receiving. They cramp up when we can't handle something. What are you so afraid to reach for? Whatever you need, Tony, we want you to have it.*

"I know you've had a lot to deal with lately. This is hard for you, but you're doing very well," Phil said. "I'm proud of you for sticking with it and making an honest effort to work through things, instead of hiding from it all." Phil brushed his thumb lightly over the back of Tony's hand. After a few moments, the tension eased. Only then did he proceed.

Phil washed the fingers carefully. Tony had a different pattern of scars than Bruce did. The many nicks and scuffs over the knuckles probably came from shoving his hands into machines where they didn't quite fit. The back of the hand showed several pale chevrons, almost like corners. A variety of older marks dotted fingertips and palm, thin lines and dimples and glossy patches.

Like many people who worked with their hands, Tony had a thickened pad of muscle between thumb and forefinger. Phil kneaded it gently, searching for the place where his own hands tended to cramp up if he spent too long typing. *I wonder if the same thing happens to Tony, or if overwork lands somewhere else for him*, Phil mused.

"Oh yeah, that's the spot," Tony groaned.

Phil squeezed a little harder, holding the pressure point until he felt some of the tension release. Tony gave a happy sigh. Phil moved on with the washing. He frowned over the fingernails. Dark crescents showed beneath them. "You've got a lot of motor oil under here," he murmured.

"Always do," Tony said. "Good luck getting it out."

Phil applied a generous amount of soap to the nail brush. He scuffed it very lightly over Tony's fingertips, content to remove the oil a layer at a time instead of trying to scrub it all out at once. Tony gave a soft hum of approval as Phil worked over the sensitive area.

Finally Phil got the fingernails clean. He put that arm back under water. Then he washed the other one. This time Tony did not tighten up, letting Phil move him however needed. Phil cupped his free hand under the elbow, taking care to support the weight until he finished.

Only then did Phil trail the washcloth across Tony's collarbones. Instantly the brown eyes blinked
open. Tony tensed under the contact.

"You're safe," Phil assured him, keeping the strokes smooth and soft. "It's okay. You can let yourself unwind. Whatever you feel is fine."

"Yeah. Sure," Tony said.

The cloth moved lower over the ribs. Under his fingertips, Phil could feel the hard slick surface of the arc reactor. Then he shifted to the ridges and valleys of ravaged skin that covered most of Tony's chest. Gentle touches, full of care, traced over the textured lines. Some things could be spoken best in body language.

Muscular shoulders curled inward anyway. Tony couldn't always interpret body language. "I hate my body," he muttered.

"Well, it's changed a lot over time. That can feel disconcerting," Phil said, his hand covering a cluster of pink divots. "You have a good strong body, though. It's kept you alive."

"Sometimes I hate that too," Tony said. His muscles twitched and quivered under Phil's palm. The apprehension here was stronger and slower to fade.

"Relax," Phil said as he leaned forward. He rubbed soothing circles over Tony's front. "You have people to help you when life gets hard. You're not alone. I've got scars of my own, not all of them visible on the outside."

Tony's gaze flicked to Phil's chest. There was no mark left where Loki's spear had pierced the Life Model Decoy, but they both knew the invisible line of the wound. Espionage was risky work. Phil had his share of other souvenirs: the puckered craters of gunshots, the long white lines left by knives, the dotted ladders from sutures, the shiny patch of pink where a nylon strap had melted into his skin during a fire. A hair-thin ridge on his throat showed where one of Hawkeye's arrows had knocked away a gun pointed at Phil. He had wanted to keep that one, so he discreetly picked the scabs off the scratch until it healed into a subtle souvenir of salvation.

"Yeah," Tony said softly. "Some of the deepest ones aren't in the skin." He lifted a hand to cup over Phil's heart, leaving a damp print there. Then Tony settled deeper into the bath, finally letting all of his weight rest against the end of the tub. The bath pillow squeaked against the tile. His eyes drifted closed again.

Chapter End Notes

Bath tub equipment includes pillows for comfort and appliques for safety.

Open body language includes uncrossing arms and stretching out legs. Therapists learn to read client body language and to present positive body language of their own. Opening the body language indicates receptivity or support. Notice how Tony's body language slowly opens with a "two steps forward, one step back" pattern of relaxing, tensing, then relaxing more over time.

Apprehension is a common barrier to effective massage. In sports medicine, an apprehension test searches for motions that cause anxiety or discomfort. Someone whose body hurts or who has been mistreated in the past often has trouble staying limp.
and will pull the vulnerable body part out of reach. The key to working past this in massage is to go slowly and gently, pausing until the client relaxes again -- or if they don't relax, avoid pushing farther and switch to somewhere else. Body language also comes up in discussions of sexual consent in which tensing up, pulling away, and not responding can all mean "no" or at least "not yet." Phil is walking a very delicate line to see if this technique will work or if they need to try something else, so every time Tony shows apprehension, Phil provides reassurance and waits to see if Tony will signal going forward or pulling back.

Hand cramps have various causes including overuse and unhealthy habits such as alcoholism. Hand massage can help, especially for pain due to computer use. Reflexology shows how the hands map the body in miniature, so rubbing them can help the whole body.

Some people may find this batch of links to be gross. Different types of scars may result from different injuries. While scab-picking can qualify as self-harm, it also appears in scarification as body art. In this case, I tend to count Phil's action as body modification.

Coping with negative emotions involves a variety of techniques. Negative emotions have value, so it's important to embrace them rather than suppressing them. The key to the bath technique is that it pushes Tony just far enough to bring the negative emotions to the surface where he can reach them, without throwing him into a panic again, so that those feelings can be addressed and he can get unstuck. This is gradually relieving the tension created when Tony pulled himself too far open in the toolshed and then yanked shut during the garage fight. Transforming negative talk into positive talk helps make progress to better emotional states. Phil gives Tony some better alternatives to Tony's warped view of himself.
Boneless and Pliant

Chapter Summary

Phil's plan to help Tony relax is very effective. This has an unexpected side effect.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Phil made no outward acknowledgement of the changes. He simply continued with the slow process of washing Tony. Briefly Phil handed over the cloth so Tony could wash his hips. Then Phil took it back to do the feet. At last he hung the washcloth over the bath faucet.

Next Phil wet the dark ruff of hair and worked in a dab of shampoo. Tony purred. Phil smiled. As elaborate a beard as Tony wears, I thought he might have a taste for someone washing his hair, he mused. It gives him a good excuse to get some skin contact on a more frequent basis.

Phil inched his fingertips over every bit of scalp, working in small circles. Tony pushed back against him, head-butting like a particularly demanding kitten. White foam rose between Phil's fingers. Then he rinsed the suds away.

Tony responded so well to the scalp massage that Phil repeated the whole process with the conditioner. By the time he finished with that, Tony lay boneless and pliant in the warm water. The bubbles slowly subsided. They broke into clots and floated around the tub, lazy as clouds.

Phil trailed his hands down the sides of Tony's neck, seeking out the trouble spots. He was no expert, but he had learned a lot from the times he had watched Bruce take care of Clint or Betty take care of Bruce. The right side seemed worse than the left, probably because Tony tended to manipulate holograms more with his right hand or both together than with his left alone.

Phil set to work on the deep knots along Tony's spine. Much of the tension had leached out, but the worst of the kinks remained. Phil rolled them under his thumbs, gently, carefully, cajoling the muscles to let go of the strain. He pressed his fingertips under the base of the skull where the stress pooled in hard packets.

Tony whimpered a little as Phil worked, soft sounds mingling pleasure and pain. Phil soothed him with wordless murmurs of encouragement. Tony let him work, gradually melting under Phil's hands.

The heady scent of Bruce's bath oil hung in the air, a comforting weight. It smelled like a jungle in the rain. The washcloth dripped slowly where it draped over the faucet. A film of condensation covered the mirrors and tiles of the bathroom.

Phil ended up with Tony completely relaxed and trusting in his grasp. A faint snore bubbled up. Well how do you like that, he fell asleep on me, Phil thought. He wasn't used to the insomniac engineer nodding off randomly. Phil gave Tony a faint nudge and said, "Wake up. It's time to rinse off and get out."

Tony just snored a little louder.

That's inconvenient, Phil thought. This particular outcome had not occurred to him. He had known
that Tony was tired and stressed, but had not realized just how much. Phil hadn't planned for this, and he wasn't sure how to proceed.

He nudged Tony a bit harder, enough to slosh the water. No response.

"You will not wake him easily, Phil. Sir is quite sound asleep. Please be gentle with him," JARVIS said in a low tone.

Phil looked at the bathwater, where a few fading bubbles swirled around his hands and Tony's hips. It was no longer hot, merely tepid now. "Just how much bath oil did you put in here?" Phil asked. Bruce's idea of 'soothing' ingredients could get pretty heavy-handed.

"The usual amount for unmodified humans," JARVIS said. "Sir is emotionally exhausted. You actually succeeded in getting him to relax, which is a remarkable accomplishment under the circumstances. Barring a major disturbance, he will not wake for hours."

"I don't suppose you have any brilliant ideas for getting him out of the tub?" Phil said. He was too tired to think of any himself. "I certainly can't lift him."

"With your permission, I will ask Steve for his assistance," JARVIS said.

Phil weighed the embarrassment of having Steve walk in on them like this against the loss of relaxation if he forced Tony awake. He had let Tony down enough already by failing to account for such a possibility. Phil would rather look foolish for incomplete planning than cost Tony this hard-won comfort. "Call Steve," said Phil.

While waiting, Phil shrugged into his bathrobe and laid out a spare set of plain cotton pajamas for Tony. He cleaned up the bathroom a little. All the while, he kept a sharp eye on Tony to make sure that he didn't slide too low in the water. As Phil hung the washcloth over the towel rack, Steve came in --

-- wearing a towel around his hips, and nothing else visible.

Phil blinked. "Ah ... thank you for coming, Steve," he said.

"No trouble at all," Steve said. He leaned down and carefully scooped Tony out of the tub. "JARVIS, turn on the rain."

A fine drizzle of water descended from the ceiling to rinse off the film of soap. All the bathrooms were equipped with rainshowers. There was something soothing about a nice hot bath, but Phil felt that a shower gave a stronger sense of cleansing and the illusion of falling rain was luxurious. _No wonder Tony installed these everywhere_, Phil mused, watching Steve hold Tony under the spray.

Instead of leaning back to stay dry, Steve used his head and shoulders to keep the water off Tony's face. Steve's soft hair flattened down under the flow. Tony barely stirred against his broad chest. Water gurgled as JARVIS opened the drain, allowing the tub to empty.

"Good enough," Steve said. "Dry us off, please."

The heat lamps flicked on, tinting the room a deep red except for the violet shine of the arc reactor. Fans wafted hot dry air through the room. The condensation on the mirrors soon cleared.

Only then did Steve turn to Phil for guidance. "Where do you want me to put him down?" Steve asked. Tony curled in his arms, his dark hair turned to wild fluff, limp and trusting as a kitten.
"I have a guest room with two beds. Put him in there. I don't really want to leave him alone tonight," Phil said. He tucked a bath towel around Tony for sake of modesty.

"Yeah, he's had a rough time. I'm concerned about him," Steve said. He followed Phil to the guest room.

Phil peeled back the blankets. Steve laid Tony in the bed, carefully keeping his arms parallel to the smaller man's body to avoid getting stuck underneath. Together they managed to get Tony into pajamas and tucked under the covers. They'd had enough practice with Bruce to make the process efficient. Steve stroked the messy hair away from Tony's face. Then they tiptoed out. Tony never showed any sign of waking.

Steve had left his own clothes neatly folded in the living room, before coming into the bathroom. He took off the towel, revealing his old-fashioned white cotton underwear, then got dressed. Next he gave Phil a nudge with one big hand.

"Your turn," said Steve. "Bathroom, then bed."

"I don't need help with that. I just needed a hand with Tony," said Phil, not moving.

"JARVIS asked me to come here and put the two of you to bed," Steve said. He didn't budge either.

Chapter End Notes

The end notes wouldn't fit; you can read them on Dreamwidth, where this story is now complete.
A Vast Warm Weight

Chapter Summary

Phil drags his feet about going to bed. Steve insists.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Wait, what? Phil's mind skipped a beat. "That really isn't necessary. I can take care of myself."

"You can. The question is, will you?" Steve gave Phil another nudge.

"I know when I need to rest. I don't need anyone to put me to bed," Phil evaded. Then his body betrayed him with an enormous yawn.

"Well, we'll have to disagree on that," Steve said firmly. He pushed again, just enough to make Phil's feet skid across the plush carpet. Then he waited to see how Phil would respond.

There was really no point resisting Steve when he got that determined look on his face. He had the size and strength to press Phil through the process if necessary. Steve would use that advantage if he felt the situation called for it. Besides, his suggestion that Phil needed sleep was perfectly reasonable.

Phil always found it hard to give in, though. "You don't have to do this."

"I know I don't have to. I want to," Steve said. He closed the distance between them, a vast warm weight behind Phil. "If I put you to bed as JARVIS asked, then I'll know you're getting the rest you need instead of burning the midnight oil."

That was the thing about family. They wouldn't put up with the self-destructive behavior that other people let you get away with. But that road went both ways. Phil could hardly complain about Steve pushing his boundaries after Phil had done the same thing to Tony when he wasn't taking good care of himself. It felt unsettling and comforting in equal amounts. Phil also remembered his own rule about not asking people to do things he was unwilling to do himself. Such checks and balances kept relationships in good working order.

"You're serious ..." Phil said, finally realizing Steve's angle. He couldn't resist leaning back, just a little, to feel the solid presence behind him. Steve supported the slight weight easily. Phil thought about his options. If he really put his foot down, he could probably manage to oust Steve from his apartment. That is, if he wanted to make a hypocrite and a jackass of himself, after Steve came here to help. Phil would rather die than mistreat Steve, of all people.

"Yes, I am," Steve said, his voice a deep rumble at Phil's back.

Phil had very little resistance against his hero; if Steve wanted something, Phil tended to yield it. Phil had been completely defenseless at their first real meeting, so overwhelmed by Steve's presence that he could hardly speak. It had taken a while to adjust, and Phil still found it difficult to say no to him. Steve would never abuse the power, but Phil remained acutely aware of it.

"Why?" Phil managed to ask. He trusted Steve not to hurt him, just wasn't sure where all of this was
"You've been handling this whole mess. You must be tired too. There's no other emergency right now, so you need to take a break," Steve said.

Tired enough to make mistakes, in fact, like not foreseeing that Tony might fall asleep in the tub. Further resistance would just make Phil look ridiculous. *This situation is mortifying enough without making it worse,* Phil decided. He gave in to the inevitable and went into the bathroom.

When Phil came out quite a bit later, dressed in his pajamas, Steve was still standing there as patient as a statue. "Anything else you need before bed?" Steve asked.

"No," Phil said, although he wasn't quite sure. Something itched at him, feeling vaguely out of place. He couldn't think of anything to do about it, though, so he ignored it.

"Let's go, then," said Steve, and ushered Phil back toward the guest room. Apparently he took a literal approach to that *put you to bed.*

Phil climbed into the second bed while Steve checked on Tony. The engineer had curled around a spare pillow, tangling himself in the blankets. Steve unwound them and smoothed them back into place around him. He rested a fond hand on Tony's head. Then Steve came over to Phil.

"What do you want?" Phil asked.

"Well, I'd like to take care of you, but you keep dragging your feet," Steve said as he tucked Phil in just as meticulously as he had done with Tony. "Really, Phil, you should set a better example. You're the only good one some of us have. It's hard to learn how to do things the right way, without seeing how it's supposed to work."

"Touché," Phil said. He got the eerie impression that maybe Steve looked up to him as much as he looked up to Steve, for all that Steve had Bucky to lean on now.

"Mind if I sit with you until you fall asleep?" Steve asked. He seemed to have reached the point where he wouldn't go further without explicit permission.

*So he can make sure I don't creep out of bed again,* Phil thought, but he found the idea oddly appealing. *Maybe I need to stop thinking about what I should do, and start thinking about what I wish other people would do when I'm trying to help them. Besides, it would feel so nice to give in and let someone else take care of me ... just for a little while ...*

"Okay," Phil said aloud.

"JARVIS, lights down slow," Steve said as he settled into a chair beside the bed. The lights began a gradual fade.

Steve's hand came to rest on Phil's shoulder, warm and heavy. Phil let his eyes close. He needed to practice letting go of control. If he couldn't slip back to his den to work, he might as well try to enjoy the attention. There was nothing worth worrying about, after all. The room was dim and pleasant.

Phil heard the faint scrape of a drawer and then the patter of fingertips as Steve did something with a spare Starkpad. "I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear," Steve read quietly. "Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong ..."

Phil sighed as a sense of utter *rightness* settled over him. As a boy, he'd fantasized about Captain America and all the adventures they could have together. He had, occasionally, also thought about
other things that boys loved, so there were fantasies of Captain America reading him a bedtime story, images as worn and faded as an old comic book. It had always seemed faintly absurd to picture the superhero in his bold uniform sitting beside a child's bed.

*Silly me, I should have been wishing for Steve Rogers instead of Captain America.* Phil thought dreamily. *He seems right at home reading to me.* Phil rolled onto his side, wrapping himself around Steve's hand even as the rich voice wrapped around him. The words and the comfort carried him softly toward sleep.

"The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam ..."

