Life, Love, Empire and Cake
by manic_intent

Summary

Peter Quill's mom had (as far as he remembered) always been a sweet, gentle and kindly soul. As such, he had grown up convinced that his father must have been, by way of cosmic balance, an asshole, and 100% a dick.

After all, Peter had to have inherited that particular character flaw from someone.

Notes

A/N: Wow. I did not expect any MCU movie to take the place of Iron Man 1 in my heart, but I think Guardians of the Galaxy easily smashed all my other fav MCU films out of the running. Even XMFC... :o And that was in a showing within which some parent had brought their squalling little spawn to the theatre, causing everyone else to miss pretty much the first bit of the film till past the jail scenes. Going to watch it again sometime. I hope.

I also left GotG not shipping anyone, which is strange for me... until I read a few Bendis GoTG issues (1-3...)

NOTE: FOR THOSE WHO HAVEN'T READ THE COMICS OR THE WIKI, MILD SPOILERS FOR PETER QUILL’S BACKGROUND STORY.
In the comics, the Spartax people are people-shaped, and presumably also reproduce like people (lol). In MCU, Nova Prime hinted that they were something far more mysterious. So I'm going to go with the MCU speculation while still retaining the comics Spartax empire. Set post-GotG and post Thor 2.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

Peter Quill's mom had (as far as he remembered) always been a sweet, gentle and kindly soul. As such, he had grown up convinced that his father must have been, by way of cosmic balance, an asshole, and 100% a dick.

After all, Peter had to have inherited that particular character flaw from someone.

This childhood theory is proved right when Peter lands in Xandar to refuel after a long haul trip spent investigating suspicious renegade Kree activity in rim space, and promptly gets arrested.

"I thought we got an amnesty, man," Peter protests again, as he's frogmarched briskly from the spaceport, trailing Corpsmen and his friends, none of whom, Peter notes sourly, seem to be bothering to attempt to un-arrest him.

Corpsman Rhomann Dey shrugs his heavyset shoulders. "You're not under arrest, Star-Lord."

"Oh yeah?" Peter arches his eyebrows at the heavily armed Corpsmen surrounding him.

"Surely you've been really arrested enough times to know the difference."

Dey has him there. Peter scowls. "You guys could have asked me nicely."

"This is us asking nicely."

"More nicely. What's this about? C'mon, Rhomann. How long have we known each other?"

Dey wrinkles his forehead. "Including or excluding the time you've spent in official custody?"

That was definitely a snort from Gamora. A small snort. Peter shoots her a wounded look, but her expression is already carefully blank. Thankfully, showing that there was at least one person in his group of new friends who actually deserved the designation of 'friend', Drax rumbled to life. "Peter Quill is not in trouble?"

"No. That's what I said from the start," Dey notes patiently. "No one's in trouble. Nova Prime just wants to talk to Star-Lord, that's all."

"All right then," Rocket yawns, showing sharp, white teeth. "You going to take long, Quill? You said that you were going to show me a cantina in Lower Five that sold hyphanastin-"

"That sold astara mead," Peter corrects hastily. "Very, uh, very shiny, uh, astara mead, that is not illegal at all on Xandar, or in any sectors of Xandarian Space, uh."

Drax's brow starts to crinkle. "Peter Quill. You did inform Rocket that the substance for sale was hyph-"

"So," Peter raises his voice a little desperately, turning to Dey, "When did Nova Prime decide that she wanted to meet me, anyway?"

"The alert went planetwide eighteen hours or so after you had last left Xandar," Dey recalls. "But you had already jumped towards rim space."
Unfortunately, Dey refuses to say anything more, for all of Peter's attempts at wheedling and goading, and eventually, they're deposited in the glass Nova Core, with its all-encompassing view of Xandar, bustling with Nova Corpsmen strutting about with their usual air of purposeful constipation. Many people on Xandar, being the Nova Corps in particular, needed to take life easy, in Peter's opinion.

Hunched over the holodeck in the centre of the hive is the current Nova Prime, Irani Rael, looking equally bowelly strained, studying something made out of a ton of pretty pink lights that Peter can't quite make out. When she notices their presence, she waves away the holo with a flick of her fingers, and straightens up.

"Peter Quill. Greetings."

"Uh, hi," Peter ventures. "How can I, uh, help you this time?"

She sighs, glances around, then beckons. "Come with me. No, just you, Peter Quill," she adds, when Gamora makes as if to step forward.

"O-kay," Peter hesitates, but when Rael starts to stalk off briskly, he finds himself towed into her awake, trying not to drag his footsteps like a reluctant schoolkid culled off the herd by a headmistress.

Rael leads him past the organised mass of Corpsmen to a side office, which scans her retina before letting her in, with a soft, sexless, "Greetings, Nova Prime."

The steelglass door seals shut behind him, taking with it all the noise from the Nova Core, and at a wave of Rael's hand, it goes opaque. Peter tries not to flinch, even as he takes in Rael's private office. Personal holodeck desk, check. Chair, check. State-of-the-art versolink console decks, almost paper-thin, scrolling down from the ceiling, check. Nothing else. No personal effects, no holoframes of family, nothing. Not even a little potted plant.

All right.
Not creepy at all.

"Um," Peter tries, when Rael circles around behind her desk, and folds her hands behind her back.

"Peter Quill. Have you ever met your father?"

Of all the questions that Peter had been preparing himself for, this one utterly throws him. "No?"

"Do you know who he is?"

"No." Peter scowls. "All I know is that he's some dickhead who knocked up my mom and abandoned her. Presumably, he even left the planet, if your DNA scans of me are correct."

Rael actually winces at that, looking pained, but she forges on. "After you left Xandar, we deposited the DNA mine with the Xandarian Worldmind. It was... curious. It is not often curious."

Peter blinks. "A living computer centuries old can still be curious about stuff?"

"Apparently a natural DNA cross like yours should not have been possible. Tell me, Peter. Have you heard of the Spartax Empire?"

"Yondu... er, the leader of the Ravagers, he always said that the Spartax people have no sense of
humour and are absolutely krsa... er... serious about their Imperial Law or whatever, and not to ever raid any Spartax ships, ever, which isn't hard because they apparently live in the arse end of space, though it's a pity, because Spartax salvage is hot shit if you know where to hawk it."

Rael sighs. This, Peter notes, tends to be the default interplanetary reaction whenever Peter expressed his professional opinion of anything, born of a rough-and-ready early education at the hands of the Ravagers. It was always kinda uncalled for, in his opinion.

"There are seven great intergalactic empires, Peter Quill, upon whose treaties any true, lasting intergalactic peace is built. The Asgardians, the Kree, the Sh'iar, the Negative Zone, the Brood, the Badoon, and Spartax."

"So my dad is some sort of... big shot Spartax criminal mastermind?" Peter guesses. When Rael blinks, he adds dryly, "You don't have to spare my feelings, or whatever. Apples don't fall far from their trees, right?"

"The gravitational pull of a-"

"Well," Peter cuts in hastily, before he has to explain the concept of an Earther metaphor to yet another alien race, "What happened? Did he get caught? Am I supposed to bail him out or something?"

Rael presses her hands flat on her desk, then she says, briskly, as if to crest over an unavoidable distasteful thought, "DNA matching and Spartax Imperial edict have... declared... that you are Crown Prince Star-Lord, son of King J-Son of the Royal Conclave of Spartax. King J-Son has provided us with a set of galactic coordinates in the event of your return to Xandar and-"

"Wait, wait, wait-"

"-duly instructs you to make a jump for Spartax Imperial space-"

"Look, is this some kind of joke-"

"-or in alternative, you are cleared for a Bifrost Relay to Asgard, whereupon you will be introduced to your betrothed, Crown Prince Thor of the Asgardians."

"Okay," Peter says faintly, after a long pause. "Now I know that you're shitting me."

II.

The Guardians of the Galaxy take a surprisingly long time to mull Peter's hushed and slightly hysterical revelation over, in the private quarters provided for them in Xandar.

"So you're a princess." Drax offers thoughtfully, breaking the silence.

"What? No!" Peter slaps his palm against his face. "How did you even... no. Just. No. No!"

"A Spartax Prince, huh. The Spartax Prince," Rocket's ears twitch forward, then back. "Say, could you requisition me a crateload of k-sak-thaon grenades from your empire? For cultural reasons."

"No. No grenades. No titles. No empires. We're leaving Xandar, right now. I hear that Xoxa Novan has the most awesome-"

"Peter," Gamora's perched primly on a high-backed chair, and as he turns to her, she offers him a faint, sharp smile. "Given your status, reputation and criminal record, I'm quite certain that Asgard,
Spartax and the Xandarian Worldmind must have repeatedly checked your DNA sample all these past months before reconciling themselves to the nature of your birth. Nova Prime does not jest."

Peter groans. "Can we not discuss this? I'm this close to having a breakdown, guys."

"Why?" Rocket quips. "You just went from being a, admit it, barely interesting Earther to being the Crown Prince of an entire galactic empire. That's a good thing. Even if the empire's, okay, in the asshole of the universe. But it makes really great grenades. That's something."

"Right," Peter snaps, "And my Dad's first edict is for me to go home, or go get married. To a totally different species. Doesn't that sound, maybe a teeny bit dysfunctional to you? What kind of jerk would drop that kinda baggage on his son for shits and giggles?" Drax tilts his head. "Not me."

Rocket's tail twitches, and he bares his teeth into a toothy grin. "Royalty, eh?"

Gamora shrugs. "It won't be so bad. Asgardians look like Earthers. They even have the same colour range."

"That's not the point!"

"Spartax does not usually contact other civilisations," Drax notes. "I have never heard of them doing so. They are insular."

"And they are also," Drax continues, "Known to be ruthless when their will is thwarted."

"I got that," Peter grumbles, "What with Nova Prime dropping increasingly heavy hints that I should either make the jump or call up the Bifrost relay, as soon as possible, preferably yesterday."

Drax' brow furrows. "It is not possible to travel to earlier times. Not yet."

"We could go to Asgard," Rocket perks up. "They use a stratosolar mainframe there for light. Good for plants. Groot will like it."

"That's such a great idea," Peter drawls. "Let's totally decide my fate on whether or not a certain planet has tech that Groot will like. And what will I say to Crown Prince Thor when I see him, eh?"

Rocket leers. "I do?"

"Oh, for fuck's-"

"Asgard is a known entity," Gamora cuts in. "And friendly to outsiders. One of the great civilised Intergalactic Empires. Unless you would prefer to make the jump to Spartax, which isn't known to be friendly to outsiders. Or anything at all. Not even Thanos knows what the Spartax people even look like. They're a highly secretive race."

"Nice tech, though," Rocket cuts in wistfully. "I saw a salvaged Spartax spacer in a Badoon backwater mining planet once. Nobody even knew where it was from."

"I thought maybe we could try Plan C, and leg it," Peter suggests hopefully, then he sighs, when Gamora raises an eyebrow. "All right. Fine. I don't want to make trouble for Xandar, not after we went to all that trouble to save it from Ronan. We'll jump to Asgard. Fuck this new 'taking responsibility' gig."

"Who knows?" Gamora notes idly. "In all probability, you will antagonise the Crown Prince, the
betrothal will be called off, and you will be free to make trouble again all over the universe again."

Peter shoots her a suspicious glance, but Gamora's expression remains impassive. "That actually
sounds like a fairly good idea, if I didn't have a sneaky impression that you're laughing at me somehow."

"At you? Never."

"Worst. Liar. Ever."

III.

The Bifrost relay is disorienting, but not utterly stomach-churningly horrific like Peter had originally
thought. They're in a gold and crystal dome, the walls whirring slowly to a stop all around them,
while beside them a tall, dark-skinned man in a golden fucking suit of fucking armour blithely pulls
a fucking sword out of a platform. What the fuck.

Peter stares. This is the first time he's seen an Asgardian - they're not common outside of their empire
- and as far as he can tell, this one looks more or less human. Human-shaped. Maybe.

The Asgardian studies them all thoughtfully, expressionless, then he speaks, his tone just as even and neutral. "Prince Star-Lord of the Spartax Empire-

"Oh my God," Peter groans, and gets smacked across the arm by Gamora.

Even as he yelps, the Asgardian continues, utterly unconcerned, "I am known as Heimdall, Keeper
of the Bifrost. Welcome to Asgard." With that, he settles beside the raised platform, settling the
sword tip-down on the ground, and goes absolutely still.

Peter exchanges a glance with Gamora, who lifts one shoulder into a shrug and starts to walk
towards the exit of the Bifrost chamber, even as it whirs to a complete stop. Before she can get
outside, however, a line of spear-wielding guardsmen in more shiny golden armour file in, and hustle
them off over a dangerously thin crystal bridge somehow suspended with no apparent supports over
a torrent of dark water, rushing outwards to fall at the rim into space itself.

Beside him, cradling Groot's pot in his arms, Rocket grunts. "Show-offs."

"What?" Peter whispers.

"All this," Rocket spits over the side of the bridge, narrowly missing one of the shiny guardsmen.
"You'd think that a civilisation that survived a supernova by harnessing the energy would've been
less into using replicator tech on a planetwide scale just for a pretty waterfall effect. Show-offs."

"Survived a what?"

"Peter Quill, I like you," Rocket says soberly, "But sometimes I wonder how you can live with
yourself. What's it like?"

Peter scowls. "Being an Earther?"

"Being so... so stupid." In the pot, Groot waves its small, leafy hands briefly, and says something that
only Rocket's ears can pick up, but which Peter is fairly sure involved the words 'I', 'Am' and quite
possibly 'Groot', in that particular order. "Fine, fine. I know he can't help it."

"Why do you do that?" Peter asks, and when Rocket tilts his head, he adds, "All that Groot is saying
is 'I am Groot'. We all know that."

Rocket snorts. "That's because your shitty Earther ears can only pick up a really shitty spectrum of frequencies. All that you can hear from him is something that sounds like 'I am Groot'. Which isn't what he's really saying." Groot gestures, with a whispery sound, and Rocket nods. "Yeah, I know. Fucking sad."

Peter frowns, unable at this moment of mild hysteria and panic to correctly parse sarcasm, and gives up. Thankfully, although Peter had prepared for the worst, including possibly shooting his way out of a shotgun (hah) wedding if necessary, his ordeal was brief, formal, and utterly devoid of any marriage noises whatsoever. He and the other Guardians were introduced to Odin, everyone made polite greeting noises, and then they were packed off to the guestrooms posthaste.

Huh.

"Maybe the All-father doesn't approve of his only true-born son marrying someone who was, until only recently, an outlaw," Gamora points out dryly, when Peter mentions how weird everything has been so far to her in the shared private guest gardens.

"Great! I'm starting to feel better about all this," Peter concedes, because they've just had an awesome dinner of delicacies that he mostly didn't recognise, but were still awesome. The Asgardians were being generous to their guests: the gardens could probably fit two Nova Cores with space to share, lush with brightly flowering alien vegetation, and the chambers were far more luxurious than anything that Peter had ever seen.

Rocket had carefully set Groot's pot down next to a fountain, and was squinting up at the faintly shimmering dome of the biosphere field that was all that separated Asgard from deep space. Further along the garden, Drax was sitting in the grass, propped against a tree, sharpening his blades. If no one was getting married, Peter thinks, this would have turned out to be a pretty great holiday.

Cheering up, he turns to Gamora to say as much, then freezes up: at the top of the wide stairway leading down to the guest gardens is Crown Prince Thor.

Nova Prime had 'helpfully' provided Peter with a holodeck image of Thor when they had been preparing to leave Xandar, but the image had been of some hulking fancy dress weirdo with a hammer and a full winged helm, of all things, and Peter had just hastily deleted it. Thor in the flesh is... well, Thor looks exactly how a Crown Prince of an entire intergalactic empire should look: tall, broad shouldered, golden and handsome, with a whiskery tawny beard and a shoulder-length mane; he steps down to the garden with a leonine grace that completes the impression. Thor is dressed in a black vest, inset with six clear blue leys, huge muscular arms bared to the wrists. That weird stubby hammer dangles at his hip, and Peter tries not to stare as Thor ambles towards them, comfortable as you please.

