Seeing and Believing
by Anonymous

Summary

In which Steve finally sees just exactly what Tony believes.

OR

In which Tony takes Steve's words a lot harder (and a lot more seriously) than Steve ever meant him to.

Notes

Okay so this is mostly just Tony being sad and hating himself and Steve trying to fix it. Tony might be a bit OOC. I don't even know. I wrote it for ironfries, on Tumblr. Enjoy!

See the end of the work for more notes.
Seeing

For all that Steve is honourable and kind and empathetic, he really knows how to hit where it hurts. Maybe his relative virtue even makes it worse, Tony thinks, because for some reason Steve's words are still rattling around in his head, even after they had resolved their differences. Somehow, Steve had managed to point out everything that is wrong with Tony without even trying, and probably without realizing it.

So after the final battle against Loki and his army, after Tony nearly threw away everything for them, after the Avengers split and went their separate way (for now), Tony goes for a drive. He doesn't answer Pepper when she asks where he's going, and he lets Bruce into one of the Stark labs, and he gets in his car and drives.

He's gone for a week. He doesn't answer his phone and he doesn't stop, except for gas and for food. He wears hoodies and shades and doesn't allow himself to be recognized. When he comes home, he's quiet and maybe a little sad, because he couldn't escape himself, couldn't escape Steve's words, and he worried Pepper, so he just feels more selfish than ever. He wonders what he's doing, and then remembers that he's done everything wrong so far, so why should he try to break the pattern now?

The direct hurt from Steve's sharp tongue fades eventually, but Tony doesn't get much better. He's still a bit quiet, and bit withdrawn. Tony's as brilliant as ever, but he doesn't have much drive anymore, and he doesn't know why.

Pepper call it depression, and asks him what happened. He ignores her completely.

Eventually, she gets tired of being ignored. She tries to get help first, calls Rhodey and tries to get Tony to see a doctor. He refuses, again and again, until she's had enough.

“I can't keep doing this, Tony,” is what she says to him. “I don't know what happened to you, whether this has anything to do with that week you were gone, or if it was before that, but you've changed. I clearly can't help you with this.”

He looks at her and smiles. It looks as empty as his soul feels. “I'm okay, Pepper. I'll try to do better.”

She takes it at face value, because Pepper doesn't want to think about what that could mean.

Tony does try harder. He hadn't realized how much of a recluse he had become until suddenly he was dealing with the press again, fighting the occasional idiot as Iron Man, returning to his life, really. He does a couple jobs for Nick Fury, invents some things, changes the world again and again the smallest possible ways. It still feels like failure, because he can't ever make up for what's in his past, and they all seen the footage. No one's ever going to forget who he was, no matter who he is now.

Tony feels sick to realize how much he's allowed Steve to get to him, to realize that he's become weak. But maybe he was always weak, and Steve was just exactly the right person to see that and call him out.
And he thinks that maybe Pepper had sort of figured it out too, because she's growing distant from him. He thinks that if he tries he could pull her back, but the truth is he isn't sure if he wants too. Tony loves Pepper, a lot, but she could do so much better. So when she comes to him and tells him that she can't watch him slip away any more, he lets her go. She tells him that when he's ready to be himself again, when he's done giving up on everything, she'll be happy to come back, to try again. He's just not sure why she isn't happy to have escaped him.

By the time the Avengers reassemble, Tony has mostly buried Steve's words. He's mostly buried everything, honestly, except for his public face, the smiling Mr. Stark, and Iron Man. He's pretty sure that Steve said what he did in the heat of the moment anyways, it shouldn't matter at all.

So the team gets back together, this time to fight Hydra. They've resurfaced, and it sucks, and everyone gives everything they've got. They win, in the end, and everything is a bit more friendly for it. The Avengers decide to stay together this time, and Tony offers Stark Tower. He's not sure why he's doing it, but he's not sure why he does anything these days. Everyone seems grateful though, so he lets himself feel good about it.

And then, one day, Steve comes to see him while he's tinkering with something in his lab. “Hey,” the soldier says, hovering in the doorway.

Tony waves him in, and doesn't say anything. Steve tries again. “Er, you missed lunch,” he says.

“Oh,” says Tony, and doesn't look at Steve. Tony knows he missed lunch, he hasn't eaten all day. It's been a few days since he's slept, too, but that's pretty normal.

“I was worried,” says Steve. He kind of sounds like he's telling the truth, which is a bit surprising. Tony looks up.

“You were? I mean- That's nice Steve, what are you doing here?”

Now Steve looks a bit surprised too. “Of course I was. I just wanted to make sure you were okay. You're a member of the team, I-”

“I can still fight,” Tony assures him. “I can go longer than this.”

For some reason, Steve doesn't look very assured. “It's not about if you can fight. It's your welfare.”

Tony shrugs. “I don't really care all that much. Just so long as I can function.”


“Alright,” says Tony, and turns back to his work.

And then there's another fight, and another, and then Tony does something stupid and reckless and risks his life and Steve is so angry and Tony doesn't understand why. He's lived, though he was a bit banged up, and he's managed to pull it off, maybe even saving all of them.

