Hitching a Ride

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Summary

Tony and Nebula, at the end of the universe.

Notes

The ending of Infinity War left me with a lot of feelings, but the number one feeling was, "I should write a 10,000 word fic about what the hell Tony and Nebula do now!" Even though it's been six years since I've written MCU fic and this is the strangest pairing in a long history of very strange pairings I have loved.

Anyway, this is even less beta-ed than usual, but I hope you enjoy. Songs for this fic are "Clone" by Metric and "Just Like Honey" by The Jesus and Mary Chain.

The Guardians’ ship was destroyed.

“I have a pod,” Nebula said. “It can get us both to the next habitable planet.”

Stark kicked the scrap one last time, and it came off completely, dropping to the ground and immediately disappearing among other wreckage. “I’m not going to the next habitable planet. I’m going to Earth.”

Nebula turned and headed toward her pod. She didn’t bother checking whether Stark was following, but she heard his footsteps behind her.

“That’s your business,” she said. “You can find transportation on Alpha Centauri. Or wherever I stop to refuel.”

“You know what?” Stark sped past her and spun around, planting himself in her path. “No. I commandeered a spaceship, I fought the giant purple asshole who tried to conquer my planet, I got stabbed, I… I…”

Nebula knew what came next, which was good because it seemed that Stark couldn’t bring himself to say it. He collapsed to the ground, leaning against a bit of rubble from Titan’s moon.

“I want to go home,” Stark said. He sounded like Gamora, the day she and Nebula met.

Probably, Nebula shouldn’t have said what Thanos had said on that day. Probably, she should’ve tried for better words. But those were the only words she had.

“I know,” she said.

Stark shook his head and seemed to gain back some strength from that invisible place where people like him and Gamora kept it. “You want to go home too, I guess.”

“I don’t have a home.”

“Then why not take me to Earth?”

“Because Thanos won’t be on Earth.”

Stark laughed. “Revenge? That’s what you’re after?”

“Aren’t you?”

“I’m an Avenger,” Stark said wryly, as if that meant anything to Nebula. He saw her blank expression and looked away into the distance. He seemed to be staring at something, but there was nothing there to see. “There’s a woman. On Earth. Pepper. I need to know if she… Before anything else, I need to know. Don’t you have anyone?”

Nebula blinked, first her right eye and then, a fraction of a second later, the left. The prosthetics did that, sometimes.

“Not anymore,” she said.

Stark breathed in. Breathed out. Stood up.

“Just take me somewhere I can hitch a ride.”

#

Nebula’s pod was tiny. A pilot’s seat, a copilot’s seat, a console, and along the back wall, a long box
with a padded top that looked like a combination storage chest/bunk. Tony had owned bathrooms larger than this pod. Actually, Tony wasn’t sure he’d ever owned a bathroom \textit{smaller} than it. He guessed that was why it was a “pod” and not a “spaceship.”

“There are rations in the hatch over there,” Nebula said, dropping into the pilot’s seat. “Try to make them last.”

“How far \textit{is} it to the nearest planet? The big… wheel ship made it here in no time.”

“This pod is an escape hatch. It was set up for a single one-way FTL jump. Now that that’s used up, it’s going to be a little slower.”

“Not to be a cliche, but that wasn’t an answer.”

Nebula sighed and looked pointedly away, and for a moment she looked just like a Natasha. Tony hoped Natasha was alive.

“We’ll be there in about eight days,” Nebula said. “There are about four days’ worth of rations. So if you feel more than half full, stop eating.”

Eight \textit{days}? Tony had occasionally been accused of being a little overdramatic, but he was pretty sure he’d die if he had to wait a week to find out whether… to find out. “I don’t suppose your days are \textit{way}, \textit{way} shorter than Earth days?”

“We’ll get there when we get there. Sit down, I’m about to take off.”

Tony bit back the urge to stamp his foot like a child. Then he thought, it’s the end of the universe, what the hell? And stamped it anyway.

“What?” Nebula said.

“Nothing.” Tony sank into the copilot’s seat and buckled himself in. The pod took off a moment later, bumpy and bumpy and then smooth, the moment they left the atmosphere.

The front of the pod was made up of a plate of something that looked like glass, but probably wasn’t. On Titan, there hadn’t been much of a view, but now that they were in flight, it made it feel as though they were constantly about to fall upward into the stars. Tony stared out as long as he could, playing chicken with himself. There was nothing to fear out there. Not anymore.

He stared until he felt nauseous, and then he turned his gaze inward. Not a great idea to throw up in a closed, bathroom-sized pod. Or with a recent stab wound.

“I think I’m in shock,” he said.

“Don’t throw up,” Nebula said.

#

After Stark drank some water and passed out on the bunk, Nebula sat awake for a long, long time.

Thanos would not be on Earth. He wouldn’t be on Knowhere, or Xandar. He wouldn’t be on his ship — it was a war ship, and Thanos no longer believed himself to be at war. He wouldn’t return to the site of any of his crimes. There was a long, long list of places Thanos wasn’t.

But Nebula needed to know where he \textit{was}. 
She thought back to her childhood. Every interaction she’d ever had with Thanos — every brutal lesson, every dismissive look, every time he’d calmly carried her to the surgical bay as she screamed and begged — she combed through them all. But Thanos had never mentioned a destination for after his goals were achieved. Maybe he’d told Gamora. If he’d told anyone, it would have been Gamora. But if so, that knowledge had died with her.

Nebula had a contact on Alpha Centauri. Well. Nebula hoped she still had a contact on Alpha Centauri. Samaya was a former smuggler, now “entrepreneur,” meaning she was the boss of a lot of other smugglers. Her network extended far. If Thanos had made an appearance, she might have heard about it.

Or she might not, with half her employees gone.

An indicator flashed on the console. An asteroid had wandered into the pod’s path, about a light-year ahead. Nebula toggled the directional switch, setting the pod onto a slight curve to avoid the obstacle.

“What are you doing?”

It had been a lifetime since Nebula had been a person who jumped at sudden noises. She slowly and deliberately swiveled around in her chair. Stark was sitting up, bleary-eyed, his hips still buckled to the bunk.

“I’m keeping us from crashing and dying.”

Stark unbuckled himself and stood up. “Teach me.”

“No.”

“You’re gonna need a break eventually.”