"Peter Quill. Welcome to Asgard." Even Thor's voice sounds like a Prince's should: deep and rumbling and confident. Peter hates him a little.

"No cape today?"

Thor raises his eyebrows, then he grins, a little impishly, warm and as brilliant as the sun, and Peter feels his conviction that he is, as it were, a 100% red-blooded heterosexual male give way a little. Maybe. Kind of. "Not today," Thor allows, and gestures towards the inner guest solar. "Shall we?"

Peter tries not to look too hunted. "Already?"
"No. Not yet." Thor's amusement is rich in his voice. "But there are matters which we should discuss."

Peter tries a beseeching look at Gamora, but she merely rolls her eyes, and he sighs, and squares his shoulders. "Fine. Lead on."

Thor walks until they're past the solar, out through into the maze of the high-ceilinged arched corridors of the shiny Asgardian palace, and Peter is thoroughly lost by the time they get to a balcony, partly set into a rock face, overlooking vast tumbling fingers of waterfalls, plunging down with a collective roar into the churning dark below, spotted with stars. Peter hesitates instinctively for a moment before forcing himself to walk over and rest his elbows on the stone balustrade.

"It is quite safe," Thor assures him, and Peter can't help the scowl.

"Yeah, sure, laugh at the Earther."

"Not at all. I have friends in Midgard. Besides, biosphere technology of this level is uncommon outside of the Asgardian Empire." Peter blinks for a moment before he belatedly remembers that yes, Earth is technically known as Midgard, and also, technically, is part of the Asgardian Empire, backwater as Earth is compared to Asgard. Or the other Nine Realms.

"You're taking this pretty well," Peter notes cautiously, and Thor grins at him.

"The last time I lost my temper, I started a war."

Peter blinks. "Uh. I can see how that could have led to having to learn some sort of anger management."

"Indeed. I've learned restraint since then. Wisdom, perhaps." Thor studies him curiously. "You are far more human than Spartax."

"You've seen one of the Spartax?"

"Not I. But I have studied them." Thor looks briefly out over deep space, before turning his glance back to Peter. "Many centuries ago, before even my birth, Spartax provided part of the technology required for Asgard to save itself from the supernova. An alliance was proposed, to be sealed by a joining of royal houses, through the firstborn of each House." Thor shrugs. "I have known that this was to come all my life."

"Yes, well, I knew that 'this was to come' all of eight hours," Peter retorts, his voice edged. "Sort of like 'surprise! Your Dad decided to take an interest in your welfare. And, oh, by the way, you're also meant to get married. Congratulations!'"

Oddly enough, Thor grins. "You are very much more human than Spartax."

"Bully for me, seeing as I had no idea that I was half... anything until I got DNA-scanned over in Xandar," Peter points out. "Can't we call this off? Arranged marriages are totally last century. Earth century, at that. Surely you guys are way past that sort of shit."

"Peace in the universe is maintained by maintaining balance across the empires, Peter Quill," Thor notes gently. "And much of that balance is based on the premise that the Spartax and Asgardian empires are allies. Alone, we are vulnerable. Together, even if it is but a semblance of unity, even the Badoon will know to find simpler targets. The alliance needs to be reinforced: our enemies have grown bolder. Earth was recently attacked by the Chitauri."
Peter exhales loudly. "What makes you think that I care about that?"

"Do you not?" Thor counters, though he smiles as he does so. "You, who would hold an Infinity Stone in his hand, risking death to prevent a planet you hold no love for from turning to dust?"

"That's... that's just... but... do you even like guys?" Peter blurts out.

Thor studies him for a long, puzzled moment, then he starts to laugh. "Ah yes. I was told of this by friend Stark. Asgardian culture sees no difference between people of any gender, Peter Quill."

"You're all pan?" That was quite possibly hot.

Thor shrugs. "That being so, should you prefer women, that is your prerogative. What you wish to do after the ceremony is your choice."

"Wait. You're telling me that after we get... married... for the good of the universe or whatever... I can just go?"

"Is that not obvious?" Thor raises his eyebrows. "Why should you have to remain?"

"Okay," Peter blinks. "Uh. I think I can do that. So, just checking, I can just... carry on? With life? And girls?"

Thor grins at him, amused all over again. "If you like. Although," he adds, and Gods but Thor was fast - he went from leaning casually against the balustrade to all the way into Peter's personal space in a blink of an eye, big hands pressed to the stone on either side of Peter's hips, lips almost brushing Peter's ear, "If you ever feel like... experimenting, let me know."

Peter shivers, and his strangled yelp of shock was maybe less manly than he hoped, but Thor merely pats him in the small of his back and steps away. Peter's briefly tempted to try and punch the smug look off Thor's face, but trying to control his confused libido takes way longer than it should, and when he gets back to his friends, he's still red-faced.

Rocket's the first to look up, mouth full from a plate of fruit and unidentifiable delicacies, all balanced on the lip of the fountain next to Groot's pot. "So. When's the big party?"

"Shut up."
Seems that comics!verse Drax is actually originally human. I didn't get that impression from the film version... so I'm going to proceed on the premise that MCU!Drax is an alien.

oh my god I should be doing my homework

Chapter 2

Peter's self-imposed calm in the face of his upcoming matrimony-for-the-good-of-the-universe lasted until dinner.

'Dinner' seemed to be Asgardian for 'lavish drunken food coma inducer', and it took place within a huge hall larger than many decent spacesport hangars, and seemed to involve a ludicrous number of people getting drunk, singing, and eating, often all at once. Normally, Peter would have found this sort of thing highly entertaining. Today, however, it just seemed to underline exactly what he was getting into. Marrying into.

"I still can't believe that Thor is the Prince of all these people," Peter hisses at Gamora, who seems daintily engaged in trying every single dish at the table, as methodical as a surgeon.

She doesn't even glance at him as she slices a thigh off some vaguely chicken-shaped roast, if chickens had two more sets of wings and were the size of large dogs. "He's the Prince of a galactic civilisation."

"I know that. I'm just... just starting small, and working myself up to that point."

"You Earthers," Rocket pushes his snout up from a horn of Asgardian mead that was nearly as tall as he was. "Always with the de, with the, the hic denial. D'you know," Rocket adds, loudly and conspiratorially, "I heard hic that if you flyreallyreallylow over Earth, the natives make up new religions on the spot? That's really fucking hic f-funny."

"That's not true," Peter protests, "And I think you've had enough mead."

"Neversh," Rocket edges pointedly out of grabbing reach, swaying awkwardly for a moment before leaning heavily against Drax's arm. "S'true. An'... an' I heard, mostshofyou even believe that there's a Big Human in the sky that can make fissh into more fissh, heheh."

"What is fish?" Drax inquires, frowning, "And why would any sentient creature believe in something that is not proven?"

"... Your people didn't have religion?" Peter asks, after a pause.

"What is religion?"

"... I'm going to need more mead to explain that one," Peter ventures, even as Gamora says briskly, without looking up, "It is the practice of believing in the promise of something that will make
existence more bearable."

Drax mulls this over thoughtfully, even as Rocket finishes his mead all in one drag and slouches into a mostly horizontal state on the table, burbling something about quantum ions and Q-space mechanics. Feeling depressed all over again, Peter reaches over for a spare horn of mead, and raises it to his mouth.

"So, 'religion', it is like cake," Drax decides, and Peter promptly spills the mead all over himself.

Rocket starts a hissing, alarmingly wheezy sound that turns out to be a raccoon hybrid's version of drunken laughter, even as Gamora hides a grin behind one hastily raised palm, and on the table, in his pot near Rocket's tail, Groot waves, then philosophically sprouts a leaf over one shoulder as if to make a point.

"I hate you guys," Peter grumbles, appetite now thoroughly lost, and pushes away from the table, stamping off out of the feasting hall.

Unfortunately, mead doesn't seem to have mixed well with Peter's sense of direction, and he's thoroughly lost by the time he makes another random left turn in the arched corridors of the gigantic Asgardian palace. He stops for a bit of a break in a weird oval room full of what looks like large head-sized drops of glass, suspended by crystal threads from the ceiling, and while he edges around them, trying not to accidentally break anything, someone politely clears his throat from behind him.

Flinching violently, Peter lurches to a side and would have smacked right into one of the glass drops if the newcomer hadn't quickly reached over to steady him. Dizzily, Peter swivels around, a little awkwardly, and sighs.

It's Thor. Of-fucking-course.

"Tried a wrong turn," Peter explains awkwardly. "Many wrong turns, probably. What is this room? Is it Art?" One of Peter's sometime bedmates, a pretty Xonai curator in Endesh-Lrr-2, had once informed Peter that his total inability to understand 'contemporary intergalactic art forms' meant that he lacked a functional soul.

"Not exactly." Thor makes a gesture under the closest glass drop, at eye-level for Peter, and the glass lights up. Another gesture, and abruptly, a planet appears within it, spinning very, very slightly, suspended in space. It's a blue, green and white sphere so instantly familiar that Peter sucks in a tight breath: the colour and definition of this projection is beyond any holodeck he's ever seen.

"Wow," Peter concedes, and Thor grins, making a larger, sweeping gesture; the whole room lights up, each glass drop housing its own unique planet, some spinning faster than others, some seemingly not moving at all.

Peter sees something Saturn-like, something tiny and white and dense, moons, gas planets, red barren planets, gray little ghosts and more than he can count. It's quite possibly one of the most beautiful sights he's ever seen, and Peter's abruptly, intimately aware that he's half-soaked in mead, wearing a coat and vest that's a couple of days unwashed, his hair's grown lanky and uncut and he's worn the same ratty pair of powerboots for over half a decade. He feels painfully out of place and even more lost than ever, and when Thor strides into the midst of the glass drops and beckons to him, he hesitates.

"I'll break something," Peter warns him.

"It'll take more than your weight or strength to break one of these," Thor assures him, and warily,
Peter edges out amidst all the glass, muzzily trying to watch his step until he's up next to Thor.

"I should get changed," he mutters, still embarrassed, and tries not to flush when Thor merely smiles at him, warm and amused and golden. "Couldn't find my rooms."

"Getting drenched in mead is traditional during an Asgardian feasting, Prince Star-Lord."

"Oh Gods, please don't call me that," Peter groans. "Just 'Peter' is fine, thanks."

"If you wish." Thor makes another gesture, and abruptly, lines of pale green light start to connect a handful of drops in the oval room: Earth, and eight other planets... no, not quite. Peter squints. One of the planets seems to be more of a sundered ice ball, and another, in the center of it all, next to Thor, is obviously Asgard - not a planet at all, not any longer.

"Nine realms," Peter murmurs, looking around slowly.

"Nine main realms," Thor corrects, and makes another gesture: thinner lines of light shoot out from Asgard, joining other planets, and then from two of the other 'realms', like veins in a leaf, forking out further, until Peter loses count of the number of planets that are lit, blinking in the centre of the skein of it all. "Yggdrasil is more akin to a tree. Large branches beget smaller ones."

This is the Asgardian empire, Peter realizes, all of a sudden. "All these planets are colonised?"

"Some more than others. Some are but outposts. Some only have a seasonal or occasional presence. Some," Thor makes another gesture, and some of the green lines of light turn orange, "Are contested."

"I thought you guys weren't at war with anyone."

"Not officially. As I mentioned, certain species - the Chitauri are but one of them - are growing bolder of late." Thor gestures again, and the lines of light disappear, leaving only the planets, spinning on their own axes. "My father has taken to the Odinsleep for longer and longer periods. My mother has been slain. There are some that think that the Asgardian Throne has been weakened, and seek... opportunities."

Blinking and still tipsy, trying to absorb it all, the only thing that leaves Peter's mouth is an awkward, "Sorry about your mom."

Thor stares at him for a moment, as though in surprise, then he grins, a little ruefully, and turns him around with a gentle touch on his shoulder and on the small of his back, leading Peter out of the oval room. "She would have liked you, I think."

"I really don't think so," Peter notes, brutally honest whenever semi-drunk, but Thor merely laughs, and the sound's as outsized and as hearty as the rest of him, deep and as rich as a well. "You look like a Prince," Peter adds, mulishly. "I look like some sort of Belter trash dragged out of rim space."

"Not in the least," Thor disagrees, "Though if you wished to equip yourself in the Asgardian style, that can be arranged."

"Uhh... no thanks. I've got some spare vests. I think. Not really a cape person."

"Regardless," Thor continues, "Perhaps the Spartax delegation may bring appropriate clothes for you when they arrive."

"They're what?"
"It stands to reason-"

"No, wait, I mean, what, who?" Peter sets a hand on Thor's arm to try and tug him to a stop, and actually gets dragged forward a step instead, before Thor comes to a stop by himself. Whoah.

"Your father is attending the ceremony," Thor says mildly. "Were you not informed?"

"Oh hell," Peter blinks owlishly. "On second thoughts, let's just go somewhere where I can get even more drunk."

II.

Peter wakes up reluctantly when something wet and warm snuffles at his cheek, and mumbling, he bats at it, annoyed - then freezes as his hand comes into contact with something fuzzy and big. When he sits up with a yelp, the horse - a Gods-damned-fucking-horse - whinnies, shoots him a surprisingly intelligent, reproachful look, and trots off, swishing its long, white tail.

A horse.

Squinting, Peter registers that yes, it is morning, and yes, he's in a field of some sort, which - backward glance - is in Asgard, if some distance away from the massive golden spires of the Asgardian palace proper. With a horse. Horses. A Gods-loving herd of them. Groaning, Peter flops onto his back, and the ground lets out a hiss.

"Oh. Hi," Peter manages, blinking, as Thor grumbles and scrubs at his face with a palm. Mussy details float gently up into his consciousness, slowly clamouring for his attention, but all that a burst of panic ascertains is that yes, they both still have their clothes on, and no one is being evidently fabulous, or whatever. Right.

There's also a barrel of what smells like mead, a few steps away, and a couple of discarded horns, which explains the blackout and quite possibly the horse field, in a way. "Why the fuck do you guys have horses? You guys survived a fucking supernova."

Thor yawns, one big palm slapping down briefly onto the grass. "When much of your interstellar transport can be engaged via harnessed wormholes, the indirect means of transportation can be whatever you wish."

"... you guys have horses because you think it's stylish?"

Thor grins at him impishly, and Peter remembers, awkwardly belatedly, that he's sprawled over Thor's chest, in a decidedly not-manly manner, and sits up, flushing. "It is stylish," Thor corrects, uncurling upwards with far more grace, still way too far into Peter's personal space for his own comfort, and... yeah. That's definitely a morning boner, in Peter's pants, a common occurrence after a really great all-night bender. Awkward.

Reddening, Peter tries to shift to hide it, but Thor's already noticed, and he presses closer, one big hand sliding steadily down Peter's thigh. "That's a..." Peter's breath hitches, and he feels frozen to the spot. "That's a morning thing. Uh. I don't get hangovers. I just get, uh."

Thor hums, a low and purring sound in his throat, and then he's leaning over, a little more, until this is way, way past red-blooded heterosexual male territory and a voice in Peter is trying to get him to freak out. Thor stops a finger's breadth away, waiting, even as his hand inches lower, and Peter realizes, in a sudden spurt of irritation, that Thor is grinning, his lip quirked up in a sort of playful challenge.
Now if there was one thing the universe needed to know about Peter Quill, Star-Lord, and newly discovered Crown Prince of a civilization in the ass end of space, it's that Peter Quill does not fucking just *do* dares. He *kills* dares.

And such, if he's leaning over and kissing Thor and they end up back on the grass tangled up in limbs and coats with Peter finding out that okay, kissing a bearded guy is not really as weird as he thought it would be - it's just a dare. Right? Right?

*Yeah, right,* the little downer voice in Peter whispers. *And that hard-on you're pressing against Prince Thor's hip is just a strategically placed blaster stock.*

"Peter," Thor groans, and Gods but that sounds so *good,* low and rough with just a hint of violence; Peter moans and rides up the thigh that Thor pushes between his legs, because reasons, and when Thor rasp, "I want to suck your cock," next to his ear, the only acceptable response seems to be "Oh *fuck.*"

Grinning that annoyingly challenging grin, Thor manhandles Peter onto his back, and laughs when Peter growls and bites him on his lower lip. Thankfully - or not - Thor doesn't bother to try to navigate all Peter's belts, vest and coat, and just goes straight to the point, shifting down and unbuckling the statpac belt over his pants, then simply dragging pants and boxers down to his knees. Thor winks at Peter when Peter starts to frown, and then - good-fucking-*God* - laves Peter's cock in a wet, deliberate stripe up from the root to the tip.

