**Fandom:** The Avengers  
**Characters:** Phil Coulson, Bruce Banner, Betty Ross, Bucky Barnes, Steve Rogers, Natasha Romanova, Tony Stark, Clint Barton, Happy Hogan, Peggy Carter, Sam Wilson, DUM-E, U, Butterfingers.  
**Medium:** Fiction  
**Warnings:** Mention of past trauma with lingering symptoms of PTSD. Kitchen fail. Tony being a brat. Description of past deaths and self-destructive behavior. Current environment is supportive.  
**Summary:** The Avengers celebrate Memorial Day by going to Washington, D.C. for the festivities. Emotional roller-coasters ensue.  
**Notes:** Hurt/comfort. Family. Fluff and angst. Emotional overload. Coping skills. Healthy touch. Asking for help and getting it. Cooking. Comfort food. Holidays. Medals. Veteran issues. Nonsexual intimacy. Caregiving. Competence. Gentleness. Trust. Emotional confusion. Hope. Crowds. Memorials. Mourning. Letting go. Moving on. Photography. Parades. Storytelling. War stories. Nostalgia. Hand-feeding. Heroism. Public speaking. Flashbacks. Friendship. Counseling. Leaving early. Bots. Tony and his bots. Tony Stark loves his bots. The bots are Tony's kids. Bot feels. Bots being cute. Protective bots. Boundary issues. Territoriality. Making friends. Bucky's arm. Tony Stark & Bucky's arm. Watching television. Cuddling. Hand cramps. Massage. #coulsonlives   
  
**"Coming in from the Cold: Monday: Memorial Day" Part 1**  
  
The next morning, Phil's alarm woke him early. It was Memorial Day, and they had plans. He dressed and went down for breakfast.  
  
In the common kitchen he found Bruce trying to make French toast. Bruce swore over a skillet as he scraped a spatula frantically against the bottom. Betty fanned the air to disperse a faint cloud of smoke.   
  
"Phil, hi -- oh -- breakfast isn't -- fuck! -- quite ready yet," Bruce said. A corner of toast sailed out of the pan to splat at Phil's feet.  
  
"Not a problem," Phil said mildly. He picked up the toast and tossed it into the kitchen compost bin.   
  
"I do not understand why this is so difficult," Bruce muttered. "It's a simple recipe ..."  
  
"French toast is easy to mess up, if you haven't made it before," Phil said. He looked over Bruce's shoulder. "I think you're using bread that's too thin and fresh; that's why it won't hold together."  
  
"Would you like to take over?" Bruce snapped.  
  
Betty nodded encouragement behind Bruce's back.  
  
"If you wish," Phil said. "I've made French toast plenty of times. I could show you how it works."   
  
Bruce sighed, his shoulders slumping. "Yes, please," he said. "I thought I could do this, but it's not really my cuisine, and today is just not my day."  
  
"Okay, then," Phil said. He took out a fresh pan and started it preheating. Then he mixed up a fresh batch of batter. "Betty, please see if we have some day-old bread that's either whole loaf or thick slices."  
  
"There's half a loaf of heavy sandwich bread, and a stick of actual French bread," she reported, coming back with both.  
  
"Perfect," Phil said. "Give me the sandwich bread first. Then slice the loaf to the same thickness." He soaked the first few slices, explaining the process as he went along. Bruce and Betty watched intently. Soon they had a platter covered in golden-brown slabs.  
  
"What should we set out to put on these?" Betty asked. "The recipe said all kinds of things ..."  
  
"Powdered sugar, maple syrup, fruit preserves or fresh fruit," Phil suggested. Betty nodded and went to the pantry for preserves.  
  
"Oh, hey, French toast!" Bucky said happily as he came into the kitchen.  
  
Bruce glanced up -- and then scrambled away in panic, whacking his back against the counter.  
  
Phil caught him, wondering what had gone wrong. Then he realized that Bucky was already in his dress uniform. Phil hadn't put his on yet.  
  
"Bruce, are you -- oh, shucks, it's the uniform, isn't it?" Bucky said, his voice shifting from alarm to concern. Swiftly he skinned out of his coat, leaving only the plain undershirt. "See, it's just me. Everything's okay."  
  
"Bucky, what's wrong?" Steve called, footsteps hurrying in the common room.  
  
"Don't come in here yet!" Bucky said sharply. "I spooked Bruce. Give him a minute to calm down first." The footsteps stopped.  
  
Bruce shivered against Phil's side. "Let me see your back," Phil said. He tugged the shirt loose. Underneath it, the bruises were already coming up where Bruce had hit the edge of the counter. "We should put an ice pack on that."   
  
Betty hustled back from the pantry, chucking two jars of preserves on the counter. She wrapped herself around Bruce. "It's all right, you're safe," she said.  
  
Then Bruce reached out a hand for Bucky.  
  
"You sure you want me here?" Bucky asked, easing forward.  
  
"Need to know it's you," Bruce said. He buried his face in the crook of Bucky's shoulder, snuffling against the skin. "Kitchen smelled smoky, and then I saw the uniform and -- well."  
  
"I'm here," Bucky murmured. "I'll protect you."  
  
"Thanks," Bruce said. He pulled away then, and straightened himself. "Sorry for the fuss."  
  
"We understand," Phil said. He fetched an ice pack for Bruce to tuck against the bruises.  
  
"Uh, I hate to break the moment, but your toast is burning," Bucky said.  
  
Phil hastened to rescue the French toast currently in the skillet. "Nice catch," he said.  
  
Bucky went to the kitchen door. "Steve, take off your uniform coat and you can come in now."  
  
Steve came in, ignoring the food, and went straight to Bruce. "Are you okay?" he asked.  
  
"Yeah, just -- a little shaken," Bruce said. "I think maybe I should stay home today. I'm not really good with uniforms."  
  
"I'll stay with you," Betty offered at once.  
  
"No, you've been looking forward to this for days," Bruce protested. "I don't want to take away anything from you guys either." He lifted a hand to forestall Bucky, Steve, and Phil from volunteering. "I may not be a soldier but I still know what the day means to you."  
  
Natasha slipped through the door. "I will stay with you, if my company is acceptable," she said. "This holiday is not important to me. I have always been an assassin, not a soldier."  
  
"Okay," Bruce said softly.  
  
"Come, fill your plate," Natasha said. "We may eat in my room. JARVIS has found a dance video which is said to mimic zero-gravity motion. Perhaps you would enjoy the physics of it." Bruce obeyed, and she herded him out of the room, snagging the jar of mixed-berry preserves on the way.  
  
"Sometimes the patriotic holidays are hard on him," Betty said after Bruce left. "He doesn't have many good memories of soldiers. I mean, before the team."  
  
"It's harder when triggers stack up," Steve said. "First the holiday, then the smoke in the kitchen, and the uniform. It was like that for me when I was sick. A wet day or a beating I could take, but not both together, and even worse if it was cold too."  
  
"Well, now Bruce has people to look after him," Phil said. "Natasha will stay with him, and the rest of us can still go out as planned."  
  
Tony and Clint arrived just as breakfast went onto the table. "Hey, who made French toast?" Clint asked.  
  
"Bruce and Betty started it, then I joined in when I got here," Phil said.  
  
"I want bacon. Is there bacon? There should be bacon," Tony said as he forked a single slice of French toast onto his plate and drowned it in maple syrup.  
  
"Tony, be careful," Steve said, rescuing the bottle just as Tony's plate started to overflow.  
  
"Sorry, not enough caffeine yet," Tony said. He took a long pull from his enormous red-and-gold thermos. "Where's my bacon?"  
  
"I'll make some," Phil said as he got up. He'd meant to make some kind of breakfast meat before the morning went to hell. He kept an eye on his team as he covered the griddle with bacon strips.  
  
"By the way, Bucky, a package came for you," Steve said, sliding it over to him.  
  
Bucky opened the box and then just sat there staring at it for a long minute.  
  
"I'm really glad the army got your updated medals to you in time for the holiday," Steve continued. He burbled on about it for a while.  
  
"I don't ... I can't wear these," Bucky said, pushing the package away. Phil could see the distinctive glint of the Purple Heart and POW medals among others.  
  
Tony swept them off the table into his hand. "That's okay. I'll just go put them away for you."   
  
Phil wondered about that for a moment. How would Tony know where to put them? Phil thought. Then he realized, Of course. There are basically two places that medals go: in a display case, or in the back of the sock drawer. Someone who just pushed them away wouldn't put them on display, so that leaves the sock drawer. Tony's rich-geek presentation made it easy to forget just how deeply steeped in military culture he was.  
  
Steve looked a little lost. "I was only trying to be helpful ..."  
  
"I know, runt. Not your fault I'm a little touchy," Bucky said.  
  
"Do you want the first batch of bacon, Steve?" asked Phil.   
  
"I guess so," Steve said. "Thanks for making breakfast. It's good."  
  
"Remember Jacques?" Bucky said, elbowing him.  
  
"Yeah," Steve said with a blush. "I tried to make French toast over a campfire once. After I dropped the first slice in the fire by accident, Jacques never let me try again." Steve and Bucky were both smiling though.  
  
Phil brought the bacon to the table. "Well, we have better resources now," he said. "If you want to learn how to make French toast, I'll be happy to teach you."  
  
"I'd like that," Steve said. He looked down at his bacon, then back up at Phil. "You remind me of him, you know. Jacques was our infiltrator. He was a real subtle fella."  
  
"He had this ... what did Gabe call it, Steve?" said Bucky, waffling a hand.  
  
"Je ne sais quoi," Steve said softly. "Most of the team, we were these big loud guys. We would've been lost without him. I don't know how many times he kept us from getting captured. He faked the best papers you ever saw. God, I miss him."  
  
"So do I," Bucky said as he squeezed Steve's shoulder. "You're right, though, Phil's every bit as good a spook as Jacques was."  
  
Phil's throat tightened, but he managed to say, "I'm honored by the comparison."  
  
By the time Tony came back, the next batch of bacon was ready for him. Happily he grabbed a strip of it to eat with his fingers. Steve and Clint were arguing quietly about appropriate ways to celebrate Memorial Day, which had changed a lot since Steve's time. "What's the fuss?" Tony asked around a mouthful of bacon.  
  
"I like the fireworks," Clint said.  
  
"I don't," Steve said. "I mean, I do like fireworks, but not today. It's disrespectful of the dead -- okay, maybe not Dum Dum, he'd love it, but most people, no."  
  
"I prefer the parades and the bands to the fireworks," Betty said.  
  
"I just don't think it's right to turn this into a three-day weekend with parties and all," Steve grumbled.   
  
Bucky gave a morose nod. "It's supposed to be a day of mourning."  
  
"Yeah, I hear you," Tony said, showing his teeth. He pulled out his Starkphone and made a call. "Hi, Daniel, it's Tony. I found you a new backer," Tony said, then turned to Steve. "Heads up, Cap!" He tossed the phone to Steve.  
  
"Uh ... hello?" Steve said. "I don't even know who I'm talking to, Tony just threw his phone at me." He straightened abruptly. "I'm very sorry to bother you, Senator. Oh, my name? I, uh, I'm Steve Rogers yes really. No, I don't know why Tony did that. We were just talking about Memorial Day." Steve gave Tony a dirty look.  
  
"That was mean, Tony," said Phil.  
  
"Nah, just ornery," Tony said with an irrepressable grin. "They'll love each other, watch, they've got a lot in common."  
  
Steve brightened. "Yes, I'd be honored to lend my support to moving Memorial Day back to May 30. We're flying into D.C. for the day. I'm sure I could come say a few words." They chatted for a few more minutes, making plans.  
  
"Was I right or what?" Tony asked as Steve handed the phone back.  
  
"Yeah, you were right," Steve admitted. "Next time, give a fella some warning, though."  
  
"I'll think about it," Tony said, digging into his French toast.  
  
"You know, Senator Inouye has a memorable history," Phil said. "When ordered to capture a German outpost on the Colle Musatello Ridge, he got shot through the abdomen. That didn't even slow him down. He carried a bunch of grenades up the slope and used them to take out the machine gun nests. Then he got hit by a rifle-mounted grenade which tore up his right arm."  
  
"Shit. Did he stop for medical attention?" Bucky said.  
  
Phil shook his head. "Oh no. He pried the grenade out of his right hand and used it to kill the man who shot him. Then he used a tommy gun in his off hand to go charging around the battlefield, until he got shot again, this time in the leg. That one took him off his feet, so he propped himself against a tree and kept shooting until the Germans went down. Only after his unit moved in to set up defenses would he let the medics evaluate him. Single-handed, he killed twenty-five Germans that day, and wounded eight more."  
  
"Golly," Steve said. "That guy's a hero. Was he okay after that?"  
  
"Well, obviously he lived to become a Senator, but he did lose his arm," Phil said.  
  
Steve looked at Bucky. "Yeah, that happened a lot."  
  
"He's like you, Steve, if you'd been born that way instead of made," said Bucky.   
  
"Nah. He's like us, if we were both mashed together," Steve said.  
  
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**Notes:**  
  
[French toast](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_toast) is a [simple recipe](http://www.foodnetwork.com/recipes/alton-brown/french-toast-recipe/index.html) in concept, but it is [trickier than it looks](http://www.bonappetit.com/test-kitchen/common-mistakes/article/the-7-most-common-french-toast-cooking-mistakes).  
  
[PTSD](http://www.helpguide.org/articles/ptsd-trauma/post-traumatic-stress-disorder.htm) causes [flashbacks](http://www.giftfromwithin.org/html/FAQ-PTSD-Symptom-Flashbacks.html) and other miserable symptoms. Know [how to cope if you have a flashback](http://ptsd.about.com/od/selfhelp/a/flashcoping.htm). [Family members](http://www.helpguide.org/articles/ptsd-trauma/ptsd-in-the-family.htm) can also [help someone through a flashback](https://sometimesmagical.wordpress.com/2013/10/26/supporting-a-loved-one-through-ptsd-or-panic-attacks/). In this case, all the Avengers have experience with such challenges, and they know each other's triggers, so it's not hard for Bucky to figure out what triggered Bruce. Since Bruce-and-Hulk relate most strongly to smell/taste and touch, that's part of what causes the problem, but also part of what allows Bruce to reassure himself that this is his friend Bucky and not a random soldier sent to capture him.  
  
[Pilobolus](http://www.pilobolus.com/home.jsp) is a dance troupe known for geometrics.  
  
See Tony's [red and gold thermos](http://ysabetwordsmith.livejournal.com/pics/catalog/20474/430259).  
  
[The POW Medal](http://www.axpow.org/powmedal.htm) and the [Purple Heart Medal](http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/08/23/how-the-purple-heart-can-help-heal-veterans-with-ptsd.html) are among the more salient that Bucky has earned. However, some veterans feel unworthy or ashamed of their medals, and may [store them in the sock drawer](http://www.dallasnews.com/news/community-news/dallas/headlines/20101227-dallas-oilman-gathers-u.s.-german-veterans_oral-histories-of-world-war-ii.ece) or even [throw them away](http://www.veteranstoday.com/2012/05/22/us-war-veterans-tossing-medals-back-at-nato-was-a-heroic-act208180/).  
  
[Memorial Day](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Memorial_Day) has a long history [in American culture](http://www.usmemorialday.org/). [Senator Daniel Inouye](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel_Inouye) was among the people who sought to restore its original date. [He was also a total BAMF](http://www.badassoftheweek.com/inouye.html).  
  
[Jacques Dernier](http://marvel-movies.wikia.com/wiki/Jacques_Dernier) was one of the Howling Commandos, a Frenchman.  
  
[*Je ne sais quoi*](http://grammarist.com/usage/je-ne-sais-quoi/) literally means "I don't know what" in French, but the connotation is more "something special."  
  
[Memorial Day fireworks](http://dc.about.com/od/hoildaysseasonalevents/a/MemorialDay.htm) are traditional, but [can cause stress for veterans](http://blog.chron.com/thetexican/2013/06/ptsd-and-fireworks-dont-always-mix-well-but-help-is-out-there-for-vets/).  
  
[Dum Dum Dugan](http://marvel-movies.wikia.com/wiki/Timothy_Dugan) was another of the Howling Commandos, known for his interest in explosives.

After breakfast, Betty helped Phil to clear the table. Clint and Tony hastily stashed the dirty dishes in the dishwasher. People who hadn't already dressed for the trip, went back to their rooms for that before reconvening in the common room.  
  
Bucky put his uniform coat back on, shrugging his shoulders in vain attempt to get it to lay right. "Thought I had the right size," he muttered.  
  
"Good enough for government work," Steve said. "You know how it goes."  
  
Soon they were all ready to go. They took Tony's private jet to Washington, D.C. The flight was quiet, everyone lost in their own thoughts. The sky was clear and blue, the weather pleasant when they landed.  
  