“No, I won’t.”

“You’re gonna need to sleep.” Stark cocked his head, considering. “Do you need to sleep?”

“Not much.”

Stark popped open storage hatch under the bunk and started rummaging through it.

“What are you doing?” Nebula said.

“I don’t suppose you have any books on board?”

Nebula stared at him.

“A magazine?” Stark continued. “Sky Mall?”

Nebula kept staring at him.

“I’m bored,” Stark said. “I need something to do. Give me something to do.”

His fingers were twitching, drumming against the edge of the hatch. No wonder Stark needed so much sleep; he never sat still when he was awake. Nebula weighed the annoyance of hearing him poke at every button and latch in the pod against the annoyance of teaching a Terran to use basic technology.

Damn it.
“Come here,” she said.

Stark hurried over and sat beside her, leaning immediately over the console.

“Don’t touch anything until I say so.”

“Yes, m’am.”

In less than a quarter of a day, Nebula had taught him the basics. It turned out that Stark was not as hopeless with technology as most Terrans. When she told him that, he laughed. For a very long time.

Tony had been starting to think he’d never be hungry again, but his appetite kicked in on day three, as the last of the shock wore off. He pulled a bag of dried fruit — bright blue, stringy, and strangely salty? — from the rations.

“You don’t sleep,” he said to Nebula. “Do you eat?”

Nebula was staring out at the stars. She hadn’t moved from the pilot’s seat since they’d taken off — unless she’d secretly been doing yoga while Tony was asleep. Tony wondered if her cybernetic enhancements allowed her to stay still without discomfort. He wondered a lot of things about her enhancements, actually. They were gorgeous, fascinating things. Totally unlike any technology he’d encountered on Earth. Pretty soon, he was gonna break down and ask her about them.

“Hey, Smurfette,” he said, dangling the fruit in front of Nebula’s face. “Food? Do you eat it?”

Nebula broke out of her stillness with the sudden energy of a pouncing cat, snatched the fruit from Tony’s hand, and bit into it violently. She spat a few seeds at Tony’s feet.

“I guess so,” Tony said. He tucked himself cross-legged into the copilot’s seat. It made his back ache and his hips ache and the closing wound in his side ache, but he didn’t readjust. Sometimes things ached, and it was either live with them or admit you were old.

“I’m old,” Tony said. “I mean, not like old old, I’m not joining the AARP any time soon. I mean, I’m eligible, but I’m not joining. I’m not retired. You could even say I’m the opposite of retired. Pepper…”

Tony swallowed. Nebula glanced at him out of the side of her eye.

“Do you think I could take the wheel for a while?” He could use — he needed — a distraction. He’d never needed a distraction so badly in his life.

“No,” Nebula said.

Tony sobbed. He hadn’t been expecting to, he didn’t want to, and yet, it was happening. He sobbed again. Then he sobbed for a long time. It was not manly. It was not attractive. There was no involvement. He pulled his knees up to his chest and buried his face in them.

When he looked up, Nebula was not in the pilot’s seat. Tony turned around. She was sitting on the bunk, staring at him dispassionately.

“Take the wheel,” she said.
On day six, Nebula slept. She didn’t need to, but she wanted to, and Stark was not a threat. She dreamed of Gamora, and woke up gasping.

“Bad dreams?” Stark asked. He was sitting in the pilot’s seat, swiveled halfway around, with his feet kicked up against the wall.

“None of your business.” She unbuckled herself, but didn’t sit up. Stark could handle the console, and she wanted to sit in her dream for a moment longer. Gamora, young and carefree, as Nebula had never known her.

Nebula was not Stark. She would not cry.

“This Gamora,” Stark said. “I never… Uh, obviously I never met her, but she sounded really—”

“Don’t.”


Nebula couldn’t effectively glare at Stark from this position, so she sat up. Stark didn’t seem bothered.

“How do you plan on killing him?” Stark asked.

“With my bare hands,” Nebula said, and meant it.

“I’m gonna give that an A for effort and an F for execution. So I guess that’s a C, which isn’t so bad overall, but maybe you should still go with a different plan.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Of course, Nebula had no idea what Stark was talking about half the time.

“You, me, a wizard, and an actual god couldn’t take down Thanos when he only had four stones. What’s your plan for killing him with all six?”

“I’ll figure it out.”

“You’ll die.”

Nebula just stared at him. Dying was the second-best outcome. Stark knew that. He was a Terran, but he wasn’t an idiot.

Stark looked away first. “If that’s what you’ve gotta do.”

“You flew halfway across the galaxy to stop him. With no plan.”

“Yeah. To stop him.” Stark dropped his feet to the floor and leaned back in the chair. “There’s no stopping him now. He’s already been not stopped.”

“He can still be killed.”

“Revenge, yeah. You mentioned.”

“Don’t tell me you’re a pacifist,” Nebula said.

“Used to be,” Stark said. “I was a weapons dealer, then I was a pacifist, then I was a futurist. Now I’m just tired.”
“We can make Thanos pay for what he’s done. To Gamora. To her friends. To your friend, Pet—”

“Don’t.”

Stark stood up. He walked over to the bunk, and Nebula rose, preparing for a fight. But there was no fight in Stark.

“I’m tired,” he said. “You take the wheel.”

So she did.

#

It was obvious from the moment they entered Alpha Centauri’s atmosphere that Tony would not be hitching a ride there. The planet was in chaos. Tony could see that it had been impressive — eight days ago, it would’ve been a vacation destination, probably. The undamaged buildings swept upward in graceful arcs. A vast network of bridges spanned the water around the cities, so many of them that it looked like a fisher’s net from space — but a fisher’s net in desperate need of mending. Many of the bridges had collapsed.

And the cities were on fire.

“What happened?” Nebula said, staring wide-eyed out the pod’s window. It was the most emotion Tony had ever heard from her.

Tony knew exactly what had happened. He’d had plenty of time to think about it, for the last week.

“Half the people disappeared,” he said.

“So?”

“So Alpha Centauri, does it have airplanes? Hovercraft, whatever?”

“Of course.”

“What about ground vehicles?”

“Yeah.”

“Manned?”

Tony saw the penny drop.

“Oh.” Nebula’s eyes narrowed to their normal size. She shifted the descent lever, and the pod drifted downward.