Holy fuck.

Peter's had alien females across much of the wide swathe of space that the Ravagers tended to prowl, picked up from bars and cantinas, for the most part, and they mostly tended to fuck him out of curiosity. Earthers were rare. But that *also* meant that they used protection, because in interspecies relations, sometimes accidentally catching sexually transmitted diseases could be the *least* of your problems.

Even the best microfilm tech couldn't compare to skin to skin. Peter flops back on the grass, gasping and overwhelmed as Thor grasps him and licks again, harder, letting out a low laugh that huffs warm breath against his skin, and Peter kicks his heels into the grass with a whine.

Thor tries to pull Peter's pants down further, then snorts impatiently and leans back, dragging off Peter's boots, then his pants and underwear, before leaning back over and lifting Peter's hips into the air, easy as you fucking please, grinning at Peter's shocked gasp. The bristles of Thor's beard rasp against his inner thigh as Peter awkwardly hooks his ankles over Thor's shoulders, then he lets out a strangled whimper as Thor lazily sucks one of his balls into his mouth and rolls his tongue under it, oh, oh *fuck.*

It's certainly the most *thorough* blowjob that Peter has ever had, and by the time Thor actually sets him down on the grass to swirl his tongue up Peter's aching dick, his brain is so shot that he can't remember why this was a bad idea in the first place. This is an *awesome* idea. Thor lets out a low growl, pressed against Peter's hip, when Peter spreads his legs to let Thor settle between them, and this time, when he licks up Peter's cock, he also dips his tongue lazily under the foreskin, curling under and around, what the fuck: a hoarse yell gets dragged out from Peter's throat, and he probably would have come right there and then if Thor hadn't curled his huge fingers tightly around the base of Peter's cock.

"Not yet," Thor cautions, and when Peter makes a grumpy sound of protest, adds, with a wicked grin, "Do not waste it."
"Waste wh-nngh," Peter arches up into Thor's mouth as Thor takes him into his throat and oh, oh hell, maybe Asgardians have no gag reflex, and Peter has just enough brain power left to think, *Well this is escalating quickly* before he gives up and digs his hands into Thor's thick hair, heels jerking grooves into the grass beside Thor's knees.

Just like before, Thor takes his *fucking* time, not that Peter's in any mood left to complain, even if he could still speak. There's no real rhythm to it all and it's hell on what's left of Peter's nerves, as that *wet, hot* and tight throat clamps down around him and Thor drags his mouth up and back down, it's possibly the most obscene thing Peter has ever seen, Thor's lips stretched around his cock, and Peter's been to the clubs in sub-strata Knowhere. Gods.

Then Thor starts to hum, and that's as much as Peter can take for the morning: he's shaking and screaming as he comes, hands curled so tight in Thor's hair that it probably hurts, but all Thor does is drink him down, with a deliberate and lazy hunger that Peter knows, just *knows*, is going to feature in his fap material for quite a bit to come whether he likes it or not.

As Peter lies on the grass, blinking and dazed, Thor licks him clean, then wipes his own hand on the grass, cleaning himself up, and wow. Thor had *gotten off* sucking Peter's cock. That thought shouldn't have been as hot as it really was, but Peter has to bite down a sudden whimper as his spent dick jumps.

"What the..." Peter clears his throat, and manages, barely, to sound a little less strangled. "Where the hell did you learn how to do that, *your Highness*?"

Thor grins at him, and when he speaks, his voice is only a little hoarse. "I *am* older than modern Midgardian civilisation," he points out, and oh yeah. That's right.

"And I just thought that this situation could not in any way get weirder," Peter decides, blinking.

"Asgard has a very different view of sexual relations," Thor shrugs. "We do not take physical intimacy as seriously as Midgard seems to."

"You, uh, okay, I think I'm not awake enough to process that, what," Peter rubs at his face, in the vain hope that the universe would seem slightly less insane in the process. No luck. "Or life in general, actually. Why did I get so smashed last night?"

"Your father's impending visit seemed to trouble you."

Oh. Right. Peter groans, and gropes for his clothes. "Second question. Can we still get mead in the mornings?"
Chapter 3

I.

Given his luck with life to date, Peter had in fact expected something to go terribly wrong prior to actually engaging in said act of getting-married-to-save-the-universe. As such, he only shot the broadly grinning Yondu and his ragged gang of Ravagers a briefly exasperated look before glaring at Rocket.

"What? It wasn't me," Rocket folds his little furry arms defensively. "Or Groot."

Gamora shakes her head when Peter looks to her, which means...

"Drax. Seriously? Again?"

Drax nods solemnly. "You told me during the jump to rim space that the Ravagers were your family during your childhood. Weddings should only happen when all family members are present."

"Firstly, I said effectively. They were effectively family, only because they kidnapped me. Effectively. Secondly, what the hell, Drax. You are totally banned from using any sort of interstellar comms device, for ever."

Drax rolls his massive shoulders into a shrug. "Weddings are also a good time to resolve family problems."

"What, really? Even it's the sort of 'family problems' that can only be resolved with blasters? Nevermind. Don't answer that." Wearily, Peter squares his shoulders. "Hi... Yondu..."

"Peter, my boy," Yondu's grin grows wider as he saunters over the rest of the Bifrost span over the churning waters to the main Asgardian planarform, slapping Peter hard enough against his back to shove him forward a step. "Now, we always knew you were something special."

"Bullshit," Peter snorts. "I don't remember the number of times you guys just picked on the 'Earther kid' for the hell of it. Or the number of times you threatened to throw me out of an airlock-"

"You see," Yondu says cheerfully, ignoring Peter, "It ain't any day that the King of an entire galactic civilisation asks you to swipe some Earther sprog and deliver him to the ass end of the universe."

Peter's eyes bulge a little. "... What. The fuck."

"Aww, c'mon, boy," Yondu pats him on the shoulder. "Y'didn't think that we snagged you for the conversation, did you?"

"I don't even... what the... Yondu, I..." Peter throws up his hands. "So you guys were paid to grab me? It wasn't random?"

"Boy, if I were of a mind to make a long haul trip to Earth to swipe something, I would'a swapped something smaller, fluffier and cuter than a loudmouth Earther kid. Possibly something that we actually could have used as emergency rations, just sayin'."

"And you guys decided not to deliver me to Spartax, why?"

"Like I said before, the crew wanted to eat you, and I-"
"Not that again," Peter growls, glaring at Yondu. "Seriously, Yondu. The Ravagers are a stickler for contracts. Mostly."

"Well," Yondu scratched his jaw pensively, "Why didn't we deliver him again, Kraglin?"

"Cos we got paid up front, Cap'n," Kraglin says promptly.

"I knew it," Peter mutters, and adds wearily, at the same time as Yondu, "So we thought that we could negotiate for more."

"That's it," Yondu says approvingly, and pats Peter again on the back proudly, a loud slap that makes him flinch. "We've done well by the boy, haven't we, Kraglin."

"That we did, Cap'n. Grown up all big and strong, with his head in the right place, he has."

"You've got huge balls showing up," Peter mutters, "Since apparently my actual Dad is going to show up as well."

"We heard that over the datanet," Yondu notes agreeably. "So what with your blue friend here, whatshisname, inviting us over for your wedding and all, we felt it might be a good time to take the opportunity to ask your father for that extra cut, and maybe a bit more. Goods preserved in storage, as it were."

Peter's eyes widen. "You're fucking with me."

"It's the letter of the thing, boy," Yondu sniffs.

"Let me guess. My Dad failed to specify some sort of deadline to this delivery."

"That's it," Yondu agrees approvingly. "So you could say, we're still on the clock, just with a bit more transit time involved."

"Wear an' tear," Kraglin agrees.

"Room and board."

"Travellin' expenses and refuelling."

"Danger pay. Especially with that shootup over in Xandar," Yondu finishes. "Going the extra mile and all that. And other expenses not mentioned but which we'll itemise on demand."

"Why didn't my father just pay you guys a bit more the last time? Surely he can't be broke."

"Eh," Yondu glances at Kraglin, his craggy blue forehead wrinkling briefly. "I forget."

"Could've been that small problem of a civil war over in Spartax," Kraglin points out. "They just finished up. Or maybe they haven't. Not sure. Nobody really cares. I don't even remember what it was about. It's been going on for a while. Seems that's why no one's really seen a Spartax ship save out by the Oort zone, in recent years. Spartax territory is in the-"

"Ass end of space, I know," Peter groans.

It figured. As unreliable as the Ravagers looked, despite that - or because of it - Yondu did receive a lot of work, often from dubious and rich pillars of the galactic community. It wasn't unusual for them to cut and run on contracts if they weren't sure that they would get a good payday at the end.
"Then we just got used to having a kid underfoot and I s'pose we just forgot about it," Yondu shrugs. 
"Fair's fair, boy. You cheated me out of one payday. I'm here to claim another one. Then we'll be 
even, you'll be married, the universe will keep on tickin', everyone will be happy. 'Sides, I've never 
been to Asgard before." The Zatoan looks curiously at Thor, who's been eyeing the Ravager crew 
with an air of mild astonishment, off to a side. "This the other Prince, then?"

Thor arches both his eyebrows. "Friend Drax advised us that these Ravagers are your family?" His 
tone indicated a certain degree of dry disbelief.

Peter sucks in a tight breath, then lets out out in a drawn-out exhale. "Yeah. I guess they are. 
Effectively. You could say that when I was a kid, I didn't so much as fall in with the wrong crowd as 
got abducted by it, but it turned out... mostly okay. But they're still not going to steal anything 
while they're here, are they, guys?"

"What d'you take us for, boy?" Yondu saunters over to Thor, holding out a hand. "Yondu Udonta. 
Artifacts found, deliveries made, extractions processed, no questions asked if the money's right." 

"Welcome to Asgard," Thor says, if openly dubiously, shaking Yondu's hand firmly. "A guest wing 
has been prepared to house you and your friends."

"That's very civilised of you, Prince Thor," Yondu says genially, in a way that makes Peter stiffen 
instinctively, "Kraglin, why don't you take the boys off to our 'guest wing' while I talk a bit more 
business, eh?"

"Sure, Cap'n." The Ravagers file off, following the Asgardian royal guard, and on occasion, eyeing 
particularly shiny parts of Asgardian decor with barely concealed avarice. Peter's heart starts to sink.

"Well, I'm off," Rocket yawns. "Groot wanted to check out Mímaneĩðr and your betrothed," Rocket 
leers as he says this, "Said we could."

"One of the Flora Colossi will always be welcome at Mímaneĩðr," Thor says politely while Peter's 
still grimacing, and Rocket waves before stamping off back into the depths of the Asgardian palace. 
Drax nods at Peter before following suit, and Gamora raises an eyebrow, then glances pointedly 
towards Yondu. Peter hesitates, then gives her a half-shake of the head, and she nods lightly, 
stepping away.

"Mima-what?" Peter asks.

"It is a holy tree, in a grove. The First Tree. My ancestors believed that it was the beginning of the 
world," Thor's lips quirk faintly. "Superstition, of course. But from the sap of the Mímaneĩðr came 
the genetic code that unlocked functional immortality, and the technology that allows the Odinsleep. 
It is the oldest living thing in Asgard."

"That's all very cultural and all," Yondu clears his throat pointedly, "But I had a more important 
problem to discuss, your Highness."

Peter's heart sank a little further. "Seriously, Yondu? Shouldn't you stick to gouging my father? 
Seeing as peace in the universe is at stake or whatever?"

"Well, boy, there's the slight problem that it might be that your dad's travelling light, with no 
credsticks, or maybe he's got nothing he'll be willing to barter in lieu of creds," Yondu points out, 
with a toothy grin. "The Spartax are pretty greedy about their tech, and sadly, your father don't know 
we're here. And so, in the matter of this here extra debt that your family be owing us-"

"... Yondu," Peter says slowly, "Every time I think that you've taught me everything there is to know
about douchebaggery, treachery, being mercenary to a fault and the intricacies of interstellar contractual transactions, you surprise me."

"Why, thank you."

"Asgard would be pleased to pay a debt on Peter Quill's behalf," Thor says mildly, "If it is within reason." The Crown Prince grins when Peter visibly relaxes.

"You're a lucky man, Quill." Yondu glances at Peter, then he smirks at Thor. "And I think that we're going to get along just fine, your Highness."

II.

That night's feasting was rowdier than usual, but not as bad as Peter had expected. No one got blasted, nothing caught fire, and as far as he was aware, no one was blithely pocketing the gold and silver plates and goblets, but just to be sure, he made a mental note to drop a broad hint to Thor when he had the time. Not that Peter was, morally speaking, against the practice of creative reacquisition of assets, but considering that the business of marriage was already going to be awkward as all hell, if the Asgardians got ticked off, divorce was probably going to be way, way more awkward. As such, Peter was exhausted by the time it was over and the 'guests' had been pointedly ushered off to their quarters under guard. He sneaks off to get some peace and quiet and Gamora finds him hiding in the grove of the so-called Ever-Living Tree, curled against one of its massive roots with Groot's pot beside him.

Mínameiðr was not only the biggest tree Peter had ever seen, it was possibly the biggest living thing he had ever been in the presence of, and that included the vast oceanaria park in Zakazot-4 that the Ravagers had once magnanimously snuck him into when they had been in a job on the planet and had wanted him occupied for a couple of hours. Many of Mínameiðr's vast roots were taller than Peter, thickly overgrown with moss and undergrowth, and its massive truck was easily thicker than one of the astrawhales in the oceanaria park; above, its thick crown of leaves were in a hundred thousand shades of red and gold.

Oddly enough, or perhaps not, the Asgardians had built a delicate golden drum tower around the tree, shielding it from the elements, the sides limmed with a warm, gentle glow that was apparently even better for plants than the strato-whatsit that was outside. Groot liked it, anyway.

Their little companion/houseplant waves at Gamora as she perches on the top of the root, hands loose over her knees. "How long are we going to be here?" she asks, her tone hushed. Even Peter got that way in this grove. There was something about being in the presence of a living thing that had existed for longer than most galactic civilisations.

"Well, the grove closes to the public in an hour or so, but Thor said that we could leave Groot in here if we wanted. Apparently Rocket said it was better that way for his growth or whatever."

"I meant Asgard."

"Oh." Peter sighs, and slumps back further against the root. "I'll get, uh, married when my dad gets here, apparently it'll take a week or so for him to get here from wherever Spartax is, and then we can leave."

"That's it?" Gamora tilts her head.

"Yeah. Why?"
"This is more like a business transaction than a wedding."

"Apparently it's a thing, politics," Peter waves his hand dismissively. "We should make another long haul trip, I was thinking to-"

"You did not seem displeased by Prince Thor."

Peter somehow manages to keep his expression absolutely still. He's chalked down the... horse field matter... to the copious amount of mead that he and Thor had drunk, and besides, it was Experimenting. Right? Nothing wrong with Experimenting. "I still like girls!" That hadn't come out right.

Gamora snorts. "You Earthers are the only space-level sentient species I know who are still hung up on gender preferences. Other than the Badoon, but the Badoon are fundamentally segregated." She pauses. "And I suppose the Brood, but they are a hive mind species ruled by Brood Queens."

"Well," Peter admits awkwardly, "We're not exactly space-level yet. Technically. Though I'm not sure if that will solve anything."

"It will. To be able to reach other galaxies is to open a collective consciousness," Gamora points out. "Many societal differences quickly become petty." She smiles, tight and wry. "So it was for my own species."

"'Was'?"

"The Zen Whoberians were exterminated by the Badoon." Gamora lets out a soft breath. "Aided by Thanos. I am the last." Her eyes narrow briefly, but she relaxes again when Groot waves his branches at her. "There are more Infinity Stones out in the universe. We should find them."

"That's going to take a lot of doing. Got a lot of ground to cover."

This time, the smile Gamora flashes him is sharper, brighter. "It'll give you something to do after your nuptials."