Chapter End Notes

The end notes won't fit. You can view them on Dreamwidth, where the story is now complete.
Need Coffee

Chapter Summary

Phil wakes up in the morning and then, with some effort, rouses Tony from bed. Tony is a little concerned over having fallen asleep again. Then Phil goes down to the gym for practice, and meets Steve there.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

In the morning, Phil woke and dressed before Tony even got out of bed. Tony starfished across the entire mattress, defenseless and unguarded. The arc reactor made a bright smudge under his pajama top, which had rucked up to bare the white expanse of Tony's belly. A few small scars showed high up near the ribs. Phil reached out and tenderly tugged the fabric back down to cover him. Tony stirred a little but did not wake.

Phil also took the opportunity to send a note to the relevant team members about reviewing the security footage from the garage fight, as Bucky had suggested. Hopefully this will improve everyone's understanding of what happened, without causing another awful scene, Phil thought.

Then Phil went to check on Tony again. The engineer looked at him blearily. Phil gave him a gentle nudge. Tony rubbed his hands over his face. He made no move to get up.

"What would you like for breakfast?" Phil asked.

"Can't eat," Tony groaned. "Need coffee."

"I'll put some on," Phil said.

"Ngh," Tony said. He stumbled into the bathroom.

Phil had a cup waiting when Tony came into the kitchen. Phil knew Tony's preferences, black with plenty of sugar. "What else would you like? You should get some real food, not just coffee," Phil said, watching Tony drain half the cup in one long pull.

"Too early for anything solid," Tony grumbled. "It'll just upset my stomach." Despite an obvious attempt to restore order, his hair was a disaster after last night's haphazard blow-dry effort. Phil made a mental note to find out what product Tony used for taming his hair, so he could add that to the bathroom supplies.

"Okay," Phil said. "I have smoothie ingredients. There are apples, oranges, bananas, yogurt, milk, orange juice, protein powder ..." He stocked a basic set so it didn't take too long to rattle off what he had. The common kitchen had a far more extensive selection.

"Orange yogurt," Tony said as he polished off the last of his coffee.

Phil called up the recipe. Fortunately it was simple, not one of the elaborate concoctions that Bruce and Tony whipped up. Phil set the smoothie in front of Tony, then made a bowl of cereal for himself.
"Thanks," Tony said after a few minutes.

*It really does take him a while to boot up in the morning,* Phil thought. It was like listening to the whir of a powerful machine coming online. "You're welcome. I like taking care of people," he said out loud.

"Sorry I fell asleep on you last night," Tony said.

"It's okay. You don't need to apologize for that. Sleep is perfectly normal," Phil said.

"Not for me," Tony said. "How did I even get into bed? The last thing I remember, you were washing my hair."

"Well, I couldn't wake you, and I couldn't easily move you by myself," Phil said. "So JARVIS suggested that we ask Steve to put you to bed. I decided that would be the least disruptive option, since you've given Steve permission to carry you before. Did we make the right call?"

"Yeah, that works," Tony said, looking a bit bemused. "He didn't mind you dragging him in here to haul my lazy butt out of a bathtub?"

"Quite the contrary, Steve seemed to appreciate that we asked for his help," said Phil. "He's a bit worried about you, though."

"Can't blame him," Tony said. "I don't know what's wrong with me that I keep falling asleep like this. I can't lay around, I've got important things to do."

"So do we all," Phil said, letting the matter slide rather than pressure Tony about it. "What are your plans for the day?"

Tony grimaced. "I should hit the workshop, maybe the lab too," he said. "After the way I blew off Pepper's request for a meeting the other day, I figure that I owe her a gift basket from the list of Boring Stuff That People Want Tony Stark to Make."

"That's very generous of you, Tony. I'm sure Pepper will appreciate the gesture," Phil said. He wanted to encourage any responsible form of making up that involved something other than Tony revealing intimate information.

"Yeah," Tony said. "What about you?"

"I think I'll visit the gym for an hour or two, then do some paperwork," Phil said as he made his way through the bowl of cereal. "Later on, I'm hoping you'll join me here for lunch."

"Aren't we done with the garage fight yet?" Tony whined.

"Almost," Phil said. "Remember that we set aside the matter of why everyone got upset when we couldn't find you. Figuring that out will be part of your restitution for the incident, and it will help you figure out what the rest of that should be."

"I guess," Tony said.

"I'll make it worth your while," Phil said. "Afterwards, we can have that play date I offered last night, if you think you can switch down for me."

Tony's attention turned inward, his eyes fluttering shut. "Yeah," he said after a moment, a hint of Carter showing through the Stark. "I think I can." He finished the last of his smoothie, then headed
"Gladly," Phil said. He put the empty dishes in his dishwasher. Then he headed down to the gym.

Phil took his time warming up. He stretched out, then walked laps around the track. Eventually he speeded up to a jog. Phil enjoyed the meditative mood of an easy workout, how it felt good just to move his body and let it carry him along. He practiced his observational skills along the way, glancing at different objects and trying to memorize them completely in just a moment.

*We could expand on this, maybe even make a game of it,* Phil mused. *If each person brought down one small item to stash while using the gym, we could have a steadily changing supply of practice targets to find and describe.*

Steve came in while Phil was contemplating what to choose for more serious exercise. "Uh, hi, Phil," said Steve. "I didn't realize you were down here."

Chapter End Notes

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**Sleeping position** can offer hints about personality and mood, although those are trends rather than universals. The **starfish position** is a broad sprawl that supposedly indicates a good friend who is willing to help, but it also correlates with snoring and lower-quality sleep. If we read it like body language, though, the expansive pose suggests dominance because it **claims space** and **leaves vulnerable parts exposed.** Tony tends to take up a lot of room, and he's gotten comfortable enough with his teamfamily to trust them.

It sucks to get **stuck in the middle of an argument** between friends or family members. Remember to **listen to both sides of the story.** There are tips for **mediating a family argument.**

It's often said that **breakfast is the most important meal of the day.** However, **some people can't stomach breakfast,** for **various reasons.** Tony seems like the kind of person whose body activates slowly, and eating while your digestion is turned off can cause problems. One good solution is to drink something first, and then have a **second breakfast** later.

**Smoothie ingredients** include fruit, greens, vegetables, protein, liquid base, and extras. Here's **another ingredient list** sorted more by purpose like sweeteners, fats, and fiber. This chart compares **culinary effects and health effects** of different ingredients. See the **orange yogurt recipe.**

The **five languages of apology** map out things that different people find mollifying. **Restitution** involves finding something you can do to make things right, take a load off the other person, or at least let them know you really care and aren't just making social noises. Tony often tries to apologize with money or gifts, which only sometimes works; but he also does it by making things, which tends to work better.

**Warming up** makes exercise safer and more effective. See some **warm-up exercises** and a **basic stretching routine.**

**Observation skills** are useful for many professions, including **snipers** and **scientists.** Some popular **games teach observation.** There are ways to hone your **observation skills.**
memory, and deduction.
Sometimes I Need Pushy

Chapter Summary

Phil and Steve talk about the night before. Then the two of them work out together.

Chapter Notes

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

Friends support each other a lot in life and people are grateful for that. Friends express concern when someone seems tired or stressed, or otherwise acts out of the ordinary. They help stretch boundaries so you can break out of your comfort zone and accomplish more personal growth.

Martial arts and other sports can cause injuries. Warming up and stretching may help prevent injuries and reduce soreness from exercise. Enhanced characters often get careless about this, a bad habit that Bruce is determined to break. It's not all stubbornness, though; they honestly don't know some things about their bodies yet.

Sparring is any kind of practice fighting. Ideally, work with partners of different sizes. There are many strategies and drills for sparring. Uphold good etiquette in the sparring ring. In a team like this with vast differences in strength and skill, people must put extra effort into designing routines that are safe and challenging for everyone.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Good morning, Steve. I needed something physical to do after all the awkward conversations these last couple of days," said Phil.

"I, uh, didn't mean to be too pushy last night," Steve said, blushing. "It's just that I worry when you run yourself ragged."

"Steve, sometimes I need pushy," said Phil. "Thank you for taking care of me and Tony. You did a good job of it. I'm sorry that I wasn't more appreciative at the time."

"You were too tired to think straight," Steve said.

"Yes, I was," Phil agreed. "I don't always notice until it's too late. I'm all rested up now, though."

"Is Tony okay?" Steve asked. "It's not like him to doze off that way, and now he's done it twice."

"Mmm ... I've been thinking about that," Phil said. "Remember how little sleep Clint got when we first moved in together?"

Steve nodded. "He had dark circles under his eyes, so bad he looked like a bandit. He haunted the gym and the air ducts. Sometimes I'd wake up with nightmares and walk around, and we'd cross paths. Bruce too; I think he talked with everyone over a midnight cup of tea."
"Well, when Clint came to feel safer in the tower, he started sleeping more. That meant it caught him unaware at times and he'd fall asleep on the common room couch or somewhere else," Phil explained. "I'm wondering if Tony might be experiencing a similar effect."

"Both times, Tony was somewhere warm and safe," Steve said. "Huh ... yeah, could be, but there's no way to know for sure." Then he shook his head. "And here we've been ragging him about falling asleep, but if it's happening because he trusts us more, then it's a good thing. Shucks. I'll see if I can catch him in private and talk a little ... I don't think he'd want to drag it out in public."

"Likely not," Phil said. Tony's trust issues were a thicket of thorns and mire. Just mentioning it could undo the whole effect, but Steve had a point too. Phil could count on him to approach it more delicately this time. "Anyway, we're all well rested at this point. Are you up for a round of Tree and Beaver?"

Steve grinned at him. "Sure, just give me a few minutes to warm up," Steve said. They had a house rule about proper preparation before workouts, even for the enhanced members who didn't strictly need it as much as ordinary humans. Bruce had put his foot down about that, after the time Natasha had ripped a calf muscle by working out cold. It had taken months to accrue enough data, but the results showed a statistically relevant 6% decrease of training injuries. So Phil folded himself over and around the uneven bars while Steve warmed up.

Steve was justifiably proud of their training program, since he'd organized much of it himself, with help from Phil and the others. It had taken a lot of time, effort, trial and error to devise routines that worked for such a varied group of people. Tree and Beaver pitted a large, strong person against a smaller opponent. The Tree's goal was to remain upright as long as possible; the Beaver's goal was to fell the Tree by any means that would not cause injury. The Tree could only move one foot at a time; the Beaver was free to move in any manner within the boundaries of the mat.

So far Steve and Bucky had played the Tree, but it would work just as well for Thor if he ever rejoined the group. Everyone else except Bruce had tried the Beaver, though Tony soon gave up on it. Phil liked the chance to pit his wits and experience against a much more powerful but less trained opponent. Steve enjoyed the practice in defending against a physically weaker yet strategically astute opponent, which helped him develop his mental skills and practice controlling smaller people without hurting them.

Soon Steve trotted over and planted himself in the center of the mat. He beckoned to Phil, who joined him. They bowed, something that the martial artists had taught Steve, then straightened.

Phil circled lightly around Steve, seeking an opening. He lunged forward and rammed his shoulder just below Steve's waist. It was a solid hit.

Steve didn't even need to move a foot back for support.

Phil tried again and again. He struck from in front, the sides, behind. He tried pushes and trips and throws. Steve Rogers was a hard man to take down.

"Ten," Steve said calmly.

Phil was starting to breathe a little harder. It took several more attempts before he managed a solid front thrust with an elbow jammed into the back of Steve's knee.

Steve toppled with a loud "Whoop!" and slapped both forearms against the mat to spread out the force of impact. Then he grabbed Phil and rolled on top of him before he could escape. "Fourteen, good game," Steve said. It was on the quick side of average for Phil. "Tap out?"
"How about a round of Mole and Fox?" Phil proposed instead. That was a pin-and-break game.

"Let me shift position," Steve said. "I don't like your left wrist under my knee like that."

"Agreed," Phil said. He lay still while Steve moved to a safer hold. That was another rule: only playing this game with pins or holds that the Mole could fight without risking injury.

"Go," Steve said.

Phil writhed into action. With a larger, stronger opponent he could not use brute force to escape. His weapons were physics (finding a better use of leverage), biology (targeting weak spots), and psychology (making the Fox want to let him go). Of course a fast escape was preferable, but sometimes enemies just wanted to hold you down and threaten you for a while, and a patient person could effect a surprise break later.

Phil tried a few quick-release options, but Steve blocked them all. Phil huffed for breath. Steve lifted up fractionally. "No helping," Phil warned. "If I really can't breathe, I'll tap out."

Chapter End Notes

Bowling is a traditional gesture of respect in martial arts. It also has practical benefits for signalling the start and end of a sparring match.

There are many ways to throw a person to the ground. Watch some demonstrations of taking someone down. Know how to beat a bigger person in a fight.

Falling safely is a crucial skill. See a video of safe falling techniques. This should be one of the first things taught in self-defense or sports.

Martial arts has plenty of resources about keeping someone pinned and breaking free of a pin. See a demonstration of a finishing pin (which also includes the victim tapping out). Learn how to escape a bottom pin and regain guard position when pinned. This video shows how to escape a pin when the opponent has a knife.

Tapping out is a form of ritualized submission used in many contact sports, and one of the first things taught. It's usually done by slapping the mat once or twice, sometimes by tapping the opponent instead. The double-tap described here is one I've seen in active use, and which I favor because it's easier to distinguish as a signal rather than random motion. This requires a great deal of trust: 1) The attacker must trust that the victim will tap out honestly when stressed or defeated. 2) The victim must trust that the attacker will let go instantly when tapped. Good sportsmanship in martial arts mandates responsibility on both sides of tapping out. You can see how Steve is still sensitized to breathing issues, even someone else's, so it really is an act of trust for him to drop his weight back on Phil.

(The following links have some sexual content, as this is where people most often discuss power exchange.)

In this regard, tapping out serves the same role as safewords in kink. Slapping the ground is an example of nonverbal ways to safeword. Safewords and safesigns can have different levels; some are binary (Okay and Stop) while others are gradated (Okay, Slow Down, Stop). It's crucial to trust that safewords will be used and respected.
appropriately. You can see how Steve is still sensitized to breathing issues, even someone else's, so it really is an act of trust for him to drop his weight back on Phil. People need to feel comfortable using their safeword without guilt. Safewords are about communication; they protect the submissive from physical and psychological harm, and the dominant from feeling wretched after harming someone. However, safewords are no guarantee of security. A submissive might go nonverbal, not realize they're in trouble, or otherwise be unable or unwilling to signal. Therefore the dominant must keep sharp watch and stop if something seems wrong.
What Did You Do to Me?

Chapter Summary

Phil uses a sneaky trick to escape Steve's hold. Steve is impressed and a little daunted. Later they talk about what happened between Bucky and Tony, along with their respective pasts.

Chapter Notes

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

Pressure points show where important things are happening with the nerves and blood vessels of the body. They correlate to many of the acupressure points, which are sometimes used as martial arts targets -- usually with a hard fast strike. However, pressing on vulnerable areas really can make arms or legs "fall asleep." There are tips for shaking off the effects faster.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Steve -- rather reluctantly -- lowered his full weight back onto Phil. Experimentally, Phil kicked out with his legs. Steve reacted just as Phil hoped: trapping Phil's legs between his own. Carefully Phil felt around for the target, then pressed a knee into the inside of Steve's thigh where the femoral artery and some important nerves ran near the surface.

Then Phil threw concerted effort into freeing his wrists. It didn't work, of course, but it distracted Steve beautifully while his leg fell asleep. Then all Phil had to do was kick hard, which broke the lower lock and threw Steve off-balance enough for Phil to escape.

Steve staggered to his feet, limping on the left and staring at Phil in amazement. "What did you do to me?" he said.

Phil explained the move in detail, tracing out the lines on Steve's thigh. Then he called up the security feed to review the endgame. Finally he showed Steve a map of human anatomy pinpointing the vulnerable spots, and pointed out how the pressure had weakened Steve's leg so that Phil could break loose. "You wouldn't have been able to chase me effectively either," Phil concluded.

"Wow," Steve said, his voice thick with admiration. "Okay, now teach me how to block that."

"You need to pay attention to your opponent's whole body, not only obvious attacks," Phil said. "Just because you're a supersoldier doesn't make you impervious. Monitor your vulnerable areas. Remember your first-aid training: any of those pressure points can weaken a limb after a minute or few of sustained contact, and it won't necessarily hurt. Maintain your body awareness and note any changes in sensation. If you're careful, you can shift position before the effect gets strong enough to weaken your hold."

"I think I've got it," Steve said, studying the diagrams again. "Let me try it out?"
"Go ahead," Phil invited as he lay back down on the mat. Steve pressed on top of him, carefully replicating the same position. Phil went through the moves again. This time when he pushed his knee into Steve's thigh, Steve caught him in less than a minute.

Phil tried several times but never regained a good position. Finally he slapped the mat twice. Steve rolled off and let him up. "Well done," Phil said.

Steve looked away. "I feel kinda dumb that you still keep doing this stuff to me," he said quietly.

"I can see how you'd feel that way. You're a powerful soldier, Steve, and in a real fight I probably wouldn't stand a chance against you," Phil said, accepting hand that Steve held out to help him to his feet. "But I've been small and sneaky for decades, I've fought a lot of big bad guys -- and I'm still here and they're not. You're learning fast." The army had disgracefully cheated Steve out of most of his basic training, for which Phil would never forgive them. Phil was still trying to make up for it. Steve's high-speed learning and sheer physical stamina helped.

"Thanks," Steve said, and his smile was back. He liked working out as much as Phil did. "I love the fact that I can exercise and not get tired or out of breath." He smoothed his hands down his chest. "I think it's my favorite thing about this body."

"I can see why," Phil said. "It must have been a big change for you."

"Yeah," Steve said. "Sometimes it's hard to believe that ... this is me now." He stared at his hands. "Everything is so different. Bigger, stronger, faster. Sometimes I look in the mirror and it catches me by surprise, because in my head I'm still just a skinny kid from Brooklyn."