Even though it was a hopelessly lost cause, they did look for a ship for Tony. They checked out what Nebula claimed had been a government shipyard, but was now a burning field of twisted metal. There seemed to have been an explosion. Then they made a tour of private landing pads. No dice. There didn’t seem to be a functional ship anywhere on the planet.

Finally, they touched down just outside city whose name Tony didn’t bother to ask about, where Nebula’s smuggler contact lived. Tony followed Nebula through a field of red grass, over a small and crumbling bridge, and into what had clearly once been the business district. There were stalls with bright signs in an unfamiliar language, some of them collapsed, nearly all of them looted. None of them had people in them. Every once in a while, Tony thought he saw a flash of blue moving ahead, but the people always scurried out of a sight before he could get a good look.
It was good to stretch his legs again. It was weird that it could be good to stretch his legs again when he was wandering through another planet’s apocalypse, but it was. The universe had ended, but Tony was still here, and he had cramps.

Nebula led him down a side street paved with red stone, and knocked on a red door. These people liked red.

Nobody answered.

Nebula knocked again. Still no answer.

“Stand back,” Nebula said.

Tony rolled his eyes, but he stood back as Nebula — Jesus Christ, as she punched bare-fisted through the door. As the splinters of wood settled around him, he couldn’t help grinning. Those enhancements were something else.

“Come on,” Nebula said.

He followed her into a room that was half kitchen, half lounge, decorated exclusively in mirrored surfaces. There was a mirrored countertop in the kitchen area, a mirrored table dominating the center of the space, and sofas with semi-reflective cushions around the sides. And the pièce de résistance: The back wall was, itself, a single, gigantic, floor-to-ceiling mirror.

“This Samaya’s kind of a megalomaniac, huh?” Tony said, checking out his reflection in the wall mirror. He’d lost some weight, and not in a good way.

“It’s some sort of symbolic thing. I don’t know, I never asked.”

“Do you think she’s gone gone, or just gone?”

“I don’t know.” Nebula scanned the room. She stalked over to a mirrored desk in the corner and picked up a small, glass square — a nonreflective one. “Samaya’s log. She wouldn’t leave this behind.”

“So, gone gone.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry,” Tony said. “Were you guys friends?”

Nebula paused in the process of tapping at the glass square to give him an incredulous look. “I don’t have friends.”

“Right. Sounds very healthy.”

Nebula wasn’t paying attention. She’d succeeded in accessing Samaya’s log. The glass square projected long scrolls of holographic text into the air, where they were reflected on a dozen surfaces at once. Nebula flicked through them, muttering to herself.

“What are you looking at?” Tony asked.

“Reports from Samaya’s employees.”

“Anything useful?”
“Well, I know why we couldn’t find any ships. Everyone who had one working used it to get the hell off this planet. Mass exodus, after the disappearances.”

“Why?” Tony asked. “They think it’s better somewhere else? Every planet in the universe is in the same boat.”

Although if Thanos had truly been random, then the law of averages said that some planets had to have minimal losses. Maybe there was even one out there with no disappearances at all. Maybe…

“People are idiots,” Nebula said. “Let me focus.”

Tony wasted a few minutes looking at his face from every conceivable angle, and a few angles he’d never conceived of at all.

“What are you looking for, exactly?” he asked, when his boredom got the better of him. “A big red arrow labeled ‘Thanos?’”

“I’ll know it when I see it,” Nebula said. And then, not a moment later: “Ha!”

“What is it?”

“A planet in Beta Quadrant,” Nebula said. “According to Samaya’s employees, all the people have disappeared.”

“All of them?” Tony said.

“All of them.”

The law of averages, rearing its ugly head.

“And you think that’s where Thanos is?”

“It’s his style,” Nebula said. She tapped the log to turn it off, and slipped it into her pocket. “Let’s go.”

Nebula took the red-paved streets at a run, and Tony stumbled after her, wondering whether it would be worth it to deploy the suit and let it do the heavy lifting.

“Nebula,” he said, when he was caught up enough that he didn’t have to shout. “Nebula.”

She didn’t stop, and she didn’t say anything, but she did slow down. Tony fell in line beside her.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“Beta Quadrant.”

“You have to take me to Earth first.”

Nebula didn’t respond, just set her shoulders and kept moving. She had a look in her eyes that Tony had only ever seen before on the Winter Soldier’s face. No emotion, just purpose.

Did Tony hope that Bucky was still alive? He wasn’t sure. He hoped that Cap was. He’d give anything to talk to Cap right now.

“Nebula, please.”
“I’ll take you to Earth after Thanos.”

Tony stopped, grabbing Nebula’s hand to pull her back to join him. He realized after he took hold that it was her prosthetic hand. She broke his hold instantly, but she didn’t walk away.

“There is no ‘after Thanos,’” Tony said. “This is a suicide mission, and I can’t die. I can’t. I need to get home to Pepper. I’ve spent six years going after Thanos, but now that’s over, and I need to do what I said I would and come home.”

“Then find your own way,” Nebula turned around.

“If Gamora was still alive, would you be going to Thanos or her?”

Nebula spun on him and advanced, and for a second Tony thought that it was all pointless anyway, because she was going to kill him right here. She took him by the throat. Her grip was cold and very strong.

“Do not speak about my sister,” she said.

“If you really want to die,” Tony choked, “you can at least… help someone first.”

With her free hand, Nebula gestured to the empty, crumbling city streets around her. “This universe is beyond help.”

“But I’m not.”

Nebula released him. Tony immediately replaced her hand with his own, massaging his neck.

“Please,” he said. “Help me.”

After a moment’s consideration, Nebula started walking again. “Come on.”

“Where are we going?”

“Looting,” Nebula said. “It’s thirty days to Earth. We need water, food, and fuel. And booze. We need a lot of booze.”

#

“What is it,” Stark said, spinning around and around in the copilot’s seat, “with aliens and blue?”

Stark had assured Nebula that he could hold his liquor, and like an idiot, she’d believed him. Now here they were, not even half a bottle of Centauri rum down between them, and Stark was smashed.

Not Nebula, though. Nebula could hold her liquor.

“What’s wrong with blue?” Nebula started spinning the pilot’s seat to match Stark’s. It wasn’t bad, spinning.

“You’re blue, the Centaurians are blue — wait, you’re not Centaurian, are you?”