First on their schedule was the ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery. A crowd of people filled the grounds. Tony's connections made it possible for them to slip through and find an excellent view. Everyone stood solemnly and watched the laying of the wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.  
  
Phil had to close his eyes for a minute, bracing himself against the sudden upwelling of emotion. Every time he came here, he couldn't help but remember all the people he'd lost -- the ones he served beside, the ones he commanded, and especially those who fell under circumstances that made it impossible to recover their bodies. Good job, he thought, with a mental salute to their memory.   
  
Phil kept his breathing slow and steady. It wouldn't help to make a scene, although he could hear plenty of people crying in the crowd. It was the sharp catch of breath nearby that snagged his attention. Quickly he opened his eyes and scanned their little group for trouble.  
  
"Steve, are you okay?" Tony murmured.  
  
"No, not really," Steve said, his voice tight with strain. He looked pale and shaky in the warm spring sunlight. "This was ... this was us, Tony. Bucky and I were both lost for decades. Everyone thought we were dead, and this is the only grave we had. I never thought much about that until just now, and it kind of hit me like a load of bricks ..."  
  
"Yeah, I get that," Tony said. "Bucky, how are you doing?"  
  
Bucky didn't respond. If Steve was a little shaky, Bucky seemed outright shut down in shock.  
  
Phil reached out and gave him a steadying touch on the elbow. "Bucky?"  
  
Bucky startled at the contact. "Huh?"  
  
That's not good, Phil thought. I think Bucky's had a little too much of this particular celebration ...  
  
"Oh yeah, we need to get this show on the road," Tony declared. "Clint, you've got point. Make us a route back to the limo. Phil, get Steve and Bucky between us. Betty, you guard our backs." Tony chivvied the whole team into motion with a few deft gestures.  
  
Behind them, the concert started up. That helped to keep the crowd stable. Clint was assertive but not rough about clearing a path for them. He used deft touches at elbows, knees, and waists to shift people aside.  
  
It looks like we aren't the only ones bailing out early, Phil thought as he saw several other veterans moving away. He couldn't blame them. Emotions ran high on Memorial Day, especially here. Then a rising mutter caught Phil's ear.  
  
Tony was scolding himself as he walked Steve and Bucky back to the limousine. "Dummy. Dummy. You should have seen this coming, should have known, you've seen it before. Dummy! Need to get them out of here."   
  
Phil realized that Tony's self-talk was spilling out loud, unnoticed as the man focused on getting his friends safely out of the cemetery. The harsh recriminations grated on Phil's nerves. I wonder if that's how DUM-E got his name, he thought abruptly. The others fit a similar pattern -- I know that U is short for 'Hey, you!' and Butterfingers is pretty self-explanatory. JARVIS may be the only one who was named in advance, on purpose. The thought ached, a bitter reminder of Tony's unhappy upbringing.  
  
The Avengers made it back to the parking area in snug formation. Steve and Bucky were leaning on each other, flanked by Phil and Tony for support. Clint opened the door for them so that Happy wouldn't have to get out.  
  
Tony carefully tucked Bucky into the limousine. Next Tony guided Steve in, then finally climbed in himself. Everyone else took a seat as well. "Happy, drive," said Tony.  
  
"Problem, sir?" Happy asked as he pulled away from the curb.  
  
"Ah, Steve and Bucky crashed at the Tomb of the Unknown. You know the drill," Tony said.  
  
"Yes, sir," said Happy. Soon he stopped at a drive-through and placed an order. Then he rolled down the partition and handed back several bags.  
  
Tony put most of the bags between his feet and opened the last. He pulled out two large cups of orange juice, then passed the first one to Steve. "Here, drink up. It'll help," Tony said. Steve quickly opened it and took a sip. Tony reached over to offer the second to Bucky.  
  
"Maybe later; I'm a little queasy right now," Bucky said.  
  
"Phil, you're closest to the fridge. Get him a bottle of water," Tony said.  
  
Phil leaned over to rummage in the limousine's mini-fridge. "Got it," he said, handing the water to Bucky.  
  
"Thanks," Bucky said. He took the bottle and rested the cool surface against his forehead.  
  
"Coffee and croissants, grab 'em if you want 'em," Tony said as he opened more bags. The Avengers shared the bounty.  
  
Phil accepted some of each. He was intrigued that Tony's instructions had cued a sugar-rich beverage, some bland food, and nothing with a strong greasy smell that might cause upset. Tony really has done this before, Phil mused.   
  
"No coffee for me, but I'd like a croissant, please," said Steve.  
  
"Yeah, coffee after a bad shock, definitely not recommended," Tony said. He handed Steve a croissant.   
  
Plastic popped and cracked as Bucky finally twisted the top off his water bottle to sip at it. "Thanks, Tony," said Bucky. "I'm sorry for freezing up back there."  
  
"It was my fault. I should've known better than to suggest this in the first place," Tony said.  
  
"No, it was a good idea," Bucky said. "I needed, we needed -- what's the word I read in those exercises? -- oh, closure. Coming here helped me and Steve remember that we're not dead, just got stuck for a while, even though people thought we were dead." He took a long pull of water. "It's just, we know what people were thinking about us, because it's what we thought about the ones who never made it home. Standing at the Tomb ... it was kind of like having seventy years of mail dumped on us all at once."  
  
"Yeah. What he said," Steve said. He sounded a little better, though, and at least nobody had broken down crying. "Is there any more juice?"  
  
Paper crinkled as Tony reached into another bag. "Sure," Tony said, handing him the cup.  
  
"I think I'm ready for mine now," Bucky said. He finished his water and held out a hand for the orange juice that Tony passed to him. "Thanks for getting us out of there."  
  
"That's what friends are for," Tony said. "I just wish things hadn't turned sour like that."  
  
Phil mentally reviewed the event, now that he didn't have a minor crisis on his hands. Tony makes a more capable leader than he realizes, Phil thought. He took over when Steve was out of sorts, made a good plan, and implemented it. All our hard work on teambuilding paid off today.  
  
"I wish we could've stayed for the concert, but it's okay," Bucky said. He picked the foil off the top of the orange juice and took a sip. "Steve and I need to get back into the swing of things, but sometimes we have to take small steps."  
  
"It helps a lot, just having friends there for backup," Steve added. "You took care of us when we blanked out for a minute. That makes it a lot safer to try things, because we know you'll step in if something goes wrong."  
  
"I can't hide from the world forever," Bucky said. He reached over and helped himself to a croissant. "I can't hide from what I did. I have to ... make it part of me, somehow, and move on. This is helping."  
  
Formation of a post-traumatic identity, Phil thought. Dr. Samson had sent him some materials on that topic that proved more useful than what Phil had found previously. That made it a little easier to support Bucky as he integrated what had happened to him.  
  
"Yeah, same thing happened to me after Loki ..." said Clint, picking at a croissant. He shifted restlessly against Phil's side.   
Phil gave him a gentle squeeze of encouragement. Clint hadn't talked much about that, but maybe he was feeling the need more. "Go on," Phil coaxed.   
  
"At first I couldn't remember much, just a jumbled mess," Clint said. "Then more came back, and it was hard to sort out what was really me and what wasn't. The more I looked at things and put them back in place, though, the better it got."  
  
"Bruce-and-Hulk have a similar problem," Betty said quietly. "It's hard for them to keep their memories organized because the transformations are so disruptive. It helps to have friends who can tell them what really happened, so that they can integrate it. You're not alone, Bucky, Clint. We all need each other."  
  
Phil rubbed a hand over the phantom scar where Loki's spear had stabbed through the Life Model Decoy. Would I have recovered from the shock as fast as I did, without anyone as anchor? Probably not, he thought. He had clung shamelessly to Clint and Natasha after reuniting with them. He curled his fingers around the coffee cup, a comforting weight in his hands.  
  
"We'll be okay," Steve assured Tony, who still looked a little anxious. "You haven't messed up anything. So what's up next?"  
  
"Uh, the next scheduled event is the parade at 2 PM," Tony read from his Starkphone. "I figured we could drive around for a little while, maybe get something more for brunch, then watch the parade. We can hit a deli after that. Steve's thing on moving Memorial Day is later this afternoon, and the fireworks start after sunset. We'll fit supper around those, depending on when folks get hungry."  
  
Phil smiled. It's different, planning a trip for people with such fast metabolisms, but we're getting the hang of it, he thought.  
  
Happy treated them to a rolling tour of Washington, D.C. Phil expected that the holiday traffic would make it impossible, but the chauffeur knew dozens of clever shortcuts and back routes that gave them excellent views of the monuments from unexpected angles. He narrated the sights with practiced skill.  
  
"Happy worked a summer here as a tour guide," Tony murmured as they admired a flowering park from an overpass.   
  
"I wish I had a camera," Steve said sadly.  
  
"Phone, Steve," Tony reminded him. "Your phone is a camera, and because it is a Starkphone, it is not a crappy camera, although it isn't as good as one with interchangeable lenses. It's fine for snapshots, better than any point-and-shoot you could buy in a store."  
  
"Oh yeah, right," Steve said, squirming so he could pull his phone from his pocket. "Some parts of the future I really like."  
  
"Okay, turn on the camera mode," Tony instructed. "Touch the window and the car. That tells the camera to compensate for the fact that you're shooting through glass from a moving vehicle." Tony tapped something on his own phone, and the tinted window beside Bucky suddenly turned clear. "You should be good to go."  
  
Steve leaned over Bucky, trying to reach the window. Bucky rolled his eyes and switched places with him, pushing Steve into the window seat. Then he had to buckle Steve's seatbelt for him because Steve was too busy rubbernecking.  
  
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**Notes:**  
  
[The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier](http://www.arlingtoncemetery.mil/Explore-the-Cemetery/Tomb-of-the-Unknown-Soldier) figures into some [Memorial Day](http://dc.about.com/od/hoildaysseasonalevents/a/MemorialDay.htm) observations.  
  
[Emotional overload](http://www.goodtherapy.org/therapy-for-emotional-overwhelm.html) can happen due to [acute or chronic stress](http://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/stress-symptoms-causes-and-effects.htm). In this case, Steve and Bucky froze up because of how the current situation interacted with their past experiences. Know how to [handle emotional overload](http://lorithayer.com/handling-emotional-overload/) or [help a friend through it](http://sfhelp.org/cx/apps/overwhelmed.htm). The key is to take the weight off, at least long enough to regain balance.  
  
[Self-talk](http://au.reachout.com/what-is-self-talk) is the voice in your head when you narrate your actions or talk to yourself. Usually it is silent, but some people talk aloud, especially under stress. You can actually hear Tony doing that in the movies. Understand how to [silence negative self-talk](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/04/06/negative-self-talk-think-positive_n_3009832.html), [promote positive self-talk](http://www.pickthebrain.com/blog/7-steps-to-positive-self-talk/), and [help a friend with low self-esteem](http://www.wikihow.com/Help-Someone-With-Low-Self-Esteem). It can be very tricky to challenge someone else's poor (and inaccurate) image of themselves, without directly contradicting their right to their own feelings. One good way is to provide counterexamples: "I'm stupid." "You feel stupid, but you figured out yesterday's problem faster than I did." Another is simply stating that you disagree; you're entitled to your own opinion too.  
  
[Closure](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Closure_%28psychology%29) helps people stop ruminating on things. Some people have a higher need for closure than others; [here is a scale](http://terpconnect.umd.edu/%7Ehannahk/NFC_Scale.html). Steve and Bucky need closure in order to release their hold on their native time and adapt to their current time. There are [ways of finding closure](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/in-flux/201104/5-ways-find-closure-the-past).  
  
[Moving on](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-main-ingredient/201112/how-move-forward-0) is the next step. You need to [counter the if-only guilt](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/love-and-gratitude/201308/loss-4-ways-move-forward-and-counter-if-only-guilt) in order to [move on with your life](http://www.wikihow.com/Move-On). As Steve and Bucky form new attachments in the here-and-now, they shift their focus from the past to the present. There is a [Moving Forward](http://www.veterantraining.va.gov/movingforward/) program for veterans.  
  
Trauma can [shatter a person's sense of identity](http://www.systemiccoaching.com/sw_articles_eng/trauma_ptsd.htm). They must then figure out [who they are after that trauma](http://changeyouchoose.com/who-are-you-after-trauma-a-question-of-identity/). This applies to all the Avengers in one way or another. Here are some sample exercises for the [formation of a post-trauma identity](http://yourlifeaftertraumabook.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Your-Life-After-Trauma-Sample-Chapter.pdf).  
  
For many people, talking about [painful feelings](http://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/talk-painful-feelings-therapy) and [bad memories](https://drkathleenyoung.wordpress.com/2011/06/09/talking-vs-processing-in-trauma-therapy/) is a necessary part of recovery. (Other people find that it doesn't help, or actively makes things worse, so pay attention to the effects of any problem-solving techniques you try.) [Trauma recovery tends to proceed in stages](https://1in6.org/men/get-information/online-readings/recovery-and-therapy/stages-of-recovery/judith-hermans-stages-of-recovery/): re-establishing safety and finding a support network, processing all the crap that happened and the fallout from it, then rebuilding a new identity and life to move forward. Clint in particular has taken time to reach a point where he can talk about what Loki did to him, because first he couldn't remember it very clearly and then he needed to calm down enough to recognize and analyze what's in his head. But there's a similar pattern with Steve and Bucky, who were also too shocked by their respective experiences to respond immediately. (In canon, they still haven't, and wow are they fucked up in The Winter Soldier and Avengers 2.) Sometimes it helps to [focus on the contextual details of bad memories](http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/04/140418141121.htm), instead of dwelling on the miserable emotions. You can [transform negative memories](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ronald-alexander-phd/mindfulness-practice_b_4047094.html), [let go of them](http://www.wikihow.com/Let-Go-of-Painful-Memories), and [erase the trauma](http://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/four-steps-to-erasing-trauma-of-painful-memories-061214).  
  
Many [smartphones come with a camera](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camera_phone) now. Here are [some of the best](http://www.tomsguide.com/us/best-phone-cameras,review-2272.html) in our world. Naturally, a Starkphone is better! I simply extrapolated that it would have features to adapt to different demands, which the user could select from the camera management screen. There are tips on [how to use a camera phone](http://www.wikihow.com/Take-A-Good-Picture-On-Your-Camera-Phone).

"Food truck ahead," Happy announced presently. "Anybody want some Rito Loco?"  
  
"Yeah, pull us up alongside," Tony said. "Steve, Bucky, you guys want to try the Rib Rito, it sticks with you. Bruce is going to regret missing this."  
  
"We can bring him another time," Betty said. She poked at her phone. "I'm having the Fruit Rito. Anybody else need to see a menu?"  
  
"Nah, I'm good with Tony's advice," Bucky said.  
  
"Same here, but if they've got fruit then I want one of those too," Steve said.  
  
"O.G. Rito for me, please," said Phil. He loved the colorful local flavor of the D.C. food trucks and tried to catch one every time he came to town.   
  
Clint hesitated. "I don't want to eat so much that I'm heavy on my feet ..."  
  
"You can share mine. I feel the same way," Phil said.  
  
"I'll share too," Bucky offered at the same time Steve said, "You can have some of my fruit."  
  
"Okay. Thanks," Clint said.   
  
"Add the usual Mojito Rito for me and whatever you want, Happy, that's a wrap," Tony said.  
  
Happy relayed the group order and soon passed back piles of fragrant food.  
  
Phil smiled as he watched Clint alternate nibbles from the O.G. and the Rib Ritos. This is so much better than stakeout with other agents picking on him for his 'funny' eating habits, Phil thought.   
  
When Phil first brought Clint in from the cold, the wary and traumatized young sniper had tended to gorge in private but refused to fill up while on the job, a relic from his circus days. He'd been beaten for poor performance too often to risk it. Phil had finally resorted to squeezing into the hawksnest alongside him and hand-feeding Clint bits of smuggled sushi. Clint's appetite had leveled out with time and care, so that the old habits rarely showed now, but he still lowered his eating if he needed to stay alert and agile.  
  
It was all Phil could do not to laugh when Steve started picking strawberry slices out of the burrito and hand-feeding them to Clint.  
  
They showed up a little early for the parade. This time it was Phil's connections that had procured a prime spot. The Avengers wedged themselves in beside several representatives of the World War II Veterans Committee that sponsored the National Memorial Day Parade. At first Bucky and Steve were breathless in the company of men who had been their contemporaries but were now separated by a gulf of time and experience. Eventually they relaxed enough to start talking again.  
  
"Steve and I, we never really got our homecoming like the other fellas," Bucky said as they waited. "It's kinda sad. He's a hero, he should have a parade."   
  
