e quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle

by avienexjel

Summary

translation: "and so we came forth, and once again beheld the stars." - william styron

Tony is seventeen on the last day he sees his family.

Notes

au in which all the avengers - excluding tony - are (technically) dead, and they are assigned to watch over their kid until he reaches adulthood.

kotenok: russian for "kitten"

See the end of the work for more notes.

By the time they come, Tony's fallen asleep.
He lies relaxed on the blanket where it's stretched out over the earth, his pants rolled up to his ankles, the flashlight still on and casting small glimmers of light over the water. The sun, flushed and hot and red-orange, hasn't quite receded, clinging onto the bare dark edge of the horizon.

He doesn't awaken until Clint crouches next to him, trademark grin on his face, and shakes his shoulder. "Tony. Hey, kid. Wake up."

Tony flails an arm out and finally sits up, mouth thick and sour. "Was enjoying my nap," he mumbles, drawing his legs up to his chest. "No thanks to you."

"Yeah, okay," Clint says, and settles down next to him, alongside all of his other friends. Natasha, slender and pale, extends her bare legs into the water. "Bring any snacks?"

Tony always brings them snacks, no matter what. It wasn't until recently that he started bringing them to the lakefront, where they would be able to see the sunsets and sunrises better, but the snacks have been a tradition since he was five. "Of course," he says, ducking his head to hide a wavering grin. "Always."

No one seems to notice his apprehension. As soon as he reveals the basket he's got behind him, Clint and Thor are diving for the candies and chips. Bruce takes a soda to share with Natasha after giving Tony the expected sheepish smile, and Steve sits back like he still can't believe Tony's got so much food to give them. (Steve had grown up during the Great Depression. Not to mention, his family had been poor even before it.)

Clint unwraps a strawberry sour rolled belt and puts the end of it in his mouth, sucking the sugar off contentedly. "Say, Tones, it's your birthday soon, isn't it?"

Tony freezes, fingers clenching around the hem of his sweatshirt, but he manages to keep himself composed. "Yeah. Soon. Yeah."

"When is it?" Clint says absentmindedly. It comes out garbled, his mouth still wrapped around the strawberry belt.

"I think what Clint means to say," Steve says with an exasperated but fond quirk of the mouth, "is that when we're not here, we lose track of time. It doesn't pass the way it does here on Earth."

"Oh, it's not for another, uh, four months." Tony swallows down the sudden stickiness in his throat. It's not like him to lie - or, at least, he'd like to pretend he's not his father, and Howard certainly has no qualms about lying. But lying's better than the truth, sometimes.

Night is flooding the sky. He fingers the flashlight, angling it towards the basket of food and away from the water.

"Good," Bruce says softly. Tony's noticed over the years that he's grown to know Bruce that the physicist is very soft-spoken. He gives Tony a brief, but warm smile. "That means we see you two more times before we've got to leave."

Tony knots his hands into the fabric of his sweatshirt. He doesn't want to think about it - about them leaving, about them never coming back. Jarvis and Ana left him, once. He isn't sure he can bear more people going away again.

"Tony." Natasha is watching him. For all the things she's told him about her past as a Soviet spy during the Cold War, her eyes are gentle and warm green when she looks at him. "Do not be afraid, kotenok. You will be eighteen soon. An adult. We appeared to you to protect your heart, from your father. But once you are grown, you will no longer need our protection."
Tony is seventeen and his birthday is tomorrow and the warm air is stifling him. He feels five again, five and scared of these adults appearing to him one night after his father's drunk too much again, five and confused. Five and small and alone.

"It's not going to be easy," Steve adds in kindly. "For us, either. You mean as much to us as we hope we do to you. But you're strong, Tony. It might not seem like it now, but you won't need us around."

Need and want. Two very different things, and yet, not separated by much. Thor hands him a sour straw, suddenly somber, his big hands clasping Tony's.

"My birthday's tomorrow." There. He's said it. In a dry, cracked whisper, but it's out there nonetheless. He feels the heat behind his eyes, the swollen insides of his throat, the sudden quiet. The kind of quiet that happens inside people, not just by the closing off of sound. "I'm sorry, I didn't - I couldn't - I - "

"No, no, it's okay," Clint says soothingly, coming to the rescue. His hand - the one that isn't sticky with spit and sugar - comes up to rub Tony's back in circles. "No one here is blaming you. Hell, I'd probably be in a ball crying right now. But I'm glad you told us. So we can have a proper goodbye."

"No goodbyes," Tony whispers. Jesus Christ, he's acting like a baby, for God's sake he's rich and smart and old and he can't even keep himself together long enough to behave properly in front of his family. Family - a word that has never belonged to the Starks, a word that has tried to edge between himself and Howard countless times only to be flung aside by fathers drinking and fathers crying and fathers hitting their sons because they see themselves in their children and they can't bear it, they can't bear to look at their own faces. But these people - Clint, Natasha, Steve, Thor, Bruce - they are family. Aren't they?

But family always leaves.

And that's true too, isn't it? Jarvis and Ana, they were his family, they left. Howard and Maria, they had separated themselves from their son before he was even fully out of the womb. He's got nothing, nobody, just some mean kids at school and ghosts who've made big mistakes assigned to take care of him. Nobody's ever really chosen him for who he is.

"What's wrong, kotenok?" Natasha says, gaze discerning. Her hair is so red, as red as the sun before it tipped beneath the earth. "There is something else, that is bothering you."

Tony shifts. Clint's hand doesn't pause in its circles over his shoulder blades. "Do you guys...," he begins, voice small. "Actually, you know. Like me?"

"Of course!" Thor exclaims abruptly, his tone shocked. Bruce shhs him, eyes concerned behind his spectacles.