Nebula blew a raspberry.

“Right, you’re blue, Centaurians are blue, the, the, what are they called, the Kree are blue. I know you’re not a Kree. Space chicks are supposed to be green.”
“Gamora was green,” Nebula said.

“Was she? They never told me that.”

“Well, she was.” Why, she wondered, was she talking about Gamora?

“Tell me something else about her.”

“No,” Nebula said.

Stark rolled his eyes. The bastard.

“Why do you want to know about Gamora?”

“I dunno.” Stark shrugged. “I wanna know about almost everything. Hey, you know any drinking games?”

Nebula started spinning the other way. “Drinking games are stupid.”

“You’re right. Nothing more pathetic than a couple grown adults playing Never Have I Ever,” Stark said agreeably. “Let’s play Truth or Dare.”

“What’s that?” Nebula asked.

Stark told her. She blew another raspberry.

“You know what’s bullshit?” Stark said.

“What?”

“He didn’t kill 50 percent.”

“I’m pretty sure he did,” Nebula said. She was thirsty. Where had they put the water?

“Hear me out, though. At any given time, there’s about 5,000 commercial airplanes flying over the US. Do you know what the US is?”

“A stupid place that makes Star-Lords.” Nebula tripped past the pyramid of alcohol they’d made in the corner and fumbled open the rations hatch. There was the water.

“Among other, better people,” Stark said. “Each commercial airplane has a pilot and a copilot, so when Thanos snaps his fingers, a quarter of those planes is left with no one at the wheel. That’s 1,250 planes, times 150 passengers, divided by two to take care of the disappeared people, so just in the US, just from airplanes, that’s an extra 94,000 people who died. Assuming none of the airplanes landed on anyone.”

Nebula pulled a long draught from the water canteen and tossed it to Stark. He fumbled it, then caught it again.

“On Aramis,” she said, “all the public transportation is by submarine. Without a pilot they’ll never come up for air. All those people probably suffocated.”

Stark guzzled water, spilling some down his shirt. “How many?” he asked.

“I don’t know the numbers.”
“You know, for a methodical, genocidal madman, your dad was kinda sloppy.”

Something occurred to Nebula. She laughed.

“Really?” Stark said. He was pouting. “That gets a laugh? After all this time, it’s that?”

“Not what you said.” Nebula was still laughing. “I just thought — somewhere out there, someone was about to be murdered, and the murderer just disappeared.”

After a moment, Stark laughed too. “That bastard. He did it. He saved a life.”

#

Tony was still nursing a hangover when the distress call came.

“Attention all passing craft. We are survivors of the destruction of Xandar. Our ship engineers are… they’re… Our ship engineers are gone. We are in desperate need of aid.”

He and Nebula looked at each other.

“No,” Nebula said. “Not for Xandar.”

“Is Xandar evil?” Tony hoped Xandar was evil. Then he could ignore their distress call and keep going to Earth.

“They’re not evil. They’re just the worst.”

“So’s General Ross, but I’d still save his life.” Tony grimaced. “How far off course would it take us?”

Nebula tapped at the console. “Three days.”

Three days was nothing against the Xandarian lives. Tony knew that. He did. And he almost cared. He remembered very clearly the version of himself that would have cared.

“How old is the message?” he asked.

Another series of taps. “Also three days.”

They were probably already dead, then, right?

“They’re probably already dead,” Nebula said.

And really, what could Tony and Nebula do, in their tiny pod, with their minimal resources?

“There’s nothing we can do for them,” Nebula said.

Tony sighed. “I am, technically, an engineer.”

“It’s Xandar,” Nebula said, annoyed. Then the console blipped. An obstruction warning. Nebula looked up and said, in an entirely different tone of voice, “It’s Xandar.”

Tony followed her gaze out the windshield. In the two weeks he’d spent on the pod, he’d gotten used to constantly seeing stars out of one half of his vision.

He wasn’t seeing stars now. He was seeing wreckage. Fragments of a ship — large enough that he could see that its design must have been clean and elegant, small enough that he had no idea exactly
what the design was — and fragments of people. Pink-skinned people, but still clearly people.

“They must have had a malfunction when their engineers disappeared,” he said. “Explosive, if the force blew them across our path.”

Indeed, the wreckage was still in motion. In the hard vacuum of space, it would stay in motion until it hit something.

Nebula toggled a switch, making sure that the pod would avoid the wreckage. “At least we don’t have to go off course, now.”

She was assuming that Tony would’ve decided to answer the distress call, in the end. She was probably right.

#

The booze helped, but Nebula was sick of Stark. She was sick of his smell, she was sick of his voice, she was sick of his constant need to move and talk and be doing something. Her only reprieve was the hours he spent asleep every day — although even then, he snored. As he was doing right now.

“Shut up,” she whispered, as he let out a particularly irritating snort. She took a swig of rum and checked the console. Twenty-three days to Earth. Twenty-three days until she could turn back the way she’d come and hunt Thanos down.

Stark snored again.

Or she could just turn back now. Who cared about Stark, anyway? He wasn’t her family. He was barely even an ally. He was just the guy she’d happened to be standing next to when Thanos snapped his fingers.

This was all Gamora’s stupid fault. All that talk about helping people. Nebula never used to care about helping people. She never used to care about anything.

The console beeped softly, announcing a transmission. Nebula groaned, hoping it wasn’t another distress call. She checked the console and breathed a sigh of relief. Not a call at all; just space noise. Random data from a random planet. A news broadcast about people she’d never heard of.

Then a name caught her eye.

“Stark,” she said. “Stark.”

Stark tried to shoot upright, but got caught by the buckles. “What?” he said, as he freed himself.

“We caught a transmission from Earth. It mentions you, I think.”

Stark was at the console before she’d even finished saying “Earth.” He hit the button to play the transmission.

Video played out translucently on the pod’s viewscreen, the stars half-visible behind it: Two boxes, a polished blond woman behind a desk in one, and in the other, an equally polished dark-haired woman, standing at a podium, addressing a small crowd. Below both, a chyron: “THE RAPTURE: RECOVERY EFFORTS CONTINUE.”

The blond woman spoke. “Power in New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, Seattle, and Houston is being provided by Stark Industries, which has existing energy contracts in those cities. Newly
appointed CEO Rumiko Fujikawa said earlier today that the corporation hopes to work with utility companies in other cities to expand coverage across the US.”