In the distance, Phil could hear the crisp military music approaching. Heads turned as everyone watched for the front line to appear. "Well, maybe this one will help serve that purpose for both of you," Phil said. They'd been offered the opportunity to march but had both declined. At the edge of Phil's view, the crowd rippled as seated people stood up.  
  
"Somebody tell me when the flag comes into view. I can't stand up for long," grumbled the nearest veteran, who was sitting in a wheelchair.  
  
"I have the lookout," Bucky said.  
  
"You don't need to stand up at all, sir," Steve said. "I'm sure everyone would understand."  
  
"Day I can't stand for the flag, you can nail the box shut and throw me in the ground," the old man said. "And I'm pretty sure that captains don't 'sir' sergeants."  
  
"You still have seniority," Steve said, but he was smiling as they teased each other a little.  
  
"Here comes the flag," Bucky announced, then in a lower voice, "Got your brakes on?"  
  
"Yes," the old man said, bracing himself against the arms of his chair. "Just need some leverage ..."  
  
"I make a fine fencepost if you want one," Steve offered. He waited for the nod, and then he and Bucky carefully helped their fellow veteran to his feet. They closed ranks around him, propping him between the two of them so snugly that he couldn't have been holding much of his own weight. Phil leaned back a little. Sure enough, both of the super-soldiers had their inside arms wrapped behind for extra support. From the front, though, it would look like they were all standing at attention.  
  
The flag passed by, its proud colors rippling in the warm spring breeze. Bright music streamed alongside. The parade spooled out behind.  
  
"Flag's out of view," Clint called from the far side of the team.  
  
"Care for a ride back down?" Bucky asked. The veteran nodded again. In perfect unison, Bucky and Steve knelt in slow motion to lower him into the wheelchair. The move was so practiced that Phil wondered how many times they had done this for injured teammates in the war.  
  
The old man patted their hands as they let go. "There are fewer of us every year," he said. "This is the first time we've ever gotten anyone back."  
  
"It's good to be back," Bucky said.  
  
The parade included marching bands and veteran units from all fifty states. All of the wars with surviving veterans were represented. Along with them came patriotic floats and huge helium balloons. Steve frowned at the balloons. Then the old man said something that Phil couldn't catch, which made Steve and Bucky both chuckle, lifting their mood again. It took a long time for the parade to go by. The route ran from the corner of Constitution Avenue and 7 Street, along Constitution Avenue to pass in front of the White House and end at 17th Street.   
  
At last the crowd began to break up. "Hey, Tom, you want to join us for lunch?" Steve said. Evidently they had exchanged introductions while Phil's attention was on the parade.  
  
"What in the world for?" the elderly veteran said, his tone pleased but surprised.   
  
"Catch up on old times," Bucky said. "Steve and I, we missed a lot."  
  
"Sure, why not," Tom said. "I don't have plans until later."  
  
"Need a push?" Steve asked.  
  
"No I do not," Tom said. "Nothing wrong with my arms yet." He spun his chair neatly in place and rolled down the sidewalk as the Avengers shuffled into motion. "Thanks for the offer though."  
  
They made their way to a deli from which delicious smells emerged, but it was crowded and all the tables were full. "Do we stick with the line here, look for another place, or bribe our way in?" Tony asked.  
  
"I can wait ..." Steve said, but his stomach gave an ominous growl.   
  
Phil looked at his watch. It had been over two hours since brunch from the food truck, and Steve hadn't eaten as much as usual. "Bribe," Phil said.  
  
"Hey mister, do you need a table?" asked a voice.  
  
Phil turned to find a table crammed with teenagers who were hastily gathering up their sandwiches. "You're veterans, right?" said the tallest girl. "We saw the uniforms. If you want the table, it's yours. We can eat standing up."  
  
"Thank you, miss, that's very kind of you," Phil said, motioning for the team to settle in. Bucky whisked one of the chairs out of the way to make room for Tom's wheelchair.  
  
"I know the waitresses here. I'll send somebody over to take your order, so they know there are new people at the table," said one of the boys.  
  
It happened so fast that even Phil was impressed. The waitress arrived with water and a basket of breadsticks, most of which went to Steve and Bucky. She managed all their orders. Phil could see Tony mentally tallying the tip as she recited the entire list from memory without missing anything, even though Bucky had ordered brisket on rye with mustard and Steve wanted the same thing without mustard.  
  
The Avengers chatted casually as they waited. Tom filled in anecdotes from planning the parade and solicited everyone's opinions. He explained his personal feelings on balloons -- that they kept the little kids entertained so the older folks could focus on the main attraction. Even Steve had to admit that helped.  
  
When the food and beverages arrived, though, everyone went quiet for a moment. Phil looked at Tom. The oldest veteran raised his glass of iced tea and solemnly intoned, "To absent friends."  
  
"Absent friends," everyone chorused, clinking their glasses together. For a moment the air seemed full, pressed close with ghosts and memories. It always hit Phil this way, and stronger in the company of people who had lost so many to the swift fire of war and the slow tide of years. Then it was gone again in the next instant, folded away back into the corners of the mind where it waited.  
  
While they ate, the stories came out. Phil opened with one from his early days in SHIELD, when he'd been young and cocky enough to get shot down in enemy territory. Nick Fury had gone in after him and carried him out. "I didn't realize until he collapsed beside me in the safehouse," Phil finished softly, "that he walked the entire distance on two broken ankles."  
  
"I helped run a Navy landing ship on D-Day," Tom said. "I took five boatloads to that beach. Maybe one guy from each made it out of the water alive, except for the fourth trip. By then it was bad, you could see what you were getting into, like wading through hamburger. There was this kid ..."  
  
Bucky and Steve both looked up at that.  
  
"... maybe fourteen, fifteen years old, had to have lied about his age to get in. He kept saying that he needed a shave, I think to throw off suspicion that he wasn't old enough. Came to about here on me," Tom said, touching a hand to his chest. "He asked me how bad it was, and I said hell on Earth. So then he said, 'If that's how it is, best I go out first,' and squeezed through to the front." Tom fell silent for a long minute.  
  
"What happened to him?" Bucky asked.  
  
"Soon as the ramp dropped, he was struck by machine gun fire. Dead before he hit the water," Tom said. "But the three soldiers behind him, they all made it to the beach alive. Took out a machine gun nest, I saw that much before I had to turn back for another load. That kid may not have made it to the beach, but he sure as hell made a difference."  
  
"Thank you," Steve said.   
  
"For what?" Tom asked.  
  
"For telling me how it would have happened," Steve said. "I know you recognized me. Well, before this --" Steve swept a hand down his powerful body "-- I was tiny. I lied my head off trying to enlist anyway. I knew I was going to die young; I just wanted it to mean something. If I'd never met the man who made me who I am today, that story you just told, that would've been me, or something like it. I'm really grateful. It feels good to know that somebody that size managed to do his part."  
  
\* \* \*   
  
**Notes:**  
  
[Rito Loco](http://ritoloco.com/) is one of the more famous [food trucks of Washington, D.C](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/going-out-guide/wp/2013/06/12/six-d-c-food-trucks-included-among-americas-101-best/).  
  
(Some of these eating links may be distressing.)  
[Disordered eating](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Disordered_eating) refers to unhealthy food habits that are [not as severe as eating disorders](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/contemporary-psychoanalysis-in-action/201402/disordered-eating-or-eating-disorder-what-s-the). Many of the Avengers have or had a troubled relationship with food. It helps to [understand food disturbances](http://www.wikihow.com/Fight-Against-Eating-Disorders). There are [resources for coping](http://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/resources/infopax.cfm?Info_ID=48) with disordered eating [if you are ready](http://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/docs/2%200910%20How%20ready%20am%20I%20to%20change2.pdf). Know how to [help someone with food disturbances](http://www.helpguide.org/articles/eating-disorders/helping-someone-with-an-eating-disorder.htm). Focus on lowering stress related to food. Sometimes tracking/weighing helps but other times makes it a lot worse. A casual approach works better for some people.  We had a great discussion about [disordered eating and other food challenges](http://ysabetwordsmith.dreamwidth.org/10266225.html) on my blog.  
  
(Some of these feeding links are cute, but others may be stressful in various ways, and not necessarily the same for all readers.)  
[Food sharing and feeding](http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/anthro/faculty/fiske/pubs/Miller_Rozin_Fiske_Food-Sharing_1998.pdf) convey intimacy. Hand-feeding is associated with [infants](http://kidshealth.org/parent/growth/feeding/feed47m.html), [disabled or elderly people](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assisted_feeding), [lovers](http://eatsomethingsexy.com/wordpress/cooking-recipes/diva-dish/fifty-ways-to-feed-your-lover/), and [submissives](http://michaelsamadhi.com/feeding-submission-28-days-serafina/). It is also used for [raising hawks](http://wildpro.twycrosszoo.org/S/00Man/AvianHusbandryTechniques/UKBHusbIndTech/HR_Av_Birds_of_Prey.htm) and other birds, and [adult hawks may be hand-fed](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sifZ1MeeWG4) as well. It was actually the bird references that inspired Phil to try that with Clint. Steve does it because he simply doesn't realize that most people don't. To him it's perfectly normal, because he was so sick so often growing up that Bucky or someone else often had to help get the food into him.  
  
[Developing a healthy relationship with food](http://jessikneeland.com/healthy-food-relationship/) typically shows a [pattern of traits in good eaters](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/04/17/healthy-relationship-to-food-habits_n_5107037.html).  
  
[The Memorial Day Parade](http://www.americanveteranscenter.org/avc-events/parade/) is one of [many celebrations in Washington, D.C](http://washington.org/article/10-ways-celebrate-memorial-day-weekend-washington-dc). for that holiday.  
  
[Traditional flag protocols](http://www.homeofheroes.com/hallofheroes/1st_floor/flag/1bfb_disp6.html) are very conservative. Few people follow them anymore, but some people remain extremely serious. The main point is to convey respect. Steve and Bucky justifiably vary the rules a bit because they're holding someone up.  
  
[Wheelchair etiquette](http://dizabled.com/wheelchair-etiquette/) includes offering help and then letting the rider decide what to do.  
  
Tom's remark about veterans is a paraphrase of sentiments from "[The Band Played Waltzing Matilda](http://celtic-lyrics.com/lyrics/36.html)."  
  
Washington D.C. has [many fine sandwich shops](http://www.washingtonpost.com/gog/best-bets/sandwich-shops,64337.html).  
  
[A toast](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toast_%28honor%29) is often offered by the senior or ranking member of a group. Steve has the highest moral and military rank, but has made it very plain that he considers Tom's lived seniority more important. "To absent friends" is popular throughout a wide range of military organizations including the [U.S. Marines](http://4mermarine.com/NAPS/respect.html) and the [Royal Navy](http://detritusofempire.blogspot.com/2011/06/know-your-royal-navy-toasts.html). [To Absent Friends](http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/ToAbsentFriends) is also an entertainment trope about remembering those lost or distant.  
  
(These war-related links range from morally painful to downright gruesome.)  
[Veterans may waffle](http://strongeratthebrokenplaces.com/should-veterans-tell-their-stories-kyle-nowak/) over whether to tell their stories, but [many of them find it helpful](http://exitwoundshomecoming.blogspot.com/) to relate their experiences to a sympathetic listener. [Here are some sample war stories](http://www.sfgate.com/opinion/article/SOLDIERS-TELL-TRUE-STORIES-OF-THEIR-WAR-2466818.php). [There have been projects](http://whenjohnnyandjanecomemarching.weebly.com/uploads/5/9/5/1/5951178/listening_to_veterans-_the_welcome_johnny_and_jane_home_project-3.pdf) to connect [veterans with listeners](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/just-by-listening-civilians-can-help-veterans-heal/2011/11/01/gIQA7YYamM_story.html). Understand how to [talk with veterans](http://nationswell.com/vets-come-home-5-things-say-5-things-shouldnt/) and how to [listen to them](http://www.thrivenet.com/articles/Vet-list.shtml). The main ideas are 1) don't pry, and 2) be gentle with their memories, because many of those memories still hurt. If someone is telling you war stories, it usually means that they are trusting you a great deal. Occasionally it means they're so numb that they can't tell where their boundaries or morals are, so keep an eye on where those lines are.  
  
[The invasion of Normandy](https://www.dday.org/history/d-day-the-invasion/overview.html) during World War II, also known as D-Day, remains one of the more horrific battles in history. For Steve in particular, this story provides a sense of closure, because he has spent a lot of time wondering "what if" he hadn't met Dr. Erskine.

"If we're talking about tiny, I knew a medic that size once," said Clint. "I was flying medevac around Kabul."  
  
Phil remembered this story. SHIELD had loaned out Barton's services after a hit on the Ten Rings who were stirring up the theater in Afghanistan, because he could fly like a hawk and get into places that nobody else could.  
  
"She crawled into my chopper with what looked like a piece of meat, and I thought, what the hell?" Clint said. "Turns out it was a soldier -- no arms, no legs, just the head and torso. She got pretty ventilated herself too. I asked if she needed me to short-stop the flight so I could patch her up well enough to make it back to the base." Clint took a deep breath, and then went on. "Turned me down, told me she didn't need it. She said, 'If you fly true, I can save this one. If we stop, he's a dead man.' So I kept flying, and I tried not to knock them around dodging all the rockets in the air. By the time we landed, my boots were sloshing in blood. She was already dead -- light as a bird when I lifted her up. That guy, though, he made it. She told me true on that. Just didn't tell me what it'd cost."  
  
Just then, the waitress came by to set a basket of pastries on the table. "Today dessert is free for veteran parties," she said, then hurried to the next table. The place was still mobbed. Phil grabbed himself a cheese danish and then passed the basket to Steve and Bucky.  
  
"One time Peggy went on a raid with us, because she had a hot tip about some captured Sherman tanks," Bucky said, taking a caramel turnover. "She was the only one with contacts in the resistance there, and managed to hook us up with them. It was a good thing too, because we got pinned down away from our ammo dump -- the tanks were on the move and they cut us off. Steve was already down by then."  
  
Steve flexed his left hand, right fingers rubbing over it. "Yeah, I had a perfect view from the ditch," he said. "These two British boys ran upside the tunnel where the tanks were coming out, and dropped bundles of explosives. Collapsed the whole tunnel. They didn't make it out of the blast, but they kinda saved the world that day."  
  
"After that, Peggy and I got to the ammo dump and picked off the remaining tanks," Bucky said. "You know Ronsons --"  
  
"Lights the first time every time!" chorused Tom and Tony.   
  
"How do you even know that, kid?" Tom asked, eyeing Tony.  
  
Tony shrugged. "My old man made weapons, so I know pretty much everything about them. Steve and Bucky have heard me use that line before."  
  
"So you're old school despite your age," Tom said with a chuckle. "Eh, I've met a few others." Then he sighed. "Good people lost a lot in that war."  
  
"Some more than others," Bucky agreed quietly.  
  
Tom raised an eyebrow at him.  
  
Bucky rapped his left fist on the table, and even with the skin glove, the metal underneath made a muffled clank. Phil could see the slight stiffness in the wrist, where the forearm didn't rotate quite the way a flesh-and-bone one would, because the prosthesis had a different infrastructure. "It's a good fake, but it's still fake. I left the original behind in Germany," said Bucky.  
  
"It's not a good fake," Tony muttered.  
  
"Perfectionist," Bucky said, his voice fond.  
  
"Better than anything I've seen," Tom said. "Not Stark Industries work?"  
  
Tony shook his head. "I'm working on a replacement. That one is ... adequate in performance but unreliable in other regards."  
  
That was an effective way of shielding classified information, Phil mused. Tony may not care about rules, but he does care about protecting people. He filed away the observation in case of future need.  
  
"I'm sure that'll be something to see," Tom said. "Starktech is popular down at the VA, at least for guys who can afford it."  
  
"Ping me if too many people slip through the cracks," Tony said absently, fiddling with his phone. "I've got programs for that sort of thing, but it's hard to keep them current with people's needs. Easier if I can get good feedback, you know?" Deft fingers tapped at the tiny screen. Phil wondered what he was doing.  
  
"Sure thing," Tom said. "I know a guy who works at the VA here, good counselor, he should know what you need. Let me just fly him a kite so you can hook up." Tom sent a message on his phone -- which happened to be a Starkphone -- then launched into a story about a German guard dog, three soldiers, and some black-market steak.  
  
They kept telling stories until they emptied the basket of pastries and the waitress came back. "Thanks for taking care of my friends today," Tony said to her.   
  
Phil caught a flash of gold paperclip as Tony tucked a fold of bills into the pocket of the waitress' apron. She probably just earned a week's income, he thought.  
  
"It was my honor," she said with a nod to the soldiers, setting the leather folder with the bill on the table.  
  