“Why would you do that!” Steve is yelling. “It was a stupid risk, you could have been killed!”
And suddenly, Tony is angry too. Something wells up inside, a hurt that he'd long buried, and he spits back, “I get that I'm not the guy to make the sacrifice play, Steve. But that doesn't mean that I can't do it when it means saving the rest to you! Your opinion of me doesn't decide my actions!”

Steve takes the words like a slap, and his mouth snaps shut. Tony takes the opportunity, and continues. “I'm not the most selfless member of this team. I'm not even the best fighter, or the strongest, and Banner can probably rival me when it comes to smarts. I know that you don't like me, that I don't stand up to your friends from the war, or even my dad. So can you please just respect it when I try to be the better man and give of myself to help you!”

Steve finds his tongue, and says, “Tony, I don't think that about you. I know that you fight for other people, I think that you're valuable. I was just-”

“Just what?” snaps Tony.

“Concerned. Upset. I don't know, Tony, but I wasn't angry because I thought that it aught to be someone else's job to sacrifice themselves for the team.”

Tony laughs, and it's bitter and angry. “Get out,” he says, and doesn't say anything else to Steve, doesn't even look at him, until he does.

Steve tries to talk to Tony a few more times, tries to apologize, to get him to listen. Tony doesn't really want to hear it. Steve didn't do anything wrong, Tony sees that now, and it wasn't the right thing to do to yell at him. Steve is the team leader, he has every right to lecture Tony for doing something that could have failed and weakened the team.

Tony doesn't want Steve to be more angry at him than he is, so he shuts himself up in his workshop, talks to JARVIS and ignores everyone else. He locks out the rest of the Avengers, eats very little and sleeps even less. He invents things; a new set of arrows for Clint, a new style of body armour for Steve, a new type of sheath for Natasha that will tuck into her clothes even better. Nothing for himself. Sometimes he lies on the cot he keeps in the workshop and wonders why he can't do anything but hurt people and make them angry. Why no one has ever wanted to stay. Why he has all this genius, all this wealth, and isn't able to just be a good person for once.

He wishes that he had a way out of his own head.

Steve breaks into the workshop on the ninth day. He plucks Tony from his seat at a worktable and physically carries him back to Steve's own rooms. He shoves him into the ensuite bathroom and pretty much orders him to take a shower. Tony does as he says, and then changes into the clothes that materialized on the counter while he was washing. There's a stretchy t-shirt and a pair of sweat pants, both far too large for him, probably Steve's. When he comes out into the room, Steve is reclined on the bed, drawing something.

“Er,” says Tony. “I'm just going to go back to my room.”

“No.” The denial surprises Tony and he starts. “You're staying here,” Steve continues, “where I can keep an eye on you. You're going to sleep, and when you wake up you're going to eat. And then we're going to talk.”

Tony doesn't like the way Steve says “talk” but he doesn't really have a choice. He's nothing without his suit, he'd never be able to get away from Steve. So he listens. He crawls onto the bed
next to Steve and curls up next to him, careful not to touch. He doesn't draw the covers over himself, even though he's a bit chilly. He just curls into a ball, back to Steve. Tony is sharply aware of Steve's gaze on his back, but he doesn't react to it other than to shudder slightly and close his eyes. All of a sudden, he becomes aware of how tired he is, and lets Morpheus take him.

When he wakes, Steve is gone, and someone has drawn the covers over him. He's in the same position he fell asleep in, and Tony realizes that he must of been truly exhausted to have slept without nightmares. Before he can rise from the bed and sneak back to his workshop, Steve walks though the door, a sandwich in one hand and a glass of juice in the other. “You're awake,” he says.

Tony nods, and sits up. He takes the food when Steve offers it, and eats without tasting it. He's not sure if he would have thrown up if he had registered the food or not, but he thinks that it would have been likely. When he's done, he looks back at Steve, who's watching him again.

“So, talking?” Tony says. “I can do that, we can do that, I mean, I'd much rather not, but-”

“I'm sorry,” says Steve. “For what I said to you. And for getting angry.”

Tony shrugs. “You didn't do anything wrong. I was being stupid.”

“No,” Steve says, “you weren't. I mean, yeah, you were, but you were also being noble and selfless and a real hero, okay? I shouldn't have gotten angry at you, I had no right.”

“Whatever,” says Tony, and doesn't believe him at all. Almost getting himself killed was more selfish than anything. “Just don't apologize to me, if anything I should-” He cuts himself off. Tony doesn't know how to say sorry, though maybe he should learn. It might help a bit.

“Damnit, Tony,” says Steve. “I do need to apologize. Both for this, and for what I said to you-about you- when we first met. You're a good man.”

Tony laughs in his face, and Steve looks a bit offended. “What?” he asks.

“I'm not a good man,” Tony says. “I have a lot of money and some cool tech, but you were right when you said that there are men out there with nothing who are worth ten of me.”

“I don't think I was,” Steve says. “And I have a hard time believing that you did believe me.”