"Oh Gods, stop reminding me."

"We should check on the Collector," Gamora adds, after she finishes smirking. "He had other Infinity Stones in his collection, I think. So Odin believes."

"You've been talking to the All-father? Just like that?"

She shrugs, and looks away. "The All-father has been to Zen-Whoberi. Long before the war with the Badoon. It is - or was - part of the Asgardian Empire."

"Why didn't he stop the massacre, then?"

"He was within the Odinsleep. His sons... son, Thor, was yet to come of age, and had not yet mastered Mjölnir. The Asgardians sent a contingent, led by the late Lady Frigg, but it was forced into retreat before the combined might of Thanos and the Badoon." Gamora lets out a slow breath. "They win some, they lose some," she adds, her tone painfully neutral.

Peter slides further down into the undergrowth, taking in a deep breath of earthy scents, something like pine, something like grass, all however still distinctly alien. Groot wriggles again, whispering something that Peter can't quite make out: not that it matters. Wrapped in the tranquility of the grove, still disoriented by everything, Peter finds that he can't quite grasp the enormity of the situation that
Gamora describes, that a single civilisation could be responsible for the security of so many worlds. He thinks of the room with the glass planets, and shudders.

"I don't think that me getting married is really going to solve everyone's problems," Peter says finally. "Yondu and the others said something about a Spartax civil war. So I wouldn't get my hopes up for some sort of change, if I were you."

"Probably not," Gamora says agreeably. "Not while Thanos lives. He fears no empires. No kings or princes."

"I thought that you were pretty sure that Thanos couldn't be killed."

"Nebula thought that an Infinity stone would work," Gamora notes softly. "That is why she tried to help Ronan. She thought that Ronan would be able to use the stone to defeat Thanos."

"You want to use the Collector's Infinity stones - assuming he actually has any - to give it a shot? Really?"

"No. We may not survive a second attempt, and I have heard that each stone has its own... eccentricities. And should we fall in the attempt, if a stone was to fall into Thanos' grasp..." Gamora shudders. "There may be another way."

"Do tell."

"Your father," Gamora says quietly. "I know you resent him, Peter Quill, and perhaps you are right to do so. But little is known about the Spartax, save that their technology is greater than much of the known universe, and perhaps - perhaps the Spartax have a solution for Thanos."

"So you're saying that I should be... nice?" Peter drawls.

"If that is not beyond you," Gamora notes dryly.

"No promises," Peter tells her, though he grins, and Groot makes a wiggly gesture, then sprouts an orange leaf over his head. "What should I say, 'Hi Dad, I know you haven't seen me for years, but you knocked up my mom and it seems I'm now your heir, can I have a crate of those k-whatever grenades that my friend here asked for'?"

"The world of combat is greater than grenades." Gamora arches an eyebrow.

"Don't tell that to Rocket." Peter rubs a hand over his face. "I think you guys are placing a bit too much hope on Spartax. Not just you, Asgard as well. Sure, they're more advanced, but they can't be that much more advanced, right? Will people like the Badoon really stop being dicks just because two assholes they don't know get paired up? Besides, the Spartax might have their own problems. And if they were that great, why didn't they take over the universe? Get rid of assholes like Thanos?"

"Perhaps they did not care to," Gamora suggests, though she exhales in disappointment, staring at her feet. Groot rustles his leaves pointedly, with another whispery sound. Even to Peter's untrained (shitty) ears, it sounds reproachful.

"Look," Peter relents. "I'll ask. And try to refrain from punching my Dad in the mouth. If he has a mouth. But just saying, if he couldn't really be fucked doing much more than send a bunch of Ravagers to pick me up from Earth, and didn't care enough to keep trying to get me off their hands after that, I'm not sure that this King J-Son is really into the whole business of proper parenting, let alone helping us against Thanos. I bet he doesn't even care that my mom is gone," Peter adds bitterly. "He ruined her life."
"Perhaps he can be disposed of, and then you will be King," Gamora says meditatively, and smirks when Peter lets out a strangled sound and almost pitches over to the side, precariously close to Groot's pot.

"That's the worst idea I've heard from anyone so far!"

"I was speaking in jest."

"I fucking hope so," Groot waves, sprouting a small white flower over the end of one stubby hand. Peter scowls. "And don't you start, whatever that was." He could feel a headache coming on.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I.

On the third day of The Saving The Universe Thing, as Peter's started to mentally term the Asgard... trip... he finds himself being introduced to apparently every important Asgardian in the city, because apparently this is what important people do. He's deathly bored during lunch and contemplating jumping out of the nearest gold-plated arched window by the late afternoon: he's tuned out Odin hours ago and quite possibly only one thing is keeping him remotely sane, and it's Thor.

Every so often, when Peter drifts, and when Thor thinks that no one's watching him, he pulls a little face at Peter. Sometimes it's just a wink, or a smirk. But when it gets to Thor very briefly sticking out his tongue at Peter while rolling his eyes and escalates, Peter thinks it's quite possible that he will either implode from sheer boredom or sheer pent-up mirth and it will all, all be Thor's fault.

Thankfully the Asgardians haven't quite invented a way around having to have toilets - although they've overcompensated by gold-plating the hell out of said toilets - and Peter manages to get Thor alone in one of them while they're touring some sort of Imperial Scientific Gold Observatory or whatever it was.

"You are such an asshole," Peter hisses, and Thor grins at him, archly innocent; that's probably the start of it, Peter thinks later, on hindsight. It was either punch Thor or kiss him, and Peter settles on the latter, for the sake of the universe. Reasons.

This is just as crazily, uncomfortably good as the horse field, even without the side benefit of an all-night mead bender, and Peter badly stifles a whimper when Thor picks him up as though he weighs nothing and props him on one of the fucking stupid shiny gold-plated wash basins, rucking big fingers up behind Peter's skull and opening up for the kiss like he needs it to breathe.

Peter had never thought himself a particularly willowy guy, but Thor is huge, easily bracketing Peter against the sink, rumbling as Peter runs his hands tentatively up over the solid mass of muscle that is Thor's arms to mountainous shoulders. He's a little jealous. Thor could probably break him in two without even sweating and hell, that shouldn't have been hot but somehow it is, especially when Thor thrusts his tongue into Peter's mouth with a purr.

"We're going to be missed," Peter objects, when Thor reluctantly lets them up to breathe, and Thor grins: even in the relatively short time that Peter has known Thor, he knows what that grin means. Mayhem and mischief.

Peter's cock throbs and presses insistently against his pants, fuck, even as Thor mouths against his jaw and says, in a low, rough voice that's hell on Peter's nerves, "I know."

"And what do you think your dad's going to conclude about our disappearing act, hn?" Peter asks, a little desperately, because his libido has clearly decided that matters of sexual preferences are irrelevant and has already pushed most of the blood south and out of Peter's brain.

"That depends," Thor notes, nipping Peter's ear with a rumbling laugh, "On how quiet you can be, Peter Quill," and squeezes Peter's cock through his pants so fucking deliberately, almost to the point of it becoming uncomfortable. Asshole. Peter has to bite down on his own fist to stifle a moan, hips
bucking into Thor's grip, and Thor presses a rough and strangled sound against his throat.

They end up in one of the cubicles, belts undone, pants pushed to their knees and grinding against each other, dicks wet from Thor's spit and this, Peter thinks, dazed, should really feel more fucking weird than it's turned out to be. There's no reason this should even feel good, crushed between Thor's immovable bulk and one of the ridiculous gold-fucking-plated walls, with his pulsing dick rubbing against the, well, the monster that Thor turns out to have been packing in his pants.

There's no space to breathe, not with Thor's low and rumbling growls as he kisses Peter as roughly as Peter's riding against him, Peter's fingers scrabbling over his vest and the scent of sex growing thicker around them. "Come on," Peter chokes out, "Ah, fuck, fuck, fuck," and Thor grins at him, a little wild, a little crazy, and Peter's coming with a shout that Thor hastily muffles with the palm of his hand.

Irritated, panting, out of sorts, Peter bites, and Thor jerks the palm back, smirking, and uses the same abused hand to squeeze them both, making Peter whine and wince, oversensitized, but Thor ignores him, his flushed and open face intense with naked lust. He thrusts a couple of times more against Peter's belly, then he's letting out a breathless string of words that the translator implant can't parse as he comes against Peter's vest.

"Now we've made a mess," Peter says, trying to sound irritated, but his voice hitches into a squeak when Thor merely smirks at him and goes down on his knees. At the first swipe of a pink tongue up Peter's soiled vest, Peter might, quite possibly, have let out a distinctly breathless squeak. Thor licks him clean, so very deliberately, smirking all the while through Peter's whimpers, and if Peter still had any reserve brain power, he probably would have kneed Thor in the throat for it all when Thor finally gets around to tucking Peter back in.

Peter manages to stagger out of the cubicle when Thor's already out, philosophically cleaning up by a washbasin, and he does try to say something jokey and suave, he really does, but what really comes out is, "I still like girls."

Thor arches an eyebrow at him in the mirror. "As do I." At Peter's blink, Thor adds, "Asgardians see no differences between people. Women hold as many positions of power-"

"I meant, I mean, yeah, that's right, I, oh, you gods-damned asshole," Peter adds irritably, as Thor starts to grin again. "You knew gods-damned well what I meant!"

"I have lived on Midgard for a time," Thor wipes himself down, and slots the used fabric through a seamless receptacle in the wall. "It is a strange culture. You have lived much of your life offworld, however. Consider me surprised. Only the Badoon and the Brood-"

"Yeah, I know," Peter cuts in, a little irritably. "I just, well-"

"When I was on Midgard," Thor adds, and Gods, he's fast, all the way up next to Peter again in no time at all, "There were many things about your homeworld that I found primitive. Some, more than others. There was a child," he continues, when Peter starts to turn defensively. "No, I knew him not. But he was on the local datanet - the news. He had hanged himself because he favoured other boys as bedmates, and it seems," Thor says, in the same, mild tone, "That Midgardian children can be merciless."

Peter's words stutter to a halt in his throat, and he swallows hard, clenching his fists. A finger catches his chin, tilting up his stare when Peter tries to look away, and Thor's expression is solemn, with none of his mischief. "On Asgard we revere deeds, Peter Quill," Thor's tone remains unchanged. "Everything else is irrelevant. You have held an Infinity Stone in your hand, not knowing if it would
have destroyed you - and survived the attempt. There is courage in you, and cunning. And there are flaws," Thor adds, and kisses Peter's forehead, a mere brush of the lips, "But whom you prefer as a bedmate is not one of them."

"You guys could've done a lot of good in Midgard," Peter mumbles.

"Perhaps. But it is not our way. Besides," Thor continues, "You have not lived on your homeworld for a very long time. Let it go. Perhaps you clung to its memory and its customs because it was all you had left when the Ravagers took you. That life is long behind you."

"Yeah," Peter's voice is only a little shaky. There's something hypnotic about Thor's voice, when it's this low, this gentle, with Thor's palms pressed over his cheeks, then stroking over his arms, so very soothing. He blames that for the loosening sensation he feels within him, like a tightly coiled spring starting to unwind, for what he does next - lean forward, tentative, to kiss Thor on the mouth, quick and hesitant. He can feel Thor's beard brush his jaw, and it is still... weird. Especially now that he's calmer about it all.

He tells Thor this, and Thor grins at him, so very smug and amused, his big hands now warm and firm on Peter's hips. "Midgardians," Thor says, his eyes laughing, and the only acceptable response, in Peter's opinion, is to bite Thor on his lower lip until he gets a groan.

II.

Watching Gamora and Thor's friend/bodyguard (?) Sif spar is pretty educational. Peter had not, in fact, realized how truly terrifying Gamora is when she was pushing herself until now, possibly because in every other moment to date he had been occupied with trying to steal things/not dying/killing Ronan.

Beside him, sitting on one of the benches in the sparring grounds, Drax watches the two females in their deadly circling dance with a sort of professional curiosity, attentively quiet, and after a long moment, Peter asks, "Was this what you did before?"

"Before what, Peter Quill?"

"Well," Peter temporises, realizing awkwardly that he'd never thought to ask more about Drax's earlier pre-Ronan life, not even during the jump to rim space and back, "Before uhh... well, before, when you were living on your homeworld."

Drax looks at him thoughtfully for a moment, before a loud clang of blades draws his attention back to Gamora and Sif. "Before Ronan killed my family," he notes, his tone nearly flat, "I was a farmer."

"Seriously?" Peter blurts out, before hastily adding, "Uh, I mean, I couldn't have guessed, you're a great warrior, and all."

Drax snorts, but at least he doesn't seem offended. "Many would not have guessed," he says finally, and rubs a big palm absently over the ugly red whorls of scar tissue that run over his right arm.

"Where did you get those from?" Peter asks, unthinkingly. "Ronan?"

"No." Drax raises his eyebrows, but doesn't elaborate, and with some relief, Peter settles back into silence. It doesn't quite last, though: Drax suddenly says, "You should train with Gamora."

"Me?"

"Whom else?"
"What do you mean, 'whom else'?" Peter scowls a little.

"I mean," Drax notes, in his flat and matter-of-fact tone, "That of all of us in the 'Guardians of the Galaxy', you are the least combat-capable, Peter Quill."

"What," Peter sputters, "That's not true," and finishes with a yelped, "Even Rocket?"

"As I have said."

"I am totally combat capable," Peter retorts, injured. "You're starting to hurt my feelings, Drax."

"It is not meant to be insulting. It is an observation. You are imbued with fairly good aim and an instinct for low cunning that has served you well to date."

"Low cunning?"

"-but you should practice more often," Drax rumbles on, ignoring Peter's objection. "For you are the Captain."

"We can't all be cybernetically enhanced beings or giant Flora Colossi or crazy blue psychopaths," Peter grumbles. "I can too hold my own. I would have gotten away from Rocket, and Groot and even Gamora in Xandar if the Nova Corps hadn't gotten involved."

Drax frowns a little at him, then he raises his voice. "Gamora!"

"Drax-"

"Peter Quill would like to practice."

"Now wait here-"

Naturally, or perhaps not, Peter ends up being embarrassingly kicked around the sparring chamber by Sif, all the while with Gamora watching from the sidelines, covering her mouth as though to hide amusement, and Drax offering the occasional unhelpful suggestion, often along the lines of 'You should be dodging more quickly'.

Stiff, sore, pride bruised, Peter complains to Groot later in the shadow of the Ever-Living Tree, and Groot wiggles, sprouting another white flower on his little hand, though this time he offers it to Peter. "Thanks, I guess?" Peter grumbles, lying down a little gingerly on the undergrowth, tucking the flower away into a pocket in his coat to show willing. "I'm beginning to think that you're the only friend worth having, Groot."

Groot rustles, possibly appreciatively: Peter can't tell. Above, Rocket's voice drifts down, high up on top of one of the roots. "Find your own sentient houseplants."

"Nuh-uh. We're all sharing and caring here." Peter rolls onto his back, looking up into Rocket's furry face. "Where have you been? We've never been able to separate you for long from Groot here before."

Rocket snorts. "That was before," he mutters, bristling a little, then calming down when Groot waves and whispers something. "Yeah. I bet." Turning back to Peter, Rocket adds, "I was looking around the Asgardian labs. Got permission yesterday."

"Really?" Peter hesitates. "Not the Armoury, I hope."
"No. Didn't get that far yet," Rocket sniffs, and even as Peter suffers a vague unease about the word 'yet', Rocket says, "They have some seriously weird tech here. It's based on scientific principles that nobody else uses."

"The leys?"

Rocket looks briefly and grudgingly impressed. "You've heard about it, then?"

"Heard about it," Peter says, as casually as he can, and Rocket studies him for a moment.

"So that's why you took so long in your cabin before we had to shove off to accept a Bifrost relay," Rocket says slowly. "You were reading the datanet."

"Researching the datanet," Peter glares. "What did you think that I was doing?"

"Having a nervous breakdown? I don't know. Gamora wanted to check on you, but Groot said that we should leave you alone until you got over it. Earthers are fragile." Rocket hops off the root, landing silently beside Groot's pot, and sits down, tail plumping briefly. "Anyway. Ley tech can't be copied. That's why you don't see it anywhere else but on Asgard. It's all channelled from their central core. Pretty crazy."