Stark collapsed. He landed in the chair, but Nebula thought that was luck, not design. On the viewscreen, the sound switched to the dark-haired woman. Stark watched, transfixed.

“We have all been hit by this tragedy,” the dark-haired woman said. “Virginia Potts always wanted Stark Industries to be a helping company — a vehicle for good in the world. Now, more than ever, we have to live up to that vision.”

The blond woman addressed the camera again. “Virginia Potts, the late CEO of Stark Industries—”

“Turn it off,” Stark said. His head was in his hands. “For god’s sake, turn it off!”

Nebula turned it off. “Did you know her? Virginia Potts?”


An emotion Nebula couldn’t quite name rolled through her. So Pepper was dead. Not surprising. As Stark himself had pointed out, the odds were better than even.

Pepper was dead. What happened now?

Nebula inched forward and very cautiously put a hand on Stark’s shoulder. The instant they touched, he stood up, throwing her hand off of him. He turned to the nearest wall and kicked it. Then he kicked it again. Then he tapped the glowing spot in his chest, releasing the blaster on his right hand.

“Hey!” Nebula stepped in front of him. “Are you trying to get us both killed?”

Stark breathed heavily for a moment, staring through her. Then he tapped the glowing spot again, returning his blaster to its invisible sheath.

“I’m ready,” he said. “Let’s go to Thanos.”

Nebula had half the coordinates punched into the console before her brain caught up with her fingers. Her brain, annoyingly, spoke in Gamora’s voice.

Don’t be an idiot.

“You’ve still got half a planet left,” Nebula said. “There’s nothing left you need to do? No one you need to see?”

“I said let’s go, you’ve been talking about this for two weeks, so let’s do it. I’m on board. Revenge, a dish best served right the fuck now.”

Nebula crossed her arms. “Not to be a cliche, but that wasn’t an answer.”

“Okay, I get it, that’s the thing I said before, but now you’re saying it to me. Very clever. Let’s go.”

Stark tried to dart around her to get to the console, but Nebula held him at bay with one hand. He was no match for her without his suit. She hoped he didn’t deploy his suit.

“Answer me!” she said.

“What was the question again?”
“Is there really nothing left for you to do on Earth?”

“There’s…” Stark backed away. “Fuck.”

“Right.”

“The kid’s aunt. If he still has… had… if she’s still around. She should know what happened to him. *Fuck!*”

“So it’s Earth,” Nebula said.

“Earth first. I’ll talk to May, then we’ll go get Thanos.” Stark kicked the wall again, then fell back onto the bunk.

He didn’t get up for three days.

#

“Get up, Stark.”

Tony cracked open one eye. Nebula was standing over him. Looming. Looming over him.

“I thought you liked it better when I was asleep.”

“Get up.”

“Why should I?”

Nebula crouched down and casually dangled a bottle of rum in front of Tony’s face. “I want to play a drinking game.”

Slowly, Tony pushed himself up. “What kind of drinking game?”

“You tell me something about Pepper, then I’ll tell you something about Gamora.”

“And how is that a drinking game?”

Nebula gave him something that would have been a grin on any other face. “While we do it, we’ll drink.”

Instead of the bunk or the pilots’ chairs, they sat cross-legged on the two feet of open floor that the pod had to offer. Sitting on the floor hurt — what else was new — but proper drinking games didn’t involve furniture. Each of them had their own bottle of rum. They were already sharing feelings; no need to complicate it by sharing alcohol.

“You start,” Nebula said.

Tony closed his eyes and thought of Pepper. Champagne, crisp white dresses, modern art. Eye rolls, polite insults, slim hands on his collar. Corporate ethics. Pepper and her goddamn ethics.

Out of all of that, he came up with, “Pepper had red hair. But she started dying it blonde a couple years ago. I didn’t like it, but she said she didn’t care if I liked it.”

He took a drink.

Nebula closed her eyes. She had great eyes, when they were open. “Gamora had purple hair,” she
said. She drank.

The part of Tony’s brain that never stopped making sarcastic quips wanted to say something about the purple/green color combination, but now wasn’t the time, and Nebula wouldn’t have understood his Barney reference anyway.

“Pepper went to UCLA.” Judging by Nebula’s look, she didn’t understand that reference, either. “A school. A university. Business administration. She got her MBA while she was working for me. She used to be my assistant.”

Tony drank.

“Gamora…” Nebula frowned. “She was a better fighter than me.”

Nebula drank.

“Pepper collected art. I mean, technically it was my collection, but she did all the actual collecting. I think I might have officially gifted it to her a while back. I’m not sure. She’d… she’d know.” Drink.

“Gamora collected losers.” Drink.

Tony laughed.

“Pepper made friends everywhere. I guess it’s technically called ‘networking,’ or whatever, but name a city, there were 12 people who lived there who owed her favors. How’d she even have time to get owed that many favors, that’s what I want to know. I’ve basically lived with her for 15 years, when was she meeting all these people?” Long, long drink.

Nebula matched his pace. She was halfway down her bottle already.

“I lived with Gamora for most of my life,” she said. “She was the only person in the universe who cared if I lived or died.”

Tony leaned forward. He thought maybe he saw tears starting to well in Nebula’s eyes, but it was hard to tell. He didn’t even know if Nebula could cry, physically.

“Pepper…” He wanted to say that the same was true of Pepper, that she was the only person who cared, but it wasn’t, was it? Even if it felt true sometimes, it wasn’t. Definitely not the way he suspected it was true for Nebula. He changed topics, in that way he did sometimes that surprised even himself. “You and Gamora. You guys were both raised by Thanos?”

“If you can call what he did ‘raising’ us.”

Tony was just drunk enough to ask, “What was that like?”

Nebula, apparently, was just drunk enough to answer, “Awful. Lonely. And then Gamora came, and it was still awful. But not as lonely.”

“Thanos… He what, he kidnapped you?”

“He killed my family and destroyed my planet. Just like he destroyed Gamora’s.”

“What planet are you from?”

Nebula looked quietly at Tony for a long time. “It was called Luphom,” she said. “After Thanos came, there was a civil war. It still exists, technically, but there’s not much there, now.”
If Tony’d been holding a can, instead of a bottle, he’d have crushed it with his grip. “Did he ever go back to the planets he ‘saved’? Or does he just assume everything was cool with half the people gone?”