“Yeah, well.” Tony looks away, and knots his hands in Steve's blanket. It's royal blue, warm, soft, and comfortable.

“And I didn't mean to hurt you,” Steve continues. “I was angry, you were just brushing off the danger in the situation, and you weren't exactly nice to me, either.”

“I know I wasn't. I'm always like that,” Tony says. “I don't think I'm capable of being a decent human being, never mind a hero.” Tony doesn't know why he's being so honest, but he's not really feeling up to putting on the face of Tony Stark, Genius Billionaire Playboy Philanthropist. Right now he just kind of wants to be Tony. Hopefully Steve doesn't mind.

“You-” Steve chokes on whatever he's going to say, and he bows his head, buries his face in his hands. “You're a good man, Tony,” he says. “I've learned about you since we met. About the way you stop bad people from using your weapons to hurt innocents. About your philanthropic work. About you getting kidnapped and crawling out of the darkness as Iron Man, as a hero.”

“You're more than just Tony,” Steve says.

Tony shrugs, and drags himself out of bed. It feels like too much effort. “I have a meeting, I think.”

Steve just watches him go. Tony ignores his gaze once again, and wonders what exactly Steve thinks he's seeing when he calls Tony a hero.

The next person that Tony talks to is Bruce. He's waiting for him in his lab when he gets back there, peering at the device Tony had been working on. “This is good,” he says, when he turns around and sees Tony entering the lab.

Tony shrugs. “Just an experiment. What's up, Bruce?” He ignores the fact that he's still wearing Steve's clothes. Bruce doesn't seem to care much either.

“Just wanted to make sure you were okay. I've shut myself away in my lab as a coping mechanism before, and it's not healthy.”

“I'm fine,” Tony says. “Cap's already told me off for not taking care of myself, or whatever.”

Bruce gives him a knowing look, but doesn't actually say anything. Instead he says, “We only do it because we care.”

Tony just looks as Bruce. There's something to be envied about the man, some element of control, which would seem strange what with the whole 'giant green rage monster thing'. But it doesn't. Bruce can deal with the Hulk, can control him. Unfortunately, Tony can't control himself in the same way. Can't restrain his demons, keep them from tearing at everything he loves. Tony's darkness destroys everything he touches, but not in so obvious a way as the Hulk does.

Bruce looks back at Tony, and then he leaves. Tony's glad for that, because it means that now he can lock himself up again.

Tony doesn't really know how to live with other people. Especially really, really good people. In the past, the limit of the people he had lived with was Pepper and his parents, and neither of those really counted because Pepper was Pepper and his parent were... his parents. So it's a bit strange to suddenly have five other people living in the Tower. Thor seemed to be in every room at once sometimes, and Natasha never seemed to be anywhere (but she left knives sticking out of the walls, like breadcrumbs to help her get around or something). Clint was always perching on stuff, like the cabinets in the kitchen and the punching bags in the gym. Bruce spent most of his time in the labs, but when he wasn't there, he was in the kitchen, cooking something or other. He was an amazing chef, too, and often the smell of his cooking would lure Tony from his workshop, causing Tony to wonder if he did it on purpose. And Steve. Steve was something else entirely.

Tony doesn't know how to deal with Steve, because Steve is amazing and too perfect to be real and he looks at Tony like he was sorry, like he cared, and Tony doesn't know how to deal with that at all. The last person who had looked at him like that (not fond exasperation, not worry, caring) had been his mother, for god's sake. And Steve looks at Tony and sees Howard. Or at least, Tony's pretty sure that's what he sees, because what other explanation is there for the affection in Steve's gaze whenever it falls upon Tony?
The Avengers are only peripherally aware that Tony has a drinking problem. They know that he's had some trouble with alcohol in the past, that he used to be wild. They don't know that he still drinks far, far too much, but that now he keeps to himself when he does it. He doesn't want to hurt anyone. And he gets far too honest when he's drunk.

So when Steve finds him once, drunk and miserable, sitting on the couch in the largest den, staring at the walls like he doesn't know his own house, it's a bit distressing.

“Tony?” Steve asks carefully, stepping into the room on quiet feet.

Tony doesn't look up, but he says, “Oh.”

“Are you okay?” says Steve, moving to sit down on the couch next to Tony. There's a mostly empty bottle of something in Tony's hand, and Steve pries it away gently, ignoring the soft sound of distress that comes from Tony.

Tony shakes his head, and faintly remembers that this is why he shouldn't get drunk. He tends to tells people things he should keep to himself and keep to himself things he should tell people.

“What's wrong?” God damn you, Steve, Tony think. Stop caring and leave me alone. It'll be better for you that way.

“Nothing in my life is right,” Tony slurs. “And I'm sorry that I ruin everything and that I'm selfish and stupid and that I'm not good enough for any of you.”

“You great,” Steve says, and he sounds a bit choked up. “You're just fine, better than us in some was, even.”

“No, no,” says Tony, and he wishes hat he could hut up, but at this point, who even cares? “You don't need me.”