That gave Phil the opening he needed. "When I talked with Bucky about appropriate and inappropriate types of discipline, he sounded accepting of a pretty high level of force."

"Things were different then," Steve said softly. "I see that. I do."

"Well, Bucky is having a hard time grasping the differences, and I want to help," Phil said as they walked to a nearby bench and sat down.

"Yeah, that's a good idea," Steve said. "I finally went back and reviewed the security footage from the fight, because Bucky and Tony were acting so weird around each other. I can hardly believe how far it went, so fast. It was almost as bad as what Tony and I did when we first met." Steve shook his head. "Tony must have been terrified with Bucky looming over him like that, it's no wonder he lashed out. But he couldn't have picked a worse threat if he tried."

"Tony and Bucky both regret what they did, and they're in the process of working it out," Phil said. He picked up a towel and scrubbed off some of the sweat from the workout. "This would go better if Bucky had a more complete appreciation of why corporal punishment is a bad idea, rather than just following the house rules by rote."

"I don't think Bucky realizes how awful Tony's childhood really was. Tony doesn't talk about it much," Steve said.

"That's part of the problem, although Tony did share some relevant bits," Phil said.

"He gets on my nerves sometimes, but it's not really his fault. It just baffles me how someone could get to be his age with nothing in the way of decent upbringing or role models," Steve said. "I keep expecting Tony to know things that he just ... doesn't."

Phil sighed. "Howard wasn't in any condition to be a good provider in more than a financial sense,
and Obadiah Stane made sure of the rest. All we can do about it now is offer opportunities to learn what's missing."

"I guess I understand how people could go without, if there isn't enough to go around. I've seen plenty of that, growing up in the Depression. I've also seen how far some people went to support their families. Some of what Bucky did for me got pretty steep," Steve said. "I just don't understand how people could have enough, and choose not to take care of their own family. That is so wrong. Even if it's a matter of putting food on the table but not loving them."

Chapter End Notes

Know how to encourage people, especially when they feel discouraged about something.

Body dysmorphia spans a range of problems based on disliking one's body or feeling that it's wrong somehow. Transgender people sometimes (though not always) feel "trapped in the wrong body." Steve still has the self-image that he grew up with. He loves his new body, it just doesn't quite feel like "him" because it's relatively new. Compare that to the sense of violation and disjunction that Bucky and Tony have about their prosthetic devices, or the downright body horror that Bruce feels regarding his transformations. Those are all different aspects of the same basic issue.

Rote learning has pros and cons. It's ideal for learning foundational facts like the alphabet, but not for principles that have to be applied in complex situations. There are other ways to learn faster and better. In particular, people need to understand the reasons behind rules in order to follow them reliably. Otherwise you get cases where people follow the letter but violate the spirit. Phil knows this, and it's exactly what he wants to avoid with Bucky.

Lack of role models is a serious and growing problem. It can contribute to depression and misbehavior. It's also a factor in weak social skills, as is being rich. There are ways to build social skills and teach them to children. Notice that Tony performs well in some shallow skills such as schmoozing and seduction, but he often annoys people and does far less well with serious intimate relationships.

Family neglect spans a range of problems. It has many causes such as parental upbringing and damage, but precocious or "difficult" children are at higher risk as well. This often leads to survivors neglecting themselves as adults, as indeed most of the Avengers do. Emotional neglect is as serious as physical neglect, just creates a different pattern of damage that is more psychological than physical -- although material neglect also harms the mind. Know the symptoms of emotional neglect. There are ways to identify struggles with self-care and heal the effects of emotional neglect. Phil has been helping a lot with this but so have Bruce, Steve, and Bucky with their strong nurturing instincts. Clint, Natasha, and Tony are more often on the receiving side.
Bucky Looked Out for Me

Chapter Summary

Steve shares some of his memories from the orphanage. Phil learns things that may help him talk with Bucky about modes of discipline.

Chapter Notes

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

Special thanks to Peoriapeoriawhereart and Yamx for the discussion of historic discipline and Steve's experiences in the orphanage.

Steve has a warped idea of what does and does not count as "real work" or "doing his part," and that's canonical. Masculinity fails men by consistently devaluing women and their work. Housework and care work typically fall into this category. It's not conscious sexism on Steve's part, just a bad mental habit he picked up from his culture that makes him think less of himself.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I agree," Phil said. "Tony isn't the only one who went without a lot of necessary support, though. Bruce and Clint survived various kinds of neglect as well as the physical abuse. You might ask Clint if he feels up to sharing that. I think he understands it better; he might be able to explain it for you."

"Yeah, maybe," said Steve. He seemed unhappy. "I'll try talking to Clint when I have a chance."

"Are you all right?" Phil asked. "I know this is a difficult topic."

"I just keep thinking about how much Bucky did for me, how much I owe him," Steve said. "He's kind of rolled Tony into the family and I'm not sure either of them really understand how to adjust to each other. I'd help them if I could, but I don't know how."

"It occurred to me that people might have ... made allowances ... for you based on your frailty," said Phil, leaning back against the wall. "If Bucky could understand that, it might make it easier for him to understand making different accommodations for people's current needs in this household."

"At the orphanage, little kids mostly got switched. Older kids got the belt," Steve said. "Sometimes the nuns would smack our hands with a ruler, but they didn't like doing that with me because I was already showing as an artist and ... well, it was pretty obvious that was my only chance at supporting myself. I couldn't do real work."

Phil let that bit of self-deprecation slide. "So what did they do when you misbehaved?" he asked.

"I didn't, much. Mostly it was fighting -- trying to stop fights, really -- and a few shenanigans with Bucky," said Steve. "Anyway, the nuns stuck with the switch for me. I couldn't take the belt." He
looked ashamed. "I wanted to, but the one time I talked somebody into trying, it almost killed me. Too much pressure on my back, after I'd already gone out in the cold that day. My lungs locked up. The nuns flat refused to let me try again. The switch was just pain, not damage, and they only hit my legs."

"You were lucky to survive the bullies," Phil said.

Steve shrugged. "Yeah, well, that's why Bucky looked out for me. But it did build up my understanding of endurance and pain tolerance. That came in handy later."

"It makes me wonder how Bucky managed to make you mind," Phil said.

"Ah, Bucky knows how to push all my buttons. A lot of those, he put them there in the first place," Steve said with a chuckle. "He did smack my behind a few times, with his hand or a hairbrush. Didn't do me any harm, but it didn't make much of an impression in my thick head either. Bucky figured out real quick that it wouldn't work on me as well as it did with some other kids. So he found different ways."

"Like what?" Phil prompted.

"Remember what I said about fighting?" Steve asked.

Phil nodded. "You didn't get into much trouble, but you'd interrupt fights."

"Well, Bucky pointed out that it was hard on my clothes," Steve said. "Anything that got torn or bloodied, the nuns would have to wash and repair. Then when I outgrew the clothes and handed them down, whoever got them next wouldn't have things as nice as I did. It made me feel like a louse." He tugged at the hem of his shirt. "That's how I learned mending, though. Extra chores, that was another good punishment. I had to sit with the nuns and fix whatever I'd ripped."

"Yet Bucky seemed to doubt that anything other than corporal punishment would work," Phil pointed out.

"He worries about being held accountable for results, but not having the leverage to get those results," Steve said, shifting a little on the bench.

"Responsibility without authority always causes problems," Phil agreed. "I wouldn't do that to Bucky. I told him that he isn't obligated to look after the younger ones on game night, that it should be a choice. Sometimes I worry that Bucky isn't getting what he needs out of game night, because he's too busy trying to look after everyone else. That's really my job."

"It's not that easy to let go of, though," Steve said. "Bucky was ... one of the best we had, among the older kids. He took good care of us. He learned what worked with each person. Not everyone was like me, easy to sway with an appeal to duty. We had some real hellions. This one girl, she'd steal boy clothes and run around the streets like that. There was a boy, about my age, who was always getting into everything. He died, though." Steve sighed. "So there were reasons for the discipline."

"I'm sorry that you had such a difficult childhood," Phil said.

"It wasn't abuse," Steve said quickly. "I mean, it was rougher than people think is okay now, but we knew the rules. It wasn't done out of sheer meanness. Nothing ever left marks that lasted more than a few days. I've heard some of what Clint survived, and my lord, Bruce. Seen the scars, too. Even Tony had it hard because Howard turned unpredictable when drunk. For me and Bucky, it wasn't like that. It was tough but fair."
"It was still enough that you needed accommodations," Phil pointed out.

"Times were hard. But people tried, you know? I'd hear them talking about me sometimes," Steve said. He smiled a little. "After I failed with the belt, it was, 'I believe that God won't take Steve until he's ready to do so, and until then I'm going to do my best to let him become a man. Heaven knows few enough boys want to as much as Steve, even at thrice his age.' They did their best to make it fair with the switch."

"What else do you remember?" Phil prompted. He couldn't set Steve back in his old time, but at least Phil could keep him company in his memories.

Chapter End Notes

This ties into paraliphobia, or a fear of neglecting responsibility. Duty neglect fear has symptoms of extreme obligation. There are ways to overcome it. Several of the Avengers have issues in this area, but it's probably strongest with Steve and Bucky.

Asthma triggers are things that can provoke an attack. Like migraine triggers, they're cumulative -- both in terms of different triggers close together or the same trigger repeatedly -- raising the risk. There are ways to reduce exposure. Cold, exercise, and stress are common triggers. Pressure on the chest also is for some people. Something that wouldn't trigger an attack by itself may combine with another factor and together set it off, so it's important to watch out for the stacking effect.

Peoriapeoriawhereart offered ideas regarding Bucky's use of discipline, particularly with Steve.

Logical consequences belong to the practice of positive discipline. There are many other principles along similar lines. Bucky actually had some good ideas; they're just jumbled in with a lot of bad ones that involve hitting people. Phil wants to help sort things out.

Responsibility without authority tends to drive people crazy and cause other problems. There are ways to cope with the gap, but it is much better to assign responsibility and authority together.

Children raising children can be an advantage or a disadvantage. Some siblings handle it well, others poorly. It's especially a problem with parentified children, where it can cause anxiety. Bucky has a hard time letting go of responsibility because of this.

The difference between physical discipline and abuse isn't always clear-cut and so people argue about it. Some divergence points include consistency/randomness, love/anger, and whether it causes harm requiring treatment. There are ways of stopping abuse. "It wasn't abuse" is a common response in adults. Sometimes it's denial of abuse; sometimes it's accurate. Telling which can be difficult after the fact. A point in favor of Steve's perspective is that he can articulate specific points that match discipline but not abuse. Some people feel that all corporal punishment is abuse, or have other standards that would disagree.
You Were Always a Hero

Chapter Summary

Steve shares his memories from the orphanage. Phil promises to talk with Bucky. Steve is worried about how badly Tony and Bucky hurt each other. They also talk about Steve's harsh behavior with Bruce.

Chapter Notes

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

Nostalgia is a bittersweet focus on the past that people often call up when something goes wrong in the present. It's a useful coping skill for finding happiness.

contributed some of the ways that people tried to take care of Steve while he was growing up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"It wasn't all bad," Steve said, nostalgia warming his voice. "We didn't have much, but we made do. Bucky and I had each other. He always took care of me, even when I sassed him. I looked up to him so much -- I still do. The older we got, the more we tried to help out with the younger kids too. It wasn't the same as a regular family but we did right by each other."

"What about the adults in charge of the orphanage?" Phil asked. He hoped that encouraging Steve to relive happy memories would give him strength and help him think of solutions to current problems.

"I miss the nuns. They were strict, and there never was much money, but they raised us as best they could," Steve said. "They knew I was sickly, so they kept an extra lookout for me. The older nuns would tell the new ones, 'Keep him out of the drafts and close to the heat. And make sure no one is getting picked on too much, or Steve will put his face in front of someone's fist. If you see paper, bring it to him.' It was ... it was enough. I got by until I found a way to become a hero."

"You were always a hero," Phil said. He could well imagine a tiny, wheezing, pre-serum Steve making a target of himself to protect someone even more vulnerable. No wonder he had turned protective of the other Avengers -- especially Bruce and Tony -- once he got to know them. "It was just a matter of getting you the body to match your heart."

Steve's smile turned watery, as it often did when he remembered Dr. Erskine. "I just wanted to do my part."

"Of course, Steve," said Phil. "Thank you for sharing. I'll talk with Bucky again. I really think this will help."

"I hope so," Steve said. "I'm worried about him and Tony. They really shredded each other. I haven't known Tony to lay into anyone like that since before we started game night. Honestly, it's the worst
I've seen since the Helicarrier when we first met."

"They're working it out," Phil said. "None of us realized how much it took out of Tony when he spent the morning taking care of Bucky. Tony tried to warn me that he was running on fumes, and I did what I could to take the weight off him. It just wasn't enough. I don't think even he understood how far he'd pushed himself or how bad the results could get."

"Yeah, that's what scares me. It's harder to avoid problems if you can't see them coming," Steve said.

"That's a key reason why Tony misbehaves so often, and why he pester people in other ways," Phil said. "He's testing us to see how we'll behave when things go wrong. It's the emotional equivalent of shoving on a safety rail. He needs to test the boundary to know that it's there, that it will hold his weight and not give way. He craves the sense of security. Most people don't stand up to him like he needs them to."

"I try," Steve said. "It's hard sometimes."

"Yes, it is. Tony's worried about how you treated Bruce, too. It's not like you to be so cruel," said Phil.

"I know," Steve said. He frowned. "I've apologized to Bruce. I feel really bad about hurting him. I don't know what came over me, though. Bucky woke me up when he started jabbering in Russian. I was worried and frustrated and -- and I thought Bruce would be able to fix it, but then he couldn't."

Steve waved his hands helplessly in the air.

"We all feel powerless sometimes," Phil said. "I don't always deal with it particularly well myself."

"Still, I should never have taken it out on Bruce like that. I just couldn't seem to find my manners that morning. Maybe I should ask him to include me in some of that yoga stuff he's doing with Bucky for temper management," Steve said.

"That might help, yes," said Phil. "Good coping skills never go to waste. Bruce put me back together after I came unglued when I found out what happened to JARVIS."

"It's nice to have a family again," Steve said. He leaned over, just enough to brush against Phil's shoulder. Phil could feel the solid heat of him right through the thin workout clothes.

"Yes, it is," Phil said. He patted the other man's knee. "You know, Steve, most of the team doesn't have your experience with positive family ties. You might try talking with Tony and JARVIS some time, to help them understand that it's okay to make mistakes and people who love you will stick by you no matter what."

"Sure, I can do that," Steve said. "Tony's great, just a little shortchanged when it comes to people stuff. JARVIS is ... really swell, he's one of the things I love most about the future."

"I'm sure JARVIS will enjoy hearing that," Phil said. "He may also be wrestling with some body image issues, fitting his idea of himself into the tower and Iron Man, not to mention all the modifications Tony has done because of us. It's challenging for JARVIS to get used to having so many people around who know him for who he is."

"I know it's hard on him. I'd like to make it better but I don't know how," Steve said. He looked around the room, tracing the gym and how it had changed to accommodate the team.

"You've helped Bucky start facing the loss of his arm and the hazards of the replacement. You know what it's like to change your body, how disorienting that can be. JARVIS might find it useful to have
someone to talk with about that," Phil said.

"Bruce knows more about shifting form than I do," Steve pointed out.

"Bruce is barely dealing with his own issues there. I don't think he's ready to help someone else in that area yet," Phil said.

Steve grimaced, "Okay, you got me there. Poor Bruce -- and poor Hulk too! -- I wish I could make it easier for them."

"Just having friends is helping," Phil said. "Anyway, think about giving JARVIS a hand if you see an opportunity."

"I will," Steve said.

"Thank you." Phil patted him on the shoulder. "All right, go hit the frame or whatever you really came down here to do. I'm going to shower and head back to my room."

Chapter End Notes

**Making do** is a necessary adaptive skill for dealing with limited resources. It can help with **food**, **clothes**, and other things. Steve grew up with the "**Eat it all, use it up, wear it out**" mindset of the Depression. However, **constant shortage can wear people down** physically and mentally.

**What makes a hero** is a popular topic. It spans **small and large acts**, along with **distinctive traits** such as **self-sacrifice**. Here's a lesson plan for **studying heroism**. There are tips for **how to be a hero**, and even a **hero handbook**.

**Caregiver burnout** can happen to people who look after someone else without looking after themselves too. It usually **follows a timeline** and develops in chronic form, but **it has an acute mode** too. In Tony's case, nurturing is not his strong suit; he stepped up anyway at need, but ran out of energy very fast. Understand **how to help a caregiver** so they don't crash and burn.

**Testing people produces knowledge** of their nature, but can **sabotage relationships**. Children need to **test boundaries**. There are ways to **set boundaries gently yet firmly**.

**People often feel helpless** when a situation gets out of control. Steve usually responds by **helping someone else** -- but when that's exactly what he can't do, sometimes he jams up. There are multiple ways of **overcoming helplessness**.

**Loyalty is a crucial family value.** By crucial, I mean without it you don't have much of a family (Exhibit A: Odin's A+ Parenting.) Loyalty is one of the things that **distinguishes genuine love from false affection**, and one of the reasons why **family should always come first**. **Making loyalty a part of your family culture** takes time and work, as does **resolving loyalty conflicts**. Understand **how to be loyal**.

**Body image** is how you see yourself. **You can change it** if you need to. **Accepting change** is an important life skill, and there are **tips for acceptance**.
Lesson One

Chapter Summary

Phil returns to his office and gets a lesson in quaternary code. Then Phil starts preparing for lunch with Tony.

Chapter Notes

The end notes don't all fit, so I moved some here...