"Like a battery?"

Rocket scrunches up his muzzle briefly. "If we want to run into gigantic, meaningless generalisations, yes, Quill, like a battery."

Listening to Rocket chatter on about ley tech and synchronous energy relays is restful, and Peter's very nearly dozing off by the time Rocket adds, "By the way, Groot says that it's theoretically impossible for a human-Spartax hybrid to exist."

Peter blinks, and looks over at Groot with a frown. "What? Why?" He shudders. "Wait, what do the Spartax people look like? There was nothing in the datanet." And he had always meant to ask Thor, he really has, just that every time they actually had some alone time... things... happened.

"We always thought that their ships were remote controlled," Rocket notes. "What with there being no flight deck or bridge or anything. Turns out that's not the case at all. Groot says that they're light."

"What?" Peter blinks. "Like their bones are hollow or-"

"No, that's the Sh'iar," Rocket flicks his tail. "They're light."

"Like... balloons?" That was pretty gross.

"No," Rocket says, with exaggerated slowness. "Their actual forms are light. They're paradimensional creatures. Their 'existence' in this plane - the Prime plane - is just a projection. We see it as light, you know, like something that il-lum-in-ates?"

"... but... how even... did my mom..."

"Exactly," Rocket notes, with great satisfaction. "You're sort of a genetic miracle. No wonder the Xandarian Worldmind was interested, eh?"

Peter rubs slowly at his temples. "Hold on, how the hell did a shiny ball of light or whatever get my mom pregnant?"

"How am I supposed to-" Rocket pauses when Groot makes a rustling noise. "Groot says that since
you're a multi-celled organism that reproduces through genetic material combining, it is not beyond the realms of possibility to manipulate cellular structures during ovulation of your females-

"Oh my God just stop. Stop. Stop." Peter claps his hands tightly over his ears, and manages to pick out Rocket's sniff, very faintly, as well as a "You see. Earthers. Fragile."

"You asked," Rocket points out primly, when Peter finally cautiously pulls his hands away. His head is starting to hurt.

"To my eternal fucking regret, yes." Groot offers him another flower, but Peter ignores it this time, scowling. "How does Groot even know about the Spartax?"

"He says they visited his planet before." Rocket pauses, when Groot wriggles. "His homeworld was part of the Spartax empire."

"There's a planet full of plants like Groot?" Peter blinks. "Why haven't they conquered the galaxy?"

"Not anymore. And that's all he'll say about it." Rocket tilts his head a little. "I've asked." The hybrid looks away, up at the towering crown of the gigantic tree. "Us, we're the last. Gamora too. Maybe Drax, he won't say."

"Yeah," Peter notes uncomfortably.

"And I guess you're the first and last of whatever you are. Half Earther, half Spartax." Rocket grins. "Maybe instead of being called the Guardians of the Galaxy you should'a gone with 'The Last of Us', eh?"

Peter pulls a face, even as Groot wriggles, and Rocket pulls a face, scrunching up his muzzle. "What did he say?"

"Something about fungi and dogs. Not sure." Rocket grins toothily. "Relax, Quill. You're here. You're alive. Who cares how it was done?"

"... Mom did use to carry on about angels," Peter says sourly, and shudders. "I always thought she was being metaphorical."

"You Earthers and your metaphors," Rocket snorts, flicking his ears in disdain. "Though, y'know, if multicellular organisms can be rearranged, maybe the Spartax can make it such that you can have kids. After all, Princes are meant to make more Princes, right?"

"What... even... I... Rocket... the fuck..."

"It's not my fault," Rocket tells an agitatedly-waving Groot with an evil grin, when Peter curls up with a groan into a fetal position, "Earther brains just break really easily."

Chapter End Notes

there will be no mpreg in this fic. haha ;3
"Why am I here again?" Gamora whispers, as Peter slinks after Yondu and Kraglin.

The Asgardian palace is a brilliant set of gold spires well behind them, gleaming against the artificially dimmed sky. The stratosolar mainframe powers down during the 'night', the streets lit by low-level leys inset into walls and streets instead, in strings of small, pale tiny green dots, often cunningly inserted as part of wall murals and local decor.

"Moral support," Peter whispers back. They flatten themselves against a wall at Yondu's sharp gesture, and Peter breathes in slowly, then out, at the sound of brisk, heavy footsteps. A guard patrol passing, on the main thoroughfare ahead, by the sounds of it.

Gamora frowns, though she waits until Yondu gives the all clear before whispering back, "I am morally against walking through the city of our hosts like a thief in the night."

"Well, so am I," Peter mutters, "But would you rather I let Yondu and Kraglin here thief all over the city of our hosts in the night by themselves?"

"We're just taking a look," Kraglin whispers, with a lopsided grin pulled all the more sinister by the shadows, then they're darting silently across the thoroughfare, down another alley. "Don't tell me you ain't bored of the same old, same old in that drafty castle. Got to see the real Asgard."

"Find some gambling pits." Yondu murmurs approvingly.

"Make a few friends."

"Get to some real drinking."

"Find some recreational drugs what can be sold elsewhere," Kraglin concludes. "It's all very cultural."

"This is all going to end in tears," Gamora notes disapprovingly, though she presses closer and hunkers down when Yondu holds up his palm. Above, a ley-powered drone sweeps past, curling around the sleek spires of the Observatory, and disappearing in the direction of the great steelglass dome that housed the spectroscope.

"That's why I asked you to come along," Peter whispers. "If it does all end in tears, you're the best person to get us out of it. I think. Rather than make it worse."

"Your confidence is inspiring," Gamora murmurs, unimpressed, but Peter isn't fooled. Save for her sparring sessions over the past four days, Gamora's mainly affected a look of blank stillness that Peter knows is really representative of utter boredom. Now she's fully alert, her eyes slightly narrowed, and there's a sleek tension to her that Peter never knew he missed until Asgard. "What if we do get caught? That would be-

"That's why we asked Prince Charming over here to come along," Yondu jerks a thumb over his shoulder at Peter without looking back. "Worst be worst, he can kiss up and make better."

Peter pulls a face and rolls his eyes when Kraglin leers at him, and grumpily decides not to grace Yondu's comment with an answer. Gamora snorts, and whispers dryly, "Do we even know where
"Peace," Yondu peers briefly around a corner into a wider street, then waves them through, twisting past a large walled garden loud with the gushing sound of a fountain, "I know how cities work."

"That is so reassuring," Gamora mutters, but she offers no further complaint, especially when Peter doesn't chime in. It's true. Yondu has a nose for trouble that's simply legendary, as far as Peter is concerned. It's only rivalled by his nose for profit.

True enough, they've only had to walk for perhaps nearly a couple of hours or so before the whole gold-plated walled garden armed guards theme starts to peter off, and the buildings start to look somewhat saner. Peter presses his hand briefly against the wall of one blocky building: there's the look and consistency of white stone, almost, but rougher and with no filigrees or murals. Beyond the sloping eaves of the rooftops still comes the occasional shiny tower, but the guard patrols have eased off, and the ley lights are less common. Yondu straightens up a little, satisfied, but they still walk softly.

It takes another hour before Peter starts to hear the familiar pneumatic sound of an active spaceport, if muffled, and seeming to come far below his feet. He looks around, startled, and Yondu smirks.
"Thought so."

"There's a spaceport on Asgard?" Gamora whispers, frowning. "I thought that their sole means of travel was by Bifrost relay."

"That's what you see on the datanet," Yondu shrugs. "But Kraglin and I, we've met the occasional spacer from the Yggdrasil system. They keep to themselves, but they're pretty damn obvious in a crowd."

"Bifrost relays is what the high and mighty use," Kraglin notes, with another toothy grin. "You didn't think that everyone on this floating rock was rich an' gold-plated, did you?"

That had, in fact, been Peter's assumption, but he shakes his head regardless and tries to look as though he had known that all along. "People are the same the universe over."

"That's right." Yondu spits on the ground derisively. "There be the rich, up top," he jerks his thumb upwards, "And there be us poorfolk, doing what we can to get by."

Peter rolls his eyes. Yondu and the Ravagers have put aside enough creds over the years in various boltholes over the known 'verse to be, at the least, as rich as medium-sized trade conglomerates in their own right, but before he can point this out, Yondu holds up a palm again, his eyes narrowed, tilting his head. They flatten against a wall, but this time, it's too late - there's a low whistle, and then a string of Asguardians crowd up at the mouth of the alleyway.

These Asguardians certainly aren't 'gold-plated': to Peter's eyes, save for the vague resemblance of their gear to an Earther LARP game, they could probably mostly pass as spacers in any known spaceport. One of them even has a blaster in a holster at his hip, to Peter's surprise: all the other Asguardians he's ever met tended to rock the medieval weaponry vibe.

The Asguardians seem about as surprised as they are, and they stand in a frozen tableau for a moment before Yondu says, casually, "Any chance of a real drink around these parts?"

Peter doesn't relax: he can see that Yondu's quietly twitched aside his coat, ready to use his supertronic arrow on a moment's notice, and Kraglin's hands have gone loose beside his hips. The Asgardian at the head of the pack blinks, then he studies them more closely, his gaze jumping from
Yondu to Kraglin to Gamora, then settling on Peter with a studied suspicion that promises trouble.

"You. You are Star-Lord of the Spartax Empire."

"Oh my God," Peter mutters. He's never going to be able to live that nickname down now.

"He's new to the Prince business, we don't hold it against him," Yondu says evenly. "You want to let us by, friend?"

"We really do just want a drink," Peter says hastily, recognising one of Yondu's trigger words instantly. "The, uh, stuff back in that golden pile is bad. Very bad." He looks to Gamora for support, but she merely raises her eyebrows briefly.

Thankfully, Kraglin chimes in. "It's fuckin' piss awful."

"Nothin' like what you'll get in a spaceport," Yondu adds blandly. "'Cos that's what we all are. Spacers. Where's the fun at on this shiny rock, eh? We're three days in and fucking dying of boredom."

The Asgardians exchange glances, even as Peter holds his breath, then, abruptly, the tension seems to leech out of the group. "Spaceport's down past Idun Pass," the Asgardian leader says gruffly, gesturing to his right. "You keep going down that road then take the second left through to the tunnel."

Another Asgardian starts to frown. "Gylf, Vánagandr won't be-"

Gylf grunts. "Vánagandr doesn't rule Lyngvi. These offworlders can do as they please, as long as they keep the peace. If they want to go drinking and whoring in Ván, that's their business."

"The Spartax Prince will be trouble."

"Maybe he will. Maybe not. Keep moving, strangers." Gylf steps aside, and after a reluctant grumbling pause, the other Asgardians shift out of the way. Peter catches Gamora watching them out of her peripheral vision as they walk briskly down the suggested road, and she exhales a little as they take the second left. At the front, Yondu hums to himself, low and pleased.

"Are we still going to the spaceport?" Peter hisses.

"Sure," Yondu eyes him briefly, with mild surprise. "Now they've gone and made me all curious."

"I knew it," Peter groans.

"All of this. Tears," Gamora predicts in a ghoulish murmur behind him, though she chuckles softly when Peter glares at her. "I revise my opinion of this venture, Peter. This is actually starting to get fun."

II.

Walking into Ván feels like coming home.

There are spaceports the universe over, and as part of the Ravagers, Peter's been to his share of both legal, semi-legal, and utterly illegal ones. There's a quirk and character to them all, and if Ván were a person he would be a hearty, hulking beast of one, grizzled and loud and fierce, as quick with a dirty joke as he would be on the punch. Even Yondu relaxes a little as they walk out from the tunnel through to the underground din, lit up with yellow leys that dot the ceiling: like most semi-legal
spaceports out there, Ván is part trading post, part open bar, part brothel, part open sewer, all chaos.

It's in the dead of night, but spaceports hardly ever sleep, so Peter isn't really surprised to be rubbing shoulders with other people even at this hour as he twists through the crowd on Yondu's tail. What does surprise him is the scattering of offworlders that dot the crowd: not as many as there would be in a normal spaceport, but still remarkable after a few days of living among a homogenous species.

There are a few hulking species in semi-medieval outfits that he's never seen before, possibly from other Asgardian branch worlds, but along with those, there are pink-skinned Kree, colourful and slender Sh'iar star-runners, bulky steelglass-plated Xoxa merchants, a handful of Zatoan scribes, even a Mok cantor, its multi-joined limbs hunched protectively over crates of dubious product as it argues with a couple of Asgardians.

"Now this is more like it," Yondu grunts, and Peter, sadly, has to agree. All the gold-plated pomp and ceremony had been getting on his nerves a little. "Kraglin, go sniff out the lay of the land. Peter-and-friend, you're with me."

"Where are we going?" Gamora asks, as Kraglin slips off into the crowd.

Yondu offers her a sharp grin, even as Peter sighs. "We're going to find the biggest drinking hole and suss out what people here like to trade for, how much, and how often. Maybe a few contracts. Maybe things worth stealing."

"You can't say that we haven't left you with some valuable life lessons, boy," Yondu tells him self-importantly.

They manage to square a table in one of the open bars, and Gamora turns on her stool, peering up over the crowd to the distant sectioned-off hangars, where the high silver fin of the Sh'iar runnership rises high over the squat fans of the Xoxan cradlecraft. "Strange," she notes.

"What's strange?" Peter asks, as Yondu orders for them from wait staff: a male Asgardian, with the dull-eyed disinterest of poorly paid wait staff the 'verse over.

"That there are other species here, but not above."

"Can't have us muddying up their shiny gold-plated city," Yondu suggests, pointing over the mass of the crowd to other tunnel mouths set into the walls at random intervals, between the bars, between offices and buildings inset against the stone. "I bet there're rooms here for spacers. Refuelling stops. Everything they need's in the spaceport, so they don't have t'go up top."

"The Asgardians up above don't use ships."

"And how many times have you seen that Bifrost thing power up while we're up there?" Yondu snorts. "'Sides, that thing obviously isn't made to move many people. Or things. This floating rock is pretty, but it ain't self-sufficient. They got no farms that I can see. No factories. No manuf-cubes or hydron basins. They've got to get some raw materials in from somewhere. Bet you a hundred creds there's another port, but imperial use only, somewhere else on this rock."

"How'd you know they've got no farms or anything?"

Yondu shoots Peter a disappointed look. "Come on, boy, we've taught you better than that."

"I knew you guys were being suspiciously quiet and well-behaved the last couple of days," Peter grumbles. "What do you want out of Asgard? You're talking like you're thinking of setting up shop."
"Maybe. If they have to import all their stuff, I want to know what they're buying it with," Yondu grins. "They don't sell their ley tech - not alot of it'll work for long offworld, just the weaps, so I've heard. They've got nothing to sell, far as we can guess so far. The creds have to be coming in from somewhere. That could be a secret well worth cracking."

"You would destroy a galactic system's economy?" Gamora demands, frowning.

"No, girl," Yondu gives her an amused glance. "Why put a knife to a gyrufu herdbeast when you can keep fleecing it, eh? If we can find out what they're selling, we can also find out what they like to buy, everyone's happy, everyone gets rich."

"Maybe some get richer than others," Peter says dryly.

The open bar, thank the Gods of Time, Space and Alcohol, serves a variant of rich and malty ale that might quite possibly have made Peter moan a little as he drank his first sip. "Fuckin' mead," Yondu agrees feelingly, hands clasped over his own flagon.

"You guys drank barrels of the stuff," Peter points out.

"Was free," Yondu shrugs, and takes a sip of his Zatoan shaker. "But this is something worth shooting for. 'Sides," he adds, with a leer, "It be customary for the groom to get absolutely krutacking drunk a couple of klicks before, aye? You want to do that on mead?"

"And you think it's going to be a good idea to get wasted in a possibly hostile spaceport, do you?" Peter's tempted, though, and Gamora even orders the next round, and as such, he's far more than comfortably tipsy by the time trouble inevitably finds them, in the form of a circle of heavily armed Asgardians ringing their table.

Behind their patchy semi-medieval armor and blasters, Peter can see the other patrons of the open bar hastily vacating the immediate area, and the bar staff retreating behind the stone counter. He sighs, and pinches at the bridge of his nose.