“Of course we need you,” Steve says, and he sounds kind of like he actually means it, which is obviously bullshit.

“Fuck off,” Tony mumbles. “And give me back that bottle.”

“No,” says Steve, and now he sounds offended. That's about right, Tony thinks, that's normal.

“Please?” Tony tries again.

“No.” This time Steve sound less offended and more firm, and he grips the bottle tighter. “Tony, I won't let you drink yourself to death.”

“Not to death,” Tony says. “Just until I can sleep and forget and not dream.”

“Close enough.”

Steve isn't getting it. “Steve, you have no reason to stop me. Give me the bottle and leave me in peace.”

“Tony, no,” Steve's voice is mostly sad. “I won't watch you do this to yourself.”

“That's what Pepper said,” Tony mumbles, “she just left.”

“I won't.” It's his Cap voice this time, and Tony looks up and meets his eyes.
“Why are you doing this?” Tony asks, honestly bewildered.

“Because.” It's the Cap face, too. “We care about you. We want you to be happy, to be with us, not to drink until you can't even stay conscious. We need you, Tony. So stop being an idiot.”

“Tony can be an idiot all he wants,” Tony says. “You need Iron Man. But not Tony, no, never Tony. No one can deal with me. No one can want me.” Tony is cursing his drunken honesty, even as he watched Steve's mouth drop open. He looks surprised, like he hadn't already seen the fact that Tony is, at heart, not a good person, and then pointed it out to him quite succinctly.

“I hadn't realized,” Steve says, and Tony thinks, oh. He realizes all of a sudden that he had had hope that Steve would be different.

Tony cuts Steve off before he can say anything else. “I'm sorry I can't be my father for you, and I'm sorry I'm not Bucky Barnes. All I can be is Tony. I know I'm not good enough, and I hope that Iron Man will still be welcome among the Avengers.” He figures there won't be a problem with Iron Man. Tony does thinks that maybe he should move though, go live in an apartment in the city, rather than forcing them to deal with him 24/7.

Steve looks a little disgusted. “Tony, Tony, no. Tony, we want you here, we honestly do like you!”

Tony shrugs. “Whatever you say, Cap,” he says, and lists sideways. His head thumps against Steve's shoulder. “Sorry.” he mutters. His eyes drift shut. “I'm gonna sleep for a bit Cap. Thank you for lying to me.” Then he falls asleep in Steve's presence for the second time.

When Tony wakes, he's in Steve's bed again. He's still in his day clothes, which is probably a good sign, but he doesn't remember much of what he said (or did) to Steve the previous night.

Steve himself is no where to be found, so Tony pries himself out of the bed and slips form the room. He returns to his own room and changes his clothes, then heads to the kitchen for a cup of coffee. Steve is there, making toast. He turns around when Tony enters the kitchen, and Tony considers turning and walking right back out again when he sees the devastated look on Steve's face.

“Tony,” Steve says.

“Is there coffee?” Tony replies, and ignores the way that Steve's face falls even further when he's brushed off. He does nod though, so Tony grabs a mug and pours a cup. He drinks it, pours another, then turns back to Steve.

“What's up?” Tony asks, trying to figure out why Steve is so upset. Tony thinks that he must have said something.

“It's just- Do you really believe everything that you told me last night?”

Tony raises an eyebrow. “To be honest, I don't remember much of last night. And depending on what it was, it could either have been way too honest or a terrible lie.”

Steve really needs to stop looking like a kicked puppy, Tony thinks. “You told me that you were worthless, that no one wants you, that you think that you're less than all of us.”

“Jesus, Tony,” Steve says. "You can't honestly believe that."

“Sure I can. Everyone else does. Even you, which you pointed out to me quite well not long after we met.”

“Tony!”

“What?” Tony takes a sip of his coffee, watched as emotions play out over Cap's face. Finally his expression firms into determination.

“We're going to fix this, Tony. I can't- it's so wrong that you would think that of yourself, think that others think that of you. And it's wrong that you feel that you have to hide yourself away.” Steve looks like he's not going to give up on this, but Tony's going to try to shut him down anyways.

“I don't need help,” Tony says, waving his hand dismissively. “And you have no reason to try.”

“We're your team, Tony. Your friends.”

“Yeah, and? I think my opinion of myself is my business.”

Steve shakes his head. “I'll do it myself if I have to, Tony. I won't let you carry on this way.”

“Whatever, Cap,” Tony says, and starts to leave the kitchen. “Do what you want.”

Steve watches him go, and then asks JARVIS to find the rest of the Avengers. He's going to need some help with this.
Believing

Chapter Summary

In which Steve has to make Tony believe what all the rest of them see.

Chapter Notes

So, this is the last part, guys. Much less depressing than the last bit. Enjoy!

The Avengers aren't entirely sure what to expect when Steve calls them together, but it is immediately clear to them as they gather in a small living space that something is horribly wrong. Steve look like he's been punched in the stomach, and everyone feels the absence of Tony profoundly.

Bruce is the one to break the silence. "Has something happened?" he asks. "Is Tony okay?"