Or maybe a month's, Phil amended as he saw Tony scribble something extra at the bottom of the paper.  
  
After lunch, they parted ways with Tom, who had called a friend to pick him up. Phil watched with wry amusement as said friend boggled over Tom's choice of company. Then the Avengers regrouped with Happy. He took them on another scenic drive on the way to Steve's event.  
  
Steve was anxious, fussing with his cuffs as they climbed out. "This was a dumb idea. I should never have agreed to this. Tony, this is all your fault."  
  
Tony just smirked, the accusations rolling off him like water over a freshly waxed car.  
  
"Not a fan of public speaking, huh? Neither is Bruce," said Betty.   
  
"I always feel like a dancing monkey," Steve said. "Nobody really wants to listen to me."  
  
"Well if they don't, they're idiots," Betty said.  
  
Steve gave a blustery sigh. "It's just ... different this time. I really care about this. I don't want to mess it up," he said.  
  
Phil steered him firmly toward the back of the stage. "Just say what's in your heart. That will never lead you wrong," he said. "We'll be in the audience, and you can concentrate on us if you get nervous."   
  
After leaving Steve in the capable hands of the stage manager, Phil collared one of the Secret Service guards and said, "Make sure nobody pesters Captain Rogers, please. He's skittish enough about public appearances without getting mobbed by groupies."  
  
"Yes, sir," the guard said crisply. Phil had his connections there too.  
  
The Avengers settled into their seats just before Senator Inouye walked onto the small stage. "Most of you have already heard me speak about the importance of moving Memorial Day back to May 30," he said. "This time I've got a new supporter who'd like to share a few words. Ladies and gentlemen, Captain Steve Rogers.  
"  
Steve strode to the podium with a brisk confidence that belied the anxiety only his friends could detect. "This used to be called Decoration Day. It goes back all the way to the Civil War," he said. "It's not a holiday in the sense of being a day for celebration. It's a day of mourning. You know what veterans do today? We get together and tell stories about our dead friends. War leaves marks on civilians too. I've known people who couldn't leave home on Memorial Day because the memories were too bad. You take a day like this and stick it right after a weekend, people want to turn it into a party. It's not meant to be. I don't think it's right. So I'd like to request your support for Senator Inouye's efforts to change the timing back where it belongs. Thank you and good night."  
  
Phil had to shake himself back to awareness after the quick, sharp speech. Steve had already hustled off the stage. The audience was still staring after him in stunned silence.  
  
"Well that was like getting hit in the face with a brick," Tony muttered. "Shit, I think Steve just broke the audience. I better go do some damage control." He slipped out of his seat and vanished expertly into the crowd.  
  
The stage manager had come out to announce the next speaker. The audience finally responded, some individuals giving a brief spatter of applause. There also came some shuffling as people moved in or out to follow favorite speakers.  
  
Phil saw Tony snag Steve as the taller man emerged from the wings, guiding him over to a cluster of the Senator's supporters. Poor Steve, he hates gladhanding, Phil thought. It looked much better than usual, though. Tony never left his side, coaching Steve with subtle touches that kept him on the right track. Tony smiled and nodded at the important people, doubtless smoothing the way with copious donations as well. Tony's right, of course, that much blunt truth is more than most people can hear without losing their mental balance a bit. Sometimes Steve doesn't know his own strength.  
  
The next speaker was an elegant woman with a theme of social dynamics and what holidays say about a culture. Phil listened with half an ear as he watched his teammates. Presently Tony made it back to the group with a sweaty, frazzled Steve in tow.  
  
"You did great," Bucky assured him. "Look at how much you got through to the audience."  
  
Steve broke into a huge grin of relief. "You really think so?"  
  
"Yeah, I do," Bucky said, giving him a sideways hug.  
  
"Daniel is thrilled with our support," Tony added, but Bucky was the one whose approval Steve cared about.  
  
By the time they made it back to the car, Steve and Bucky had deflated again. They crawled into the seat and just sat there. "You look tired," Betty said.  
  
"A bit," Steve admitted. "Give me a few minutes and I'll bounce back."  
  
Tony's phone jingled a text alert. He glanced at it and then said, "Happy, swing by the VA office. I need to meet someone there."  
  
"You got it," Happy said. The ride went smoothly, and before long they pulled into the parking lot of a plain brick building.  
  
"Bucky, would you mind coming in with me?" Tony asked. "It goes easier if I have someone to vouch for my technical expertise in prosthetic hardware. You're not wearing my tech yet, but you've volunteered to alpha-test it for me, so that should do."  
  
"If it'll help, I'll come," Bucky said.  
  
"I'll come too," Steve said, climbing out of the car.  
  
"I'll sit this one out, if you guys don't mind," Clint said. Betty nodded.  
  
"Chatter says there's an antique shop around the corner, if you want to check it out," Happy said. Evidently he was in touch with other chauffeurs. "They're open today to catch the tourist traffic."  
  
"Have fun," Tony said, patting the car as he left.   
  
Phil followed him into the building. Inside it was dim and mostly quiet. A small crowd of people huddled in the cheap plastic seats near the front desk. Holiday stress, Phil guessed. Tom's counselor friend must have his hands full today.  
  
Tony leaned casually on the desk, chatting up the secretary. "I'm here to see -- actually, Tom didn't give me a name, but we talked about prosthetic support and he said one of your counselors was the guy to see. I've got some new tech in development, and I want to make sure everybody's got what they need of the old. Maybe even find a few more volunteers so I can pick their brains about what kind of fresh features would be the most useful." Tony held out his phone, evidently displaying a message. "Can you help me with that, Jenny?"  
  
"Yes, of course," the secretary replied, her fingers pattering away on a keyboard as she checked the schedule.  
  
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**Notes:**  
  
[Ten Rings](http://marvel-movies.wikia.com/wiki/Ten_Rings) is a terrorist organization in the Marvelverse, behind Tony's kidnapping among other mayhem.  
  
[Kabul](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kabul) is the capital of [Afghanistan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Afghanistan), and an important strategic location [in the war](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/War_in_Afghanistan_%282001%E2%80%93present%29).  
  
Due to medical advances, [more soldiers survive catastrophic injuries](http://money.cnn.com/2012/04/27/news/economy/veterans-disability/) than they used to. This includes several who have [lost all four limbs](http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/2014/jul/04/travis-story-a-soldiers-perseverance/).  
  
[M4 Sherman tanks](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M4_Sherman) got the nickname "Ronsons" (after [the lighter](http://www.finepipes.com/articles/ronson-lighter.html)) from their [notoriously poor armor](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M4_Sherman#Armor). One good hit really could set them aflame.  
  
[Evaluating casualties in combat](http://www.armystudyguide.com/content/SMCT_CTT_Tasks/Skill_Level_1/0818311001-evaluate-a-cas.shtml) follows some very different guidelines than in nonhostile territory.  
  
[The Veterans Administration](http://www.va.gov/) is responsible for health care and other needs. However, it's not doing a good job of [keeping up with prosthetic equipment](http://www.woundedwarriorproject.org/programs/policy-government-affairs/key-policy-priorities/objective-3-optimal-long-term-rehabilitative-care/initiative-3.aspx). Outcomes for [replacement arms are especially poor](http://www.nbcnews.com/news/investigations/war-vets-cast-aside-costly-prosthetic-arms-citing-usability-n271211). Tony's persistence in digging up user input is aimed at improving performance and acceptance. Bucky still has no idea how useful his help is in this regard.  
  
Tony likes to use [gold star paperclips](http://www.deskstore.com/Paper-Clips-Star-Gold/en) for holding tip money.  
  
[Public speaking](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_speaking) entails a [whole host of skills](http://sixminutes.dlugan.com/25-skills-every-public-speaker-should-have/). Based on the painfully awkward examples in [*Captain America: The First Avenger*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Captain_America:_The_First_Avenger), the army shamefully cheated Steve of suitable coaching as well as shortchanging his physical training. Learn how to [prepare and deliver a good speech](http://www.wikihow.com/Prepare-and-Give-a-Speech).  
  
[Memorial Day](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Memorial_Day) actually began as [Decoration Day](http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/civil-war-dead-honored-on-decoration-day). There is a movement to [return it to May 30](http://www.usmemorialday.org/act.html), so that it doesn't seem like just another three-day-weekend excuse for a big party.  
  
[Gladhanding](http://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/british/glad-handing) means going through an audience shaking hands, talking, and being extra-friendly. It can be a way to make connections, seek favors, or smooth ruffled feathers. Know how to [work a crowd](http://www.askmen.com/money/how_to_300/365_how_to.html).  
  
PTSD can make [holidays hell for veterans](http://www.theveteransvoice.com/AskSue-PTSDandHolidays.html). This is especially true [in case of fireworks](http://www.wpbf.com/health/how-veterans-cope-with-with-holiday-fireworks/33908874). There are ways for [veterans to cope with holiday stress](http://www.columbiamo.va.gov/features/Managing_Holiday_Stress.asp).

There were a couple of amputees among the little cluster of veterans in the waiting area, Phil noticed. The black woman wore a replacement leg on her left, and another man's right forearm was plastic and metal. Bucky and Steve had drifted over to speak with them. Yolanda and Arthur, their names were. Phil could see Bucky's left fingers drumming restlessly against his thigh as they talked.  
  
Steve at least had been recognized, which sent him into what Phil privately called his "aw, shucks" routine. In this case it blended oddly with his respect for other veterans; he was more interested in thanking them for their service than in collecting praise for his own. Phil remembered that Steve had grown up admiring soldiers.  
  
Tony shifted to point at something on the computer screen, his knee bumping against the desk. The metal gave a loud, hollow boom.  
  
Every veteran flinched. The man with the prosthetic arm doubled over in his seat, trying to cover both ears when he only had one proper hand.   
  
Steve was on his knees in a heartbeat, gently taking hold of the man to shield him from the sound, one big hand covering the unprotected ear. Just in time, too, because the desk boomed again as Tony sprang away from it.   
  
"It's okay, everything is fine, we're safe here," Steve said, his voice low and confident. Even as rattled as they were, the veterans looked to him for reassurance. If Captain America wasn't on alert, surely they didn't need to be.  
  
"All clear," Bucky said crisply. He'd cased the room in moments.  
  
"All clear," Steve echoed. The man clinging to him still hadn't let go, muttering something that Phil couldn't make out. "IED, huh? Yes, Arthur, I've heard about those. Rough stuff."  
  
Phil saw one of the office doors swing open, brass 'Counselor' plate glinting in the light. He raised a hand to beckon to the dark man stepping out of it, who started to turn the wrong way.  
  
"On your left," Steve said quietly.  
  
The man approached, but he snagged on something else. "Tony?"  
  
"Sam?" said Tony. "Well ... crap. Fancy meeting you here."  
  
"I should --" Sam began.  
  
"-- take care of your man, yeah. I'll wait my turn," Tony said.  
  
Sam peeled the veteran off Steve, saying, "Thank you for stepping up when it's not your job."  
  
"It's always my job to take care of the man on my right and the man on my left," Steve said.  
  
Sam gave Steve a broad smile while guiding Arthur to the office.  
  
Another case of hero-worship, Phil mused. Something about Sam seemed vaguely familiar, but he couldn't pin it down.   
  
"I am so buying you a new desk," Tony said to the secretary.  
  
"Yes, please," Jenny said. "This one makes too much noise if anyone leans on it, but we have to take what we can get."  
  
Tony leaned over -- very carefully not touching the desk itself -- and typed something on her computer. "Pick whatever you need."  
  
"I don't see any prices."  
  
"Just pretend that it's a date menu," Tony said with a wink.  
  
"What if I decide to order the lobster?" Jenny said, teasing him back.  
  
Tony grinned. "I'm Tony Stark. I like a girl who knows how to have a good time. Get yourself a file cabinet appetizer and a bookcase dessert if you want."  
  
Yolanda and some of the other female veterans were smiling at the easy banter. Tony had a way with women, when he wanted to be charming instead of raunchy. Yolanda turned out to be an expert in explosives.  
  
"It's too bad Bruce isn't with us today," Steve said. "He's our chemist. You would've got on great with him. About the only way I blow things up is if somebody shoots at me while I'm standing on them."   
  
It got the expected wry laughter, then Yolanda shook her head. "I don't like explosions as much as I used to."  
  
"Hey, that gives me an idea," Tony said. "Who here wants a ride to somewhere quiet for a day or two, before the main fireworks go off tonight? I've got a country house outside the city. Far as I'm concerned, you folks already paid your rent."  
  
Nearly every hand in the waiting room went up.  
  
Tony rubbed his hands together. "Okay, great, let me just set that up," he said. Then he pulled out his Starkphone. "Happy, give me a shout-out on whatever the chauffeurs are using for chatter. I need a bus and driver to carry some guests out to my country house on the Virginia side." The holiday would be busy, but someone inevitably got stood up and would be grateful to score a replacement gig.  
  
Steve gave Tony an adoring look that Tony was too busy typing to see, but Phil noticed. Steve likes people who take care of people, he thought. Phil took out his own phone, brought up a list of Tony's favorite restaurants in the area, and queried which of them might be enticed to cater on short notice. That evidently crossed over a search that JARVIS was already running, and the two of them conferred in swift text before settling on Art and Soul for the chicken dumplings.  
  
By the time Jenny had redecorated the office and Tony had arranged transportation, Sam came back with a somewhat calmer Arthur. "We're hopping a bus out of the city, courtesy of Mr. Stark here," said Yolanda. "You want to come along, Arthur?"  
  
"Uh yeah, sure, if it's okay," Arthur said.  
  
Sam was staring at Tony as if he'd grown another head. "You what?"  
  
"I'm loaning out my country house to any veteran who needs a quiet getaway from the holiday," Tony explained. "Would you rather go with them for emotional support, or stay here and help me pick out another counselor to put on the bus?"  
  
Phil suddenly realized that if this Sam had known Tony before, he was probably altogether unprepared for the new improved Tony, a breach made all the wider by the hints of Carter compassion and honesty showing around the sharp bright core of Stark. "We just want to help," Phil murmured. "The VA is always short on resources, and people are feeling edgy in the holiday crush. This is something we can fix. All right?"  
  
"... okay, then," Sam said, catching up. He was quick on the rebound. "I better stay here, where folks know how to find me." Sam turned to the secretary. "Jenny, who's on call as backup today?"   
  
"Denice and Juan," said Jenny. "I can try both and tap whomever calls back first."  
  
Sam nodded approval, then turned back to Tony. "What brings you here? This isn't your usual ..."  
  
"I'm diversifying my portfolio," Tony said, edged with something that Phil couldn't define. "Guy named Tom gave me a hot tip that you were the one to talk to. Now I know why. Can you pencil us in?"  
  
"For you, yes," said Sam. He led them into his office.  
  
"A while back, I made some serious hardware for Sam and his partner," Tony explained.  
  
"That's where I know you from," Phil said. He'd read about the secret project which fitted pilots with mechanical wings. "Sam Wilson, United States Air Force Pararescue, code name Falcon."  
  
Sam's face clouded over. "No. Riley was Falcon. I was Tiercel, his wingman," he said. "We had a deal, though, if anything happened to him I was supposed to take up the mantle. After he died, I managed it for a few more missions, but ... I just couldn't do it without him. When the program was canceled, I didn't fight it."  
  
"Yeah, about that," Tony said, scuffing a hand over the back of his neck. "Some of the new things I'm working on should make your old rig a lot more agile."  
  
"I don't fly anymore," Sam said.  
  
"Too bad, we could use more air cover," Tony said. "I'm sure you've seen the footage of the Avengers in action."  
  
"I saw you fly a nuke through a hole in the sky, Tony. You had to know the chance of that being a one-way trip," said Sam. "You talking to anyone about that?"  
  
"Not if I can help it," Tony said tightly.  
  
Phil realized that Tony and Sam had known each other well enough before they'd lost touch for the jagged edges of the relationship to turn cutting now, even without either of them necessarily meaning it. "We came here to discuss prosthetic devices," he pointed out.  
  
"Okay, well ... take a look at Bucky's hardware, then," said Tony.  
  
"Sure," Bucky said, showing off his arm.  
  
"That's not Starktech," Sam said at once.   
  
"No, that's HYDRA garbage," Tony said. "What I'm working on will be lighter, safer, a little more sensitive --"  
  
"You solved the neural interface," Sam guessed.  
  
"Uh no, my lab partner has contributed more than I have on that end of things," Tony said. "We've got it almost ready for alpha testing, though. I'd like to get your opinion on acceptance/rejection patterns in veterans using prosthetic arms. In return, I'll top up whatever you've got for supplemental funding of their devices. I know the government doesn't cover everyone who needs it."  
  