"Spartax Prince Peter Quill." The speaker is an Asgardian with a relatively unassuming face, a widow's peak of ruddy brown hair and narrowed eyes behind a dull steel-gray helm, jaw clenched. Over his black leather vest is a symbol placed high over his heart, that looks a little like the jaws of an animal, bared wide, and the same sigil sits on the rest of the Asgardian newcomers.

"This always happens, Yondu," Peter tells Yondu, without looking up.

"Vánagandr wishes to see you." The lead Asgardian scowls.

"Does it involve a drink, business, or a joke?" Peter asks mildly, then tries again, not that he thinks that it will help, "We don't want trouble, guys. We're just here to drink, sight-see, and drink some more."
Tipsy as he is, Peter's still ready when the first Asgardian behind him grabs for his shoulder, ducking away and up onto the bar table, drawing his blaster - which abruptly jumps out of his hand and into that of an Asgardian to the right, a ley point on his gauntlet glowing briefly blue.

"No fair," Peter yelps, outraged, and Gamora slams the heel of her palm into the belly of her closest opponent, then spins against the table and kicks her booted foot precisely up into the throat of another, with enough force to crush a windpipe. Yondu starts to whistle, but one of the Asgardians manages to get a left hook in against his jaw, and then the scrum starts in earnest.

Bar fights.

Peter loves bar fights.

It's cultural.

The fight is over sadly quickly, because Gamora is frightening as hell, he'll give her that, though Peter has the satisfaction of cracking his bar stool on the head of the guy whom had stolen his blaster. He grabs it back as the Asgardian slumps down, unconscious, and after a moment's pause, unbuckles and pulls off the ley gauntlet, fitting it onto his own hand. In his peripheral vision, he sees Yondu philosophically going through the pockets of the Asgardian who had been in charge, even as Gamora crouches on the bar table, eyes narrowed and scanning the gathered crowd.

"Time to get out of here?" Peter guesses. There are angry murmurs all around them, though no one's yet thought to join in. Gamora tends to have that sort of dampening effect on people.

"When the two of you are finished looting the fallen," Gamora says dryly.

"Victors, spoils," Yondu regretfully straightens up, however, and nudges the unconscious body over with his foot. "Right then. Let's leg it. Kraglin can catch up."

"Lead the way," Peter agrees, which is as far as he gets - Yondu abruptly staggers back a step, blinking, clapping a hand to his shoulder, then he crumples. Startled, Peter freezes up, even as Gamora snarls "Down!" and darts off the table. Peter has just about enough time to get to Yondu's side, to see a slow pulse, then something stings him high on his shoulder, and the ground's coming up to meet him-
Chapter 6

I.

Waking up in some sort of dungeon/cell/brig is a sadly common part of Peter's life to date, and as such, he merely unsticks his face from the stone, rolls onto his back, and rubs his eyes with a grimace. His shoulder aches, but other than that, everything seems to be present, unbroken and correct.

Cautiously, Peter opens his eyes, pushing himself up. He's in a one person cell, with a - damn - some sort of force field wall that's keeping him caged in, but at least there's a cot and sanitary facilities. Across a narrow corridor is another cell, where Yondu's already sitting back on his cot, shoulders against the wall, whistling tonelessly.

Peter internalises a sigh. He knows this mood too. It means that someone's confiscated Yondu's arrow, the one thing that Yondu loves most in the world other than his own skin, and there was going to be hell to pay.

"You're up. Good." Yondu breaks off to eye Peter over briskly. "Good news is, they didn't get your friend or Kraglin. Bad news is, this is a damn good security field."

Peter nods. Yondu has a great many get-out-custody gadgets secreted around his person, some even subdermal, and if he's not yet busted out of dodge, it means they're well and truly stuck for now.

"Any idea why we got bagged?"

"What, d'you think this is some sort of doco? The bad guy walks on in and vomits his plans for 'verse domination all over us? Yeah, fucking right."

Peter pulls himself onto the cot, a little glumly. The bastards had even taken his powerboots. Assholes. The cold from the dull metal floor seeps right up his thermafleece socks, and he pulls his feet up awkwardly under him. Just his luck. "I suppose if we sit tight we'll be rescued sooner or later." How big could Asgard be?

"'Gamora will find us,'" Yondu rolls his eyes, once their captors are gone. "Well, there's still-"

"Don't say it," Yondu interrupts, with a scowl, and Peter subsides irritably.

"Those guys were the spacer Asgardians, weren't they? That means we're probably still somewhere..."

"Gamora will find us,'" Yondu rolls his eyes, once their captors are gone.

"Well, there's still-"

"Don't say it," Yondu interrupts, with a scowl, and Peter subsides irritably.

"Those guys were the spacer Asgardians, weren't they? That means we're probably still somewhere..."
near Ván. If we're missed, surely the other Ravagers at least will still know where to find us. We told them where we were going."

"We told them that we were going to see whether this floating rock had any fun worth having," Yondu corrects. "Not the same thing."

"And besides," Gamora pipes up mildly, "We're just about to jump offworld."

"What." Peter sits up sharply.

Gamora knocks her hand briefly against the wall separating her cell and Yondu's. "We're in the brig of a ship. Haven't you noticed?"

"Well, no, actually!" Asgardian ships had to have the best buffer systems in the 'verse. Or maybe just their brigs did. "Holy shit."

"That's fan-fucking-tastic," Yondu growls, and sinks heavily onto his cot.

"Did you at least manage to get off some sort of cry for help? A mention, even? A peep?"

"No," Gamora shifts her legs up underneath her into a meditative position, still looking utterly untroubled by their predicament. "I told you that this would end in tears."

"I guess if we're jumping offworld, and they haven't caught K-"

"-then," Peter adds sulkily, "They've probably given up on him, he can lie low for a bit and then-"

"And then let everyone know that we're gone? Yes, fucking great idea," Yondu drawls, "So now they only have to search all of the 'verse, and that's assuming Kraglin even knows we're offworld, and we're also assuming that Kraglin isn't dead or shoved out of an airlock somewhere."

"You're such a ray of sunshine today, Yondu."

"It's not everyday that I get caught and shifted offworld to an unknown destination with all my implants and trackers and gadgets deactivated. That might have a rather negative impact on my mood right now, boy."

"It could be worse," Gamora notes mildly.

"Oh? Do tell," Yondu mutters.

"We could be dead."

Peter rubs a hand over his face, even as Yondu says, evenly, "You're not making me feel better here."

"Or tortured. Or have our fingernails pulled off. Or."

"Yes, thank you, we get the idea," Peter says acidly, and Gamora's mouth quirks up briefly at the edges. Peter has the sudden awful sensation that he has been a bad influence on Gamora after all, and sighs.

"You didn't mention the part where we're nowhere to be found when Quill here has to get hitched," Yondu adds, folding his arms under his head. "Interstellar war kicks off, two out of the four civilised
trade-friendly great intergalactic empires destroy each other, then the Brood or the Badoon take over and eat everyone."

"Yes, well, if we wanted to look at the absolute worst that could happen," Peter scowls. "Thank you, Yondu."

"You're welcome."

"That possibility seems unlikely," Gamora says optimistically. "If they wanted civil war, then they would have murdered you, and perhaps set it up to make it look as though Thor had been the culprit, and then-"

"What makes you think that isn't in the works, girl?" Yondu interrupts. "This was a kidnapping of opportunity, after all. They're probably still deciding what to do with us. Being pitched out of an airlock or having our fingernails pulled out and then fed to us is probably still in the works."

"He gets this way when people confiscate his arrow," Peter tells Gamora in a stage whisper, and Gamora rolls her eyes. 

II.

Peter usually likes being offworld. Give him space, the great, vast emptiness of space, a good ship and his mixtape anytime. Settlers could keep their planets and their natural grav.

Save for the very first time he was nabbed off Earth, however, Peter has never been locked in a spacer brig with no idea where he's headed or what's about to happen to him before, and it's an unnerving experience. He had thought a healthy degree of pants-wetting fear would be part of it all, just like the first time, but Peter hadn't really expected boredom to be the worst of this particular experience.

Two days of it and he's all but climbing up the walls. The food gets delivered to them through some sort of weird automated golem thing, they see none of the crew, and there's nothing, absolutely nothing in hell to do but talk to Gamora or Yondu. After three days, Yondu takes to sulking, however, sullenly refusing to respond to either Gamora or Yondu, and after four, even Gamora takes to 'meditating' instead of answering Peter's 'inane' questions.

So he tries singing, but after the fifth day, Yondu tells him mildly that if he hears 'another peep' out of Peter, Yondu would personally 'twist his head off' when he next gets the chance, and a wounded look at Gamora had only gotten Peter a blank expression in return. So Peter spends the sixth day sleeping, or trying to, and when he wakes up, he's on a honest-to-Gods stone floor, lying on what is, weirdly enough, hay.

He's also looking right up into Yondu's blue craggy face, and when he yelps, Yondu snorts and straightens up. "Prince Charming's awake."

"Am I in hell?" Peter groans, rolling over, and gets prodded in the small of his back for his trouble.

"Don't be so krutacking melodramatic."

"We were transferred planetside," Gamora observes, rather unnecessarily. Peter pushes himself up, just in time to see Gamora clamber up a stone wall, grasping the metal-barred window and peering outside. "No biosphere. Looks like an agri planet. Not at a high tech tier at that. Can't tell where we are."

"Lemme see that." Yondu stalks over, and Gamora obligingly shimmies back down, stepping aside.
Yondu tries a couple of times to imitate Gamora's prehensile climb, gives up, and glowers over at Peter. "Well? Are you going to fucking give me a leg up or what, boy?"

"I hate you so much," Peter tells him, and ends up having to precariously brace Yondu's weight up as Yondu mashes a knee against his cheek and hauls himself higher for a better look.

"Hn." Yondu goes thoughtfully silent for a moment. "See that brace of stars. We're still, I do think, in Asgardian territory."

"No... shit..." Peter growls, "Seeing as I don't think we entered warp... or a relay... or an interstellar jump..."

"And you're suddenly an expert on Asgardian tech, are you?"

"Well, if you're... an expert on Where The Hell we are, then which... goddamned Asgardian planet are we on?"

"It's an agri planet, like Gamora said," Yondu ignores how Peter grunts and wavers a little, shoulders straining. "I take back what I said about Asgard not being self-sufficient. It probably sourced out all its farms and manufacturing to offshoot worlds under its direct control, and maybe it just 'ports or flies in what it needs."

"So... are you done looking... yet?" Peter growls, "Because you're not... getting any... fucking lighter... Yondu..."

"You know," Yondu tells him, without moving a fucking inch, "You really take after your father sometimes-"

The rest of Yondu's words drop into a hiss as Peter abruptly jerks away, but unfortunately, the Ravager captain still manages to land on his feet, dusting himself off and smirking. "Bullshit," Peter glares at him. "You've met my father? You've never mentioned that to me before."

"I didn't meet him," Yondu corrects, "I got a transmission from him. No visual. Lots of credits though. So we listened."

"So how do you know that I'm like him?"

"Because," Yondu says dryly, "Even in the short space of time that we communicated with your father, Kraglin and I were convinced that King J-Son was, quite possibly, the biggest fucking jackass we had ever had the pleasure of encountering, and even with payment up front, it didn't sit fucking well with us to have to hand over some kid to him, all right?"

"But... that..." Peter blinks.

"Sure, don't get us wrong," Yondu continues, "If he had paid us more credits we probably would have handed you over anyway, maybe. Considerably more credits. But like we said, we sort of got used to having you around, and partway across the 'verse to Spartax we decided he could either pay more to get us to swallow our misgivings or he could go krutack himself."

"Wow." Peter says slowly. "I'm not sure whether to thank you or punch you in the mouth."

"See," Yondu raises an eyebrow at Gamora, who remains carefully expressionless, "That's the sort of hereditary attitude problem I was talking about. When you think about it, this Earther boy is the closest thing I got to a son-"
"-oh my God-

"-and I don't have to take this sort of attitude from him."

"Yondu," Peter notes, rubbing his face, "You know, you guys also taught me everything that there was to know about being a total asshole."

"You're welcome. Now do you want a leg up or not? Before you start bitching and whining about not getting a turn."

It takes a bit of clambering, and many curses from Yondu in a few intergalactic dialects, but Peter manages to pull himself up after a couple of attempts. He had been expecting - well, he wasn't particularly sure what he had been expecting, but when Peter looks outside, he has to scrub his eyes to check that he isn't dreaming.

"We're on Earth."

"No we're fucking not, use your fucking eyes and check the star alignments," Yondu says immediately.

"I meant," Peter says irritably, "We're on a planet that looks like Earth in the middle-fucking-ages, all right? We're in a fucking castle, what the fuck, and I'm looking at what looks like a fucking corn field." Except it was a little more orange than what Peter had thought it would be.

"Oh is that what it is? Funny looking plants."

"We're on Vanahem," Gamora offers suddenly. "One of the nine core realms of Yggdrasil. Three of the core realms have similar climates, similar fauna, because of Asgardian terraforming. Asgard, Vanahem and Midgard - Earth."

Peter manages to scramble down with little help from Yondu. He checks the exit - sadly, unlike the rest of the medieval setup, there's a stasis field. He tries to peer around it for as much as he can, but there's nothing much more than a strip of stone corridor, as far as Peter can tell.

"What's on Vanahem?" Yondu asks, by the sounds of it sitting down on one of the cots.

"Didn't you research Asgard or something?" Peter asks, glancing over his shoulder.

"Nope. Ravagers don't usually operate in Asgardian space, you know that, boy. Other than that one time that we jumped in to pick you up. They don't have a sense of humour about people trying to creatively make a dishonest living."

"So you took a Bifrost relay in here without research?"

"Sometimes you gotta live life on the edge, if the promise of a big payout is involved," Yondu shrugs. "We researched Asgard - what little's on the top and gray datanets anyway. We nosed around on the few days that we were there. Never heard much about no agri planets. And if the Asgardians are smart, they probably keep that on the quiet. Take over a planet like this, and you'll have that shiny rock by the throat."

"... Suddenly," Peter says slowly, "I'm not entirely surprised that whomever nabbed us has a base here."

"I heard a little about it from Thanos," Gamora murmurs. "Thanos was using one of the Jotun to acquire an artefact. He spoke briefly about Vanahem to the Other. It's populated by the Vanir."
They're a peaceful subrace of the Asgardians.

Yondu perks up visibly. "What artefact?"

"Yondu." Peter groans.

"Something that the Mad Titan might want is something that is worth a pretty penny elsewhere, boy."

"I am not certain. I was... elsewhere through much of it." Gamora averts her eyes. "He was unsuccessful, regardless." This time, when she looks up again, Gamora offers Peter a quick smile. "Because of Earthers, I heard."

"Really?" Peter asks, mystified. "How even?" Humans - normal, non-spacer, non-half-Spartax humans - had somehow managed to fight off a Thanos-aided Asgardian problem?

"Nah, can't be," Yondu grunts. "They must've gotten help in from somewhere. Nova Centurion, maybe. That crazy fucker likes to jaunt around the universe, sticking his krutacking huge nose into everything. Probably why he was missing in action when his actual homeworld came under attack. Heroes, eh?"

"Earthers can be surprising," Gamora notes, and this time, her smile is very nearly a grin.

"That boy's Half Earther. And all Ravager," Yondu retorts.

They argue this matter over desultorily for a while, and when Yondu's in the middle of making some strange and circular argument about 'squishy' Earthers, he cuts himself off, narrowing his eyes. After a moment, Peter hears it too. Guards. And a lot of them.

No Asgardians this time, or maybe not: just odd, black-cowled figures, gloved and masked. They're armed with what look like really heavy duty phase rifles of a design that Peter's never seen before, though he sees Gamora start to frown as they're marched out into the stone corridor and shoved at a quick step through the mostly empty dungeons.

"It really is a fucking stone castle," Peter marvels, as they get pushed out into a wider stone corridor, this one walled on one side, overlooking Vanaheim on the other, the only windows in that part of the stone wall small, slotted windows, as though made for arrows. The nearest black figure merely jams the muzzle of his rifle into Peter's spine, however, and snaps back into position even as Peter yelps in pain. "Ow, hey, easy on the goods!"