Steve sighs and his shoulders slump. "No, I don't think he is. But I don't think he knows that."

Almost everyone frowns. "What do you mean?" Clint says.

"I don't think any of us realize how little Tony thinks of himself," Steve says. Even Natasha is frowning by now.

Clint scoffs. "Tony's the single most full-of-himself person I've ever met. He thinks plenty of himself."

Steve just shakes his head. "I've spoken to him a couple of times over the past couple weeks, and something is very wrong. No-" he says, when Clint opens his mouth. "Don't interrupt me. I'm sure that most of you remember what I said to Tony when he met, about being nothing without his armour? Well, he believed me. He thinks that we believe him to be a bother, not useful to the team. Who he is, both as Iron Man and as the Tony Stark we see every day, is false, and Tony think that his true persona is far inferior to all of us."

"I thought I had noticed something strange about the way he spoke sometimes," Bruce says, and scrubs a hand over his face. "And the way he acted."

"I too noticed several anomalies in what he said versus what he did. And that at times, particularly in public, he seems an entirely different person," adds Natasha.

Steve nods. "I don't think that Tony is ever comfortable as himself anymore, as he spends so much time putting on his public face. Even with us, there's something wrong in the way he smiles."

"I've worked with him," Bruce adds. "He's so free, in the lab. He makes jokes and talks nearly non-stop. He's a fountain of intelligence, trivia, whatever, an he has something to say about nearly everything. Not that the Tony we know doesn't, it's just that in the lab Tony's insightful, funny. Not rude. Well, rude, but it's endearing rather than annoying, since he doesn't seem to really mean it."
Thor finally speaks up. He's been silent for a long time, standing as w often does with an uncharacteristic frown on his face. "It seems to me that the Tony that is hidden is very much like my own brother. Loki did much the same when he was not secure, putting on the Trickster's face or becoming angry. Eventually it came to a point where even I saw my true brother rarely enough that I could barely remember him. Perhaps my insight will be helpful in this."

Steve shifts, a bit uncomfortable comparing Tony to Loki, of all people. But he guesses that in a way it's true. It's just that Tony came out of it a hero, with a hard shell baked around his softer insides, and Loki came out bitter and burnt and ready to make everyone the same as himself. So he just nods at Thor, "Yes. Any immediate tips?"

Thor thinks for a minute, then says, "Loki was always most at ease when he was away from Asgard. There were too many things that he was uncomfortable with there, and escaping them always relaxed him, even if he was headed into battle."

"So..." says Clint, "we're not looking to make him comfortable, we're trying to stop him from being uncomfortable."

Steve nods. "Baby steps. And the first step is to find a way to make Tony comfortable in any part of this Tower that isn't his workshop. He needs a haven, away from his work."

"If I may interject," comes the smooth British accent that everyone recognizes as JARVIS. They all jump anyway.

"Of course," says Steve, because no one knows Tony better than JARVIS, maybe not even Pepper or Colonel Rhodes.

"There are several lounges and entertainment rooms in the Tower that may suit your purposes. One in particular is set up as a family room, where a large group of people may relax and watch movies, or listen to music, or converse. It would be simple enough to coax Master Stark into that room, and then convince him to remain there, so as to spend time with you."

Steve hums thoughtfully. "We could set up a movie night, or something. He'd spend time with us, and maybe he'd become more comfortable. Stop feeling like we were invading, or whatever."

"Shall I inform you of the location of the room that I am speaking of?" says JARVIS.

"No," replies Steve, "later."

"This is great," says Bruce, stopping Steve before he can say more. "But we have to be careful. If there's one thing that I know about depression, it's that you don't want to be helped. We have to make him think that we're being selfish."

"Then that's what we'll do," says Steve, and dismisses the team.

Steve thinks of this bit of the plan as Stage One, or Finding a Comfort Zone for Tony That Isn't His Workshop. It's a bit long winded, but it works for him. Unfortunately, it isn't working on Tony. Mostly because Steve hasn't been able to catch him in the same room since their talk. Tony is avoiding Steve thoroughly, leaving a room whenever Steve enters it, and keeping out of sight. Steve thinks that maybe he hopes that he'll be forgotten about if he stays away from everyone.

Steve hasn't even been able to propose to him the idea of a movie night. He has gone to the family room that JARVIS mentioned though, a large round room on one of the two floors designated for
use by the Avengers. It's on the same floor as Steve's room, in fact. However, Tony lives a floor above the rest of the Avengers, in the newly-repaired penthouse, and his labs are the floor below the Avengers, meaning that he's rarely on the floors the rest occupy, except for when he comes down to make use of the kitchens, or to train in the gym that's set up on one of the floors.

So one day Steve just goes to get Tony, refusing to allow him to escape again. He's in his workshop, separated from Steve by a thick sheet of glass and a door, and he's playing with his holographic screens and talking to midair, probably directing JARVIS. Tony can't hear him, but after a moment Tony stops and looks right at Steve. He looks frustrated for a second, then his facial expression turns to his default quirked eyebrow and faint smirk. He waves a hand, and the glass door in front of Steve issues a click. Steve steps into the workshop, and says, “Just thought I'd let you know, Tony, there's a team building exercise that I'm putting into place.”