“The successes. He ignored the failures.”

For a while after that, they didn’t talk, just drank.

Half a bottle later, Nebula said, “The boy on Titan. He wasn’t your son?”

As drunk as he was, it was still only the fact that Nebula had just answered a whole lot of really personal questions that stopped Tony from telling her to shut up. He closed his eyes. “No. Just a kid I knew.”

Nebula didn’t ask him out loud to tell her more about Peter, but she looked at him and raised her bottle. Right. This was a drinking game.

“I was teaching him,” Tony said. “To fight. To, I don’t know, to help people. He was a lot better at it than I was. Or he was going to be.”

He finished off his bottle.

“It should’ve been me,” he said, “you know? If one of us was going to die out here, it should’ve been me.”

“No,” Nebula said. “It should’ve been Thanos.”

Tony laughed, kind of. “Yeah. It should’ve been Thanos.”

The console beeped. Tony jumped, and Nebula swiftly turned her head in the way that was kind of her equivalent of jumping, but the beep was just a routine fuel update, not a transmission or a warning.

“One of us should probably be watching that,” Tony said. He tried to stand up, stumbled, and fell face-first onto the bunk.

Nebula laughed and lay down on the floor. After a moment, Tony laughed too.

If they’d happened across an asteroid field in that moment, they’d both have died. But they’d have died laughing.

#

After the drinking game, Nebula slept. When she woke up, Stark was at the console. But he wasn’t paying attention to it. He had a gauntlet in his hand, and he was adjusting it with a small tool.

She pulled the canteen from the rations hatch, drank some water, and sat down beside him. “You’re not hungover?”

“Still a little drunk.”

Nebula wondered if he should be working on his armor while he was drunk, but well, that was his business, wasn’t it?

“Where’d you get the tools?” she asked instead.
Stark nodded at a small, sleek metallic box lying open on the console. It contained an assortment of small tools — half of them neatly tucked away, half of them spilling out onto the console’s navigation display.

“I always carry a set with me,” he said. “Never know when you’ll need an on-the-spot fix.”

“Never do,” Nebula agreed, flexing her prosthetic fingers.

“I remember, right after I made the… it must have been the Mark IV, god… I was—”

“You made the armor?”

Stark looked up at her. Amused, Nebula thought. “What did you think, I found it on the street?”

“Or stole it.” She’d sort of assumed that it was an alien artefact he’d stumbled across. From her understanding, Earth was not a technologically advanced place. Although they had fought off Thanos — Thanos’ army, anyway — so they couldn’t be totally backwards.

“Nope, this is 100% StarkTech.” Stark held up the gauntlet and squinted at it.

“So you, what, you sell these?”

Stark dropped the tool he was using to clip the gauntlet’s wires. “God, no. It’s just for me. Well, me and a few very close friends.”

He paused in a way that Nebula had come to realize meant that he was wondering whether the person he’d just mentioned was alive.

“Can’t let just anyone get their hands on it,” he said, picking up the dropped tool and attacking the gauntlet’s innards with renewed vigor.

“What are you doing to it?” Nebula asked.

Stark smirked. “Trying to see if I can up the blaster power to Thanos-killing levels.”

Well, if that was the case, Nebula would let him get back to work. She spun to stare out the window.

“You know any songs?” Stark asked.

Nebula looked at him suspiciously. “Not really.”

“Too bad. Music helps me work.”

“Why don’t you sing, then?”

Stark quirked an eyebrow at her. “You wouldn’t mind?”

“If I don’t like it, I’ll just break your jaw.”

For a second, she could tell Stark believed her. Then he laughed. And started to sing.

#

“Never have I ever had a threesome,” Tony said, and took a sip from his bottle.

“Are these all going to be about sex?” Nebula asked.
“Most of them, yeah. That’s kind of how this game works. Does that mean you’re not drinking? Then it’s your turn.”

Nebula glared. Three weeks ago, that might’ve been intimidating. Now, Tony just laughed.

“Never have I ever…” Nebula trailed off. “Never have I ever killed someone.”

She drank.

“I just want it to be registered that you’re the one who took this to a dark place,” Tony said. He took a drink. And then another, for good measure.

“Your turn,” Nebula said.

The problem with this game was always thinking of something he hadn’t done. There were a couple of hard drugs he’d never tried, but Nebula wouldn’t even know what they were.

“Never have I ever stolen a spaceship.” Tony grinned.

Nebula did not laugh, but she did drink. She was still swallowing when she said, “Never have I ever been in love.”

Pepper. Tony rolled his eyes to distract himself from the pang in his chest. “You’re really bad at this game.”

“Are you going to drink?”

Tony drank, then wiped his chin. “Are you going to drink?”

Slowly, Nebula shook her head.

Tony weighed his choices. He could be flippant, or he could be sincere. In the end, he split the difference, and went with bitter.

“Well,” he said, “they say it’s better to have loved and lost, but I’m not sure I’m buying that right now. Maybe you were smart to stay single.”

“It’s not by choice,” Nebula said.

“Then why is it?”

Nebula looked at him like he was an idiot, which, to be fair, Nebula did about five times a day. Then she did something she did not do five times a day, and popped her left eye socket out of her skull.

If she was expecting a shocked reaction, she didn’t get it. Tony leaned forward, trying to get a better look. He thought he saw something that looked like a camera embedded in the metal plate, which would make sense for an eye socket. Was there a brain interface in there? Was—

Nebula popped the prosthetic back in.

“That’s why,” she said.

“The enhancements?” Tony asked. “But they’re cool.”

“They’re hideous!” Nebula pushed him backward, and he scrambled not to fall on his back. “They’re not like your armor! I didn’t choose them! Thanos cut me apart and replaced me, one body
part at a time!”

They weren’t enhancements, then. They were torture. Tony shook his head, stripped of speech by horror. He looked at Nebula’s eye, her arm, the crown of her head. Places where Thanos had strapped her down and cut her away. He shuddered.

“He was trying to improve me,” Nebula said. “But I used to be whole.”

Without thinking, Tony put his hand on the nanobot repository. In real life, he wouldn’t have shown this to anybody except Pepper. But here and now, it felt like the rules didn’t apply. He was drunk, the world was ending, and Nebula was the only living person he’d seen in three weeks. And he’d made her feel bad. So he needed to do something.