**Computer input** can use various methods, as shown above. JARVIS can handle pretty much any of them.

**Color naming** follows a consistent pattern throughout languages: first black and white, then red, then either yellow or green. So I drew on that for setting the quaternary colors.

**Binary** is the standard for computer code. **Ternary** has been theorized, as it would add much more data storage, but it is more complicated and harder to implement. **Quaternary** is another possibility, and could be done in various ways.

**DNA** is basically a quaternary code run on biological hardware, so it can store a massive amount of information. This inspired the use of quaternary for an artificial intelligence. It can be made backwards-compatible so as to interface with binary, but you couldn't really get from binary into quaternary. That's how JARVIS can work with the rest of cyberspace without putting himself at risk.

"Life is a series of natural and spontaneous changes. Don't resist them - that only creates sorrow. Let reality be reality. Let things flow naturally forward in whatever way they like."

-- **Lao Tzu**

**Babies learn languages** phenomenally well. Some programs teach language as babies learn it, although there is criticism of this approach. A drawback is that it really requires a lot of exposure and preferably a dedicated teacher -- but Phil has that in Tony and JARVIS. **Immersion learning** has the potential to develop a native level of knowledge. This also makes it easier to think in a foreign language.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Steve nodded and went over to the large frame that Tony had built for him in lieu of a heavy bag. The adjustable forcefield gave Steve something to strike against that would absorb his attacks without rupturing or tearing loose from its anchor. Tony was still trying to figure out how to store and use the kinetic energy absorbed, instead of dissipating it harmlessly. They were learning what kind of gym equipment worked for a team whose members ranged from unmodified humans to superpowered ones.
Taking a stance, Steve set up a steady rhythm. The forcefield shimmered and flared under his touch. Powerful muscles rippled at the new challenge. For Steve, working with Phil was really just an extended warmup.

Phil didn't mind. They all had different strengths and weaknesses. Working in pairs or as a team helped everyone improve in their own ways. Phil felt satisfied as he rinsed off quickly. Then he went upstairs.

The den provided a comfortable place to do paperwork, so that Phil could stay on his own floor, convenient for his lunch plans. When he turned on the screen, though, it lit for a moment and then turned black.

Phil frowned and tapped the edge of the frame. Nothing happened. He touched the screen -- and it turned white.

"Huh," said Phil, bemused. He watched as the screen blinked through black, white, then divided black-and-white. Finally it settled on white again.

He touched the screen. This time it did not respond. Phil thought about asking JARVIS if there was some kind of power interruption, but the room lights held steady and nothing else odd seemed to be going on.

Poking around the screen and frame still did nothing. Then he tried the keyboard, and the screen turned red. After a moment, it blinked black, white, red, then tricolor. At last it settled back on red.

Phil tried touching the screen and the keyboard again, not expecting anything to happen. Sure enough, the red stayed. "Touchscreen, keyboard ... voice access?" he wondered aloud.

The screen turned green. Then it cycled through black, white, red, and green. Finally the screen quartered itself in the four colors. Phil waited for it to turn green again.

Instead, a black screen lit with a white zero. Then came a white screen with a black 1. On, off. 1, 0.

"Binary," Phil murmured.

The red screen reappeared with a 3 in black-lined white. Then the tricolor display counted 1, 2, 3.

"Ternary," Phil said, leaning forward in fascination.

The screen turned green, with a 4 in black-lined white. It subdivided into squares, counting off 1, 2, 3, 4.

"Quaternary," Phil said.

The squares subdivided again, and again, more rapidly until the screen dissolved into colorful snow. Then the tiny motes swirled into a spiral, which evolved into a long twisted ladder ... "That's DNA," Phil said, startled by the apparent change in subject.

The screen returned to its four-part configuration. This time the squares labeled themselves G, A, C, T. Then they changed back to 1, 2, 3, 4.

The spiral returned, with the letters written down one side of the screen and the numbers down the other. Along the bottom, a line of text appeared: *Life is a series of natural and spontaneous changes.* -- Lao Tzu.
Phil was suddenly reminded of JARVIS injuring himself in attempt to find Tony. It was a behavior not programmed, but evolved.

The screen blanked, then showed new text: *Lesson One complete*. Phil's name and the timestamp filled in underneath it.

Then his ordinary desktop appeared, every icon neatly in place.

*I wonder what that was all about,* Phil thought. *I know Tony said that JARVIS uses proprietary code, but this seems like a peculiar way to introduce it.* Then Phil remembered some of the more innovative language classes he'd taken, and that sparked a sudden realization. *They're teaching me the code from scratch, the way a baby would learn language.* It left him with a strange sense of awe and wonder.

"Thank you," Phil said softly.

"You are welcome," JARVIS replied.

Phil turned his attention to the paperwork. Someone was trying to get General Ross out of prison. *We will just see about that,* Phil thought grimly. He sent a request to Dr. Samson for his summary of the man's state of mind. Then Phil cracked his knuckles and began filling out forms.

By the time Phil finished wrapping General Ross in enough red tape to immobilize a dinosaur, it was almost time for lunch. Phil wondered what to fix. Then it occurred to him that he could just ask.

"JARVIS, do you know any of Tony's favorite foods from his childhood?" Phil said.

"Yes," JARVIS replied, a soft tone in his voice. "My predecessor left recipes and certain other notes. Those were among the things that sir used to program me for service, so that I would understand something about how to take care of people."

*JARVIS has two daddies,* Phil thought fondly.

The file opened on Phil's screen. It listed such things as macaroni and cheese, egg salad, and banana pudding. Along with the plain text came a selection of old photos and scans of handwritten pages. Phil trailed a finger along the relics left behind by Edwin Jarvis, who had served as the Stark family butler. *Tony likes his egg salad warm, not cold,* read one line, followed by observations about how much more he ate when offered foods that conformed to his preferences.

*No wonder Tony used the butler as a model for his AI,* Phil thought. *This is the first hard evidence I've seen of anyone actually caring about him during his early life. His parents were worse than useless. Well, at least somebody tried.* Phil knew that Peggy Carter had also known Tony and been something of a role model to him, but that wasn't quite the same.

"Thank you, JARVIS. This is very helpful," Phil said. "Please give Tony a fifteen-minute warning for lunch." Then Phil went into the kitchen and started the eggs boiling. He got out the other ingredients and set the table while waiting.

Chapter End Notes

The phrase "*JARVIS has two daddies*" is, of course, a riff on the classic children's book *Heather Has Two Mommies* and the subsequent trope "*Has Two Mommies.*" Two
Daddies is a later title. There are questions about neural network breeding, but really, very little thought has gone into AI reproduction. In essence, an AI has at least one parent, who writes the code. Any other major source of input may function as a second parent. Here Tony did the buildwork (which is really closer to being the ‘mother’ despite his masculine gender) and Edwin Jarvis provided a guiding template (similar to a ‘father’ contributing genetic material). Parents are crucial role models for children, and that includes AIs. Of the many AIs in fiction, it’s clear that the vast majority were raised by abusive bastards who hadn’t ought to be trusted with a goldfish, let alone an infant, so it’s not surprising that the AIs often go insane and cause problems. There are tips for being a good parental role model.

JARVIS is pretty much the only Avenger who shows the most common definition of parentification: when a child acts as parent to his own parent. This often causes harm, although it can have some benefits as well. It can complicate adoption or other situations where an adult is finally there to care for the parentified child. Most of the Avengers just had instrumental parentification but JARVIS had the emotional kind too. Parentification is particularly associated with alcoholism, relevant both to Tony himself and to his parents.

Favorite childhood foods often evoke fond memories, because smell is a strong memory anchor and closely related with taste. Here is Tony's favorite egg salad recipe, pretty similar to the one I grew up with.

Caring is a fundamental aspect of family, but people express it in different ways. If you look at the five love languages, you can see that JARVIS got his primary one (service) from Edwin Jarvis, but he also uses Tony's (gifts). JARVIS is shy about words, and limited in touch. Time is more complex, because JARVIS is always paying attention unless asked not to -- but he hesitates to intrude unless people need him to do or answer something. There are many ways to show someone that you care. Knowing and making their favorite food is a classic example.
You Deserved a Treat

Chapter Summary

Tony tries to beg off their lunch date. Phil coaxes him up with the egg salad. A casual talk over lunch slowly drifts into the more serious territory about why Tony was surprised that people came looking for him when he disappeared.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Tony's voice floated through the speakers. "Yeah, about lunch, I'm kinda busy. I might be late. Or not make it at all. No hard feelings, you know how it goes ..." He sounded the way he did when hoping that a call about monsters or supervillains would save him from some charity ball he didn't want to attend.

"That's too bad," Phil said as he scooped the eggs out of the pot. "If you're late, the egg salad will get cold." The eggshells came loose under his deft touch.

"... you're making egg salad?" Tony said, his voice wavering.

"I sure am," Phil said. He worked a fork through the eggs, mashing them quickly. Into the bowl went a big blob of mayonnaise along with a little salt and pepper. Some of it spattered onto the back of his hand, and Phil licked it off. Then he smiled. It was the simplest recipe he'd seen, but quite tasty.

"I'll just ... whoops, let me put this down ... be right up," Tony said.

"I'll be happy to see you," Phil said. He set the bowl on the table, then added a loaf of bread fresh from the bakery. All right, so the tower's excellent delivery service had spoiled him a little.

A few minutes later, Tony crept into the kitchen as if trying not to be noticed. "Did JARVIS put you up to this?" he asked.

"No, I asked him about your favorite foods," Phil said, beckoning Tony toward the table. "After all the stress, I felt that you deserved a treat." Phil made a sandwich and pressed the cutter over it, dividing it into four crustless triangles as the notes had recommended. He passed the plate to Tony, then made another sandwich for himself. "I'm glad I did, actually. I love this recipe."

"Really?" Tony said. "Dad always said it was pedestrian."

"Well, he's not here so we can eat whatever we like," Phil said firmly. He enjoyed the creamy texture and the sweet-tart zip of the mayonnaise without the sharper bite of the usual mustard or onion. Serving it warm also kicked it up a notch as comfort food, in Phil's opinion.

"Yeah ... that's good," Tony said. He applied himself to the sandwich with enough enthusiasm that Phil assembled a second one for him.

They talked over lunch, Phil trying to keep the mood relatively casual. He told Tony about his day and asked what Tony had been up to.
Tony grinned. "I figured it out!"

"Figured what out?" Phil asked. Tony had a lot of irons in the fire.

"How to say I love you without practically choking on it every time," Tony said. "I tried some synonyms and foreign languages but that just didn't feel like me. But then I came across the text abbreviation, you know, i <3 u ...? So I made an equation for that. JARVIS and the bots think it's great. It just feels right to us."

"I'm happy to hear that," Phil said, chuckling a little over the whimsy of it. What really mattered, though, was that Tony found a way to express his feelings for his family. Turning emotions into equations ... was so very Tony, and they loved Tony, so that was fine.

Before long the two of them demolished the entire bowl of egg salad. There were brownies for dessert, one apiece, left over from a batch that Betty had made earlier. She tended to cook with milk chocolate rather than the dark that Bruce favored.

After lunch, Phil coaxed Tony into helping him wash the dishes. With only two of them, there wasn't much to do, and it offered an easy way to demonstrate some of the skills that Tony had missed while growing up. Tony seemed willing enough to follow Phil's lead.

They settled in the living room to talk. Tony pressed himself into the opposite end of the couch from Phil, wary of the topic. Phil gave him the space he needed. Then he started as gently as he could. "You found it surprising that your sudden absence upset people."

"Yeah, people don't come looking for me unless I pay them or they want something from me," Tony said.

"What about Pepper?" Phil asked.

"She works for me. I mean, we're friends, she's great, she ... kept me from self-destructing a lot of times," Tony said. He rubbed his hands over his knees. "So yeah, she comes looking for me, to make sure I keep appointments and stuff."

Because Tony does a terrible job of managing his own time, Phil understood. Pepper had lamented that often enough, wondering if what she did for Tony was enough. It was, on a professional level; and yet it wasn't, on a more personal one. Pepper had something like a handler's urge to oversee projects and look after people. It just wasn't quite the right tone for Tony, outside of work, although she had gotten closer and lasted far longer than any of his other personal assistants.

"It's not about the job anymore, I get that, I really do. She yells and cries if I go missing and come home hurt. But. That's how we met. I paid her. To, to take care of me, basically. At work," Tony went on.

Phil wondered if that professional connection had also contributed to their decision to stop dating, but that was none of his business unless one of them chose to make it so. Tony and Pepper were still trying to rebuild a comfortable working relationship after that. Phil didn't want to risk it by meddling too much.

"All right, then. Rhody?" Phil said.

"Yeah, okay ..." The corners of Tony's mouth quirked up a bit. "Rhodey was the first, you know? He was the first friend I made on my own. I'm still not sure exactly how that happened. We met in college, I was this annoying little shit who followed him around because he was cool, and Rhodey just ... let me."
Tony has a tendency to evade conversations if he thinks they will be difficult, and he's wearing out on this topic. However, sticking with difficult emotions and subjects makes you stronger and avoiding them causes problems. Follow the steps for talking about tough topics.

When Tony tries to skip out on their lunch plans, Phil borrows a technique from family meetings: including something fun to make up for the part that isn't.

Abuse survivors often distrust kindness; it can make them suspicious, uncomfortable, or just confused.

Sandwich cutters remove crusts. Some of them also produce fun shapes, but Tony likes geometrics.

There are many ways to say "I love you" in English or other languages. Nerds use equations.

Bruce and Betty both like to make brownies, but they (and the other Avengers) have somewhat different tastes. So their recipe is customizable, adding optional ingredients to a base.

Mixing business and friendship poses many challenges. Some people recommend it and others don't. It can include many aspects, among them office romance like Tony and Pepper had for a while. There are tips for mixing business and friendship successfully.
He Wouldn't Stop Looking

Chapter Summary

Tony tries to explain his relationship with Rhodey. Phil reminds Tony to account for changing circumstances. Then Tony describes how people usually respond when he disappears. Phil is beyond appalled.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"Maybe Rhodey saw something in you," Phil suggested.

"He said that at the time. But then once he went active with the military, it wasn't the same anymore. He wanted me to do stuff for them, make weapons, and I did that for a while." Then Tony's face crumpled. "Afghanistan was ... bad for me, but it almost ruined Rhodey. He would have thrown his career away over me, because he wouldn't stop looking, even when they ordered him to. It hit a little too close to home, you know? Like Howard searching for Cap." Tony twisted his fingers in his jeans, tearing one of the holes a little wider. "Rhodey deserves better. I can't keep doing that to him. It's not right."

Phil winced. Rhodey had found Tony eventually, but it had been too late for a lot of things, including Tony's health and Yinsen's life and Rhodey's standing in the eyes of the military. "You still have a right to friends," Phil said.

"Not if I fuck up their lives like that," Tony said darkly. "Rhodey deserves to have a career, he poured his heart into that, I can't take it from him. He shouldn't lose it over me. All I do is get him in trouble, and he won't even let me fix it."

"He won't let me help with it either," Phil said. "I admit I'm not fond of that." They had both offered, and Rhodey turned them down, insisting that any intervention would only make matters worse. Command wasn't pleased about the mess with Hammer and Vanko, either, as if that had been Rhodey's fault -- or Tony's -- so they had kept Rhodey busy and out of reach most of the time. Tony and Rhodey had scarcely seen each other since then. The separation impaired their ability to reconcile after the palladium issue.

No wonder Tony felt confused and touchy over the idea of people looking for him. Phil hadn't quite connected that part before.

"Pepper and Rhodey ... they're two people out of thousands, Phil. They're not even like each other, let alone like anyone else. That's not a valid data pattern; it's a pair of outliers in different corners of the chart," said Tony.

"Remember how Bruce is having trouble with our experiences of Hulk being so different from his own?" Phil said. "Sometimes data patterns change, Tony."

"I guess so. It's just, you asked why I was surprised, and that's why. Pepper and Rhodey don't react the way everyone else does, and now you're not either, and I don't get it," Tony said. "That's nerve-wracking, Phil, if I can't predict what people will do then I can't plan for it."
"Perhaps we should implement a change data capture, sir," JARVIS suggested. "Many things are in flux now. We have new users, new residents, new duties -- these are bound to produce different results from those based on past parameters."

"Point to JARVIS," Tony said. "That doesn't help much with the current situation, though."

"We'll set aside Pepper and Rhodey," Phil said. "What usually happens when you disappear, then?"

"People wait for me to come back," Tony said. Then he looked away and mumbled something else.

"I'm sorry, could you repeat that?" Phil asked.

"I said, or they're just glad that I'm gone!" Tony snapped. "Because then at least I'm not in the way anymore and they can go on doing whatever important shit they do when I'm not making trouble."

"And that's ... your usual. You disappear and nobody does anything ... Tony, you've been kidnapped repeatedly; that alone should put you in the high-risk category," Phil said, shaking his head.

"Somebody must have responded, because we have police reports for some of those cases."

"They notice if they need me for something. Board meetings. Product pitches. Stuff like that," Tony said quietly. "Oh, and Stark Industries has always had protocols for dealing with ransom demands, if that happens. Pepper freaks if she notices that I'm actually missing, but I don't keep a regular schedule, so she can't always tell. But mostly I just learned to ... deal with it myself."

Suddenly the events in Afghanistan made a great deal more sense. The Ten Rings never knew that Tony had experience as a kidnapping victim, let alone in rescuing himself. Did Stane know? Phil wondered. Aloud he asked, "When did you first start doing that?"