“Oh?” says Tony, and he's wearing his 'genius billionaire playboy philanthropist' face. “And what's that, Cap?”

“Movie night,” Steve says, and delights in the shock that blanks Tony's face. Clearly that was not what Tony had been expecting him to say.

“Oh,” says Tony, then recovers himself. “Finally catching up on pop culture?”

“Something like that,” says Steve, then he turns to leave the workshop. “Thursday nights,” he continues, “mandatory. Oh, and Bruce is making lunch in an hour, if you want to join us.”

Tony nods absently, already absorbed back into his work. He's not just working to distract himself, Steve thinks, he's working because he's inspired. It's a good thing, and when Steve takes the stairs back up a floor he's feeling pretty good about himself.

Tony does join them for lunch, though he doesn't linger long. He eats a plate of food in about three bites and then returns to him workshop with an apple in hand. Bruce and Steve and Clint, who are still only halfway through their own meals, watch him go, then exchange a look. Tony eating is either a very good thing, or a sign of the apocalypse. They're not sure which.

But then Tony shows up to the movie night too, and they let Tony pick. He decides on the first Bourne movie, and then spends the time laughing at Clint and Natasha's commentary. Steve watches the movie, and watches Tony out of the corner of his eye. Tony's seated away from the rest of the group, curled up in an overstuffed arm chair, wrapped around an equally overstuffed throw pillow. However, though he's withdrawn physically, he's engaged with the group, catching popcorn thrown by Clint with his mouth and laughing at Thor's reactions to the film. When the movie's over, he even asks Steve what he thought. When Steve says, “I think that it was a good choice,” he's not just talking about the movie.

When Tony leaves the group, he goes upstairs, rather than back down to the workshop, and all of the Avengers are relieved to see it.

It takes two weeks for Tony to start coming to the movie nights without being prompted. And then, near to a week after that, Steve finds Tony sitting the the Nest- so named by Clint- working on a tablet. He has a glass of something amber on a side table next to him, but there's no bottle and the glass is small and not empty. He isn't drinking to get drunk, for once.
Tony looks up at Steve when he enters, and lowers his tablet. “Sorry,” he says, “did you want the room? I can go down to my workshop.”

Tony starts to get up, but Steve waves him back down. “It’s not a problem,” Steve replies. “I’m just going to sit here and sketch anyways.” He waves his sketchbook and pencil.

Tony nods and starts tapping away at his tablet again, ignoring Steve. Steve sits down in an armchair next to where Tony is lounging on a couch and draws absently, thinking about Tony, and about the Plan, and about the team. After awhile, he hears Tony’s voice. “What are you drawing?” Tony asks, sitting up.

“Uh,” says Steve, and looks down. In his distraction, he’s sketched Tony, bent over his tablet. He’s curled up like he was on that first movie night, and though his facial features are a bit indistinct, he looks focused. He looks happy, too, content.

Tony sees the drawing, and blinks. “Have you been using me as a model?”

“No really,” says Steve, “just doodling mindlessly. That I drew you is a coincidence.”

“Do you draw the others, too?” asks Tony. Steve nods and flips through a few pages of his book. Natasha stretching, Bruce reading, Thor brandishing his hammer. A shadowed Clint perching in the rafters of a SHEILD facility. A few more pages, and there’s Fury, yelling at someone off the page, and a page of small sketches of Coulson doing various things. Steve had done that just after the battle, trying to immortalize all the details that he remembered of the man. Tony looks a bit sad when he sees it, and he takes the sketchbook from Steve to flip through a few more drawings.

Many are of people that Tony doesn’t recognize (Bucky, Peggy, the Howling Commandos, Steve’s parents), but there are also a few drawings of a young Howard, which make Tony flinch and pass the book back to Steve.

“I’ve got some work to do,” Tony mutters, and levers himself up off of the couch. He slips out of the room like a wraith, and Steve hopes that all the progress he’s made hasn’t been undone.

The progress hasn’t been undone, as Tony continues to join the team for movie nights and is found working or even relaxing by himself in the Nest. Once, Steve finds him there, fast asleep, his tablet resting on his chest grasped in limp hands. Steve considers moving him to his own bed, but Tony is a light sleeper, and so Steve leaves him be.

The next phase of the Plan in to get Tony to spend time with the team outside of movie night, briefings, and missions. So they start making a point to take their meals together when possible, and always inviting Tony to join them, though he rarely does. Eventually, though he does join them, and while he doesn’t always eat, he will sit with them, have conversation, and pick bits off of others’ plates (particularly Clint’s, because it drives Clint nuts).

The fact that Tony is now eating small amounts at fairly regular intervals because of the meals they share feels like a miracle to Steve.