Sam sighed. "I'll do my best, but you know you'll get better input from Bucky or another end user."  
  
"Yeah, but Bucky's tolerance for this topic averages five to ten minutes," Tony said. His gaze flicked to Bucky and then he added, "You can tap out any time you need to."  
  
Bucky lifted his chin. "I can take it, if it'll help other fellas."  
  
Phil caught the subtle shift of Sam's attention as he assessed Bucky's self-effacing stance.  
  
"You need to take good care of yourself, soldier, or you won't be any use to anyone else," Sam said to Bucky.  
  
"That's what I hear," Bucky said, without agreeing or disagreeing. "Tony's got some good ideas, and he thinks some of them might solve problems that people have with previous equipment ..."  
  
Phil listened as the conversation rambled over Bucky's current arm, the planned replacement, and comparisons of both to the various prosthetic devices already available. He kept a sharp eye on Bucky, but the super-soldier seemed to be holding up well. Steve had a hand on the small of his back. That grounding assist might account for Bucky's improved tolerance.  
  
Eventually, though, Bucky just ran out of steam. Phil glanced at his watch. Just over fourteen minutes, he realized. Bucky really is improving.  
  
Sam caught the rising distress before Bucky could do more than fidget. "Thanks for showing me your arm, Bucky. I think we're just about done here," said Sam. He picked up a pen and made a note for himself. "I'll ask around for volunteers interested in beta-testing new gear -- Arthur will probably go for it -- or at least answering surveys."  
  
"Oh yeah," Tony said on a bright note. "JARVIS has a whole new stack of Q&A stuff. There's a short survey and then a longer one where people can pick topics like what they want to do with a prosthesis, or their most important features like weight."  
  
"That backpack weighed a fucking ton," Sam said quietly.  
  
"I know, I know, when I started up the Iron Man project, the Mark I turned out so heavy that I could hardly move it," Tony said. "Later on, when I started putting of all the automated support into the Mark II, I felt really bad about the EXO-7 because you and Riley had to carry the whole weight yourselves until liftoff. So, I'm sorry for that."  
  
Sam dropped his pen. "Did you just apologize to me?"  
  
"Um ... yeah? Did I fuck it up?" Tony said. He cast an anxious look at Phil.  
  
"You did fine, Tony," said Phil. "I think Sam just isn't used to hearing you work through things that way."  
  
"I really am sorry," Tony repeated, looking at Sam again.  
  
Sam swallowed hard, then held out his hand. "Apology accepted."  
  
They shook on it, and Tony grinned. He was still grinning when they left the VA building.   
  
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**Notes:**  
  
[PTSD](http://www.helpguide.org/articles/ptsd-trauma/post-traumatic-stress-disorder.htm) causes [flashbacks](http://www.giftfromwithin.org/html/FAQ-PTSD-Symptom-Flashbacks.html), especially for veterans. They experience many [reminders of combat](http://ptsdcombat.blogspot.com/2006/03/combat-ptsd-what-are-symptoms.html) such as [fireworks](http://www.missourinet.com/2015/06/30/doctors-say-fireworks-can-be-stressful-for-veterans/) or other loud noises that resemble artillery.  With [Prolonged Duress Stress Syndrome or Complex-PTSD](http://www.ptsd.va.gov/PTSD/professional/PTSD-overview/complex-ptsd.asp), effects can be even worse due to repeated trauma that makes the world seem permanently unsafe.  Know how to [cope with flashbacks](http://ptsd.about.com/od/selfhelp/a/flashcoping.htm). You can also help someone else deal with [flashbacks, panic attacks](https://sometimesmagical.wordpress.com/2013/10/26/supporting-a-loved-one-through-ptsd-or-panic-attacks/), and [PTSD in family life](http://www.helpguide.org/articles/ptsd-trauma/ptsd-in-the-family.htm).  
  
[Sam Wilson](http://marvel.com/universe/Falcon_%28Sam_Wilson%29) / the Falcon appears in [comics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Falcon_%28comics%29) and the [Marvel Cinematic Universe](http://marvel-movies.wikia.com/wiki/Sam_Wilson). [Falcons](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Falcon) are birds of prey noted for their speed, agility, and ferocity. It was [*Captain America: The Winter Soldier*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Captain_America:_The_Winter_Soldier) that decided me to bring Sam into this series, because that iteration of him makes an awesome match for this recovery-focused storyline. Most of his characterization therefore stems from that source, although I like the bird affinity from the comics and I'm liable to keep that. Another tidbit of my headcanon includes his wings being Starktech, because Tony pretty much is the cutting edge.  
  
  
"[On your left](http://mediamedusa.com/10-funniest-scenes-captain-america-winter-soldier/#.VZYBkflVgoI)" is a quote from [*Captain America: The Winter Soldier*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Captain_America:_The_Winter_Soldier), which you can [watch online](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t2E1mLUrBdY). But it also appears throughout the military in references similar to what Steve says about "[the man on your right and the man on your left](http://www.quora.com/How-do-people-in-the-army-or-police-justify-sacrificing-themselves)."  
  
Fancy restaurants still carry [menus without prices](http://www.feministe.us/blog/archives/2006/08/17/the-gendered-menu/), traditionally offered to women as it is assumed the man is buying. But it also works for ladies treating their gentlemen, or business meetings where one person is buying for both, etc. Tony favors it as a way of avoiding sticker shock; between him and JARVIS they can strip the prices off of anything online.  
  
Art and Soul Chicken Dumplings rank among the most famous [comfort foods around Washington, D.C](http://washington.org/DC-focus-on/comfort-foods-dc).  
  
When people change, it can be so dramatic that [friends may not recognize them](http://emptyclosets.com/forum/chit-chat/55550-people-dont-recognize-me-anymore.html), especially after a separation of a few years without being able to watch the slow progress as it happens. Such changes can be [bad](http://www.experienceproject.com/stories/Miss-My-Best-Friend/1204480) or [good](http://anastasiaamour.com/2015/04/02/someone-says-youve-changed-now-what/). [The right friends](http://theindiechicks.com/7-ways-good-friends-make-better-person/) can help you [become a better person](http://www.wikihow.com/Be-a-Better-Person).  
  
[A tiercel](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tiercel) is a male falcon or hawk. Sam's partner Riley obviously meant a great deal to him. I've seen many wonderful interpretations of their relationship, ranging from homosexual to [queerplatonic](http://jhameia.tumblr.com/post/2868886233/word-of-the-day-queerplatonic). I'm leaning toward the latter in this series. I also got to thinking about Steve and Bucky, how in some timelines they trade off the title of Captain America. So my headcanon is that Sam is the second Falcon. He's still limping from that loss.  
  
Sam knows about Tony's tendency toward [self-destructive](http://www.psychwiki.com/wiki/Explaining_Self-_Destructive_Behaviors) and/or [suicidal](http://www.helpguide.org/articles/suicide-prevention/suicide-help-dealing-with-your-suicidal-thoughts-and-feelings.htm) behavior. [Overcoming self-destructive urges](http://zenhabits.net/destruct/) typically [goes through stages](http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2013/10/17/how-to-change-self-destructive-behavior-stages-of-change/). Understand how to [deal with a self-destructive friend](http://www.bandbacktogether.com/how-to-deal-self-destructive-friend/) or [help someone who feels suicidal](http://www.helpguide.org/articles/suicide-prevention/suicide-prevention-helping-someone-who-is-suicidal.htm). Sam actually does a great job with this stuff, he's just thrown off his balance by how different Tony is now.  
  
The Marvel movies show a pattern of suicidal behavior. Tony's most dramatic moment is that wormhole jaunt in [The Avengers I](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Avengers_%282012_film%29), but there are other scenes with a similar lack of self-preservation. Steve scuttles two ships intending to go down with them, in his [first](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Captain_America:_The_First_Avenger) and [second](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Captain_America:_The_Winter_Soldier) movies. (For this series, the first is canon but the second is not.) He really can't make it any plainer that he does not wish to live without Bucky at his side. Canon!Steve is exhausted and hurting badly and wants to be done already. In essence, these scenes play out a [Banzai charge](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Banzai_charge), or as an entertainment trope, [Heroic Sacrifice](http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/HeroicSacrifice). That kind of [self-sacrifice in combat](http://blog.usamm.com/a-marines-self-sacrifice/) raises a lot of [moral questions](http://faculty.georgetown.edu/lbh24/MJAASS.pdf). It's a murky zone because it's not self-extinction for the sole purpose of dying, but it's not healthy self-preservation either. Given the pattern established for both Tony and Steve, they clearly welcomed death, so it's combat-camouflaged suicide. And then they didn't die, which is utterly devastating.  
  
[Prosthetic limbs](http://science.howstuffworks.com/prosthetic-limb1.htm), especially arms, have limitations which can [undermine acceptance](http://www.nbcnews.com/news/investigations/war-vets-cast-aside-costly-prosthetic-arms-citing-usability-n271211). [Better testing](http://www.oandp.com/articles/2014-08_14.asp), [sensors for control](http://www.nibib.nih.gov/news-events/newsroom/implantable-sensors-improve-control-prosthetic-limbs), and [sensors for feeling](http://www.upmc.com/media/NewsReleases/2015/Pages/improving-prosthetic-limb-function.aspx) can lead to new advances in prosthetic technology. The crucial point is to ask users what they want in terms of [aesthetics and performance](http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2015/05/a-blueprint-for-a-better-human-body/389655/). In this way, doctors hope to [improve acceptance](http://www.oandp.org/publications/jop/2013/2013-62.pdf) and [enrich quality of life](http://news.sciencemag.org/brain-behavior/2014/10/prosthetic-hands-endowed-sense-touch).  
  
[Altruism](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/altruism/definition) is all about doing things for other people. But [helping others](http://www.actionforhappiness.org/10-keys-to-happier-living/do-things-for-others/details) can also [help you](http://www.uhc.com/health-and-wellness/family-health/healthy-benefits-of-helping-others). [It's not selfish](https://hbr.org/2008/09/why-its-not-selfish-to-take-ca/) to take care of yourself. Like most heroes, the Avengers do better at looking after other people than at taking care of themselves. Know how to [take care of other people](http://www.wikihow.com/Help-Others), and [yourself](http://greatist.com/happiness/ways-to-practice-self-care), and [balance the two](http://www.pbs.org/thisemotionallife/topic/resilience/helping-yourself-others).  
  
[Stretching boundaries](http://www.streetdirectory.com/travel_guide/8614/self_improvement_and_motivation/challenge_yourself__stretch_your_boundaries_daily.html) is a necessary part of personal growth, especially for people with emotional injuries that limit their current options. Know how to [stretch safely](http://tinybuddha.com/blog/5-steps-stretch-comfort-zone-take-risks-enjoy-them/).  
  
[Apologies](http://www.iep.utm.edu/apology/) make up for past oversights and repair broken relationships. Sometimes [people are surprised](http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2014/s3973045.htm) by an unexpected apology. In this case, people so rarely respond well to Tony's apologies that he's insecure about offering them, and he used to avoid doing it most of the time. So Sam is totally blindsided by the new Tony, who is now Carter as well as Stark. Understand [how to apologize](http://www.wikihow.com/Apologize) and [how to accept an apology](http://www.wikihow.com/Accept-an-Apology).

Steve and Bucky, though, lacked the fresh surge of energy that put a bounce in Tony's stride. They slogged along the smooth sidewalk as if through a trench full of mud. At least they had each other for support.  
  
"How are you two doing?" Phil asked as they climbed into the car that Happy pulled up for them.  
  
"I feel ... kind of done in," Steve said. Bucky nodded. "I'll keep up, though. I don't want to spoil the day for anyone."  
  
"It's okay if you need to go home early," Betty said.  
  
"I thought you wanted to see the fireworks," Bucky said.  
  
"I did, but there will be other times for that," Betty said. Her slim fingers plucked at the strap of her purse. "I think I'd like to get home to Bruce."   
  
"Does anyone object to departing now?" Phil asked. Clint and Tony shook their heads. "All right, then."  
  
"Change of plans, Happy; take us home," Tony ordered.   
  
This time Happy didn't dawdle. He cut briskly through the traffic, now using deft navigation to get them back to Tony's jet as soon as possible. Phil felt grateful that Tony's wealth allowed them to travel on their own schedule. He didn't relish the thought of trying to drag tired, overstimulated supersoldiers through hours of airport hassle.  
  
Steve and Bucky fell asleep in their seats, leaning against each other. Tony looked at them and got up. "There should be a closet or something ..." he muttered, rummaging around the passenger compartment. Then he made a pleased sound of discovery. Tony returned with two small fleece blankets. He handed one to Phil for Steve, and tucked the other around Bucky.  
  
Phil covered Steve with the blanket, smoothing the soft cloth over him with gentle strokes. Steve gave a drowsy murmur but did not wake up. Phil returned to his own seat and pulled a Starkpad from its nearby pocket so that he could read on the way home.   
  
Meanwhile Tony had produced a pad from somewhere, which was twice the usual size and had its own miniature holoprojector. An articulated model of Bucky's replacement arm shimmered in the air over Tony's lap as the engineer worked. Agile fingers danced over the glassy surface of the pad, then reached up to pluck minute elements from the model. Tony expanded the wrist, discarding and replacing things. Phil watched him, entranced, his own pad forgotten on his knees.  
  
Back in New York, they transferred to a waiting limousine, where Happy drove them home as efficiently as ever. He pulled the car into the garage of Avengers Tower. It coasted to a graceful stop in the precise center of the open floor.   
  
Phil noticed that Tony sat patiently and waited for Happy to walk around and hand him out of the car, instead of bailing out while the wheels were still moving as he was wont to do under other circumstances. A brief squeeze of Happy's hand on Tony's shoulder, an answering quirk of smile, and Phil understood what Tony had been waiting for. Their relationship lived in these moments of contact, communicated through service and acceptance, touch and response. They were servant and employer, but they were also friends, and they negotiated the delicate balance between those layers with the ease of long practice.  
  
It was gone in an instant, hidden away under Happy's professional charm as he helped the other passengers out of the limo. Clint and Betty got Bucky and Steve between them. Both supersoldiers were awake and mobile, but clinging to their friends for moral support.  
  
"Hey Tony, aren't you going to help us get these guys upstairs?" Clint asked.  
  
"Busy," Tony caroled with a wave of his hand, as he headed for the workshop section of the garage.  
  
Phil moved to assist the others, only to be stopped by a diffident touch, the back of Happy's wrist against his waist. "Yes?" Phil said.  
  
"A word in your ear, if you don't mind," Happy said in a low tone. "Whatever you've been doing with Mr. Stark, you keep doing that. It's working. It's making a big difference for him. I've never seen him so relaxed and ... hell, I've hardly seen him happy at all."  
  
"He's had a difficult life," Phil replied.  
  
"You have no idea," Happy said. "Not half of it hits the papers. Today may have been a bit touch-and-go for some, but for him? This is the first time I've driven him home on Memorial Day and not had to worry if I'd need to drive him to the ER later. Look at him, he's fine, he's going to go build stuff instead of get drunk. Thank you. I can't tell you how much this means to me." Happy dropped his hand away from Phil's front.  
  
Phil shifted to let his hand brush along Happy's as they parted. "You don't have to tell me," Phil said. "I understand." As he moved toward the elevator, Phil could hear the quiet garage sounds behind him, Tony already puttering in his workshop as Happy went to park the limo in its customary spot.  
  
First Phil went to his own apartment. He changed clothes, wanting something casual and comforting. He hesitated over the well-worn Captain America t-shirt, but ultimately settled on one with plain blue-and-white stripes. Then he headed downstairs to the common floor.  
  
There Phil found Bruce and Natasha on the couch. They bent over a Starkpad. Bruce's charcoal-and-ash curls banked the fire of Natasha's hair where their heads leaned together.  
  
As Phil walked in, Bruce popped off the couch and began pacing, talking with someone on the phone. "Yeah, I can do that," Bruce said. "Orbital mechanics should translate great onstage, it's all just bodies in motion. I know some guys at NASA who can help too. What, of course they'll be interested, they're nerds, we love the arts. Somebody's bound to say yes."  
  
"What's this about?" Phil asked.  
  
Natasha tilted the screen to show him a video of several dancers ... evidently on a glass platform, with the camera shooting from below them, Phil realized after a moment's confusion. "Bruce and I have been watching Pilobolus," Natasha explained. "Some of the scenes reminded him of zero-gravity motion. He wanted to explore other ways of merging science and performance. So we're sponsoring a new dance, and Bruce is speaking with one of their choreographers about physics as inspiration."  
  
Bruce finished the call and tucked his phone back into his pocket. Then he flopped onto the couch, grinning. "Did Natasha catch you up on our day?" he asked. He snuggled into Phil.  
  