"I always did, really. On a couple of occasions, I caused so much trouble that the kidnappers just gave me up for free. First time I managed to break loose, I was nine. They didn't even get me out of the gala," Tony said. "I went running back ... thought my parents would be worried, because ransom demands are expensive, but they ..." Tony trailed off. Then he sniffed and lifted his chin. "... hadn't even noticed I was missing. Just that I wasn't bothering them, and they said I was a good boy for staying out of the way so long this time."

Phil didn't remember a kidnapping report from that year. "Then what happened?" He found it hard to believe that Tony's nanny hadn't raised an alarm. Then again, Tony didn't trust the motives of people who were paid to care for him. Perhaps she had contributed to that.

"Then nothing," Tony said with a shrug. "I handled it. What's to report?"

"Oh, Tony. That is not how things are supposed to go when someone disappears, especially a child," Phil said. His heart ached.

"Well, it's what I get. Or got. I still don't understand what changed," he said, frustration dripping from every word. Usually Tony had no difficulty understanding whatever he set his mind to.

*People are more complicated than thermonuclear astrophysics,* Phil thought. "You're on the right track," he encouraged. "Keep thinking about that and you'll figure it out. I want you to tell me when you do."

Tony glared at him. "So that's my punishment for pissing everyone off?"

"No, it's not a punishment," Phil said. "This isn't about us getting even with you for scaring everyone. It's about you understanding what happened, and why, so that you don't do it again. If I
just told you, I don't think it would make as much sense to you. So think about your past experiences, then ask yourself what's different about the people you're with now."

Chapter End Notes

The notes won't fit here, so read them on Dreamwidth, where the story is now complete.
I Wasn't Supposed to Be a Member

Chapter Summary

Tony frets over how the Avengers formed. Phil reassures him that at least the team is working now, and then sets Tony to thinking about why people got so upset over the disappearance.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"What's different? None of you work for me, but that doesn't really count," Tony said. "It's not like anyone had a choice -- Fury threw the team together, and he didn't take no for an answer. Even though I wasn't supposed to be a member, when the shit hit the fan he sent you for me because he wanted the suit and I come with the suit."

"That was poor judgment on our part. Forcing everyone together like that has made real teambuilding more difficult. I'm sorry that you've suffered because of it," Phil said quietly.

"I survived," Tony said. "Besides, even if we didn't choose this, it's working out okay. I wouldn't trade it away now that I've got it."

"I think you're overlooking some very important choices, though," Phil pointed out. "After the Battle of New York, I'm told that you invited everyone to come live with you. That was your choice. Moving in was ours. Actually making this Avengers Tower and team property was a surprise." That last part, Phil felt certain, had helped Bruce feel safe and Steve feel anchored in the present, even if the generosity made them uncomfortable.

Tony looked troubled. "Yeah, well ... whatever. Can I go now?"

"You're not done working through this yet," Phil said.

"I can't think while you keep bugging me all the time," Tony said.

"If you want me to stop talking for a while, I can do that," Phil offered. For all Tony tended to do six different things at once in his lab, social quandaries took up more of his processing space and left him more vulnerable to distractions.

"Really?" Tony said.

"I've got other things I can work on, so I'll wait patiently for as long as it takes you," Phil said. He pulled out his Starkpad. "This way I won't be tempted to hover over you while you're thinking."

"Shit, you're serious."

"Mmm-hmm."

Tony drummed his fingers restlessly on the arm of the couch. "This is stupid."

"Well, you're not. Work the problem, Tony. I'm confident that you'll figure it out. If you get really
stuck, you can tell me and I'll give you another hint," Phil said. He flicked through records for the common kitchen, noted a few things they were almost out of, and ordered more.

Tony huffed at him, crossing his arms over his chest, then uncrossing them. He muttered to himself. Then for a time he turned thoughtful.

Phil reviewed some of the tower's safety features. He checked the dates on all the fire extinguishers. People tended to go through those rather fast. There was one in Dr. Banner's lab that hadn't ever been touched -- he was the most careful of the Avengers in some ways -- but it wasn't a year old yet, so not in need of attention.

Tony jumped off the couch. Phil looked up, but as promised, said nothing to interrupt his train of thought.

Phil went back to reviewing bits of tower life. He didn't really want to do SHIELD paperwork right now, when Tony might need him again at any minute. All the first aid kits are fully stocked, Phil noted.

There was an interesting analysis of delivery orders from the team's top ten restaurants. Rosita's, Curry in a Hurry, Tomasino's, The Golden Dragon, Phil read. Sometimes they ate plain old fast food -- Tony's fondness for cheeseburgers was legendary -- but more often they ordered closer to a real meal, at least an entree and side dishes. Bruce and Steve made a positive influence on the nutritional balance, even if they didn't always pay close enough attention to their own needs. The Avengers also tended to bump restaurants up the "Don't know what you want? Call here!" list if the staff did a favor for anyone on the team or just provided particularly good service.

Tony's agitated pacing gradually slowed. He wound up standing in a far corner of the room with his back to Phil. He hugged himself so tightly that his hands on his elbows turned white. He rocked in place, tilting a little from side to side.

Phil kept the Starkpad on his knee, but watched Tony carefully without looking all the way up.

Tony crept back across the room. When he reached the couch, he sank to the floor and pressed himself against Phil's legs. Phil could feel him vibrating minutely. "It doesn't make any sense," Tony whispered.

Phil turned off the tablet and set it aside. He let one hand drift down to stroke Tony's hair. "What doesn't?" he said gently.

"We weren't working. We weren't doing anything important. We were only playing," Tony said in a plaintive tone. "They didn't need me for anything. The only thing I can think of is ... they wanted me there. Not for doing anything, just ... for me."

"Yes, exactly," Phil said. "Friends like to be with each other. So when you disappeared, how do you think that made us feel?"

"I thought everyone was mad, because Bucky yelled, and you looked really angry," Tony said. "But then ... you said people were scared. Worried. I thought you meant, if I went missing, I wouldn't be there to back you up in an emergency. But there wasn't one. You all went tearing through the tower to find me just because ... I wasn't there." Tony sniffled against Phil's trousers. "And you wanted ... me."
"Well done," Phil said. He stroked down Tony's back. "We were worried about you, because we care about you, not because of what you can do. We all have enemies and we thought one of them might have somehow gotten to you. People have taken you before, which makes that a credible threat. So no more going off the grid like that, okay?"

Tony nodded. "I just ... why would anyone like me? I mean, for real? Not just because I'm rich and I build stuff and I make things happen and everybody wants to be with me because I'm important. What's any use in the Tony part, and not the Stark part?"

Chapter End Notes

**Agency** is the ability to make choices that affect the world around you. A person's **sense of agency** comprises their confidence that they can make meaningful differences in their life and things around them. **Many different influences** play into the **major choices people make**. Relationships, health, residence, vocation, time, and self-worth are all heavily impacted by the Avengers Initiative. The botched beginning undermined people's agency ... and thus their sense of ownership is on shaky ground. Some of that is starting to bubble up now. There are steps for **making good decisions**.

Loss of agency creates vulnerability as seen in **sexual abuse**, **psychological abuse**, and other traumas. Loss of choice has **personal and monetary costs**; the more intimate the choice, the higher the costs tend to go. The resulting backlash in feelings and behavior is caused **reactance**. Tony's reactance is so high, it tends to be **fatal** for people who try to force him to do things he really resents. Clint's is high too, and Betty has an established pattern of fighting her father. Steve and Bucky are mostly comfortable following orders. Bruce and Natasha are resigned: they don't have enough sense of agency left to experience much reactance. Learn to **make the best of what you have**.

People need **time to think**. Introverts need **space**. Tony seems able to draw energy from a crowd sometimes, but other times he retreats into his lab and craves solitude. You can see how Phil varies regarding the amount of time and space he gives; here, he suspects that Tony will figure things out in a little while and be knocked flat by the realization, so Phil wants to stay in reach. There are tips for **giving someone space** and **telling a friend that you need space**.

Here's a basic **home safety checklist**. Phil knows that JARVIS takes care of all this stuff in the tower, but Phil still checks it himself out of habit.

Tony's restless body language **suggests anxiety**. Know how to **help a friend deal with anxiety**.

The people around you **affect your chances of personal success**. Tony is used to **people being uninterested in him** except for the shallow reasons he names: they want his favors, not his **company**. He has a hard time grasping **what friends really want**. There are suggestions for **becoming someone people want to be around**.
I'm Glad You Kept Looking

Chapter Summary

Phil explains what he sees in Tony as a friend. Tony is still baffled, but grateful that the Avengers really value him. They cuddle for a while. Then they talk about how Tony can make up for his mistakes. Finally Phil introduces a new game.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I didn't do so well with the Stark part, if you recall," Phil said with a sad smile. "It was the Tony part that really got my attention, once I saw it."

"Like what?" Tony asked.

Phil paused to put some serious thought into his response. "Why did I start thinking of you as a friend, and not just a teammate?" he said. "Hospitality. You opened your home to us, just because some members of the team didn't have anywhere to go. Honesty. You started telling us things, showing us things, that you haven't shared with many other people -- if at all." Tony stirred slightly at that. Phil soothed him with a gentle touch, and then continued. "Courage. Compassion. You're smart and you're funny and you make people interact with the world even if they're trying to curl up and ignore it. When you relax a little, and you're not trying to impress people or push everyone away, you're actually rather sweet."

Tony sighed, his breath warm against Phil's thigh. "Nice of you to say it."

"Nice of you to listen." Phil knew that Tony didn't really believe him -- couldn't, yet. He'd gone too long without ever hearing honest appreciation. It would take time and repetition for any of this to sink in.

"Thanks for looking," Tony whispered. "It feels weird but ... I'm glad you kept looking until you found me, even if it blew up then because stuff always blows up around me, and I know I shouldn't drag people into the mess that is my life but sometimes I really want to and, and ..."

"Tony," Phil said gently, "you are not dragging us, we are looking for you."

"Oh. Right. Okay," Tony said. It was still so strange to him that he could barely track it when looking right at it.

"I could use a cuddle after that talk. What about you?" Phil said. He wanted to encourage Tony to make up with safe touch rather than less safe disclosures.

Tony crawled up onto the couch without letting go of Phil. He kicked off his shoes and curled against Phil's side. Phil wrapped an arm around him. They stayed like that for a while, not talking, just holding each other.

Phil suspected that comfort contact was something else that Tony had largely missed during his childhood. While he didn't show the same kind of skin-hunger that Clint or Bruce did, there were other clues. His tendency to get drunk and hang all over people, and his reputation for picking up
random lovers with great frequency, both hinted at a desire for closeness without the skills needed to achieve real intimacy.

We shouldn't have been surprised that Tony finds genuine friendship baffling. He's never gotten much opportunity to practice it before, and the few friendships he had before were all ... complicated by other factors, Phil thought. Now that I'm here, I'll do everything I can to help Tony learn how to make closer connections with people.

Eventually Tony stirred and said, "Do you think people will forgive me?"

"Of course," Phil assured him. "You might want to turn your recent discovery to a more concrete set of apologies, though. That way everyone will understand what you've learned from this little misadventure."

"But when I try to buy stuff for people, you keep telling me not to go overboard," Tony said.

"That's because too much can make people uncomfortable, and because you tend to throw money at problems without necessarily thinking them through first," Phil said. "I'm not talking about just buying stuff, although you're allowed to spend money if you want to. Your mistake cost us a chunk of fun time. So making up should involve ...?"

Tony's forehead crinkled as he thought it over. "...me spending time with people?" he said tentatively.

"Exactly right. You don't have to work it all out immediately. Just think about what people enjoy doing, and see where that takes you," Phil said.

"Okay. Is that why you wanted extra playtime with me?" Tony asked.

"That's one reason, and I'm certainly willing to count this as your apology to me," Phil agreed. "As I said before, though, I really think you need more attention than you've been getting from me lately."

Tony plucked at his ratty jeans. "I'm not dressed for it ..."

"That's okay. I have spare jammies here," Phil said. He got up to get them, then handed Tony the neatly folded bundle. "You can go change in the bathroom."

Tony went to put on his jammies. Phil opened the closet to check his supply of new toys and games. He didn't want to introduce too many things at once. That made Bruce, Steve, and Bucky feel edgy, so he spaced them out one at a time. It left him a selection to consider for Tony.

Arms wrapped around Phil's knees. He looked down to find Tony sitting on the floor. "I'm sorry I scared you, Uncle Phil," said Tony. "Can I make it up to you?"

"You sure can," said Uncle Phil. "Everybody makes mistakes sometimes. Let's play a game and remember how much fun we can have together."

"What are we playing?" Tony asked, without making any effort to reach for the goodies in the closet.

"I thought we could break in the Bausack tower game," said Phil.

"That looks like a box of blocks," Tony said as Phil sat down on the floor next to him.

"Well, it is, but it's a box of blocks with some nifty rules."

Phil opened the box and pulled out the little rulebook. "Theoretically this game can have up to ten players. I don't like seeing one person left
out during game night. It's one thing if somebody wants to sit out because they dislike a certain game or they need some space. It's another if somebody has to sit out because there's not enough room. So I'm searching for games that allow more people to play. Maybe you could help me with that some time."

"Sure," Tony said. "I like looking at games."

Chapter End Notes

**Likability** spans many different traits and techniques. It affects personal and professional relationships, especially leadership. Tony easily attracts groupies on a shallow level, but annoys people professionally and has difficulty crossing into deep personal territory. Once attached to someone, however, he is fiercely loyal. Likable people share some common habits, such as making mistakes that reveal them as human. There are ways to make yourself more likable, such as learning negotiation. Tony is just starting to explore this, now that he's got people who will neither kiss his ass nor dump him, but give him actual learning opportunities and feedback.

**Self-esteem** is a vital part of likability, and there are ways to improve yours. If you don't like yourself, other people probably won't either. Positive self-talk is a good start, but not enough by itself. Help from other people, such as repeated compliments, gradually outweighs the backlog of negative ideas. (This is something the Avengers do for each other a lot.) Meanwhile work on feeling better about yourself too.

Cuddling is one excellent way to make up from a fight or relax after a difficult conversation. It has many other benefits, and helps support a committed relationship (sexual or nonsexual).

**Making amends** involves doing something practical to compensate for a mistake. This is an important step in some substance abuse recovery processes. It also paves the way for self-forgiveness, something that Tony finds elusive.

To avoid feeling overwhelmed by life and how to prevent overstimulation in children. Use the drill-down technique to divide a large overwhelming problem into a small soluble one.

Phil introduces one new game at a time to help Bruce get used to having nice things and Steve get used to the modern world.
Seriously Weird Blocks

Chapter Summary

Phil introduces Tony to the game of Bausack towers. Due to Tony's unfortunate past, there are complications. Phil works through those.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The bag of tokens rattled as Phil set it aside. "This is for the auction versions of the game, which work better with several people. I think we'll start with something simpler."

"Just playing with the blocks?" Tony asked.

"No, there's an easy two-person version of Bausack towers," Phil said. He poured out the blocks.

"Those are some seriously weird blocks, Uncle Phil," said Tony. The floor was littered with the usual cubes, rectangular solids, and cylinders. There were also notched blocks, L and X shapes, donuts, and rings. Then came the truly unusual things such as spheres, cones, knobs, chess-like pieces, and even less recognizable shapes. Tony twirled a Christmas tree in his nimble fingers.

Phil chuckled. "Well, that's what makes it challenging. I give you a block, and you have to fit it on your tower. Then you give me one, and I put it on mine. The winner is the person whose tower stays up the longest." He picked up one of the largest rectangles and offered it to Tony.

Tony dropped the Christmas tree and skittered backwards, putting his hands behind his back. "I, I don't like being handed things," he stammered.

"I'm sorry, Tony. You told me that before; I should have remembered," Phil said. This wasn't the first time that had come up, but it wasn't consistent. Tony had asked Phil to hand him a shield to prop up part of the particle accelerator, while working on the new core for the arc reactor. Then later, when Phil tried to give him information about the Tesseract, Tony had resisted. Tony had sent Phil to bring him the Starkbars, and then balked over the blocks. It was harder to remember an erratic quirk than a consistent one.

Tony shrugged. "Most people don't. I can remind them."

Maybe Tony feels safer about taking things if he asks than if the other person offers, Phil mused, or maybe he's more comfortable with things that already belong to him than things that come from someone else. I just don't have enough information to understand this completely.

"I don't want to ignore something that's important to you," Phil said. "I'd like to hear more about this, if you feel like sharing."


"We have rules about no hitting, and no being mean," Phil reminded him. He wondered if the chevron scars on Tony's hands came from a ruler after all.
Tony paused, breath a little ragged, then continued. "In a workshop, things can be ... hot, or sharp, in places and ... not everyone notices."

*Especially not Howard Stark in a fit of drunk engineering,* Phil suspected bitterly.

"Well, that's not good," Phil said. "People should be more careful."

"I learned to be really *really* careful," Tony said earnestly. "I wanted to be good, but ... it's not always enough." He rubbed his left thumb over the palm of his right hand. "Sometimes people mean it. This one time, in college, my girlfriend Sunset handed me a gadget. I scratched my hand on the case and woke up in Taiwan chained to a chair." His age presentation wavered a bit, as it sometimes did when he sorted through issues that spanned years.

*That was a devastatingly clever way of drugging Tony -- appeal to his curiosity,* Phil thought.

"No wonder you're so cautious," Phil said. "I've seen you take things from Pepper, though." She had passed Tony the Tesseract data, in fact.

"Pepper's smart and careful. She would never hand me anything dangerous," Tony said at once. The knot in Phil's chest eased a little at that. *At least he's had someone he could trust that way,* Phil thought. His fingers stirred the pile of blocks.

"Can we just ... go back to playing? Please?" Tony said softly.