"Why would you think to ask that, Tony?"

"You guys said that you're just people who died and have unfinished business left on Earth." There's a thread coming loose on the hem of Tony's sweatshirt. He picks at it, like he'd pluck at a violin string. "Because you made mistakes, but those mistakes weren't exactly your fault, and so you guys get a second chance." Pluck. Pluck. Pluck. "And I'm your second chance, right? You help me and keep me from offing myself or whatever till I become an adult, and then you can leave. Aren't I just - an assignment, to you?"
"Absolutely not," Thor says, quieter but with the same amount of conviction. "We may have been assigned to you, Tony Stark, but we have grown to care for you and cherish you over the years. Were I to be allowed a redoing of my actions on Earth so that I would bypass this stage of death and move on, I would not. I was an arrogant fool when I was alive, and I have inadvertently caused harm to my scorned and bitter brother, but you would be a better man than I ever could be."

Tony breathes out, and in. It is too dark now to see anything beyond the shine of his flashlight, but he can sense - somehow - the presence of each and every one of the adults surrounding him. His heart susurrates in his chest, as subdued as the faint sound of water lapping up against the shore.

"You think we won't miss you?" Clint says, into the blackness of the night. He isn't looking at Tony but up, at the stars, frosted above him like powder. Something interesting, about the stars - they don't appear, really appear, unless you look hard enough. Beautiful, in the essence of it all, but so very escapable. "You think we wouldn't miss the kid who's given us the ability to laugh again? You think we wouldn't miss the kid who's shown us the kind of love we couldn't get on Earth since he was five?"

"You think," Steve says softly, voice as wretched as if it were torn down to the very roots of himself, "we wouldn't miss you, Tony? Because we would, and we will, and you are one of the best things that's ever happened to us, dead or not."

Tony trembles, hot and cold and everything at once like a star.

"I have never told you this, kotenok," Natasha murmurs, "but when I was a spy, I was not allowed to bear children. I am physically unable to. And after awhile, I accepted this, and I convinced myself that I would never want a child." She looks up now, and her green eyes seem to shine. "You are the closest thing I have ever had to a son. Tony, do you really think a Soviet spy, a nuclear physicist, a failed World War Two experiment, a circus performer, or a Norwegian prince would have enough patience to act under the pretense of liking you for thirteen years if we did not?"

"But treating me nicely is your freedom," Tony says softly. "It's how you'll be able to leave - to leave here. For good."

"Oh, my God, you are the most ridiculous person I have ever met," Clint groans, throwing his hands up in the air before lunging forward to wrap Tony in a tight hug. "We love you, you idiot. We aren't leaving because we want to. It's because we know you can take care of yourself, and as much as it'll suck to not be able to talk to you twice a month and check up on you, I'm sure God or whatever divine being is up there will let us see you. So we aren't leaving, not really. We'll always be here. You just might not be able to see us."

"Sounds like a load of horseshit," Tony grumbles into Clint's shoulder as everyone else crawls over to hug him too. Clint just laughs, long and loud, bright in the darkness of the night.

"Okay, kotenok," Natasha whispers after a long while of them all hugging and cuddling and staring up at the stars. "Just go to sleep, alright?"

Tony bites his lip, wills away the burning behind his closed eyelids. "You won't be there when I wake up," he says, quiet.

"No," Natasha agrees, never one for avoiding things. "I won't be. And neither will they. But that doesn't mean we don't love you. That doesn't mean we aren't watching you, that we won't want to be there for you when you're having a hard time."
"Remember when I first met you guys?" His mouth is tired now, slippery and silver and tired. He can feel the sifted earth at his fingertips, just beyond the threaded edge of the blanket. "When Dad was...when Dad was..." He can still feel it - the hard backhand across his cheekbone, the slurs, the heavy dark sweep of an arm across a table. The kind of pain that eventually hollows you out and doesn't fill you back up, the kind that pulls on you and makes you think of knotting your hands into the wet soil at the bottom of the lake and staying there, forever and ever, and ever...

"I remember." Natasha finds his hand, between an apple and an opened bag of chips. "You needed us then."

"But not anymore?"

He knows, somehow, that she is shaking her head. "Not anymore."

A silence drifts in, and Tony's insides quiet. He watches the star above his head blink in, and out, as stars are wont to do. He wonders if they were like that - so fickle, so distant - before all the smog and pollution and waste. Maybe it was prettier, then. Like paint splattered across a dark canvas, or rain falling on the surface of windshields, glittering like bits of eggshell under the streetlights.

"Go to sleep." Natasha's hand is cool as it smooths his hair back from his forehead. "You will be okay, Tony."

"You can't promise that." The darkness is taking him in now, and his mouth isn't working quite right. "You can't."

"I know." Natasha is so very gentle, and for a fleeting moment, the thought that she would've been a wonderful mother crosses Tony's mind. "I know."

When Tony wakes up again, he is alone. It is almost as if no one has ever been here beside him, except for the occasional bit of evidence - a half-eaten apple made by a mouth too large to have been his, a soda can with a smear of lipstick.

It's still grey outside; he hasn't missed the sunrise, not yet.

He shovels all the wrappers, the trash, the candies back into the basket he'd brought with him yesterday evening. Something sticky and webbed and bruised tangles briefly inside him, and for a moment, he is afraid - afraid that it will envelop him, will choke him, will form a knot so large that he can't cough it out. But then he remembers hearing a voice from the night before, a voice saying, You will be okay, Tony.

The sun appears at the edge of the horizon, a golden point, as yellow as a Norwegian prince's hair. He's eighteen today.

Tony gathers his blanket and basket in his arms. He looks out at the lake one last time before walking away.
tbh, idk what i just wrote. it's pretty unpolished and i'll probably improve it later haha

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