"Yes," Phil said, wrapping an arm around Bruce. "I'm glad that you two found something so engrossing to do."  
  
"Also we cooked supper. It is in the crockpot," Natasha said.  
  
"You cooked?" Phil said, a little surprised. Bruce often did, but Natasha rarely made anything other than cold dishes.  
  
"Bruce helped," said Natasha. "So did JARVIS. He found us a recipe for beef stroganoff made with cream cheese. It should be ready in another hour or so."  
  
Phil sniffed, and found the scent of creamy mushroom sauce wafting in from the kitchen. "It smells good," he said. "Thank you both for thinking of this."  
  
Bruce twitched a shoulder against Phil's side. "We figured that people might appreciate coming home to some comfort food."  
  
Just then, Steve and Bucky arrived, shower-damp and full of nervous energy. That was a problem with super-soldiers: let them nap while agitated and sometimes they'd settle down, other times wind themselves up afterwards. Phil didn't think a session in the gym would help with this kind of nerves.  
  
"I need, we need, something to do," Steve said. "Something grounding and soothing, I think, but I'm not sure what."  
  
"I know that, I know," Bucky said, moving his hands in a disorganized gesture, as if trying to pack something formless into a more regular shape. Then he grabbed his Starkphone and poked at the screen. "I have, there's a list, just need to find it --"  
JARVIS interrupted gently with, "Bucky, may I suggest that you use your random selector of coping methods?"  
  
"That's a great idea, JARVIS, thanks," said Bucky. He tapped the screen in a more organized manner. "Okay, we're ... cooking." Then he frowned and sniffed the air. "Only it smells like somebody started supper already?"  
  
"Yeah, it's stroganoff, but we haven't made a dessert," Bruce said.   
  
"What do you want for dessert, runt?" Bucky asked as he turned to Steve.  
  
"I dunno," Steve said.  
  
Bucky hit the selector again. "We're making ... cookies. There's a different batch for you and me: Nutella ones, and white chocolate-macadamia ones."  
  
"Okay," Steve said, relaxing a little now that he had a clear plan to follow. He and Bucky moved into the kitchen. Phil could hear the quiet clink of cookware as they set out bowls and measuring cups.  
  
Betty came into the common room. She had changed into a floppy purple t-shirt dress printed with a Thomas Kincade flower garden. Her long dark hair hung over her shoulder in a loose braid. "Have you got room for one more?" she asked, eyeing the pile of people on the couch.  
  
Bruce nodded happily. "Uh-huh," he said.  
  
Betty sat down on the other side of Bruce. He wormed his way off the cushions until he was lying on top of Phil and Betty. Phil lifted a hand to stroke through Bruce's hair. Bruce made soft happy sounds in response.  
  
Natasha perched lightly on the arm of the couch next to Phil. "Do you wish to see today's project?" Natasha asked Betty, showing the Starkpad that now displayed the project notes. "Bruce and I have commissioned a dance. It is to feature an artistic representation of physics."  
  
"What a lovely idea," Betty said. "It could do with some lasers. Laser propulsion is all the rage in modern spaceflight. We could make one of the dancers a rocket, send her flying around the other celestial bodies ... I know a guy down in Huntsville who is all over that."  
  
"Mmm ... JARVIS, record and save," Bruce murmured.  
  
"Saved and added to the dance file," JARVIS confirmed.  
  
"Not something often seen in a formal dance performance, but you could make great use of a disco ball to create a starscape," Phil said, looking over the notes thus far. Maybe he should chip in a donation too. It had been a while since he had found a creative project he really wanted to support, but Phil had always loved dance.  
  
They continued their lazy discussion of how to combine art and science. Phil felt immeasurably better than he usually did on Memorial Day evening. The scent of chocolate chip cookies went a long way toward soothing the rough edges left by the day. This is what we're fighting for, Phil thought as he let himself lean against Betty a little. She wrapped a friendly arm around his shoulders. Bruce made a warm, welcome weight in their laps.  
  
"I believe the stroganoff should be done by now," JARVIS said presently.  
  
"Thanks, I'll go check it," Bruce said, peeling himself off of Phil.  
  
"I'll come help set the table," Phil said. He stood and stretched.   
  
In the kitchen, Steve and Bucky sat at the table. Steve was eating Nutella out of the jar with a large spoon. Bucky had the macadamia nut butter, a knife, and one of Natasha's bitter chocolate protein bagels.   
  
Bruce sampled the stroganoff and declared it done. He put the pasta on to boil. Then he moved the ceramic crock of stroganoff to the table. "JARVIS, supper in about fifteen minutes," Bruce said. "Please pass the word to everyone who's not already here."  
  
\* \* \*   
  
**Notes:**  
  
[Chauffeurs can be very useful](http://www.practicallyperfectpa.com/2014/seven-reasons-why-your-boss-should-use-a-chauffeur-service/03/04/) for busy people. Happy and Tony have been friends for years, and that helps keep Tony from running completely off the rails. There are tips on how to [be a good chauffeur](http://www.wikihow.com/Chauffeur).  
  
[Pilobolus](http://www.pilobolus.com/home.jsp) is a dance company known for its unusual techniques.  
  
The [Crockpot Cream Cheese Stroganoff](http://ysabetwordsmith.livejournal.com/1412919.html) is my bit of shameless self-insert. :D  
  
[Decision fatigue](http://jamesclear.com/willpower-decision-fatigue) happens after making lots of decisions. [Choice paralysis](https://boagworld.com/usability/choice-paralysis/) comes from having so many options that they overwhelm people. [Having too many choices](https://faculty.washington.edu/jdb/345/345%20Articles/Iyengar%20%26%20Lepper%20%282000%29.pdf) can make it harder to decide. Prisoners of war and other people with PTSD often have [impaired executive function](http://psycnet.apa.org/index.cfm?fa=buy.optionToBuy&id=1995-13571-001) which contributes to these problems. Bucky copes with this by using JARVIS as a prosthetic memory and selection. Understand how to [cope with many choices](http://www.forbes.com/sites/work-in-progress/2012/11/26/the-surprising-poverty-of-too-many-choices/). and [avoid decision fatigue](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lori-rochino/8-ways-to-combat-decision-fatigue_b_6794022.html).  
  
[Goal-Fish](http://www.goal-fish.org/) is a random selector for chores and recreation that accounts for things like your energy or pain levels, budget, and time available. [HabitRPG](https://habitrpg.com/static/front) basically turns your life into a video game as you seek to establish good habits.  
  
[Nutella](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nutella) is a delicious chocolate-hazelnut spread which can be [used to make cookies](http://nutellacookies.org/). [White Chocolate Macadamia Cookies](http://www.strauscom.com/chocolates/pkreci02.html) are also tasty.  
  
This is Betty's [Thomas Kincade t-shirt](http://www.animalshirts.net/thomas-kinkade-shirts/spring-gate.htm).  
  
Enjoy some [Chocolate Multigrain Protein Bagels](http://www.food.com/recipe/chocolate-multi-grain-protein-bagels-248233).

Phil picked up a stack of plates and carried them to the table. As he set them down, Natasha flitted past and lifted the last bit of bagel from Bucky's hand, depositing a pile of silverware in front of him. "Don't spoil your dinner," she said.  
  
Bucky's knife chimed against the glass. He peered into the jar of macadamia nut butter. "Wow. Empty," he said. "I didn't realize that I'd eaten that much. I'm still hungry. Guess I better get a fresh jar out of the pantry --"  
  
"I regret that we are out of macadamia nut butter at the moment, Bucky. I have placed an order, and a new jar should arrive with tomorrow morning's groceries," said JARVIS. "Meanwhile, there is more Nutella along with almond butter and cashew butter if you wish something other than conventional peanut butter."  
  
"Shoot," Bucky said as he stared at the empty jar. He looked shaken. "I didn't realize -- I didn't mean --"  
  
Phil hastily abandoned a handful of glasses on the nearest counter. "It's all right, Bucky," he said, patting the larger man's shoulder. "We can always buy more." Out of the team, Bucky and Steve were the most prone to worrying about supplies. Everyone tried to find ways of helping them cope with a background that spanned the Great Depression and World War II.  
  
"I just feel bad for hogging the food," Bucky said in a small voice.  
  
JARVIS chimed in, "We have the ingredients to make a batch of macadamia butter, if that would make you feel better."  
  
"Huh ... yeah, I think that would help. Thanks, JARVIS, that's a great idea," said Bucky. He perked up a little.  
  
"I have placed a recipe on the screen above the counter," JARVIS said.  
  
Natasha smoothly finished setting the table while Phil helped Steve and Bucky assemble everything needed for the macadamia butter. The food processor whirred away. Bucky washed and dried the empty jar, so that they could simply put the fresh macadamia butter in there.   
  
The oven timer dinged. Betty pulled out first Steve's cookies and then Bucky's batch. The sweet notes melded with the savory steam from the crockpot. They all smelled delectable.  
  
Clint sauntered into the kitchen and boosted one of each right off the cookie sheets. "Hot! Hot! Hot!" he yelped, juggling sweets full of molten chocolate. Half a cookie detached and headed for the floor. "Fuck!"  
  
Bruce got a plate under Clint's purloined pastries just in time. "For pity's sake, put those down for a minute before you try to eat them," the doctor scolded. "You'll be miserable if you blister your tongue. Again."  
  
"Buh iff so worff it," Clint mumbled around a mouthful of chocolate-chip Nutella cookie. Bruce rolled his eyes and put the plate on the table. Clint followed as if on a leash. Tony still hadn't arrived, but it wasn't rare for him to come late to a meal, or even skip altogether.  
  
Along with the stroganoff, there were pasta and sourdough bread to use as a base. Natasha also brought out black bread and butter. Betty had microwaved a package of frozen peas. Everyone gathered around the table.   
  
They ate quietly, now and then trading remarks about how the day had gone. The dance project fascinated Bucky. Bruce wanted to hear all about the parade and what else Betty had enjoyed on her outing. The stroganoff was well received; everyone encouraged Natasha's tentative venture into hot food. Clint had to eat gingerly around the blister on his tongue, though.  
  
Phil noticed that every time Bucky went to refill his plate, he put some on Steve's plate first. Steve didn't even blink, the habit so ingrained that it barely even registered anymore. At least he wasn't eating with his forearm curled around his plate, the way he did when he felt nervous. Clint had resumed eating full portions, too. He even took a spoonful of peas without being prompted, and Clint was not a fan of vegetables.  
  
Eventually it was time for dessert. They passed around platters of cookies. Steve had become quite fond of the chocolate-chip Nutella recipe after Bruce turned him onto hazelnuts as a good source of protein, vitamin E, and assorted minerals. Of course that reminded them that somebody was still missing.   
  
Steve pulled out his Starkphone to ping the workshop again. "Tony, are you coming or not? We're almost done with supper," Steve said, a note of worry creeping into his voice.  
  
"Busy," Tony replied. "I ate today. I'm sure I did. It's still Monday, right? Yeah. I'm good." He cut the connection.  
  
Tony's definition of "good," while improving, is still not ideal, Phil thought.  
  
Bruce sighed. "I'll take down a little bit for Tony and coax him to take a break. I'm trying to show him that smaller, more frequent meals can work better than gorging once in a while," he said. "Steve, give me a couple of the macadamia-white chocolate cookies. He'll eat those."  
  
Phil was almost full, but he helped himself to one cookie of each flavor. These really taste good, he mused. The different nut butters made the cookies richer and softer, chewy in the center under a crispy crust.  
  
As Bruce was scooping stroganoff into a plastic tub, Steve's phone rang. "Hey guys, JARVIS says my shipment just arrived, I've got some equipment sitting in the main lobby that I need in the workshop. Could somebody bring it down here, please? 'Kay-thanks-bye." Tony said without pausing for breath.   
  
Steve was left staring at the dark screen in his hand. "Um ... that was ..."  
  
"That was Tony," said Bruce in a wry tone. He snapped the lid onto the container and used a rubber band to fasten a clean fork on top.  
  
"Let me take that," Phil suggested. "It'll be harder to convince Tony to take a break with new supplies on hand. He minds me a little better."  
  
Bruce nodded gratefully and handed over the food. "Thanks, Phil. I worry about him, you know? Tony doesn't always take good care of himself."  
  
"I'll pick up the stuff in the lobby," Bucky offered. "I know what it's like to get caught up in building something."  
  
"That's very thoughtful of you, Bucky, thanks," said Phil. They left Clint clearing the table and Steve putting away the leftovers.  
  
Bucky had no trouble carrying the several packages that waited for Tony in the lobby. Phil did take one long tube of something that rattled faintly, because it proved unwieldy with the square boxes. As they rode the elevator to Tony's workshop, Bucky began singing softly:  
  
First you say you doAnd then you don'tAnd then you say you willAnd then you won't  
  
Phil recognized the lyrics of a jazz song from the late 1930s. The tune was plaintive and a little sassy. It fit the awkward push-pull of the relationship between Tony and Bucky.  
  
You're undecided nowSo what are you gonna do?  
  
Ah yes, that was the title, "Undecided." For all their uncertainty, though, the two men had decided to stick by each other. Phil felt grateful for their sincerity, however clumsy their efforts at mutual support.   
  
JARVIS opened the door to the workshop. Phil and Bucky had to kick aside a pile of empty cardboard boxes in front of the door. Tony still wasn't used to having other people around his workspace, and didn't always account for the change in traffic.  
  
The raucous blare of Tony's rock music surged over them. Bucky winced. It was nothing like the soulful jazz and lively swing that he'd grown up with. To him, this was just a wall of noise. Phil couldn't help but sympathize. He preferred classical and swing himself, although Clint had since turned him on to some of the better country and western songs.  
Inside the workshop, DUM-E and Tony were headbanging away to the music. They toiled over something gleaming and complicated laid out on a bench. Neither of them looked up, intent on their work.  
  
The opening of the door sent U and Butterfingers zipping into their charging stations. They plugged in with a plurk-plurk sound and both went dark. The bots were still skittish around people other than Tony. Usually when anyone else came near the garage or workshop, they hid.  
  
Alerted by the motion, the engineer looked up to see Phil and Bucky, then waved the music down to a less ear-rending level. He bounced happily at the sight of the tube under Phil's arm. "Yay, they came! I so need these," Tony said, heading for them.  
  
DUM-E dashed between Tony and the others. His engine revved to a menacing growl. The metal hand snaked forward.  
"What the heck?" Tony said, trying to shove the bot out of his way. "Knock it off, you tinsel idiot, they come bearing gifts. We never turn away guests who bring us goodies."  
  
"Tony, what's wrong?" Bucky asked. "I mean, you said not to hassle your bots because they're not used to people, but this seems like ... more."  
  
"Yeah, um, DUM-E has seen what can happen when other people attack me, so he's got his reasons," Tony said. "He's a bit overprotective is all. Just don't harsh on him, okay? He is a sensitive little snowflake."  
  
Bucky put down the packages he carried to show his empty hands. He did not encroach any further on DUM-E's territory. Phil held out the coveted tube at arm's length. Tony managed to snag the far end of it. "Yes!" he crowed. DUM-E whined in protest.  
  
"Why is DUM-E blocking the path?" Bucky asked. "I've been down here before a few times. Usually they just avoid other people. What changed?"  
  
"We're carrying things," Phil said, watching how DUM-E's camera eyes tracked the two vistors. "That can seem threatening, especially if you don't know what's inside the packages."  
  
"Wow, he's really upset," Bucky said with a worried frown. He crouched down to put himself on the little robot's level. Then he took off his shirt. Thick scars fanned out from the seam at his left shoulder. "Tony, toss me the rim key."  
  
"You'll need a chemical rinse if you take the sleeve off," Tony said, lobbing him the tool with an easy underhand pass.  
  
"Yeah, I know. I don't mind if you don't," Bucky said as he unfastened the synthetic skin.  
  
"No problem," Tony said. He petted DUM-E, trying to soothe the anxious robot.  
  
Bucky peeled off the long fleshy glove and handed it to Phil. It felt soft, almost alive in Phil's grasp. This is remarkable material, Phil thought.  
  
"Look, DUM-E, I'm just like you and Tony," said Bucky. He turned his palm up, showing it empty. Then he waggled his silver fingers. "See, it's metal. You know metal."  
  
DUM-E gave a startled chirp. He rolled forward, then jerked back. Bucky held out his hand and waited. DUM-E inched toward him again. The three claws opened, servos whirring softly as the robot reached for Bucky. Then DUM-E paused, hesitating just before contact.  
  
"It's okay, you can touch it. You won't hurt me," Bucky said.   
  
"Gently, DUM-E," Tony coached. "No more than 3 psi."  
  
"My hand can take a lot more than that," Bucky said.  
  