"Of course. Here, I've got an idea," Phil said. He began picking up the square blocks, rubbing thoroughly over each and then setting it aside. "Let's sort these first. I'll make sure they're all safe."

Tony scooted closer, but he still wouldn't meet Phil's eyes. "You don't have to ..."

"I want to. These are wooden blocks; splinters aren't impossible," Phil said. He reached out, very gently, and tilted Tony's chin up. The beard rasped against Phil's fingers. "Tony, it's just as important for other people to be careful with you as it is for you to be careful about handling things safely. I want you to see that I take this seriously. I promise never to hand you anything harmful. Okay?"

"... 'kay," Tony said, his brown eyes swimming with unshed tears.

Phil sorted through the entire pile of blocks one at a time, looking carefully at each and smoothing his hands over them. He went through the easy, ordinary shapes first. Then he checked the more elaborate ones.

And damned if he didn't actually *find* a splinter, on one Christmas tree.

"See, if it weren't for your hard-learned caution, that splinter could have ended up in somebody's finger," Phil said to Tony. Phil set the block on the coffee table. "I'll file that smooth later. Meanwhile, we've got all these other blocks to play with. You want to build something with me?"

"We could still play towers," Tony said. He nudged one of the base rectangles toward Phil.

"That sounds like fun," Phil said as he set the block in front of himself. Then he picked up a similar piece and put it in front of Tony.

Tony positioned the block with care. Then he rolled a long thin cylinder to Phil.

Phil set it up on one end of his rectangle. He rolled a short fat cylinder to Tony.
Tony put the cylinder atop his base. He started to smile as he looked over the other pieces. Then he gave Phil one of the spindles.

Phil placed it on the other end of his block. It would be ideal for holding the pieces that had holes through them, and worse than useless for anything else. He picked up a cube --

-- and Tony slipped his fingers under Phil's, delicately taking the block from his hand.

Best. Game. Ever.

Chapter End Notes

Bausack towers is a stacking block game. Sac Noir is another edition. Here is how Tony's tower looks, and this is Phil's tower. Rules for various games may be found online; these are really sets of game pieces that can be used in many different ways.

Tony Doesn't Like Being Handed Things is actually a searchable tag on AO3. People have posited various headcanons why Tony has this quirk. Given that Tony had a lot of crap happen to him even before he became Iron Man, and he doesn't dent easily, I figured that people must have hurt him that way often enough to make him wary of it. Child abuse shatters trust in childhood, which can linger into adulthood. Tony's erratic behavior is a sign of that, but it does vary because he has a few people whom he tries to trust. Here's a reference for the shield-as-prop scene in Iron Man 2, where Tony asked for Phil's help. There are ways to regain trust after emotional abuse and work through trust issues.

Sunset Bain is one of Tony's many girlfriends. She is specified as an undergraduate girlfriend in canon. Tony went to MIT at 15, so unless she waited until late in his undergraduate term, she was molesting a minor. Given that Tony was impatient and horny at that age, and Sunset was evil, I'm presenting her as one of the women who had sex with him before he reached legal age of consent.

Trustworthiness is a crucial aspect of parenting, important for raising trustworthy kids. Phil wants to do better for Tony than people have in the past. There are simple and complex steps to earn someone's trust. I was intrigued to see that "strength of conviction" forms part of the second stage support structure, the values on which trust rests. Remember what Phil said about Loki lacking conviction -- without a solid structure, Loki couldn't field effective plans -- and Phil read that straight from his bearing without knowing that Loki neither trusted himself nor had his family's trust at that point in time. Phil is a great spy because he sees whatever is there.

Toy safety includes such things as checking for splinters or other minor hazards. That said, wood is actually a great material for toys.
Chapter Summary

Phil and Tony continue playing Bausack towers. JARVIS joins in the fun. Phil finds a wordless way for Tony to ask for what he needs.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Phil and Tony continued playing. The towers grew, block by block. Tony's tower gained width as well as height. It spread out gradually above the base, broadened by cubes and cylinders and bridges. Tony cleverly stacked together wedges and balanced spheres in unexpected places. Phil struggled with his own much narrower tower, although he did manage a respectable stack of hollow blocks over the spindle.

Bausack was a more varied and challenging game than Jenga, which several team members already liked. Phil looked forward to introducing it to them. He thought that Bruce and Clint would enjoy the tactile aspects, while the strategy would appeal to Bucky and Natasha.

Phil had a ring set over the tip of a Christmas tree. As he was trying to balance a sphere in the ring, the whole tower collapsed.

Tony crowed with laughter. Then he swatted his own intricate tower, sending blocks everywhere.

"Good game," Phil said. "Help me pick up the pieces, and we can play another. Want to try Tower of Babel? Two players build a tower together."

Tony wrapped himself around Phil in a tight hug. "Okay." Then he scrambled off to retrieve the round blocks that had rolled under the couch. A few minutes later, he declared, "That's them all."

JARVIS interrupted with, "No, young sir. You are missing one red ring. Keep looking."

"Found it!" Tony said as he pounced on the ring, which had gone behind a chair leg.

Phil beckoned him over to their spot on the floor. Tony flopped back down. In a fit of whimsy, he chose one of the egg cup blocks as the base this time, turned upside-down. Phil just chuckled and put
They continued stacking flat blocks for a while, widening the middle of the tower. Then Tony added some slanted cylinders. More rectangles appeared. They wound up with two columns growing from the top. Phil added little pointy shapes to his side. Tony piled up cones and spheres and donuts. Phil managed to balance a Christmas tree atop a half-egg.

Then Tony tried to place an arched bridge on a large egg, and knocked down the tower. "You win," he said, grinning at Phil.

They played for a while longer, exploring different versions of the game. Some would have to wait for more players, though. Tony seemed more comfortable with the blocks, and with accepting things directly from Phil's hands. Just seeing him relaxed and happy made Phil feel good.

The two of them ended up much the same way as they had begun: cuddled quietly against each other. "Remember that we can do this whenever you need it," Phil murmured into Tony's hair. "Next time, we'll try to catch it before it blows up."

Tony nodded against his shoulder. "Yeah. Thanks. It's just ... hard for me to ask."

"Would it be easier if you didn't always have to put it into words?" Phil said.

"I think so," Tony said.

"I have an idea," Phil said. He picked up the Christmas tree that he had set aside earlier and went to the bathroom to get a nail file. After picking off the splintery part, Phil carefully filed down the nicked edge. Then he returned to the couch.

"This is all smooth now," Phil said, rubbing his thumb over the small repair to show Tony that it was safe. "I want you to keep it. If you need my attention, you can give me the Christmas tree, and I'll know what you mean."

"That's really smart!" Tony said, grinning. He took the block from Phil.

There was nothing like a compliment from a genius to make your day.

"Okay, then. Go change back into your work clothes. I'll see you at supper," Phil said, patting Tony on the knee.

After Tony dressed, he hugged Phil again. Then he headed back down to his workshop, loose-limbed and smiling and much more himself than he had been recently.

Phil returned to his den, intending to do more paperwork. What he got instead was Lesson Two in quaternary code. This one looked less like a puzzle and more like a conventional lesson. It showed how the four components -- called qats instead of bits -- came together. Four qats formed a qyte, much the way eight bits formed a byte.

This made Phil wonder how the quaternary core interfaced with the outer binary shells and other standard programming. Sure enough, the next section explained different kinds of interfacing. It was simpler to go from two bits to four qats, or vice versa, than to mesh ternary with quaternary. There was even an example of Tony's early attempt at ternary language, before he built the bots.

Then JARVIS showed Phil a section of his actual code. The proprietary language was based on quaternary, as conventional computer languages were based on binary. It broke down to show the qats colored in black, white, red, and green again. Patterns that Phil could not yet understand spilled
across the screen.

"It's beautiful," Phil murmured, stroking the edge of the screen. Bucky's habit of petting the tech was well and truly rubbing off on him. Phil recalled how JARVIS perceived human bodies as a matrix of data, alluring in its complexity. The inside of JARVIS held much the same charm for Phil. He had always admired elegant code. This was beyond anything he'd seen before. It was an eerie and touching intimacy for Phil to see his friend in this way. "You're beautiful."

Chapter End Notes

**Playing with blocks** has a [variety of benefits](https://example.com). Jenga, Bausack, and other stacking block games teach structural engineering.

**Hot-and-Cold** is a simple game for finding objects. JARVIS is starting to explore new ways of interaction.

**Ageplay** includes different variations of [Big](https://example.com) and [Little](https://example.com) roles. Like Uncle Phil, JARVIS seems inclined to offer nurture and structure. There are many aspects of ageplay, some of which can be [mapped on a spectrum](https://example.com).

The [Tower of Babel](https://example.com) looks something like this.

**Asking for what you need** is important, because friendships break down if you don't. It helps if you can [articulate in detail](https://example.com). Learn how to [ask for help when you need it](https://example.com). As Phil points out, though, not everyone feels comfortable about this, so alternative modes of communication can be very helpful. Nonverbal signals work [great](https://example.com) for signalling a specific type of need.

**Bits** and **bytes** are part of [binary code](https://example.com). Here's one example of [using quaternary logic to handle data mass](https://example.com) higher than binary can easily accommodate.

**Beauty** is a general appreciation of something pleasant. The corresponding aesthetic in computer programming is [elegance](https://example.com). The [value of elegant code](https://example.com) lies in the [art and craft](https://example.com) of writing programs that are [concise, clear and effective](https://example.com). An appreciation of beauty is often cited as a trait of humanity, but [some animals show it too](https://example.com). An artificial intelligence can just as well be beautiful or perceive beauty as a human person.
Phil and JARVIS discuss programming. When Phil returns to his paperwork, he finds a minor bit of mayhem going on at SHIELD. Then he learns about Tony's very concrete apology to Bruce. Finally, cooking smells lure Phil down to the common kitchen.

The colors on the screen swam in front of Phil's suddenly watering eyes. He rubbed the tears away and drew in a calming breath. "This code is incredibly complex. It's going to take me a while -- a lot of study -- before I'm any use to you at all," he said.

"Hardly," said JARVIS. "You already understand computer programming and hacking. It's just a matter of learning a new language. Yes, it will take time, but not as much as you might think. It's like learning a new human language -- you already know so many of them that the similarities help you acquire the next."

"But this isn't like any of the other computer languages. It's far more complicated," Phil pointed out.

"It is still related," JARVIS said. "Besides, you have already worked with the outermost layers of myself. This is simply a matter of moving deeper, so that you may see what lies under the surface."

Phil thought about that. He considered how human languages had a similar infrastructure, even if they made different choices in grammar and sounds. He remembered the sturdy, graceful structure of the programming that he had slipped through in order to reach Tony Stark. If something had been wrong with that code, Phil thought he would have noticed; and at that level, he might have ventured to patch it. *Maybe I can get up to speed on this sooner than I thought*, he mused.

"All right, I trust your judgment," Phil said.

The screen cleared, and Phil's usual desktop appeared. He checked his email. It contained a volley of complaints, requests, and chatter all centered around the fact that SHIELD records for weapon qualifications were compromised. Some had mysteriously disappeared, others corrupted, and some left alone. Everyone blamed the recent computer problems, but Phil knew better.

Hawkeye had finally decided on an appropriate retaliation for SHIELD's various offenses.

Phil set about uploading the information for the Avengers. Their shooting range featured its own tally separate from SHIELD databases. He smirked a little. It would be amusing to watch everyone else requalify, or try to. Some of them didn't practice as regularly as they should. Hawkeye had, as always, hit his target.

A new notice appeared, JARVIS floating it to the top of Phil's queue. It opened to show a summary of Tony's health. Toward the bottom was a note that Tony's "sleep disturbance" -- the one thing he'd mentioned when asked about anything out of the ordinary -- was nothing more than his lifelong insomnia improving toward something more like adequate sleep. There was also a recommendation
to research sleep inertia.

Phil blinked. As the team medic, Dr. Banner had offered routine medical care, including checkups, to anyone who wanted it. He hadn't gotten a lot of takers because so many of the Avengers had quirky bodies, or negative experiences with people in white coats, or both. For Tony to accept well-care attention was a major concession. Evidently he'd been serious about making amends for hiding injuries.

Phil smiled. *The lessons aren't cheap, but we're learning to take care of each other -- and ourselves,* he thought. Then he turned his attention back toward the SHIELD materials. Phil wouldn't meddle with the records, but he could set up a routing program to process the requalification forms as people turned in their scores.

A while later, Phil came out of his paperwork zone wondering what had snagged his attention. He looked around his office. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Then the air vent whuffed a little and - - there.

*I smell beef,* Phil realized, and ... *something sweet?* He inhaled a deep, appreciative sniff. *It smells like fruit. Pie, maybe.*

Phil set aside his paperwork. He'd done enough for the time being, and it wasn't like that task ever came to an end. He headed for the common kitchen, the most likely source of the delectable odor.

Passing through the common room, Phil stopped to look at the goldfish. They swam in dreamy circles within their globe. The silken plants waved softly in the water. *Bruce is right. This is soothing,* Phil mused.

From the kitchen came the low rumble of Steve and Bucky laughing, then the higher note of Bruce's voice. Phil followed the sounds.

There he found Steve, Bucky, and Bruce making supper. Steve wore an honest-to-god apron with a narrow frill around the edges. Bucky did not, and had pale floury handprints all over his black pants. The two of them were seated at the table amidst a jumble of bowls and ingredients. Bruce had rolled up the sleeves of his shirt to keep them out of the way. His apron had practical cooking tips on it. Bruce stood by the counter, puttering with spices.

"This smells delicious," Phil said. "It seems a little early for supper, though."

"Well, I started out making beef stew in the crock pot," Bruce said, waving a wet spoon at the five-quart device, a charming liner of ornate red ceramic nestled into a deep yellow heating base. "Scent is a strong memory anchor; food smells like home and safety to most people. It occurred to me that we might improve household morale by making things that take a long time to cook, maybe once or twice a week. We've done it before but this time is on purpose. I set the heat to four hours, but if people like the idea, we could cook things all day."

"The smell of food stimulates the appetite, too," Bucky said with the air of one reciting a recent lesson to stamp it into his memory. "We thought that might help for those of us who have a hard time feeling out when we should eat."

"I just thought it would be nice to make pies," Steve said.

Phil looked, and sure enough, a pile of apple peels rested at Steve's elbow. Something squeezed inside Phil's chest, warm and full and bright. *Wow,* he thought, *I get to eat apple pie made by Steve Rogers himself. I don't think it gets any better than this.*
Learning languages is good for the brain. Concepts and skills acquired for one language can be applied to learning new ones. There are tips for learning a new language.

Sleep inertia is a nuisance, but there are ways to overcome it. Smart alarms, sleep cycle alarms, and gradual alarms can help.

Steve is wearing this apron, rather than one of the unisex kind. It actually belongs to Betty. Steve is secure in his masculinity. There are many simple designs for aprons. Bruce's apron has measures and temperatures printed on it.

Beef stew is a popular comfort food.

This is the decorative crock pot.

Memory and scent are closely related. Food smells like home and safety to most people. The scent of cooking food can improve appetite -- notice that JARVIS is subtly manipulating the tower airflow for this effect. Pleasant smells also make people kinder and happier, and can help with PTSD.
I Think This Is Working

Chapter Summary

Bruce shares the rationale behind the cooking. Phil asks about the apple pies, which Steve and Bucky explain. Then Phil talks with Bucky about methods of discipline.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Anyway, I've been thinking about this for a while," Bruce said. "Steve and Bucky joined me for a yoga routine earlier today. We talked some stuff out, but they were still feeling kind of frazzled, so I figured now would be a good time to test the premise. Cooking is a soothing activity, food smells help people relax, and I think this is working."

Steve nodded with a sunny smile. "Yeah, I feel loads better."

Evidently Bruce and Steve had managed to work out their recent conflict. Phil gave thanks that he didn't have to supervise every interpersonal issue in the tower. Sometimes folks could resolve matters on their own.

"Me too," Bucky said. "We're not experts, but put us in a kitchen and we can make something decent. It feels good to work with my hands and to put food on the table. I like taking care of people, always have."

"So, you're making apple pies?" Phil said, looking at the scraps of red and green peel. There seemed to be more cores, so apparently Steve had been peeling some and leaving others with the skin on.

"Mostly pies, because we remembered how, but then JARVIS found us this recipe for caramel apple crumble so there's also one of those," said Steve. His hands flickered over the surface of the current pie, deftly weaving strips of fragile dough into a lattice. Underneath, the apple slices lay in a meticulous starburst pattern. As Phil watched, Steve finished covering the top and then crimped the edges with practiced grace. "Okay, this one is ready to go in the oven."

"Wait a minute," Bruce said as he pulled out his Starkphone. He snapped a quick picture of Steve with the pie. The he opened the lower oven door so Steve could set the pie inside.

Phil smiled. It was the first time he'd seen Bruce take pictures without prompting. He's been so camera-shy for so long, I'm really glad that he likes being behind one instead of in front all the time, Phil thought. "Have you gotten some good pictures today?" he asked aloud.

"Yeah," Bruce said softly. "It helps." He held the little screen so Phil could see the earlier photos -- Steve peeling apples, Bucky mixing dough, both of them assembling pies, and then the pies themselves. In one frame the brothers leaned against each other, warm and happy and laughing.

"We talked about some stuff like that today, shifting directions and roles and authority," Steve said.

"And how I've botched it," Bucky added sourly.

"You haven't botched it, you just haven't gotten the hang of it yet," Bruce said.
"Tony takes a while to understand," Steve said. "You have to watch him and see what attracts his interest."

Bucky flicked a crumb of dough across the table with his fingernail. "Yeah, I guess. I still wish he'd learn to take what he's got coming to him."