He unscrewed the nanobot repository.

“What are you doing?” Nebula said.

“Showing you something,” Tony said.

He removed the nanobots, and the armor lining, and the tank underneath, until finally, he was bare-chested, and Nebula could see it: the three-inch hole in his chest, lined with metal.

She leaned in, just like Tony had a minute earlier, inspecting the hole. “What is it?”

“Something I didn’t choose.”

Nebula inched even closer.

“I was held hostage,” Tony said. “Long story, doesn’t matter. Point is, when I was captured, there was an explosion, and I had about a thousand tiny pieces of shrapnel in my veins, trying to work their way into my heart. This—” he tapped the metal that had once housed the arc reactor “—is where they cut me open, scooped out some bone, and installed an electromagnet to keep the shrapnel in place.”

“Your captors,” Nebula said.

Tony nodded. “Up until a few years ago, the armor used to run off the same power source that was keeping me alive.”

Slowly, and then very fast, Nebula reached toward the arc reactor housing. She traced it with a finger.

Even in this drunk, not-real place, that felt strange. The only person other than Tony who’d ever put their hand there was Pepper. But Tony didn’t move away. He reached his own hand forward, and gently ran a thumb along the metal plate that made up Nebula’s left cheekbone and browline. It was warm, and softer than he’d thought it would be.

“Mine’s a gold-titanium alloy,” he said. “What’s yours?”

Nebula shook her head, not quite hard enough to dislodge Tony’s hand. “No idea.” She squinted at Tony’s chest. “Does it hurt?”

“Not anymore. Does yours?”

“Not most of the time.”
They were knee to knee, breathing each other’s air, feeling each other’s pulses through metal. Neither of them spoke. Then Nebula turned her head, just a little, and kissed Tony’s wrist.

His stomach dropped. His heart jumped. It wasn’t that this was totally out of nowhere — Tony knew a charged atmosphere when he was sitting in the middle of one, okay, and this one was on the verge of electrocuting him — but it was maybe the first time in his life he’d started a game of Never Have I Ever without trying to get laid.

“Do you want to see the rest of it?” Nebula asked.

This was a bad idea. This was a stupid, self-destructive idea, the kind Tony kept swearing off. But then, he wouldn’t have had to keep swearing off them if he didn’t also keep going back to them. And it was the end of the world, and Nebula was beautiful.

“Yeah,” he said. “I really do.”

#

The fourteen days that followed were the strangest of Nebula’s life. There was a routine: Stark slept, and she watched the console. Then Stark woke up, and he watched the console while Nebula ate and bathed. Then Nebula returned the favor. Then Stark worked on the armor and kept half an eye on the console, and Nebula planned attack after attack on Thanos and kept half an eye on the console. Then they drank, and fucked, and nobody paid any attention to the console at all.

And there was variation in the routine: Sometimes they fucked before they drank, and once they did it in the middle of the day. Sometimes Stark sang while he worked. Sometimes they told stories to pass the time.

It was domestic. The sort of thing people on Xandar must have done, before Thanos destroyed it. The sort of thing Nebula’s parents, her real parents, must have done before Thanos destroyed them, too. It was boring, and it was comforting, and it was fascinating, and it couldn’t last.

As they neared Earth, they started to pick up more transmissions. News broadcasts, mostly. Some text posts. Tony was able to verify that a few of his friends had survived. A woman named Natasha. A man named Steve.

On the fourteenth day, they reached their destination. Stark flipped the switch to take them into geostationary orbit. Stark’s planet — blue, green, brown, and white — dominated the viewscreen.

“Are you going to descend?” Nebula asked.

Stark swallowed, his eyes fixed to the viewscreen. “What if it’s like Alpha Centauri?”

“You’ve heard the news broadcasts. You know it’s not.”

“The news isn’t always incredibly trustworthy about this kind of thing.”

“The fact that there even is news already puts Earth one up on Alpha Centauri.”

“Yeah. Yeah.” Stark nodded in a way that Nebula knew meant he was psyching himself up. “You remember the plan?”

Nebula threw her head back and groaned. “Yes, Stark. I remember the plan.”

“Good.” Stark threw the descent lever, and they began to drop.
They landed, as planned, on a large, sweeping skyscraper — Stark’s own. Except for the color, it wouldn’t have looked out of place on Alpha Centauri. The streets around it looked a little like Alpha Centauri, too. Not because of the color or the design, but because of the damage. Ruined vehicles, burnt-out buildings, crumbling roads.

But unlike on Alpha Centauri, there were people. Not as many as Nebula thought the city was designed to hold, but some. Out in the streets, cleaning up rubble. Or just walking around.

She studied Stark’s face as he saw it. He looked like he was feeling something she never had.

The moment the pod stopped moving, Nebula threw the switch to open the doors. Stark stepped out first, and Nebula stayed behind him, because this was territory that Stark knew better than her, and that was the plan. So it wasn’t until she’d fully stepped out of the pod that she got her first unfiltered view of Earth.

They were on a landing pad, hundreds of feet above the ground. The air smelled like machinery. In between them and the entrance to the skyscraper were three armed men and one unarmed one.

“Boss?” said the unarmed man.

“Happy,” Stark said. Nebula couldn’t see his face, but his voice sounded… momentous. Broken, and relieved, and grieving, and overjoyed.

He stepped forward and threw his arms around the man, Happy. Happy hugged him back.

“We thought you’d disappeared on us, Boss.”

“I know.”

Happy looked up, then, and saw Nebula. He stepped back, alarmed; the men behind him raised their weapons.

“Oh, that’s Nebula,” said Stark, following their gazes. “She’s a friend.”

Nebula waved.

“Is she…”

“Yes, she’s an alien. That can’t possibly be surprising anymore, can it?”

“Well, no, but…” Happy glanced back at his men. “People aren’t really thrilled to see aliens, right now.”

“That’s why we should probably move this little reunion inside, don’t you think?”

“Right.” Happy nodded at the men. They retreated. Happy, Stark, and Nebula followed them inside.

The interior of Stark’s skyscraper looked kind of like a palace on The Sovereign, if the Sovereign had been obsessed with glass instead of gold. Floor-to-ceiling glass windows. Glass furniture. A whole lot of glass bottles, sitting on a bar in the corner. Nebula wandered over there and poured herself a little of something golden and astringent-smelling.