"Yeah, I know, but it's junk and I don't trust it," Tony said. "Besides, I'm trying to teach DUM-E how to shake hands and most people won't shake with him. Except Rhodey that one time, but he stuck DUM-E with a joy buzzer and that was really not funny."  
  
"No wonder the poor kid's so skittish," Bucky said. "I'm not that kind of jerk, DUM-E. I won't hurt you or Tony."  
  
"Rhodey didn't mean it, he just has a rough sense of humor on the rare occasions when it lets it off the leash, you know?" Tony said. "I've known him since college. Rhodey was the only friend I had for a while, and -- and he's been around for DUM-E's whole life. So don't diss him."  
  
"I just think DUM-E deserves better, is all," said Bucky.   
  
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**Notes:**  
  
[Nut butters](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nut_butter) come in many [tasty and nutritious varieties](http://vegnews.com/articles/page.do?pageId=3072&catId=2). Here is a general guide to [making nut butters at home](http://www.cookinglight.com/food/recipe-finder/nut-butter).  
  
Macadamia butter is luxurious stuff. You can [buy it](http://www.auntphyllismacnutbutters.com/), or make your own. This recipe is just [macadamia nuts, macadamia oil, and salt](http://www.islandscene.com/Article.aspx?id=4235&sidebar=5) (Tony safe). This recipe adds [coconut oil and honey](http://thecoconutmama.com/2012/12/homemade-macadamia-nut-butter/) (NOT for Tony).   
  
[Hazelnuts](http://www.nutrition-and-you.com/hazelnuts.html) have a lot of nutrients.  
  
"[Undecided](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Undecided)" is a 1938 song by Ella Fitzgerald appearing on [many albums](http://www.allmusic.com/song/undecided-mt0038447588). [Read the lyrics](http://www.lyricsfreak.com/e/ella+fitzgerald/undecided_20045942.html). [Listen to the song on YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O8XRpclHDQI).  
  
Tony Stark built three bots: DUM-E, U, and Butterfingers. While JARVIS behaves like an adult, the bots act more like rather young children. Read about [DUM-E and U](http://marvelcinematicuniverse.wikia.com/wiki/Dum-E_and_U). [Butterfingers is mentioned here](http://ironman.wikia.com/wiki/Dummy). This is a [baby picture of DUM-E with teen father Tony](https://theinsightfulpanda.files.wordpress.com/2014/04/tony_dum-e_news.jpg). Watch a [video of Tony and his bots](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcYq-jRO-yE), including the scene of DUM-E saving Tony's life in [*Iron Man 1*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iron_Man_%282008_film%29). [This article has a little animation showing U](http://www.pcmag.com/slideshow/story/310944/inside-the-tech-of-iron-man/5). [Here is DUM-E](http://rebloggy.com/post/gif-film-robert-downey-jr-iron-man-tony-stark-gif-iron-man-2-dummy-lol-he-s-so/34288603658). Both of these show Tony's [severe verbal abuse](http://consumer.healthday.com/encyclopedia/children-s-health-10/child-development-news-124/yelling-at-children-verbal-abuse-648565.html) of the bots. He really loves them, but he doesn't know how to show love very well. Since children learn what they hear, imagine what conversations Tony must have grown up hearing. (Thanks Howard, you fucking waste of oxygen.) There are [better ways to talk to children](http://www.verbalabuse.com/page3/page7/page7.html). Know how to [deal with verbal abuse from your parents](http://www.wikihow.com/Deal-With-Emotional-Abuse-from-Your-Parents-%28for-Adolescents%29).  
  
[Situational awareness](http://www.artofmanliness.com/2015/02/05/how-to-develop-the-situational-awareness-of-jason-bourne/) and [threat assessment](http://www.apa.org/monitor/2014/02/cover-threat.aspx) are useful in personal and building security. [Threatening behavior](http://www.apa.org/monitor/2014/02/cover-threat.aspx) can include things like moving closer aggressively. (DUM-E has trouble distinguishing between a harmless advance and a credible threat.) Another is carrying objects that might be used as weapons. [Risk factors in employees](https://forensiseuropa.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/2011_theroleofwarningbehaviorsinthreat.pdf) include a troubled past. (Basically all the Avengers, and DUM-E has no way to know yet that these people will protect Tony.) There are ways to [improve your situational awareness](http://besurvival.com/tips-and-tricks/10-ways-to-improve-your-situational-awareness).  
  
So DUM-E has [PTSD](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/index.shtml), mainly from seeing Tony half-dead from having the arc reactor ripped out of his chest. (Thank you Obie, you fucking waste of carbon atoms.) [PTSD can appear in children](http://www.stanfordchildrens.org/en/topic/default?id=post-traumatic-stress-disorder-in-children-90-P02579) but with [slightly different symptoms](http://www.adaa.org/living-with-anxiety/children/posttraumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/symptoms) compared to adults. Here DUM-E shows [hypervigilance](http://ptsd.about.com/od/glossary/g/hypervigilance.htm). Know how to [help someone through a panic attack or flashback](https://sometimesmagical.wordpress.com/2013/10/26/supporting-a-loved-one-through-ptsd-or-panic-attacks/). There are ways to cope with PTSD [in the family](http://www.helpguide.org/articles/ptsd-trauma/ptsd-in-the-family.htm) and [in children](http://www.anxietybc.com/parenting/home-management-strategies-ptsd).  
  
Bucky does exactly the right things by backing off and showing DUM-E that he is not a threat, instead of ignoring the bot's worry. Bucky uses [nonthreatening body language](http://bodylanguageproject.com/nonverbal-dictionary/category/nonthreatening-body-language/) such as [crouching down](http://bodylanguageproject.com/nonverbal-dictionary/the-body-language-of-body-lowering-or-body-shrinking/) and [displaying his empty hand](http://bodylanguageproject.com/nonverbal-dictionary/body-language-of-palm-up-displays-or-the-rogatory-posture/).  
  
[Gentleness is a virtue](https://en.wikiversity.org/wiki/Virtues/Gentleness). In order to [touch gently](http://news.discovery.com/tech/robotics/robots-reach-touch-gently-130430.htm), robots need excellent programming and plenty of sensors. Tony has to figure out ways of explaining "gentle" to DUM-E, who perceives the world differently than humans do. [3 psi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pounds_per_square_inch) is just above average human blood pressure. There are tips for [being a gentle person](http://www.wikihow.com/Be-a-Gentle-Person) and [teaching gentleness to children](http://www.livestrong.com/article/560847-gentle-touch-activity-for-toddlers/).  
  
Traditional [joy buzzers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joy_buzzer) are mechanical, spring-wound toys. There are now [electric ones](http://www.amazon.com/thumbsUp-HANSHK-Hand-Shock-Buzzer/dp/B004WIRWSO) too.

The robot gave a querulous trill and nudged his hand, then skittered away. Bucky didn't move. DUM-E crept back and took careful hold of Bucky's hand, the powerful claw gripping gently as instructed. The handshake was tentative yet complete. Phil could see the tiny camera lenses shifting to focus on small details of the prosthesis. Then DUM-E let go, turning around to regard Tony with a chirp of curiosity.   
  
"Yeah, Bucky's like me, a cyborg," Tony said. "It's nice not to be alone the way I used to be. I'd like to share the garage with him, but if you're not comfortable with that, let me know. This was your home first."  
  
DUM-E made a thoughtful hum. Then he rolled back to Bucky, grasped his hand again, and tugged gently.  
  
"I guess this means I get to be in the club," Bucky said with a grin as he followed the robot further into the garage.  
  
Phil took a step forward, intending to hand Tony the food next. DUM-E squawked in protest. "One new person at a time, is that it?" Phil said. "All right, then. Bucky, come get Tony's supper, please."  
  
Bucky doubled back for the food. "Tony needs to refuel, DUM-E. We brought him beef stroganoff and white chocolate-macadamia cookies."  
  
Plurk, went DUM-E, and did not interfere with the transfer.  
  
"I'll take the cookies," Tony said, holding out a hand.   
  
"After you finish your supper," Bucky said. He kept the cookies just out of reach and presented the small container of stroganoff instead. "Come on, eat up like a good boy and then Bruce won't nag us."  
  
"Tyrant," Tony grumbled, but opened the tub.  
  
"Yeah, he can be, but we love him anyway," Bucky said.  
  
"I meant you." Tony sampled the stroganoff. "Hey, this is really good. Who cooked?"  
  
"Bruce and Natasha made the main dish. Steve and I baked the cookies. We needed to relax," Bucky said.  
  
"Cool," Tony said. "So hey, look at this." He pointed with his fork to the mess of metal on the workbench. "I got an idea for fixing the wrist, think I can make a two-strut model work, just like a real forearm. That should fix the flexibility problem you have."  
  
Phil couldn't make out the details from where he stood, but he could see Bucky's back stiffen. "It'll jam. Won't it?" Bucky said.  
  
"Not if I build it right, and I will, so trust me," Tony said.  
  
DUM-E rolled up to the bench, his chassis fitting neatly under the empty space beneath it so that he could work comfortably. Sensitive metal fingers nudged the partially constructed device. He gave a crisp chirp.  
  
Bucky leaned over to look where DUM-E was pointing. "Is that ... like a piston, or a shock absorber?"  
  
"Something like that, yeah," Tony said. "I'm experimenting with some different things. The wrist needs to be flexible so that it can accomodate the double strut from the forearm. I'm thinking maybe some parts that slide, and some that compress or expand as a solid mass. I can't just rebuild an anatomical wrist out of metal, it won't work the same as live tissue, so it's got to perform the same functions in more mechanical ways ..."  
  
The two men chatted with enthusiasm while Tony ate. Phil discreetly checked the time. Despite the bumpy day, Bucky seems to have recovered well, Phil thought. He shows more tolerance than usual for discussing the delicate topic of his arm. Most of the time he doesn't recover this fast after bailing out earlier in the same day.  
  
"Okay, you can have your dessert now," Bucky said when Tony handed him the empty container, exchanging it for the cookies wrapped in a paper towel.  
  
Tony rolled his eyes in pleasure as he bit into the first one. "Umm. So good. I love these things." Belatedly he turned back to Bucky and Phil, taking another bite. "You wan' fum?"   
  
"Don't talk with your mouth full, Tony, and no thanks, I'm stuffed. Phil and I ate upstairs," Bucky said.  
  
The white chocolate-macadamia cookies didn't last long. Soon Tony brushed away the crumbs and returned his attention to the project at hand. "So next step, I'm testing fancy polymers and shit for the compression zones. Reed sent me some samples that he thought might work with these rods," Tony said as he opened the long tube that he'd claimed earlier, spilling out lengths of metal. "Somebody find me the right box."   
  
Phil sorted through the packages that Bucky had set on the floor. "I believe this is the box you want," Phil said, holding it up.   
  
Bucky came to get it. "Thanks," he said. Then he lowered his voice. "Sorry about the robotic guard dog not letting you into the work area."  
  
"It's all right," Phil said. "I am aware of DUM-E's reasons for caution, and they are not unfounded, even if he doesn't understand yet that I pose no threat to Tony." DUM-E had seen his father butchered and dying right in front of him, when Tony crawled downstairs after Obie's attack. No wonder the little robot worried so much.  
  
"Oh no, don't you dare!" Tony said. "Put that thing down. You do not need the fire extinguisher, DUM-E, because there is not going to be a fire."  
  
Bucky chuckled as DUM-E danced out of reach while Tony tried to grab the fire extinguisher away from him. "What's the problem, Tony?"  
  
"He sprays me all the time when I'm not on fire," Tony said, making another futile lunge. "It is annoying and he is an overprotective mechanical nanny! Which I do not need."  
  
Phil privately believed that Tony needed more minding than he admitted, but did not say anything aloud. He watched DUM-E continue to keep the fire extinguisher just out of reach. Tony and DUM-E chased each other around the table. Tony was smiling a little, though. At least this way, Tony gets some safe exercise and entertainment, Phil mused.  
  
Bucky frowned. "Tony, how many times have you actually set yourself on fire?"  
  
DUM-E twittered. "Four hundred seventy-two," JARVIS translated.  
  
"That is bullshit," Tony said. "It hasn't been more than a couple dozen. Few dozen. Whatever. Certainly not hundreds."  
  
"DUM-E, can you tell when Tony is about to catch fire, before flames become visible?" Bucky asked in a thoughtful tone.  
  
The bot gave an affirmative chirp, nodding his hand with the fire extinguisher still in place.  
  
Tony froze in the act of reaching for the coveted device. "Sweet JSTOR, I never thought of that," he said. "I am such an asshole. No, worse, I'm a stupid asshole." He smacked himself on the forehead. "I should have thought to check ... I wonder how much of the other dumb shit he does, actually has a reason behind it."  
  
Probably more than anyone has realized, Phil thought. DUM-E thinks differently than the rest of us do, even compared to the other bots, but he is neither stupid nor irrational. He is Tony's son. He's just ... quirky.  
  
DUM-E whirred over the fire extinguisher.  
  
"Yeah, you can keep it, just in case Daddy sets himself almost on fire again," Tony said. "You are my very special snowflake, you know that? Never change."  
  
DUM-E set down the fire extinguisher within easy reach. He nuzzled his metal hand against Tony's shirt. Black oil smeared over the white cloth. Then DUM-E leaned over the workbench where he could assist Tony.  
  
"Bucky, would you like to help too?" Tony offered. "Stay for as long or as short as you want. It's ... um ... speaking from experience, easier to develop a sense of ownership for things you've actually built ..." His hand fluttered over the arc reactor.  
  
Bucky pressed a palm to Tony's chest, just for a moment, and Tony's fingers skimmed over bright metal. "Yeah, I could try that, a few minutes anyway," Bucky said.  
  
"I'll leave you boys to your work, then," Phil said. The atmosphere had turned intimate in a way that made him feel like an eavesdropper. He set the remaining packages in a neat row beside the door. Then Phil headed to the elevator, requesting the common floor. He didn't feel like doing paperwork tonight.  
  
On the way up, Phil mulled over what he had observed. We've been avoiding the garage and workshop most of the time, giving the bots their space, he thought. Maybe we overdid that. Too much avoidance can make matters worse instead of better.  
  
"JARVIS, do you think DUM-E is all right?" Phil asked aloud. "We didn't overstress him by leaving Bucky in his territory, did we? I assume you could tell if something went really wrong."  
  
"All of us are networked together, so yes, I know when DUM-E is in distress," JARVIS replied. "At first he found the intrusion alarming. Now he seems to consider Bucky part of the family."  
  
Phil sighed. "If only it were that easy with those of us who don't happen to be cyborgs," he said.  
  
"You are gentle and thoughtful. I feel confident you will think of a way to reassure DUM-E that you have sir's best interests at heart," JARVIS said.  
  
"This isn't just about me, it's about the whole team," Phil said. "We live here; this is Avengers Tower now. I don't mind giving the bots some private space, but I don't want them to be afraid of us."  
  
This was usually where Tony said "fucking Obie."  
  
"Regrettably Obadiah Stane furnished them with examples of humanity's moral nadir," JARVIS said, his voice cooling. "Ms. Potts and Colonel Rhodes, while loyal to sir, have been ... erratic in their reception of his inorganic family members." Then his tone softened. "Bucky is the first person other than sir who has ever reached out to DUM-E like that, accepted his perceptions as valid, and offered comfort. That gives us more of a foundation to build upon."  
  
It reminded Phil of something. "JARVIS, did you know that DUM-E was responding to workshop fires at the smoulder stage rather than waiting for visible smoke or flames to appear?"  
  
"I did," JARVIS confirmed. "I also tried to explain that to sir, but he was unreceptive and ordered me to desist." The air vents whiffled a mechanical sigh. "On such occasions that he becomes careless enough to cause fires, he is often quite drunk, emotionally overwrought, or otherwise impaired in function. Or all of the above. Of course there are times when an unanticipated reaction occurs, but that happens less often. Sir is excitable, but he is a gifted engineer and not prone to making sloppy mistakes."  
  
Four hundred seventy-two.Oh, Tony.  
  
Phil was suddenly, fiercely glad that Bruce had finagled a promise from Tony about the proper treatment of work-related injuries. "I think that Tony might benefit from a semi-permeable boundary on the garage level," Phil said. "The other Avengers could visit him more often, even if it's just a matter of carrying materials or bringing food down to him. That should help DUM-E get used to the rest of the team and learn that we all care about Tony too."  
  
"I concur," JARVIS said. "I believe it would benefit sir as well as DUM-E. Sir needs to hear that he is accepted and appreciated, but sometimes he becomes uncomfortable with overt displays."  
  
"You think that a more oblique approach would appeal to him more, like people interacting with DUM-E," said Phil. It made sense. Tony craved affection, but he had so many experiences of betrayal that it was no wonder such words made him nervous. Hence his efforts to buy friendship, which in turn made some of the other Avengers uneasy.  
  