"Shut up," Gamora whispers, in a low hiss. "We're in a hell of a lot more trouble than I thought."

"What - ow," Peter gets prodded again, and he sulkily keeps his peace as they're taken up a narrow flight of steps and then through another interminable corridor. They don't encounter any other occupants of the castle, which is a little weird, and more than a little creepy, and Peter's actually, really starting to worry by the time they get marched out into a large hall, some sort of throne room, with a raised platform near the end with a high chair.

Gamora sucks in a harsh breath at the sight of the black-cowled figure on the throne. Whoever it is seems tall, and thin, as tall as Thor, narrow-shouldered, with gold-limmed black high collared vestments and strange, closely-fitting enamel armor like scales down his arms and legs. A sweeping, ragged jet black drape flows from his shoulders to pool at his booted feet as he uncurls to his feet, using some sort of weird golden spear... thing... as a prop.

As he steps closer, Peter notices, with a sick lurch, that what little of the skin he can see under the
cowl is milk-white, the jaw too wide, the teeth, razor sharp.

"Gamora," the black-cowled figure says, in a voice like grating steel on slate, sibilant, inhuman. "What a pleasure."

"Corvus Glaive," Gamora says stiffly. "The pleasure is yours."

"... Frenemy of yours?" Peter suggests.

"He is one of the Five, the leaders of the Black Order," Gamora's hands clench tightly. "Thanos' elite. Corvus is his herald. His blade. His right hand."

"Your father is very... disappointed," Corvus notes, his inflection unchanging. "In yourself, and in Nebula. He is not oft used to disappointment, and will be... pleased by your return to Sanctuary. Take her away."

"Hey!" Peter objects, as two of the black figures grab Gamora by the arms. She snarls, twisting, slamming her heel into the knee of the first, and using momentum to whirl the first guard into the second, but even as she dives clear, a third guard's rifle starts to charge up.

With a roar, Yondu barrels into the guard, the rifle discharging into a fourth, and then he's grappling for the weapon even as Gamora hesitates.

"Hold your fire!" Corvus barks, "Our master wants her alive!"

"Fucking run," Peter yells at Gamora, and she sets her jaw and takes off, even as Peter launches himself at Corvus with a snarl.

Sadly - and okay, maybe Drax has a point there about Peter's state of combat-readiness - this doesn't last long: Corvus moves like a striking viper, sidestepping his charge and hammering punches into precise points against Peter's side and back. Peter drops like a stone, his body nerveless and bright with pain, in time to see one of the guards knock Yondu out with the butt of his rifle.

"Get after her," Corvus hisses, and more boots leave his line of sight. Peter has just enough time to feel relieved before a bony, far-too-cold hand clenches itself in his coat collar and hauls him up with insane strength, until he's eye-level with Corvus, and if he could shiver, he would've. Under the shadow of Corvus' hood, his face is skull-thin, stretched over inhuman tendons, sunken in folds, his eyes bright with vicious madness.

"Bring the Zatoan back to his cell, I have no use for him at present." Corvus' eyes narrow, very slightly. "The Spartax Prince and I have much to discuss."
Chapter 7

I.

The other Black Order guards leave Peter alone with Corvus, which is, Peter has to admit, kinda depressing. If he hadn't had firsthand knowledge of how fast Corvus was, he would probably have tried to leg it - but now he's propped in a chair, still mostly numb all over, while the weird bat-faced...thing...curls claw-like fingers over the shaft of the golden spear, staring at Peter as though he's studying an insect.

"What's with the golden spear?" Peter asks, trying not to feel creeped out. "Were you once Asgardian or something? What's with this galactic system?"

"Not Asgardian, no. But once... a denizen of one of their 'core' realms, yes." Sharp, clawed fingertips tap briefly over the golden scythe-like blade at one end of the spear-thing. "A very long time ago. Particularly by the way your mother's kind counts time."

"...Did everyone know whom my Dad was except me?" Peter grumbles.

A rasping, papery sound curls out from under the black cowl, and it takes Peter one hair-raisingly creepy moment to realize that Corvus is laughing. "The Spartax Empire is the oldest of the so-called Great Empires, Peter Quill. Thanos follows its... progress... with great interest. Particularly that of its royal House."

"Aw shucks, if I'd known, we would've invited Thanos to my wedding, except, y'know, he's kinda unpopular with some of the guests of honour-"

"Regardless," Corvus interrupts, "Your presence promises to solve a rather intractable problem that Thanos has been facing recently. There is something kept within Asgard that my Master wishes to possess, but we had no means of cracking their security. No leverage. Until now."

Corvus curls the sharp edge of the scythe blade a hand's breadth away from Peter's neck, and Peter tries not to make it look as though he's briefly stopped breathing. "Uh, if you think that Asgard's going to cough up some sort of galactic treasure for me, you're mistaken. I don't think Odin's feeling too hot about the wedding, to be honest."

"Perhaps not. But your Father may leverage him in turn." Corvus taps his sharpened claws on the haft of the spear again, in a skittering sound, then he draws the spear away. "Or he may not, by which case, perhaps with a few... nudges here and there, we may be able to incite a war. During the confusion, things... do go missing."

"Well, so, if it's me you want," Peter says hopefully, "Maybe you can let the others go. I mean, what do you need of that Zatoan guy anyway-"

"The Black Order disposes of things that they do not need."

"-uuh, that is to say, you totally do need that Zatoan guy," Peter adds hastily, "Because, uh, if you want an expert on shiny, shiny artefact stuff, you just need to talk to Yondu. He's, a, gold mine of information about shiny stuff. That Thanos might like."

"You are a very curious creature," Corvus says clinically, the way someone would say 'that mutant two-headed moth is very interesting'. Figures.

"One does have to resort to false names to deal with Asgardians," Corvus inclines his head. "I have been... involved, with Asgard, since Loki failed to acquire the Tesseract. It is a dreary assignment. A game of patience, if you will."

"Maybe you could ask your boss for a vacation?" Peter tries. "How the hell did you encourage a whole bunch of Asgardians to work for you?"

Corvus laughs again, his whispery, papery laugh. "Where there is inequality, there is greed. Where there is greed, there is opportunity. And for a species that will live effectively forever, there is a great deal of greed." At Peter's blank look, Corvus adds, a little impatiently, "Imagine this, Peter Quill. You are a farmer. You farm and till the land for your betters, for eighty years. What do you expect to do after?"

"Well I guess," Peter frowns a little, "Maybe have a better farm, and kick up my heels somewhere and retire, and leave it to any unlucky offspring?"

"Imagine then, if you will, the problems that arise when your lifespan runs into the very centuries. When a very rigid class system creates a very stratified society where your only advancement is to enter the military - and even that is a special kind of prison. The weapons they use, you see." Sharp fingers tap against the staff. "They are leashes. Manipulators. Asgard is a society that has existed for thousands of centuries. It is well into its decay."

"Then I guess maybe you guys could leave it alone? Since it's decaying anyway. It's going to be gone soon, Thanos is immortal, sooner or later whatever shiny treasure you're looking for will be yours," Peter suggests hopefully. He's an optimistic person.

Corvus starts to laugh his papery, whispery laugh. "Do you not know what the Tesseract is, Peter Quill?"

"...No? The expert on shiny stuff is-"

"You held one of its brothers on Xandar," Corvus continues, his sharp-toothed grin widening unsettlingly. "It is one of the Infinity Stones."

Oh.

Well, fuck.

When Peter stiffens, Corvus adds, harsh and soft, "I propose that we help each other, Spartax Prince. You wish to live - you and your friend Yondu. I wish to have the Stone. Help me acquire it, and I will even put in a word for you with Thanos. He is... practical in many ways. It is not wise to bear the brunt of a grudge from the most powerful being in the universe."

"Can I have a few days to think about it?" Peter asks, trying to sound reasonable but probably sounding panicky. "I'm half-human, you know, and we Earthers are kinda, well, some days I wake up and I can't decide whether to have sweetener with my kaffen or kaffen with my sweetener-"

"Three days," Corvus decides, and at no signal that Peter can see, a row of the black guards sweep back into the throne room. "Return the Prince to the cells."

"If I had nicer rooms I might be more inclined to be helpful," Peter points out, with what he hopes is a winning grin and not a grimace.
"Do not try my patience, Peter Quill. You have three days."

II.

"An Infinity Stone," Yondu repeats, when Peter grudgingly relates the conversation to him. Yondu's hardheaded, and Peter's unsurprised that the Zatoan Captain's woken up from his beating with nothing more than complaints of a mild headache and a bad mood.

"I thought these things were meant to be rare," Peter grumbles. "We just dealt with one of those things! It seems to be fucking raining Infinity Stones in my life right now."

Yondu snorts. "Think, boy. Asgard is one of the Great empires. A trading empire at that, and an old one. I would've been surprised if they hadn't had at least one Infinity Stone in their treasury." He rubs his hands together and grins toothily. "Well now, looks like things are paying off."

"How, may I ask?" Peter asks dryly. "I've got three days before we're either rescued, or hung, drawn and quartered."

"Your friend got away," Yondu points out. "If there's a galactic comm unit on this planet, she's probably on her way there right now, pinging a message across to Asgard. We'll be out of here faster than you can say-"

"Peter!" Peter looks around wildly for a moment before he glances up to the window. Hanging against it, her hands tight around the bars, Gamora peers in at them, her expression briefly anxious before settling into mild relief. "Still alive, then."

"... never mind," Yondu rubs a hand slowly over his face. "Your friends are just as fucking... special as you are, boy. Gods."

"Concussion makes him really grumpy," Peter explains, when Gamora frowns at them. "But seriously, Gamora, shouldn't you be, I don't know, at least a few miles away by now?"

"This is the last place that they'll think to look," Gamora points out reasonably.

"Okay, that makes sense... no it doesn't!," Peter groans. "Gamora, I've got three days before my ass is toast. And I like my ass."

"What is toast?"

"Just get away from here and find a comms unit," Yondu growls, slumping against the wall. "Preferably without dying first. Or getting caught."

"You know that Asgardian artefact you were talking about?" Peter chips in hastily, before Yondu manages to piss off Gamora and she's never seen again, "It's an Infinity Stone. Corvus wants to use me to get it. He's given me three days to think about it."

"Corvus needs you to get the stone," Gamora notes. "Even if you express disinterest after three days, it's unlikely that he will dispose of his only means of leverage."

True. "He might dispose of Yondu, though."

"Is that so great a loss?"

"Now see here girl-" Yondu narrows his eyes.

"-and maybe some non-essential bits. Like my legs." Peter shudders. "Or more. He might mail me
back to Asgard in bits."

"Asgardian med tech is sufficiently advanced enough to graft any amputated limbs back upon you should that be necessary." Gamora says comfortably. "Or provide cybernetic replacements."

"Gamora!"

"I've explored the surroundings," Gamora continues, looking briefly puzzled at Peter's exasperation. "There was a Vanir village southwest. It's deserted, not desecrated. I presume the Vanir have retreated somewhere. I could try to find them."

"Or not. Corvus said something about Asgardian lifespans and dissent, I forget, I wasn't really listening," Peter admits, because, all right, maybe he does have a bit of an attention span problem, especially when faced with a spectacularly creepy bat-faced sharp-toothed weirdo. "Anyway, the Vanir might not be friendly. You should be careful."

"In that case, this building should have a comm unit," Gamora decides. "I will find it. Stay safe, Peter."

"No, Gamora, wait, that's a really bad idea... oh fuck," Peter mutters, as Gamora slips out of sight.

"Maybe you should come back and live with me and the boys," Yondu suggests. "Your new friends can't be good for your brain. I know that rebelling and running away is a phase that kids go through-"

"Yondu, for the last time, I'm not a kid any longer."

"-but sometimes, you've got to suck it up and come back to the fold," Yondu adds blithely, ignoring him. "Preferably before sustaining any permanent brain damage."

"I'm sure that Gamora knows what she's doing," Peter says unenthusiastically, and settles back down on a spare cot, with a sigh.

"Is that why she got caught the first time?" Yondu drawls.

"You never like any of my friends! Wait. Why am I even having this conversation with you?"

"It's a long time in coming," Yondu notes. "We probably should have had this conversation around the time when Kraglin and I explained sex."

Peter groans, burying his face briefly in his hands. "Thanks. I think I'd actually even managed to forget about that conversation until now."

"T'was something you had to know about," Yondu points out cheerfully. "'Bout how if you stuck it to a Kree girl with no protection you'd probably end up with a bad rash at most, but if you, say, ate out a Xarkashi female you'd probably have to-"
"Yeah? Your plan against the Dark Aster, if I recall, involved shooting a hole in the side of the ship and ramming one of our ravager spacers through it. Sure. Real subtle."

"You went along with it."

Yondu shrugs. "Sometimes unsubtle works."

III.

Gamora is nowhere to be seen over the next couple of days, which doesn't help Yondu's mood, and Peter's torn between impatience, sheer boredom, and worry. Surely Gamora had become Thanos' favourite daughter through sheer competence. Surely she couldn't have been caught and shipped off - or worse (?) killed. Maybe she's just lying low.

And she's right. Peter's pretty sure that even if he stalls past the deadline, he won't be killed. Maybe he can talk Corvus out of killing Yondu as well.

As such, Peter's still somewhat confident when they're marched out by now familiar-looking black guards over to the throne room. He's at least a week late for a bath, he feels sticky and rumpled and somewhat disgusting, but at least Peter's fairly sure that he's not going to die. Or anyone.

"You've had your time," Corvus starts, when they're marched into the throne room. A large vidlink screen has been set up, suspended a little haphazardly over what looks like a Kree-tech intergalactic comm unit, and Peter tries not to look too relieved.

"Yep. And seeing as it's a choice between us dying, or me helping you, I guess I'll be helping you," Peter says blandly. "What do you want me to do? Talk to my dad? Talk to Thor? Odin?"

Corvus studies Peter thoughtfully for a long moment, then he starts to laugh again, papery and soft. "Did you think that I would trust your word, Spartax Prince? It was not time that I gave you, Quill. Gamora would not abandon her... friends. Not unless she knows it to be a trap. The bait could not know that it was bait."

Peter's heart sinks. That had been a little too easy. "Where is she?"

"The Black Order is closing in on her location. But that is no longer your concern."

"It's totally still my concern- ow," Peter winces as one of the guards behind him nudges him pointedly with the muzzle of his rifle. Corvus ignores the interruption, watching the vidlink screen as a black-robed tech works with the comm unit, and there's a brief crackle of static before Peter gets a holo image of what looks like a Kree-tech intergalactic war room.

Odin's bang in the centre, with Thor by his side, and Peter isn't prepared for the weird rush of gratified relief that he feels when Thor looks sharply from Corvus to Peter and then relaxes, giving Peter a tight, small nod.

To Odin's right is a human-looking man who looks rather startlingly like Kevin Bacon, if Kevin Bacon was a little taller, broader along the shoulders, had a grizzled beard and liked to play dress up in weird rippled red and storm gray robes, Arabian Nights style. Kevin Bacon (?)'s gray eyes sweep Corvus, Peter, Yondu and the room with a flat, surgical disinterest before he looks back to Corvus, straightening up. Behind Kevin Bacon, there's a tight huddle of other human-like men and women, all in the same red and gray robes.

"Odin All-Father," Corvus greets. "And King J-Son."
"What," Peter bursts out, wide-eyed. "I thought that the Spartax were balls of light! That guy looks like Kevin Bacon!"

"Paradimensional beings manipulate light," Corvus drawls, his clawed fingers curling tightly over his spear. "The Spartax allow others only to see what they wish to see."

On one hand, that meant that his mom certainly hadn't been tripping balls whenever she had started on her 'you look like your Dad' spiel. On the other hand... this was even more creepy. But still. "Long time no see, Dad," Peter says, and despite the situation, despite himself, he's unable to keep sarcasm or resentment out of his tone.

J-Son ignores him, glancing at Corvus, then to Odin. "You have the Black Order within your midst, All-Father. That is unwise."

"Believe me, it is a situation that I intend to rectify at the earliest convenient time," Odin says tiredly. "Corvus, what are your demands?"