Tony seems to get better over time. They fight together, eat together, spend time together; the whole team does. Tony is more willing to relax around them, and he no longer spends all his time in his workshop. He doesn’t take care of himself as well as Steve might like, but he’s gotten better about it, so that’s something.
The only problem is, Steve doesn't know if Tony's opinion of himself has improved. Though they all make a point to tell Tony that he's done a good job after a mission, or thank him profusely when he designs a new gadget for any member of the rest of the team, he has a tendency to smile in that strange, empty way that means that he doesn't mean it, doesn't believe it, and escape their company for awhile. Steve doesn't know how to fix it.

But Tony's smiles are real more often, and he doesn't doesn't hide away as much, he seems happier. Whether he actually is, only time will tell.

Sometimes, there are Bad Days. Steve never knows how to deal with them any more than he knew how to deal with the depression before, because it's so much worse. Tony will tuck himself away in his workshop, drink himself into a stupor, and refuse any contact. The one time Steve had tried to draw Tony out during a Bad Day, he was shouted at until he left the room, Tony's words hot with fury and crueler than anything Steve has ever heard him say. Steve's feelings are almost hurt, and then he remembers that Tony doesn't really mean it.

There is perhaps one of those days every two or three weeks, and when they happen the team will often sit together in the Nest and wait for Tony to come to them. He often does, by the end of the day he'll show up looking pale and sick, and he'll curl into the chair that had become his and not meet anyone's eyes.

On one of the Bad Days, Tony emerges from his workshop, drunker than any of them had ever seen him. He slouches into the Nest, a mostly-empty bottle in his hand. Steve is the only one there, but following Tony are Clint, Natasha and Bruce, who saw him on his walk from his workshop. Thor is with Jane, and somehow Steve thinks that that's for the better. Thor doesn't have much tact.

Tony slumps into his chair and drags his free hand over his face. Then he looks up at Steve, his unfocused eyes not even registering the others. “Do you hate me?” Tony asks, and he sounds broken.

“No,” says Steve, and the rest of the team answers Tony's question with shakes of their heads, even though he probably isn't aware of them.

“Yeah, right,” says Tony. “You treat me well, better than almost everyone else I've ever met. But I know how this works. Even if you don't hate me now, you did, and you will again.”

Tony is the most articulate drunk I've ever met, Steve thinks, and then he regrets it. Now's not the time for random observations. “None of us hate you, Tony,” Steve says instead. “Not me, not Bruce, not Natasha, not Clint, not Thor. Not Pepper or Colonel Rhodes or even Fury.”

Tony shrugs and then says, “Can you stop lying please? Or stop telling the truth? You're not making this better.”

“If you're questioning it, Tony, we are making it better. Before, you were sure.”

“Before,” says Tony, and his tone is black, “I knew where I stood. Now I don't know how to think, forget how to act.”

“We just want you to be comfortable,” Steve urges. “Just be yourself.”

“I can't!” Tony shouts. Bruce, standing behind him, flinches slightly, and Natasha places a gentle hand on his shoulder. “I can't,” Tony continues, quiet again. “I don't know who I am anymore.”
“You're Tony Stark. Our Tony,” Natasha says before Steve can open his mouth. Tony's shoulders tense, suddenly aware of the others in the room.

“No,” says Tony, “stop.” His words are slurring a bit, and he takes a sip out of his bottle. Steve reaches out and takes it from his hands, prying the glass neck from his fingers. Tony has no strength left to grip, and it feels like a terrifying metaphor. Steve wonders how close Tony has come to the edge before.

“It's okay, Tony,” says Steve. They're using his name as much as possible. Reinforcing it for him that that know him, they want him, and not some mask.

Tony's shaking his head, shrinking back into his chair. Bruce places a hand on one of his shoulders, tries to rub out some of the tension. Tony shudders under the long fingers, but leans into the gentle touch.

He looks like a child, and Steve cannot keep himself from touching any longer. He slides onto his knees, wraps strong arms around Tony's shuddering figure. Tony stays curled up, but lets his head fall onto Steve's shoulder. Bruce moves around, and his fingers wrap over Tony's shoulders again. Natasha slithers in on one side, tucks one slim arm around Tony's waist. Clint moves in to card one hand through Tony's hair. And in their arms, he falls apart.

After that, something changes. Tony is at once more withdrawn and more relaxed. For all that he spends less time with the team, when he is with them his smiles are easy and soft, and his laughter matches them. He jokes around, and will even reach out to brush against the others or snuggle up with them on the couches in the Nest, rather than isolating himself.

He still has the occasional Bad Day, but he stops throwing himself in front of every bullet in battle, and he doesn't put on his public face except when in public. On occasion, he'll come out of the lab bearing a gift for one team member or another, or even chattering about some new idea he's had or invention he's working on for SI or for himself.

Tony talks to Steve more than he talks to any of the other Avengers (except Bruce, but their conversations are mostly about science), and Tony becomes increasingly more open with him. Even to the point of thanking him, one day.

“Steve?” says Tony. Steve looks up from where he's sketching the team, fighting back to back in an anonymous city street.

“Yeah, Tony?” he says. Tony has put his tablet down on the counter next to him, and he's sitting forward slightly in his chair. Steve puts down his pencil and paper, and pays attention.