“Welcome home, Mr. Stark,” said a disembodied, slightly mechanical female voice. “You have 347 messages.”

“Save ‘em, Friday,” Stark said.
“Um, Boss…” Happy looked like he wanted to stop Nebula from drinking, but Stark didn’t seem bothered — he’d better not be, after drinking so much of the booze Nebula had stolen — so after a moment, Happy looked away. “Boss, I have to tell you… Pepper…”

“I know,” Stark said.

“How do you know? Where’ve you been?”

Stark pinched the bridge of his nose. “Those are really good questions, but right now I have a question for you, which is, is May Parker alive? Do you know?”

“Yeah, she called me when Peter didn’t… Boss, Peter Parker also…”

“I know that too,” Stark said. He was already heading for the door. “I need to go talk to May. I’m just going to change, I’ve been in these clothes for a month, and then I’ll be on my way. Is she at home, do you think?”

“Probably,” Happy said.

“Stark!” Nebula said.

Stark turned around.

“Do you want me to come with you?”

Stark’s face twisted in what Nebula thought was probably a good way, even though he looked pained. “Probably best you don’t. But thanks. For the offer. And, you know, for the ride. Make yourself at home.”

And then he was out the door, his shirt already half off.

Happy looked after him for a moment, then turned back to Nebula. He took in her appearance, starting at her head and working down past the metal arm to her worn out boots, then back up again. He seemed skeptical.

Funny. It had been nearly forty days since Nebula had seen another living person other than Stark. She’d forgotten what that skeptical glance looked like.

“Well, you heard the boss,” Happy said, reluctantly. “Make yourself at home.”

Nebula sat down on the pristine white sofa and kicked her feet up onto the glass table beside it. Happy twitched. Nebula smirked. She didn’t feel at all at home, but at least there was entertainment.

It was a long time before Stark returned. Nebula spent the time looking out the floor-to-ceiling windows at the streets below. There was a small group of people on the corner, patching up a large hole in the street. She watched as, throughout the day, the people moved around, and took breaks, and talked to each other, and the hole got smaller. She watched a small crowd of people limp into what seemed to be a makeshift hospital across the street. Some of them came back out, some of them didn’t. She watched a slow trickle of foot traffic, all day long.

When the sky was very dark out, Stark finally came back. He nodded at Happy, who had been watching Nebula watch the street all day long. The two of them had a short conversation at a low volume, and then Happy left.

Stark sat down next to Nebula and took her hand. The prosthetic one. They looked out the window
together for a while. Now, she felt at home.

“How did it go?” Nebula asked.


“What else did you do?” Because he’d been gone too long for one conversation, unless that conversation involved a foot chase and a lot of violence — which many of Nebula’s did, but she doubted that was the case here.

“Walked around. Listened to my messages. Got in touch with some people.”

They watched the street a while longer.

“I can’t go after Thanos,” Stark said.

“I know,” Nebula said.

“People are rebuilding, here, and I can help them. I need to help them.”

“I know,” Nebula said again. She’d known from the moment Stark said Happy’s name that he wasn’t coming with her.

From the corner of her eye, Nebula saw Stark turn to face her. “You could help too,” he said. “You could stay here.”

Nebula shook her head. “No, I can’t.”

“They’ll get over the alien thing. Happy was just surprised. And, you know, he’s a security guy, he’s suspicious of everyone.”

“It’s not because of that,” Nebula said. “And you know it.”

Stark sprang suddenly into motion, pulling her hand to his chest in a desperate grasp. “Don’t go after Thanos. Please.”

She yanked her hand away. “I have to.”

“I don’t want you to die,” Stark said. “Please, don’t die.”

Nebula met his eyes. He meant it. He wanted her to stay. And so, she realized, did she. She wanted to stay here — not on Earth, but alive. With Stark. She wanted to stay.

“I’ll try not to,” she said. “Really.”

#

Nebula stayed on Earth two more days. Long enough to take a real shower, eat a few meals that weren’t dried, and gather supplies for her trip to Beta Quadrant. Tony even got her down to the lab for a few hours so that he could inspect and upgrade some of her cybernetics.

“Not bad for a Terran,” she said, when she’d tested out her upgraded hand by using it to crush a chunk of quartz into dust.

“Well, I’m not as hopeless with technology as most of them,” Tony said.
This time, Nebula got the joke. She laughed, and used her newly strengthened grip to pull Tony in for a kiss.

When it was time for her to leave, Tony accompanied her out to the landing pad. They stood in front of the pod doors for an awkwardly long time, not speaking. Tony let himself hope that Nebula would look deeply into his eyes and change her mind about leaving.

“I have to go,” Nebula said.

Tony sighed. “I have something for you.”

Nebula cocked her head. “What?”

He pulled a slim nanobot dispenser from his pocket and handed it to her. She frowned at it, clearly perplexed.

“It’s armor,” he said. “I made it for Pepper originally, but she would never… Well, anyway, I tweaked it to fit you. It screws onto the plate on your chest.”

“And it works just like yours?”

“Yeah. Tap it twice to deploy. It’s pretty user-friendly after that. You should pick it up in no time.”

Nebula caught his eye for a long moment, then nodded. Tony thought — he hoped — that she understood what it meant, that he was giving this to her.

“I have something for you too,” she said.

She tossed him what looked like a small, glass square. It couldn’t be Samaya’s log, because Nebula would never have parted with that, but to the naked eye, it was identical. Tony tapped the glass, and it came alive with light.

“A computer?”

“A long-range communicator,” Nebula said. “As long as I’m inside the galaxy, you should be able to reach me with that.”

Tony was pretty sure he knew what it meant, that she was giving this to him.

“Thank you,” he said. “Not for the communicator — I mean, thank you for that, too, but thank you for bringing me back. And for… Well, you know. For everything.”

Nebula placed her hand on his chest, over the nanobot dispenser, and the hole where his arc reactor used to be. Tony reached out to cup the warm metal of her face.

“Try not to die,” he said.

“Call me,” she said.

They stood there until Nebula broke away. Tony watched her as she stepped onto the pod, until the doors closed behind her. He kept watching the pod as it took off, bumpy and bumpy and then smooth as it left the atmosphere.

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