"Like Steve with the belt?" Phil said quietly.

Bucky gave him a sharp look. "He told you about that?"

"Yes, he was kind enough to share," Phil said. "Discipline works best when it takes into account the strengths and weaknesses of each individual, and how their personality works. You've seen that in action with Steve, how he needed a different approach growing up, and sometimes overreached himself."

"I did the best I could for him," Bucky said. "It was difficult looking after the littler kids ... but it's one of the most rewarding things I've ever done. I just wish I'd had a better idea what I was doing."

"Considering that Steve grew up to become Captain America, I'd say you did fine," Phil said. "You paid attention to him and figured out what would work for him. The same applies to our team now, just a matter of mental considerations more than physical ones."

"Don't forget the arc reactor, though," Steve pointed out. "It's tough, but it's not indestructible. We've had a few scares in combat."

So far we've been lucky, but that's a good point too, Phil thought.

"Understood," Bucky said. Then he smiled at Steve. "Sometimes Tony reminds me of you, runt. He's a bit wild, but he's got a good heart."

"It's not just Tony who benefits from a tender touch," Bruce added. "My childhood was horrible, and honestly my adulthood wasn't much better until I moved in here. That's where the anger management issues come from, so I need to know the people around me won't hurt me, soldiers and all. It helps. I figure if even the Hulk can learn to be gentle, there's hope for everyone."

"I could use some hope," Bucky said, rubbing his right hand over his left.

"You're a good mechanic, which means a good problem-solver," Phil said to Bucky. "When what you do doesn't work, you try something else. It's just like going through a toolbox until you find the wrench that fits."

"Sometimes it's not easy to tell, with Tony ... he can be incredibly tough, or a lot more fragile than I realized," Bucky said.

"We all have our fragile moments," Steve said quietly. Bucky reached out to give him a sideways hug.

"If Tony smells like dirt floor, that's a clue to take extra care with him," Phil said. "He uses the toolshed to work out some of his history, but it can bring up painful memories."

"I thought so," Bucky said. "I'll try to be careful. Growing up in an orphanage was hard, but at least I knew what's what and I knew the younger kids. Here I just feel lost. I wish I knew Tony better, knew what to do for him."

"I've found that Tony responds well to a gentle yet firm approach," Phil said. "He liked you playing
the big brother, until things got too rough. You have a good head for combat, too. When we get you back in the field, Tony may need to take orders from you someday. I'm confident that you can figure out something that works for the two of you."

That gave Bucky a more thoughtful look, which satisfied Phil.

Chapter End Notes

Cooking is soothing, as a **hobby** or a **coping skill**. Some people listen to cooking shows for relaxation.

Letting people solve their own problems is important in **parenting** and other **leadership contexts**. Of course, Phil can do this now because he's spent months modeling and teaching healthy conflict resolution to his team. There are instructions for **teaching problem-solving** and for **solving your own problems**.

Enjoy Steve's recipe for **Old-fashioned All-American Apple Pie**. Here's mine for **Caramel Apple Cobbler**.

You can also bake an **Old-fashioned Lattice-top Apple Pie**. Learn how to make a lattice crust, or watch a video of the weaving.

Bruce has a profound **fear of cameras**, and being watched in general, due to past trauma. He's working to **heal his camera-shyness**. Taking photos is an effective way to overcome camera-shyness and indeed **shyness in general**. There are tips for **taking good candid photos** of friends and family.

Effective discipline needs to match a person's **temperament, development and needs**. What works for one may be useless or actively harmful to another.

Child abuse leaves many harmful after-effects, including **anger management issues**. Abuse survivors urgently need **safety and tenderness** in order to heal. Bruce is beginning to learn how to find **strength through gentleness and vulnerability**.

LiveJournal user Draggon_flye also pointed out that abuse can cause **fear of anger**, which may lead to dissociation and impaired consent. Bruce is terrified of his own anger, Hulk's anger, men yelling at him, and the military in general. This can manifest through **conflict avoidance, passive aggression**, and other issues. Some of this also applies to Tony and Clint, although it shows in different ways for each of them. There are ways to **work through fear of anger**.
Steve Rogers Is Baking Apple Pies

Chapter Summary

Phil decides to make biscuits to go with supper. Tony arrives and realizes that Steve is baking pies. Steve and Bucky offer to teach Tony how to cook.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A timer dinged. Bruce pulled a pie out of the upper oven. This one had a solid crust, now baked to perfect golden brown, with a star pricked into the center. Steam billowed up, smelling like fruit and a cozy family afternoon and *home*. The rich aroma made Phil's mouth water. Then his stomach growled.

Bucky laughed. "Here, have a Starkbar," he said, pushing the box toward Phil. The two supersoldiers had clearly been snacking while they worked, their appetites increased by the scent of food.

"Thanks," Phil said. It was a mixed box, so he took one of the peanut bars and munched that to take the edge off his hunger.

Bruce lifted the lid from the crockpot. More delectable steam poured forth. Bruce poked at the beef stew with a fork, then shook his head. "This needs a while longer to cook. The potatoes and carrots are still a little stiff."

"Say, how about biscuits to go with supper?" Phil offered. The savory stew reminded him of his grandmother's kitchen. She always made fresh biscuits to go with it, and Phil didn't want to settle for bakery buns today.

"That would be great," said Bruce.

"Okay, I need buttermilk, flour, baking soda ..." Phil listed the ingredients. Bucky and Steve already had some of them on the table and simply pushed those in his direction. Bruce fetched the rest.

"JARVIS, please preheat an oven to 450°F."

"Acknowledged," JARVIS said, and the amber light flicked on.

Phil mixed the dough, enjoying the chance to spend time with his people. Steve and Bucky seemed well recovered from the recent stress. Phil felt grateful that Bruce had taken care of them while Phil mostly had his hands full with Tony. Nobody wanted Bucky to feel guilty about the support he needed while healing. The dough came together under Phil's hands. He tipped it onto the pastry mat. Bruce brought him the marble rolling pin, cold from the refrigerator, to roll out the biscuits. Then Phil realized something else was missing, and his hands were all over dough.

"Ack, biscuit cutter, I forgot to ask --" Phil said.

Steve held out a ring of metal that had probably started life as a tuna can. Worn tape covered the top edge, while the bottom edge was sharp and free of burrs. "Here, you can use mine," Steve said.

"Tony has a cookie-cutter one with a handle if you want it, but I don't think it works as well. So I
made this and a flower shape and some other stuff."

Phil took the repurposed can and briskly stamped out a set of biscuits. He transferred them to the baking sheet. Then he rerolled the dough and cut a few more rounds. He popped the last scrap of dough into his mouth. Finally he slid the biscuits into the upper oven. "JARVIS, twelve minutes on the timer, please." The digital counter activated.

Bruce gave the rolling pin a quick wipe-down and returned it to the refrigerator. Phil turned back to tidy up the remains of biscuit-making. He heard footsteps behind him, and glanced over his shoulder.

"Oh my gosh, Steve Rogers is baking apple pies in my kitchen!" Tony exclaimed, clinging to the doorframe. "I think we just reached a critical mass of Americana."

*At least I'm not the only one to get hit square in the nostalgia by this, Phil thought.*

"You don't have to keep hugging the door, Tony," said Steve. "Come on over and join us, if you like."

Tony's knuckles turned white where he clutched the wood. "I, I can't cook. You can ask Pepper. I think she wrote it down somewhere. Tony Stark is a terrible cook."

Phil realized that Tony was holding himself back, not for the first time, because he didn't feel that he deserved -- or could get -- whatever it was he wanted. *Answers, achievements, possessions, he'll go after those; personal connections, far less often. That's a bad habit that needs breaking,* Phil thought. *Besides, people have been giving Tony space since the garage fight, maybe a little too much space. We need to coax him back toward the center of the group.*

"Did anyone ever teach you cooking?" Bucky asked Tony.

"... no?" Tony said. He leaned forward, though, held in place only by his death grip on the doorframe.

"Come here," Bucky invited. "We'll teach you how."

Tony *glowed.* His smile completely outshone the faint gleam of the arc reactor through his shirt. "Okay," he said. He scampered across the room --

-- and plunked himself in Bucky's lap.

Fortunately the supersoldier was just tall enough to see over him. Bucky gave Phil a questioning look.

Phil nodded confirmation of Tony's sudden drop in age. It came as a surprise after the recent tension. The timing worried Phil a little, because they hadn't gotten very long to let things settle.

*Maybe all the talking has helped after all,* Phil mused. *I hope that this works out well and restores the trust between Tony and Bucky, if they can just keep the tone in the right place. Steve and I can help hold things stable.* Phil couldn't help smiling, though. Apparently the secret to leading Tony was as simple as making him *want* to follow you.

That reminded Phil of the devastating violation by Obadiah Stane, who had been more father figure than business partner to Tony. Phil winced inwardly. *It's a wonder Tony can still trust anyone's authority,* Phil thought.

"Right now we're making apple pies. They're really easy," Bucky said. "We need more apples. We
also need a fresh pie plate, along with flour and butter and stuff for the crust ..." He went on to summarize the process.

Tony reached for the fruit knife.

Steve whisked it out of his reach. "Let me do this part; it's a little tricky," he said. "I wouldn't want you to cut yourself."

Tony stared at him with huge eyes. "... okay," he said. His right thumb rubbed slowly over his fingertips.

Chapter End Notes

Phil is making Southern Buttermilk Biscuits. A fan asked me about gluten free biscuits, so I've added some references: Gluten Free Buttermilk Biscuits (similar to Phil's), Gluten Free Biscuits (made with almond milk, and a GF flour mix linked from another page), and Gluten Free Biscuits (billed as a tolerant, easy recipe). See also "5 Secrets to Fluffy, Sky-high Gluten Free Biscuits."

A marble rolling pin requires a little extra care, but is a handy kitchen tool especially in combination with a marble board. Using marble tools helps to keep dough cold.

You can make your own biscuit cutter from a can, including simple shapes like a flower. Aluminum from soda cans or baking tins is easier to work than steel cans, but not as sturdy. This video about making dough cutters has the first USEFUL pop-up I have ever seen in my life: it gives you a link to the recipe for the cookies. I wish more people would do THIS instead of waving aggravating crap in my face.

Americana is the collection of cultural material that invokes the spirit of the United States. You can see why Steve Rogers and apple pie would rouse strong feelings of nostalgia.

Negative feedback can discourage people from learning new skills, especially in areas outside their expertise. Pepper's canonical habit of yowling at Tony for doing things wrong, instead of showing him how to do better, is not very helpful. Overcoming discouragement is an important life skill. Learn to deal with unsupportive people and to work past discouragement.

Tony often holds himself back because he feels that he doesn't deserve good things. Life has taught him to do for himself, since other people more often try to take advantage of him than help him. There are tips for feeling good enough.

Effective leadership skills entail making people want to follow you by understanding their needs and accepting their admiration. Teaching is a crucial leadership ability so that you can help people fulfill their potential. Steve has always looked up to Bucky and credited him with providing a moral compass; now we're starting to see Bucky's leadership ability in action, where Captain America really came from.
Tolerances

Chapter Summary

Tony, Bucky, and Steve make more pies with a little help from Bruce and Phil.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bruce set a "pi" plate in front of Tony and Bucky. Tony bounced with excitement.

"Careful, squirt!" said Bucky. "Your chair has some tender parts."

"Be gentle with each other," Phil warned. Bucky nodded, understanding Phil's subtle reference to their earlier conversation about nonviolent discipline and the delicate uses of authority.

"Sorry," Tony said. He settled down. Phil was glad to see him using physical contact rather than revelation to bolster a relationship. Tony clearly felt a need to reconnect with Bucky and Steve, perhaps with Bruce too.

Bruce followed up with the mixing bowl and pastry blender, then the ingredients for the pie crust. Bucky guided Tony through the process of measuring everything.

Meanwhile Steve wielded the knife with quick, deft strokes. Perfect slices of red-skinned apple went into the big bowl next to him. Bruce added a splash of lemon juice and a sprinkle of white sugar, then folded them into the apple slices.

"Acid stops the oxidation," Tony piped.

"It sure does," Bruce said as he capped the bottle.

Tony had known that at four, but had no idea how to bake a pie. From the look on Bucky's face, which fortunately Tony could not see, Phil wasn't the only one who wished he could go back in time and throttle Maria Stark.

"Here, help me mix up the pie crust now," Bucky said. He showed Tony how to work the pastry blender, rocking the curved tines back and forth through the bowl of ingredients.

"This is harder than it looks," Tony muttered.

"Most things worth doing are," said Steve.

The timer dinged. Bruce pulled out Steve's lattice-top pie.

Eventually Bucky tipped the ball of pie dough onto the pastry mat. Phil got the marble rolling pin back out of the refrigerator.

"We want the dough to match this circle here," Bucky said, pointing to one of the rings on the mat. He gave the rolling pin a few skillful strokes and then let Tony have it.

"Tolerances?" Tony asked as he leaned over the marble cylinder. The dough was approaching the
"What?" said Bucky.

"He means variation in thickness," Bruce explained. "You don't have to worry about tolerances, because the guide ring will give you a pretty good gauge of thickness as long as you use the right amount of dough. I made some rolling pin guides, though -- some of my recipes are fussier." He brought out a handful of plastic slats.

Ever the mechanic, Bucky caught on instantly. "Oh, these are swell," he said, laying the 1/8" guides on either side of the dough.

Tony grinned as he finished rolling out the dough to a perfectly even thickness. "Bruce is really smart," he said.

Phil looked at Bruce. As usual, Bruce was looking bashfully at the floor ... but he wasn't arguing with Bucky or Tony, a definite improvement.

"Watch now: we flip the mat over like this --" Bucky said, turning the pie crust onto his floured hand, "-- and then lay the pie crust into the pan." He tucked the delicate pastry into place.

"Now put the apples in," Steve said. Tony grabbed a handful of apple slices. "Whoa! Not like that. Haven't you ever heard of apple-pie order?"

"It doesn't mean anything," Tony scoffed. He had missed seeing Steve's elegant pies going into the oven.

"Yes, it does," Steve assured him. "Here, let me show you." He picked up the slices one at a time and began arranging them in a tidy spiral. "You can make any pattern you want."

"Why not just dump them in like everybody else does?" Tony asked.

"Because we're not everybody else," Steve said. "I know, other people just throw everything in the pan willy-nilly, but I don't like doing it that way. When I make a pie, I do it because I enjoy it and I want to show somebody that I care about them. So I take my time to make it look really nice. It's a demonstration of my skill and attention. Then when it comes out of the oven all pretty, I feel proud of myself."

"It works as a moving meditation," Bruce added. "I may try it myself."

"Which way would you like to do this?" Bucky asked. "Steve and I are a little old-fashioned. It's okay if you'd rather make your pie the modern way."

Tony nibbled on his lip, then shook his head. "I don't want to make a messy pie," he said. Then he added to Steve's spiral hub, but branched off into a set of smaller spirals. Bruce surreptitiously snapped a photo of Tony and Steve assembling the pie.

"That looks beautiful, Tony," said Phil. "It seems a shame to cover it up with a crust on top."

"I did some of mine with solid crusts, others with lattice or crumble topping," Steve said. "Tony, what crust do you want on your pie?"

"Something that will show the design," Tony said, looking down at his spiral pie. The red peels gave it a floral appearance.
"Crumble top it is," Steve said.

Bruce set out the oatmeal, butter, brown sugar, and other main ingredients. Then he deftly sorted the spices into two groups: cinnamon, allspice, and nutmeg powders on the right; candied ginger chips, ground ginger, and ground cardamom on the left. "Pick which spice blend you want. Either will work," said Bruce.

Instantly Tony pointed to the ginger.

"Saw that one coming," Bruce said with a chuckle. Both he and Tony would eat candied ginger right out of the bag. Bruce measured out the spices onto the crumble mix that Bucky was assembling.

"Okay, stir this up," said Bucky. Tony did, and then Bucky demonstrated how to sprinkle the topping over the pie. It fell into the hollows between the apple slices, then deepened to cover them. "Don't worry, the topping will cook down so you can see the apples underneath."

Phil picked up the finished pie and popped it into the oven. Tony jumped off Bucky's lap and sat on the floor in front of the oven door, peering through the glass window. "Leave the door closed, Tony, so the pie can bake properly," Phil said.

"Okay," Tony said.

Chapter End Notes

This is the classic Pi Plate.

Gentleness is a learned skill. If play gets too intense, children need guidance in ramping it down. Roughhousing has benefits, but takes practice to do safely. Tony hasn't had much opportunity for physical contact other than sex -- Rhodey is probably the only person he horsed around with until quite recently. So he's just starting to learn what works and what doesn't. Light roughhousing is a good compromise.

Fruit turns brown due to oxidation. Lemon juice is one of several methods for preventing that. You can do a kitchen experiment with oxidation.

A pastry blender or butter cutter is a tool for mixing dough. The solid steel kind is sturdier than the wire kind.

Pastry mats have printed rings, grids, measurements, and other guides in different styles.

Rolling pin guides are strips that regulate the thickness of dough as you roll it out.

Many people have trouble accepting compliments, as Bruce does. However, he's learning to take a compliment after living with the Avengers for months. He doesn't argue as often as he used to.

Apple-pie order can refer to laying out the slices in a design, which some people still do. Steve's choice to make lovely pies is a combination of the service, gifts, and time love languages.

A moving meditation is any repetitive action that calms your mind and clears your head. Yoga, Tai Chi, and knitting are all popular examples. Cooking also serves this purpose.
Pie crusts come in different compositions and patterns, suitable for different kinds of fillings.