“I just- wanted to thank you.”

Steve tilts his head. “Why?”

“Because,” Tony says. “You've tried so hard to... fix me. Recently. And I don't really know if it's worked because I don't know what better feels like but you're certainly doing something and that's more than most people and I know that it's probably a waste of your time.”

“You're not a waste of my time,” Steve denies. “That idea is exactly what I'm trying to fix.”

“Yeah, well, I'm kind of dysfunctional, in case you hadn't noticed,” says Tony. “I don't know if I'm fixable, or whatever, but I think it's great that you're trying.” He sounds very earnest, very un-Tony.
Steve is struck with suspicion. “Are you only thanking me for my sake?” he asks. “Because if so, stop.”

“No,” says Tony, “I'm not. Well, I am, why else do you say thank you? But I really am grateful. Or something. I've never really done this before,” he admits, and scratches the back of his head.

“The world hasn't given you much to be grateful for,” says Steve, and he sounds more bitter about it than he meant to.

Tony shrugs one shoulder, and matches it with a mouth shrug. “Those are the cards I was dealt,” he says, resigned.

“I thought you cheated at poker.”

“How do you think I got as far as I did?” Tony laughs.

Steve has to nod. “I suppose you're right. Also, you don't have to thank me.”

“Sure I do,” says Tony, and he's in a much better humour than he was at the start of the conversation.

“No, you don't. I did it for you, not for me.” Then Steve gets up and walks out of the kitchen, Tony staring after him with a dumbfounded look on his face.

“I have something to show you,” Tony says, walking into the kitchen where the rest of the team is gathered, eating lunch. “Don't ask questions, just come. We can eat later.”

Clint grumbles, but everyone follows Tony anyways, because he's been out of sight a lot lately, but not in his workshop, and the entire team wants to know what's occupied so much of Tony's time and attention.

He leads then out of the Tower and they pile into a car, everyone but Thor watching Tony curiously. Thor is staring out the window, watching the city pass by as is his habit. Tony is smiling in the pleased way he gets when he's succeeded in a venture or invented something usefull.

Tony's driver, Happy, takes them through the city, into downtown Manhattan, and stops in front of a huge mansion that filled much of a city block. Its yard sprawls, beautifully landscaped, or what of it that is visible through the gate was. The high wall that rings the estate was built of pale stone, and the house itself was painted in a dark colour.

The Avengers pile out of the car after Tony, everyone wondering what on earth of going on, and then Tony turns to them and spreads him arms. “Welcome,” he says, “the the Stark ancestral home. Recently renovated by yours truly for use as Avengers HQ. And as a home for all of you- all of us.”

Steve gaped, not even paying attention to the others' reactions. This was... unbelievable. Amazing. That Tony had gone to such lengths for them... Tony is looking a bit nervous now, fidgeting. “So,” he says, “is this... okay? I mean, I know that some of you have homes or apartments or tiny rooms in the SHEILD housing block, or whatever, but I thought that it would be nice for you all to have a proper home, and-”

“This is amazing, Tony,” Steve says. “Amazing. Fabulous. I don't know what to say.”
“Thank you,” says Bruce, and he sounds reverent. “This is better even than the Tower. A real place for us to have just for us.”

Natasha and Clint are nodding their agreement, and Thor is beaming at Tony. “My gratitude!” he booms. “This is a wonderful thing you have done for us, Tony!”

Now reassured that the Avengers aren't going to rebuff his gift, Tony grins. “Anything for you guys. You helped me find my place, I thought it was only fair if I offered you a place of your own too.”

Both Clint and Natasha are still staring blankly at the building, as if they don't know what to think. It occurs to Steve that neither of them has had a true home in the past, and recently all either of them has had is SHEILD, which isn't much for home and family. Then, in unison, they both turn to Tony and say, “Thank you.” Steve is not sure either has ever sounded more sincere in their lives.

“No problem,” Tony laughs. “You guys ready to go inside?”

Everyone nods, and Tony goes to tap a code into the gate. It swings open and he ushers everyone inside. The group goes ahead, walking up the path to the door, taking in the lawn around them, and then the first rooms of the house as they enter.

Steve lags behind, Tony beside him. Before he enters, he turns to Tony and pulls him into a tight hug. “You don't know what this means to me,” he says. It means safety, and shelter from an unfamiliar world, and his friends, no, his family all around him.

“I think I do,” says Tony. “You showed me the same thing, after all.”

And maybe that's right. Maybe, before the Avengers, Tony had never known what it's like to have a home either. “I'm glad I met you, Tony Stark,” Steve says, and he means it.

Tony smiles softly at him. “I'm glad I met you too, Steve Rogers. Now let's go inside, I want to be there when Clint and Natasha find the shooting range in the back. Oh, and Bruce, I want to see his face when he finds the lab, and-” Tony walks into the building, still chattering, Steve following him with a fond smile on his face.

This is my life, Steve thinks. This is my home, and my family. Mine. It's the best thought he's ever had.

End Notes

Comments and kudos are welcome as always!

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