"It seems worthy of the attempt," JARVIS said. "We have reached the common floor." The elevator doors opened.  
  
\* \* \*   
  
**Notes:**  
  
Robots can indeed be [taught to shake hands](http://www.computer.org/csdl/trans/th/2012/03/tth2012030193.html).  
  
[Shyness](http://kidshealth.org/teen/your_mind/emotions/shyness.html) can have [positive or negative aspects](http://www.askdrsears.com/topics/parenting/child-rearing-and-development/8-ways-help-shy-child). It's [normal for children around ages 3-6](http://consumer.healthday.com/encyclopedia/children-s-health-10/child-development-news-124/shyness-ages-3-to-6-645923.html), which is about how DUM-E seems. He alternates between enthusiastic, protective, and hesitant. [Coping techniques](http://www.parents.com/toddlers-preschoolers/development/social/help-for-shy-kids/) for shy children include introducing one new person or activity at a time. Also, despite what some people say, it's perfectly okay to say, "He's shy." There's nothing wrong with being shy! It's only a problem if it makes someone unhappy. So follow the explanation with a hint how people can help: "Let him watch before joining in. Then he might like to help set up the supplies." Shy children will do a lot better if people avoid overloading them, and if they have fun instead of feeling harassed, they are more likely participate enthusiastically in the future. Overstimulation is a risk for [young children](http://www.secretsofbabybehavior.com/2010/12/too-much-fun-preventing-overstimulation.html) and [those with special needs](http://www.nationalautismresourcesblog.com/2013/11/04/managing-overstimulation-stress-children-autism/).  
  
[Buildings](http://web.ics.purdue.edu/%7Ebsd/building.html) and [furniture](http://www.caregivingcafe.com/high-tech-for-caregiving/furniture-and-accessories-for-disabled/) need to be designed to accommodate someone who travels on wheels. For example, [tables and desks](https://www.enablemart.com/computer-accessibility/furniture-and-accessories) need roll-under space. Tony's workspaces tend to be accessible because of the bots, but also because he likes to zoom around in a wheeled office chair, and because it's not rare for him to get injured enough to impair mobility.  
  
[Lab fire safety](http://www.stonybrook.edu/ehs/fire/lab.shtml) involved a number of [precautions](http://www.labmanager.com/lab-health-and-safety/2009/08/laboratory-fire-safety?fw1pk=2#.VZoCbflVgoI). Make sure to have the right [safety equipment](http://www.ilpi.com/safety/extinguishers.html). Bruce's bargain with Tony included buffing up the lab safety protocols and equipment.  
  
Avoidance of stressful situations can have [positive or negative effects](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avoidance_coping). The troublesome version is [associated with PTSD](http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/problems/avoidance.asp). However, [you don't have to eat the eggplant](http://rachelmanija.dreamwidth.org/506445.html). When is avoidance good? When you can lower your stress by skipping things that don't give you a benefit. When is avoidance bad? When you are avoiding things that you really need to do, or freaking out over things that are difficult or impossible to avoid. In this case -- as often happens -- the bots avoiding people worked for a while but later became less effective and more of an obstacle. That's when you need to work on [reducing avoidance](http://ptsd.about.com/od/copingwithanxiety/qt/How-To-Reduce-Avoidance.htm). Here are some [helpful worksheets](http://psychology.tools/avoidance.html).  
  
[Loving your children](http://www.5lovelanguages.com/2014/04/loving-your-children/) requires knowing what their love language is. Otherwise they have trouble [feeling loved](NULL). Tony's outbound love language is [gifts](http://powertochange.com/studies/receiving-gifts/), but his inbound is [words](http://www.rooseveltpreprimary.co.za/index.php/2015/06/04/love-language-2-words-of-affirmation/).

Bruce and Betty were curled up on the couch, while Steve lay on the floor, lazily kicking his feet in the air. They were all watching television. Phil peered at the display. "Is that ... Biker Mice from Mars?" he asked, bemused. "I haven't seen that show in years."  
  
Betty grinned. "I always loved Charley Davidson, because she's smart and talented. Besides, I wanted to show the guys here why turbo is a button you push and let go, not push and hold down."  
  
"I seem to remember an exploding bike making that point at least once," Phil said.  
  
"The mice are so weird, but I like their motorcycles," Steve said from the floor.  
  
Bruce nodded. "They are pretty cool."  
  
On the screen, Charley and Modo were trying to talk the thrill-seeking Vinnie out of some reckless plan. A stiff gesture snagged Phil's attention. That's right, Modo has a bionic arm, he recalled. All of the Biker Mice had sustained injuries from experiments and adventures that culminated in them fleeing from Mars to Earth. They found a new home and family anyway.   
  
Phil settled on the loveseat. From there he could stretch out his legs until his toes just reached the side of Steve's hip. Phil wanted to connect with his people tonight. Steve gave him a soft smile over his shoulder, then went back to watching the show.  
  
They had just started the next episode when Bucky came in, skin glove and shirt back where they belonged. JARVIS paused the action so that he could provide a summary of the plot and potential triggers for Bucky's approval. "I dunno ... maybe?" Bucky said. "Let's give it a try."  
  
"If you start watching, and something in the show upsets you ...?" JARVIS prompted gently.  
  
"I can close my eyes for a second, snuggle with friends, or ask you to pause the program," Bucky said. "If I feel like my control might slip, I can always tap out if I need to."  
  
"Good plan, Modo." Betty patted the couch, and Bucky sat down with her and Bruce.  
  
"Modo?" asked Bucky.   
  
"You'll get it in a minute; he's one of the Biker Mice. JARVIS, rewind to the beginning of this episode, please," said Betty.  
"Rewinding," JARVIS said. The episode restarted.  
  
Phil kept an eye on Bucky, but he seemed perfectly comfortable. He laughed in all the right places. Modo clearly became his favorite character. In the next episode, the appearance of the evil Dr. Karbunkle made Bucky freeze up for a few seconds. Then he wrapped himself more firmly around Bruce and settled back down.  
  
Comfort contact, Phil thought. It's a good sign that Bucky can seek refuge in his friends and thereby boost his tolerance for stressful concepts.   
  
They watched several more episodes. Steve got hungry again, wandered into the kitchen, and came back with a big bowl of plain popcorn. Betty slipped off the couch to sit with him and snitch a few pieces.   
  
Phil reached down and helped himself to a handful, then leaned back in the loveseat. It felt good to relax. Besides, the Biker Mice were hilarious.  
  
Then Tony came into the common room, one hand kneading the other. "Hey, guys," he said.   
  
"Tony, are you okay?" Bruce asked.   
  
"Yeah, I'm fi--well, no," Tony interrupted himself. "Actually my hands are killing me. Think you can fix it?" He stopped rubbing his hands and held them out.   
  
"Come here and let me see," Bruce said, beckoning to him. Bruce cupped Tony's wrist in his palm and gently manipulated the fingers. "No blisters, cuts, bruises, or other obvious injuries. What have you been doing?"  
  
"Working on the prototype," Tony said. "Phil and Bucky brought the new materials down. I finally got the wrist to work right! I am a genius. Behold the genius that is me."  
  
"Yes, Tony, that's good news," Bruce said. He rotated Tony's hand. "How long did it take you to do that?"  
  
"Since we got home," Tony said. He leaned against the back of the couch.  
  
"Hmm ..." Bruce said. He pressed a careful thumb into Tony's palm.  
  
"Ow fuck!" Tony protested.  
  
"Sorry," Bruce said, working his way up the forearm. Tony yelped again. "Okay, I think what happened is that you spent several hours coding and building finicky little things, which left you with hand cramps and possibly irritated tendons. We've talked about this, Tony -- you need to protect your hands if you want to stay able to do the kind of work you do."  
  
"I know, I know," Tony said. He rubbed his free hand along the back of his neck. "It's just, I was in the zone, I had to get to a good stopping point. I came up here to relax, honest." His voice took on a plaintive note. "So, can you fix me or not?"  
  
"I believe so," Bruce said. "Bucky, please go into the kitchen and warm up a couple of heat pillows."  
  
"Sure thing," Bucky said as he got up.   
  
Soon Phil heard the quiet click of a cabinet opening. There was a pause, a long whirr, and then the chime of the microwave oven.   
  
Bucky came back with Bruce's starry night and Steve's stars-and-stripes pillows. Bruce's smelled of peppermint and lavender, Steve's of cinnamon. "Here you go," Bucky said to Bruce.  
  
Bruce draped one over Tony's hands and wrapped the other behind his neck. "There, sit like that for five minutes and let the heat start relaxing your muscles," he said to Tony. "JARVIS, timer please."  
  
"Counting down from five minutes," JARVIS confirmed.  
  
Phil got up and went into the bathroom to get a blanket from the warmer there. He knew that Tony kept the garage level cool. After hours down there, it's no wonder he's stiff and sore, Phil thought. He tucked the hot blanket around Tony, who snuggled into it.   
  
"Good idea," Bruce said as Phil returned to the loveseat. The Biker Mice rolled on in the background.  
  
"Mmm," Tony said. He tilted against Bucky.  
  
When JARVIS called time, Bruce shifted the heat pillow and blanket enough so he could reach both of Tony's hands. He found the tender spots between thumbs and forefingers. "Tony, I'm going to squeeze down on these pressure points," Bruce said. "It'll hurt for a couple of minutes, then once I let go, you should feel better."   
  
Tony flinched and whined at the contact. "Torture me, why don't you ..."  
  
"Shh, I've got you," Bucky said, wrapping an arm around Tony's shoulders. "Let the doc do his job."  
  
Tony huffed but burrowed into Bucky's embrace for support. When Bruce let go, Tony heaved a sigh of relief. "Huh. That does feel better."  
  
"Good," Bruce said. He moved the heat pillow to cover Tony's left hand while he concentrated on the right. Bruce folded each finger forward and back, then tugged them from side to side. He kneaded the palm with careful strokes before slowly moving up the forearm.   
  
"S'nice," Tony said, responding to the massage.  
  
"I'm glad you like this part," Bruce said. Next he shifted hands, tucking Tony's right under the heat pillow while he worked on the left.  
  
Tony fell asleep. Soon he melted against Bucky, head tipped back, snoring loudly.  
  
Bucky gave him a worried look and murmured, "That doesn't sound too good."   
  
Phil knew, mostly from talking to JARVIS and Happy, that Tony had always snored. Alcohol increased the tendency. The arc reactor made it even worse. After growing up with Steve, of course Bucky finds distressed breathing uncomfortable to hear, Phil realized.  
  
"It's not good for him," Bruce agreed. "Snoring indicates a minor interruption of the air flow. Here, I'll show you what to do." He reached out and gently adjusted Tony's position until the raspy noise stopped. Then Bruce propped him in place with more pillows.   
  
"Thanks," Bucky said. "Tony needs people to look after him."  
  
Bruce nodded. Presently he finished working on Tony's hands. He patted the engineer on the shoulder and said, "You can wake up now. I'm done."  
  
No response.  
  
Phil chuckled. "He probably won't wake up, Bruce. He fell asleep on me once before."  
  
"Sir is deeply asleep," JARVIS confirmed.  
  
An evening-long engineering binge is better than a three-day one, especially minus the usual drinking, Phil thought.  
  
"Okay, uh ... now what?" Bruce said, clearly at a loss.  
  
"Don't tease Tony about it," Phil said. "This is a show of trust, and we should respect it as such."  
  
Bucky gazed at the man sleeping in his grasp. His last experience with Tony falling asleep unexpectedly had ended in disaster. Now Bucky just gave him a fond look and folded the blanket around him a bit more thoroughly. "He looks so peaceful like this," Bucky said.  
  
"How about I put Tony to bed," Steve said. He handed the empty popcorn bowl to Betty, a few unpopped kernels pinging around the bottom.  
  
"That's probably a good idea," Phil said. "JARVIS, do you think we can move Tony without waking him up?"  
  
"Most likely," JARVIS said.  
  
"Be gentle with him, guys," said Bruce. "Tony isn't used to his new sleep pattern yet."  
  
Steve slipped between the coffee table and the couch, then held out his arms. Bucky scooped Tony off the cushions and lifted him up enough for Steve to take hold. They made the transfer effortlessly.  
  
"We'll take good care of him," Bucky promised, arranging Tony more comfortably in Steve's arms. Tony turned his face into Steve's neck and sighed. Then the two supersoldiers headed for the elevator.  
  
Betty padded into the kitchen to put the empty bowl in the sink. Bruce stood up and stretched, a slow thorough yoga move of some kind from the look of it. His back popped. JARVIS had already turned off the television.  
  
Phil yawned. He checked the time. It's almost midnight -- later than I thought, he realized. Time for bed. Phil went back to his own apartment and turned in for the night.  
  
\* \* \*   
  
**Notes:**  
  
[Biker Mice from Mars](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biker_Mice_from_Mars) is a cartoon show, the only one I can think of where a majority of the main characters have disabilities and adaptive equipment. Modo has a bionic arm. [Enjoy a sample](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bt-aib0zqDY).  
  
[Coping with triggers](http://ptsd.about.com/od/selfhelp/a/CopingTriggers.htm) involves [forming a safety plan](http://ptsd.about.com/od/selfhelp/a/safetyplan.htm) that lists things you can do to soothe stress if a trigger appears. This tends to work better than [avoidance](http://ptsd.about.com/od/symptomsanddiagnosis/a/emotionalavoid.htm) for getting your life back on track. Given Bucky's background, even cartoon mad scientists make him uneasy, but sympathetic friends help him feel safer. For overall stress relief you should [identify your triggers](http://www.wholeliving.com/136177/stress-relief-step-1-identify-your-triggers/@center/136756/stress-relief-your-guided-tour), [create a plan to cope with them](http://www.wholeliving.com/136132/stress-relief-step-2-create-your-plan/@center/136756/stress-relief-your-guided-tour), [find healthy solutions for stress relief](http://www.wholeliving.com/136257/stress-relief-step-3-find-healthy-solutions/@center/136756/stress-relief-your-guided-tour), and [work on reducing anxiety in your life](http://www.wholeliving.com/136210/stress-relief-step-4-reduce-anxiety-forever/@center/136756/stress-relief-your-guided-tour). Here is a [workbook for managing stress](http://www.prevention.va.gov/mpt/2013/docs/managestressworkbook_dec2013.pdf).  
  
[Hand cramps](http://www.healthgrades.com/symptoms/hand-cramps) can come from physical or psychological causes. [Physical ones](http://renovahandcare.com/news/causing-hand-cramps/) include cool temperatures and repetitive motion. [Psychological reasons](http://www.healing-journeys-energy.com/Body-Wisdom.html) can also contribute to arm (love issues, impaired connection, fear of discouragement), forearm (blocked goals, fear of inferiority), or hand (giving and receiving, fear of action, inability to handle something) cramps.   
  
There are several ways to [relieve hand cramps](http://www.wisegeek.com/how-do-i-relieve-hand-cramps.htm).  [Exercise balls](http://www.officeplayground.com/Therapy-Balls-C55.aspx) or other [finger fidgets](http://www.officeplayground.com/Fidget-Toys-C102.aspx) move away from repetitive stress.  The Avengers have these things scattered all over the Tower.  [Hand stretches](http://www.webmd.com/osteoarthritis/oa-treatment-options-12/slideshow-hand-finger-exercises) and [range-of-motion exercises](http://www.health.harvard.edu/pain/5-exercises-to-improve-hand-mobility-and-reduce-pain) help with sore muscles and tendons. Here is a [video of some hand exercises](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DayQeLkc710). Aimed at guitarists, here's one of [finger stretches](https://guitarlessons365.com/essential-hand-stretches-for-guitarists/). This one shows [arm and hand massage](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0YxhPNtVWKg).  
  
[Heat pillows](http://www.heatpillows.com/about.php) offer another way to ease muscle pain. [Different fillings](http://www.pillow.com.cn/html/963.html) retain heat and emit soothing smells. [Choose the right kind](http://www.wise4living.org/bbpillow/heat.htm) for your needs. [This site](http://www.heatpillows.com/shop.php?p=2) is where I found Bruce's starry night and Steve's stars-and-stripes pillows. You can also [make your own heat pillow](http://www.thriftyfun.com/tf/Craft_Projects/Sewing/How_To/Making-a-Heat-Therapy-Pillow.html).  
  
Yoga stretches feel good after watching television or working at a desk. Here is an [article about office yoga](http://ergonomics.about.com/od/treatmentprevention/ss/essentstretches.htm). This video shows a [three-minute yoga routine](http://www.mindbodygreen.com/0-12759/a-3-minute-yoga-flow-you-can-do-anytime-anywhere.html).