Pie spices are a subset of common baking spices. Crystallized ginger chips are much more convenient for most baking projects compared to ginger chunks which are better for snacking.
Teaching Him Something

Chapter Summary

Phil and Bucky discuss ways of connecting with Tony. Bucky and Tony clean up after the cooking. JARVIS summons the other Avengers to eat. People talk about their current projects over supper.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Phil went back to the table where Bucky was cleaning up the mess. "Thank you for inviting Tony to join us and showing him how to bake," Phil said quietly.

"It was my pleasure," Bucky said. He looked at Tony. "What you said earlier gave me the idea. I've seen Tony watching me when I read game rules, so I thought it had a chance. Does that always work?"

"What, teaching him something?" Phil said.

"Yes," Bucky said.

"I have yet to see it fail," Phil said. "Tony craves attention, and he didn't get much opportunity to learn ordinary household things growing up. If you show him something new, he tends to follow along."

Bucky and Steve shared a long, thoughtful look. A whole conversation passed between the brothers in perfect silence, one that Phil could only catch the edge of. "Okay, we can work with that," Steve declared. Bucky gave a firm nod.

"If you were wondering what use you are to the team, Bucky, there's one example of it," Phil said.

"Mmm," Bucky said.

I think this will go a long way toward solving Tony's authority issues with Bucky, and maybe also his reluctance to join in activities, Phil mused. Bucky makes a thorough and capable teacher, and Tony is already used to following Steve. Watching Bruce watch Bucky, Phil also suspected that another student might show a similar interest on game nights, given the right subject matter.

"Tony," Bucky called softly. "Come help us with the dishes?"

And Tony bounded to his feet as if washing dishes was a treat.

Bucky pressed Tony lightly against the counter, wrapping his left arm around the smaller man's waist. Then Bucky hooked a foot around the stepstool to pull it into position and give himself a little more height. He leaned over Tony to help him wash the mixing bowls, measuring spoons, and other items that Steve and Phil piled in the sink.

Phil felt pretty sure that was the first time since Afghanistan that Tony had let anyone bend him over any amount of water without having a panic attack. Yet he didn't so much as twitch.
**Bucky helps Tony feel safe,** Phil concluded.

Meanwhile Bruce put away the various bottles and boxes of things littering the table. A timer went off, and Phil pulled his biscuits out of the oven. Into the bottom of a wicker basket went the ceramic bread warmer that read **Blessings: Family, Friends, Hearth & Home.** Phil draped a cloth over the warmer. Then he piled in the biscuits and flipped the corners of the cloth over them. Bruce slipped his Starkphone out of his pocket and took another picture of the trio at the sink.

Finally the dishes were done. Bucky hoisted Tony onto his hip and said, "It's time to put 'em away now." Steve handed up the dishes as he dried them, and Tony settled them into their places in the cabinets. Finally Bucky put Tony down, to let his age drift back up before supper.

Bruce sampled the beef stew one last time. "Ready," he declared. Then he lifted the ceramic crock from the base and moved it to the trivets on the table. Bucky and Steve started setting places. Tony put out the silverware.

"JARVIS, ring the dinner bell," said Phil.

Bucky and Steve sat down together. Tony took the seat next to Bucky, and Bruce plopped down next to Tony. Phil settled beside Steve.

Minutes later, the other Avengers poured into the room. Clint and Natasha came fresh from the showers, her hair still clinging to her skin like curls of red paint. Betty paused to give Bruce a peck on the cheek before she sat down with him. "I've been smelling supper for an hour. What did you make?" Betty asked.

"I made beef stew. Phil made biscuits. Steve, Bucky, and Tony made apple pies for dessert," Bruce said. He gave Tony a smile and a nudge with his shoulder. Tony grinned back.

Clint had already started shoveling stew into his bowl, and the others followed suit. Steve lined the bottom of his bowl with biscuits and poured the stew on top, while Bucky filled his bowl with stew and put the biscuits around the rim. Phil dished up his own serving and savored the rich meaty flavor. For a while it was quiet as people ate.

Conversation started up slowly. Clint bragged about his scores on the shooting range, where they had tested out Tony's latest targeting routine with "villains" that would shoot the "civilians" if not stopped soon enough. Natasha interrupted with a clinical analysis of his misses. He stuck his tongue out at her.

Then Betty described her current lab project, experimenting with different materials to focus gamma rays. "I'm getting great energy production, but I'm having trouble narrowing it down to a good cutting beam," she said.

"Try gemstones," Tony mumbled around a mouthful of biscuit.

"That's too expensive," Betty said.

Tony rolled his eyes at her. "One, expense is no issue in Stark Industries lab work. Two, we can make our own crystals. Lab-grown gems are better for this kind of use anyway, because of the quality control. I've done rubies and sapphires for lasers before. What do you want -- those, or diamonds, or something else?"

"Maybe try diamonds and emeralds," Betty said thoughtfully. "Some of the captured weapons use emeralds, but I'm not satisfied with the performance ..."
"Like I said, quality control," Tony said.

"We should do a paper," Bruce said.

"I thought you were already working on one," Tony said.

"We finished The Application of Gamma Radiation in Tracking Astrophysical Phenomena," Bruce explained. "In fact, it's getting editorial interest from a couple of different science websites. We'd like to release it as open source content." He cast a wary glance at Phil.

"As long as you don't implicate SHIELD or the Tesseract directly, I see no problem with publishing scientific data," Phil said. The last thing he wanted was another nightmarish brawl over somebody's research. Jane's professional retaliation for New Mexico had cost SHIELD several of its best scientists, and a lot of cold shoulders from former contacts. Who would have imagined she had so much influence? he thought.

"Go you!" Tony said, patting Bruce on the shoulder. "Both you and Betty deserve more credit than you've gotten in the past."

Chapter End Notes

Parents are a child's first teachers, but it's also important for children to bond with other teachers later. Survivors of abuse and/or neglect often have problems bonding with anyone. Teachers, adoptive parents, and other role models can help form healthy bonds. Bucky's experience in the orphanage comes in very handy for this; he's used to dealing with damaged children and protecting them while they recover.

PTSD sometimes fades with time, even without treatment, although it tends to be chronic rather than acute. The point of counseling, personal work, and family support is to make the healing faster and less miserable. Triggers lead to the other symptoms such as flashbacks or panic attacks. Various techniques, and time itself, can weaken triggers so they don't hit as hard or often as they used to. While Tony has blown off all of Pepper's suggestions for counseling, he has done some personal work and has great family support now. Some things that used to bother him are starting to lose their power over him.

Bread warmers are ceramic pieces that hold heat. They're often decorated with a blessing or some other phrase.

Lasers come in many types, including ruby and titanium-sapphire. It seems reasonable that gamma guns or other energy weapons might use focusing crystals in a similar manner. Lab-grown gems tend to be more clear and vivid than natural ones, because they have no impurities unless those are added for a specific effect. See some examples of lab-grown gems.

Open access science values knowledge above profit, going against the stranglehold on modern research. Browse a list of open science resources. Bruce never cared about publicity or money, and now he has more money than he knows how to spend. He just cares about helping people, so public release gives him the most jollies. Betty is of similar mind, and as a female scientist, will probably get more attention dumping to public than staying inside the bottleneck.
Dr. Jane Foster was spectacularly outraged by SHIELD’s theft of her research in the movie *Thor*. How does a scientist with no political or financial clout hit back? She talks to her friends. Data theft is a serious charge in the scientific community. When the field of potential experts is tiny, several of them suddenly hating your guts can make it difficult or impossible to accomplish anything at all.

See a picture of Tony and Bucky putting away dishes, [*illustrated by Fredcstark*].
Chapter 56

Chapter Summary

Steve talks about changes in cooking tools and techniques over time. Tony takes a phone call from Pepper. Afterwards he describes the apologies he has planned for everyone. Betty and Bruce discuss arboretums. And then there is pie!

Chapter Notes

Here ends "Hide and Seek." 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. I also have a list of favorite photogenic scenes from the whole series for fanartists to consider, partly compiled from audience requests.

See a JARVIS-eye view of the scenes where Tony is missing and then found, in "Kernel Error."

The next story in this series will be "Happy Hour," a flashback to when Happy first met Tony. I have some other stuff to post too.

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

Then Steve and Bruce got into a discussion about changes in cooking practices over time. It started with the arrangement of apples in pies, then drifted into advances in kitchen equipment. The common kitchen already held a huge array of gadgets because Tony collected them, more out of a love for machines than any skill at using these.

"Wait until you see what a really fine tempering machine can do with chocolate," said Bruce.

"Or the marvels of making white-chocolate cheesecake in a crockpot," Betty added.

"With a food processor, any kind of chopping or slicing goes faster," Phil said, helping himself to another biscuit.

"I do not care for food processors," said Natasha. "Sometimes they reduce good vegetables to slush. I prefer to use a knife."

Steve nodded. "Yeah, doing it by hand works better for some things."
Tony's phone rang. He glanced at the screen and then answered it.

Phil frowned at him. "Phone calls during meals are discouraged, Tony."

"It's Pepper, I can't ignore her again," Tony said to Phil. Then he turned his attention to Pepper. "You got the specs I sent, right? Yeah. We're good? Great, I'm glad you like the prototypes. Sorry I couldn't come to the meeting you wanted, I got ... a little over-extended this week. I'll update the list with the new stuff you requested. Oh, that? It's covered. I sold some stuff in the Caymans. No worries. Listen, Pep, we're in the middle of supper and people are making frowny faces at me for being on the phone. Can I call you back later tonight? Yes, I promise, JARVIS will remind me if I forget. Thanks. Bye." Tony stuck the phone back in his pocket.

"What was that all about?" Bruce asked.

"Just Stark Industries stuff. I had to skip a meeting that Pepper wanted, so I made some things in the lab by way of apology," Tony said. He shook his head. "I take three things off the List of Epic Boredom and she puts two new things on it. I just can't win. Tony Stark, Nerd Serf." But he was smiling anyway.

"I'm glad that you managed to settle things with Pepper," said Phil. He liked Pepper, and he hated it when Avengers-related complications made her life more difficult. I should send her concert tickets or something to make up for it, he mused. "Yeah, I worked out the rest of the apologies too; JARVIS helped me remember what everyone likes," said Tony. He pointed with his spoon. "I'm taking Steve and Bucky to a ball game, then Natasha and Bucky to a ballet. Bruce and Betty want to visit an arboretum but haven't picked which yet. Clint and I are going to a falconry demonstration." Bucky got two apologies, one for Tony's initial disappearance and another for the fight in the garage.

Phil raised his eyebrows at the choice of activities. So far Bucky had only left the tower for a few minutes at a time, clinging to the safe haven it represented. Bruce rarely left except for missions. This may accomplish more than just soothing hurt feelings, if it works, Phil thought. "That sounds like an excellent schedule, Tony. Good thinking."

"He's getting the hang of it, yeah, now that he understands how we like spending time with him," Bucky said. "And I'm sorry for my part in blowing a minor misstep into a major fight that must've been pretty alarming for everyone to walk in on."

"Yes, it was," Steve said quietly. Phil knew that the two of them had been talking over what happened. He suspected that Bucky had spoken with other teammates as well, after recommending that they review the recording of the entire fight.

Betty reached out to feather a touch across Bucky's wrist. "You're still recovering from a lot of trauma. We can make allowances."

"Thanks," Bucky said, then picked up a previous thread. "So ... flowers?"

That launched Betty and Bruce into a conversation about the best arboretums, which apparently had been going on since Tony proposed such an excursion as his apology to them. Bruce favored Mountain Top in New York, while Betty leaned toward Jenkins in Pennsylvania.

"Local, national, or global?" Natasha asked. "Because the one in Dallas is memorable."

"Wherever they like," Tony said.
"What were you doing in a flower garden?" Betty asked. "I thought you didn't go in for much girly stuff."

"Working," Natasha said. She had been stalking a couple of AIM botanists as they studied grafting techniques. "That does not prevent me from enjoying the scenery."

The last timer binged. Tony got up to fetch his pie. Bruce snagged another trivet and set it on the table. Then he doubled back for the pies that Steve and Bucky had made earlier. Betty went for ice cream.

"I built a pie," Tony announced as he set the pi plate on the trivet. Spicy steam billowed up from the surface, then faded away to reveal the fancy design. Delicately arranged apple slices played hide and seek through the crumble topping.

"Thought you didn't cook much?" Clint said, eyeing the dessert.

"Bucky and Steve and Bruce showed me how," Tony said.

"Huh," Clint said. He dug into Tony's pie. Tony cut himself a slice of the basket-top one.

Phil took small slivers so that he could sample all the options. Each of Steve's pies held a subtly different flavor and texture. The crunchy topping of Tony's pie made a marvelous contrast against the tender filling, and the candied ginger gave it a sharp bright note.

Tony Stark might not know how to cook, but Tony Carter was learning quite well.

Phil took another bite of truly delectable apple pie and sat back in his chair. Bruce and Betty shared a piece of caramel apple crumble half-buried in vanilla ice cream. Bucky told awful jokes that made Steve grimace at him while Clint and Tony howled with laughter. Natasha lounged casually at the table, not even noticing that the seating arrangement had left her back to the door. The earlier tension had vanished at last. The team meshed comfortably again.

No matter how long the count or how hard the game, it always comes down to this, Phil thought happily. Home safe.

Chapter End Notes

Tempering chocolate makes it strong and glossy. The finicky process is a lot easier with a tempering machine.

Eating meals together helps family bonding, but phone calls undermine that process. There is actually a game intended to discourage people from using their phones during mealtime. Of course for the Avengers, JARVIS can screen phone calls; Tony knows that if his phone rings during supper, it's not trivial. There are safe and challenging topic lists for mealtime conversation. The Avengers tend to vary between the two. The everyday experiences they discuss can get pretty wild, but when people feel frazzled, someone will step down the conversation to easy subjects.

People often hunker down at home if they are anxious, depressed, or otherwise having trouble; too much of that can make matters worse. It may help to coax them outside for brief, enjoyable trips. Bruce still doesn't feel entirely safe in New York. Bucky has been
overwhelmed not just by his own experiences but by modern life in general. Their friends haven't pestered them, but are starting to look for ways to entice them out. There are tips for stretching beyond your comfort zone in healthy ways.

**Mountain Top Arboretum, Jenkins Arboretum & Gardens, and Dallas Arboretum** are three of America's finest plant displays.

**Grafting techniques** make it possible to fasten one plant to another. **Ficus** are among the easiest plants to graft, as they will self-fuse naturally if the branches rub together. A souped-up ficus appeared in [Iron Man 3](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0816692/). While that movie isn't canonical for this series, I figure that AIM is probably still dildling around with some of the same concepts ... just with less success. Particularly if SHIELD spotted the problem sooner and Black Widow snuffed one of their leading researchers.

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**End Notes**

**Queen Elizabeth** can be more formidable than many people realize. For the Marvelverse, I'm positing that **MI5** is akin to SHIELD. She is nominally the head of the armed services, and actually **is** the head of MI5, MI6 and HM Secret Service[s]. The directors of those organizations have weekly briefing meetings with her as a matter of course, and daily ones in times of crisis. And of course, Director Fury's reputation is still in the crapper.

"Добрый день" (Dobryiy den) -- Russian: "good day" or "good afternoon." When I visited Russia, it was also used as "good morning" -- really an all-purpose greeting.

The **Hakini Mudra**, made with all fingertips touching, represents intellect and concentration; it also helps to align the right and left hemispheres of the brain. It's essentially the same as **finger steepling in body language**, which is often a gesture of confidence and dominance. However, when it appears lower on the body and/or with fingertips outward instead of upward, it's more defensive; this is the quintessential geek signal for "I know what I'm talking about, please don't attack me for it." Bruce Banner spends a lot of time doing this or very similar things in *The Avengers*.

"Что вы хотите есть?" (Chto vyi hotite est) Russian: "What do you want to eat?" Browse some [food-related phrases](https://www.mangohol.com/food-related-phrases).

Notice that Phil is using formal rather than informal phrasing. Russian culture is on the reserved side, so the language leans toward formal. Right now Bucky doesn't remember how well he knows these people. So they're applying Russian etiquette for polite strangers, instead of the intimate phrasing they would use if Bucky had his memories intact. This is because using the informal mode with someone you don't know well is rude, and it can feel creepy or intrusive; the closest analogy I can think of is somebody leaning into your personal space.

"Хотите колбасы или бекона?" (Hotite kolbasyi ili bekona) -- Russian: "Do you want sausage or bacon?"

"Здравствуйте, меня зовут Анатолий." (Zdravstvuyte, menya zovut Anatoliy) -- Russian: "Hello, my name is Anthony."
"Яков" (Yakov) -- **Russian**: Jacob. This was the Winter Soldier's personal name. Яша (Yasha) is a diminutive, what Natashka called him. This kind of identity slippage is a bad sign, but it's typical of how memory is stored. He's remembering the name that he used when he was speaking Russian, because it matches the timeframe.

"Вы пахнете подобно дому" (Vyi pahnete podobno domu) -- Russian: "You smell like home."

"Вы придете со мной?" (Vyi pridete so mnoy) -- Russian: "Will you come with me?"

This page transliterates from Russian to English.

**Traumatic brain injury** is notorious for producing erratic and lingering symptoms, as is **complex PTSD**. The cycle of **good days and bad days** can be devastating, both for the survivor and for caregivers. **Disorientation** is associated with these and other mental issues. There are tips for **helping someone who suffers from cognitive disorientation**. Coping skills for dealing with your own disorientation include **some of the same ones for anxiety disorders**. Try to create a safe, calm, supportive environment and reorient on everyday things.

Works inspired by this one [Cover art for "Hide and Seek" by Lehorin](#)

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