"My Master has professed an interest in one of your toys, All-Father," Corvus says, in his toneless, whispery voice. "It sits in your vault. Before Asgard began its first step into the stars, it had lain dormant in your planet, part of the birth of your system. It was part of your YMIR project, the key to your civilisation surviving the supernova."

"The Tesseract," Odin frowns. "I should have known. Thanos is overreaching himself, Corvus. The Infinity Stones will never be within his reach."

"Perhaps not before. But now... perhaps matters are different." Corvus steps to Peter's side, and tilts up his chin with the scythed end of his spear, the blade so sharp that Peter hardly feels the sting before the shallow cut starts to bleed wet over his throat. In the war room, Thor clenches his fists, but Odin grasps his wrist, and the Crown Prince subsides, his expression still dark with fury. "I propose a trade."

"Be reasonable, Corvus," Odin narrows his eyes. "Asgard is home to many treasures. Would Thanos be content with a-"

"No trinkets. No playthings," Corvus interrupts. "Give me the Tesseract. Or your means to peace and unity will bleed to death on my boots."

"Listen, Corvus Glaive of the Black Order," J-Son says, his tone as flat and as cold as before. "Peter Quill is my heir, and he is the Crown Prince of the Spartax Empire. It is true that I intended to create a second generation of peace through our empires through a renewed alliance."

"But if you think," he adds sharply, when Corvus seems to start to speak, "That it is, in any way, reasonable to trade a single life, or even a hundred thousand lives, for the likes of an Infinity Stone, then you are as mad as your master. This negotiation is at an end."

"Give me the Tesseract," Corvus snarls, "Or I will gut your son. He will take days to die. His agony will not end until his last breath. This I promise, in my master's name."

"You place too much worth on your bargaining piece, creature," J-Son retorts, his tone going flat and cold again. "Return Peter Quill alive, or face destruction. Those are my terms."

"Not acceptable."

"Then do your worst," J-Son says shortly, and waves his hand. The transmission terminates, and Peter's aware, all too starkly, that the pressure on his throat hasn't eased, that he's probably going to
die here, surrounded by crazies, that-

"Told you," Yondu mutters. "What a big fucking jackass."
Chapter 8

I.

"Well, this is awkward," Peter says, trying to sound blasé but probably failing. He has a terrible mental image of accidentally slipping and cutting his own throat on Corvus' blade, and tries not to breathe out too loudly in relief when Corvus lowers the scythed end.

"Tell Kys to proceed as planned," Corvus instructs the closest guard, who nods and scurries off. "Not an optimal outcome, Prince."

"Could say that, what with you threatening to kill me and all, which I would think is totally a non-optimal outcome for me," Peter agrees warily, wondering whether he should try to run for it. "You don't seem too pissed off. Or is that a Black Order thing?"

Talk fast. Stay calm. Maybe Corvus would slip up. Hopefully without cutting Peter's throat in the process. Peter's also very attached to his throat.

"I have been carrying out Thanos' will for longer than your civilisation has known fire, Earther," Corvus points out. "Always know the mind of your opponent before you come to a 'negotiating' table. J-Son is renowned in the Spartax Empire for being singularly... inflexible."

"You wanted the Spartax to declare war on you?" Peter asks, blinking. "What? Surely you didn't need me for that. You guys probably just needed to show up in their general vicinity, and, I don't know, lob a couple of grenades-"

"The Spartax would not have intervened in another civilisation's 'interior' matters without sufficient provocation. Should we not have captured you, perhaps a direct encounter could have been arranged," Corvus notes.

"So this... wasn't... about the Tesseract?" Peter asks, now utterly confused.

"Surely the concept of having multiple potential schemes in play is not one that is beyond a half-Earther. It has been a very long time since Thanos has had the opportunity to study their strength. And of course Asgard can but do no less, and must also respond in kind."

And leave Asgard open. Peter's heart sinks again. "So, uh, I can go?"

"Unfortunately," Corvus steps back, swinging up his scythed spear, "Your usefulness is at an end."

Peter backs a step involuntarily, until a rifle's shoved up against his spine. As he freezes up beside Yondu, Yondu straightens, digging his thumbs into his belt loops. "Well, boy," Yondu says wryly, "I always said that you were going to be the death of me."

"Sorry," Peter murmurs, and he means it. "You guys were my family for most of my life. A fucked up family, sure, but you guys were there for me."

"Son," Yondu begins, then he hesitates. There's been a slithering, sliding sound, like metal swept across the ground, and something streaks into view against the floor, out between them both.

It's Yondu's arrow.

Yondu drops to the floor, and Peter's a split second behind him, rolling with the fall even as he hears
Yondu's shrill and lilting whistle, commanding the arrow to start its deadly work. He uncurls in time to grab a pulse rifle off the nearest punctured Black Order guard, whirling to fire at Corvus, who dodges, hisses, then leaps backwards a shot from behind Peter earths itself in the ground where Corvus had been standing.

"You're late," Peter calls to Gamora, painfully relieved, as she levels her rifle for another shot. Behind her, Yondu's arrow stitches through a row of guards with surgical precision, leaving an orange energy trail behind it as it darts towards Corvus.

Corvus growls, holding out a clawed hand, then abruptly clenching it - the arrow drops in mid-flight, to Peter's shock: a localised military-grade EMP? - then he's backpedaling hastily as Corvus leaps at him, spear fanning down in a deadly arc.

Gamora is there to meet it, her probably-stolen blade bared as she drives him back a step in a flurry of strikes. Corvus hisses. "Step away, Thanos' daughter," Corvus whispers, as he disengages, crouched. "You, Thanos wants returned alive."

"That puts you at a disadvantage, then," Gamora retorts, stalking her prey like a cat, and she strikes again, aggressive as a viper, blows ringing down against Corvus' upraised spear. Deadly as Gamora is, however, it's instantly obvious to Peter that Corvus is better, faster; Corvus ignores wounds, doesn't bleed, and he's only seemingly on the defensive, parrying Gamora's blows with deft swings and feints.

Then it's over as quickly as it had begun - Corvus forces Gamora onto the defensive, and she falls for a feint: as quickly as it had come, Corvus reverses the swing of his scythe, catching Gamora high above her right knee with the scimitar-sharp blade and viciously tearing Gamora off balance, the sharp metal puncturing through flesh and bone.

Gamora shrieks, somehow managing to drag herself free, even as Peter snarls something and fires, ignoring the heat sink of the pulse rifle as it starts to burn hot under his fingers. He manages to catch Corvus high up on his shoulder, then another pulse snaps the monster's neck sharply and unnaturally back, breaking his spine.

"Fucking bastard," Peter spits, as Corvus crumbles, and rushes over to Gamora. "Hey, hang in there, I'll find a pressure kit, we'll-"

"Pull me up, pull me up, we have to go," Gamora's already ripping a chunk of black fabric off the nearest fallen guard to bind her wound. "Corvus can't be killed!"

As Peter watches, in slow horror, the bones and spine in the crumbled body start to correct itself, twisting with sharp clicks into shape, and Corvus starts to rise, at an utterly unnatural angle, like a white-limbed spider under black cloth and-

With a grunt, Yondu brings the scythed spear arcing down, and the long curved blade skewers Corvus' torso neatly to the stone floor like a pinned butterfly. Corvus hisses and shrills his rage, clawing at the blade, even as Yondu grabs his inert arrow off the ground and hurries over to Gamora, hauling her up to her feet and pulling her arm over his shoulder, shoving a looted pistol into her free hand.

"You can shoot?"

Gamora grits her teeth. "Better than you can, Zatoan."

"Fucking prove it then. Know where to go?"
"The Black Order has jump-capable ships in the hangar down two levels and east."

"Well?" Yondu raises an eyebrow at Peter, who's still staring with silent horror at the writhing form pinned with his own scythe. "That's not going to hold him for long. Are we gonna move or what?"

"Shouldn't we... call Asgard and tell them not to bother rescuing us? Something gives me the feeling that Corvus is ready for their fleet, and-"

"Fuck 'em," Yondu says succinctly. "They were gonna let us burn. Also, your father is a dick."

There's really nothing that Peter can say to that. "True. Let's just get the hell out of here."

II.

It's slow going down to the hangar, and but for Yondu's arrow coming back online on the hangar level from whatever Corvus had hit it with, they probably wouldn't have made it. Black Order guards and Asgardians alike fell to its silent wake as Yondu stitched the deadly weapon in two sharp loops around them all, even destroying a turret position set close to their right, up against the wall of the compact hangar. The route takes them past the chamber with the rest of their gear, however, which puts Yondu in a good mood, strapping all his gewgaws back under his coat. Peter's just happy to have jetboots and his blasters again.

This part of the castle looks more or less recently built, hollowing out like an ugly gray shell from the fortress proper, devoid of any decoration but functionality. Definitely a Black Order gig, Peter thinks, as they pile into the nearest jump-capable ship on Gamora's direction. Even the ship is ugly, a black funnel-shaped craft fitted with phage cannons tucked under stubby wings, like overripe fruit. It starts up well enough under Yondu's touch, as Peter straps down, and lumbers towards the mouth of the hangar with as little grace as its form.

"Hang in there, Gamora," Peter says anxiously, as Gamora closes her eyes wearily. She's lost a lot of blood. "You did good."

"I won't die from this, Peter," Gamora assures him, though she doesn't open her eyes. "Cybernetic enhancements."

"You look pretty pale to me," Peter disagrees dubiously, as Yondu pulls them up and out of the hangar, into the sky. "Asgardian med tech is meant to be awesome, isn't it? We'll be back soon."

"Should still have tried to find a comm unit," Yondu notes, squinting up at the sky. "But strangely enough, everything worked out."

Gamora sniffs. "It took us... six days to be transported here, on an Asgardian ship. By that measure, had I managed to find a comm unit out in the wilderness of an unfamiliar planet and call for aid, it would have taken days more for aid to come, by which time the both of you would quite likely have been dead. I know the Black Order."

"... Okay, you have a point there," Peter concedes.

"Not particularly," Yondu growls, "The Bifrost relay allows instantaneous intergalactic travel. Aid could have come immediately."

"Assuming that I found a comm unit in the wilderness-"

"Look, it doesn't matter," Peter says hastily. Yondu's like a fucking terrier with a bone when he's grumpy, and Gamora looks like she's at the end of her tether. "We got out, right? We're home free-"
A jarring impact against the glass dome of their stolen ship tears the rest of his words into a yelp, and as he jerks against his seat straps in automatic shock, he looks up to see Corvus perched on the glass, spear raised to swing.

"You're a krutacking jinx, Quill!" Yondu snarls, yanking on the flightstick controls, but even as the ship starts to tilt, Corvus' scythed spear arches down, slicing neatly into steelglass as though it was made of butter.

Peter hesitates in the middle of fumbling for his pulse rifle: pulse beams would probably ricochet back into the flight deck rather than blast out and hit Corvus. Yondu whistles, but Corvus ignores the arrow as it stitches through his chest, somehow maintaining his footing as his spear starts to glow, white-hot-

Then something slams Corvus off their ship even as the glass cracks and shatters, and projected loudly around them, Peter can hear Rocket yelling, "Jump, you idiots, fucking jump!"

Fumbling off the straps of his seat seems to take an eternity, grabbing for Gamora takes another - she's already cut her own, and Yondu's ahead, already leaping off the nose of the ship. Peter hugs Gamora against him and gets a leg up, jumping into open space and trying not to look down as the ship spirals crazily away beneath them - and they're frozen in place, within the golden tractor beam of a sleek gray and gold ship of a delicate make that Peter's never seen before. Asgardian, possibly.

When they land on deck, Peter rolls onto his back with a groan, looking up, just in time to see Drax clambering down from up top and closing a hatch on the roof of the ship, setting down yet another of Rocket's jury-rigged cannon contraptions in a case. He nods at Peter, then frowns as he sees Gamora's injury. "Gamora. You are hurt. There is an adequate medbay on this ship," Drax tells her, and picks her up carefully.

"Drax," Gamora says tiredly, not even resisting, "I never thought that I would ever say this, but I'm really fucking glad to see you."

Peter lies on the deck a little more, until his breathing evens out, then he rolls onto his feet and gets himself to the flight deck. Yondu's already there, clapping hands with Kraglin before strapping himself into a seat, and Peter straps down as they rise up past the stratosphere. This part of the ship's as sleek and as subtly alien as the rest of it, beautiful and minimal, and the control panel that Rocket is manipulating seems to be built of lines of light, like no other interface that Peter's ever seen.

"Thanks for the rescue," Peter offers.

"Don't mention it," Rocket grunts.

"But how the hell did you guys find us so quickly?"

"Got a tracker in your pocket."

"I do?" Peter says incredulously, turning out his pockets. As he'd thought, he has nothing in them - or almost nothing. The Black Order had confiscated everything remotely tech-based, leaving only a slightly crushed... white... flower... "Wait... Really? This?"

In Rocket's lap, still in his pot, Groot waves at him enthusiastically.

"How even?"

"We could dump you back on Vanaheim if you want to test the 'how' and the 'why' of it," Rocket snaps, always on edge when paws deep in unfamiliar new tech, "Or you can sit tight, shut up, and
enjoy the rescue."

"I'll be quiet," Peter offers, injured.

"Good! Kraglin, did you remember if that bit of light was the thrusters? Or was it this bit?"

Yondu sighs. "Couldn't you lot have stolen one of the other ships at the spaceport? The Zatoan one... or even the Sh'iar one-"

"That spaceport? Nah, we didn't break into that one," Rocket says briskly. "Was swarming with crazy and crazier Asgardians."

Yondu raises his eyebrows. "So where did you get this ship?"

"We busted into the Imperial spaceport, obviously."

Peter groans. "So, just confirming, are we going to land in Asgard only to get arrested?"

"Maybe. Haha! That'll be funny." Rocket shoots him a toothy grin over his shoulder. "Hey, that'll solve your problems, won't it? You can't get married in jail."

"... you're welcome back to the fold whenever you get tired of your crazy new friends, Quill," Yondu offers.

III.

"So let me get this straight," Rocket summarises, when they're on autopilot, en-route to Asgard, enjoying a surprisingly good if unidentifiable stew that the ship's replicators had coughed up. "You were kidnapped quite randomly, because of some idiot decision to explore Asgard on the down-low, then the renegade Asgardian leader turned out to be a Black Order General, and then... transported to Vanheim, where the Vanir have possibly been killed or rebelled or gone into hiding, and then Corvus Glaive wanted to trade you for the Tesseract. Which is an Infinity Stone. This can only happen to you, Quill."

"He also wanted to ship Gamora back to Thanos," Peter supplies, with a glance at Gamora. The ship's medbay had been way more advanced that anything Peter had seen, and Gamora had been patched up in no time at all.

Also, the shower facilities were awesome. Peter feels warm, clean, and well-fed, a great deal better than the filth and protein cube diet of the past week and a half.

"And then your dad decides he'll rather let you die than trade you for the stone, which is, I should say, the correct tactical decision-"

"Rocket," Peter protests.

"-although okay, he was kinda a dick about it, but he is your dad."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Then it turns out that Corvus didn't mind, and wanted a fight anyway, and now Asgard and Spartax are going to do a smackdown on his Vanheim HQ, which you guys already busted out of, so it probably won't be much of a fight, so, it looks like we're all good? The day is saved?" Rocket finishes, ears twitching back.

Yondu scrapes his spoon along the edge of his plate, chasing the last of the gravy. "Seems so.
When's the wedding?"

As Peter grimaces, Gamora pipes in, "Nothing is simple with the Black Order, least of all with Corvus. It sounded as though he had... operatives in Asgard itself. Thanos' primary goal would be to acquire the Tesseract. His secondary goals would be investigating Spartax strength... and returning me to Sanctuary."

"That will not happen," Drax rumbles. "Although some day I hope that we all do visit Sanctuary... and bring our curses home to Thanos."

"Sure, attack the Mad Titan, why not," Rocket drawls, even as on the table, Groot waves a little at Drax as though in support.

"Your friends," Yondu shakes his head.

"Enough about my friends," Peter scowls. "My friends saved our asses, all right?"

"Kraglin was there too," Yondu disagrees.

"And the other boys," Kraglin adds. "You didn't think that everyone was going to miss out on the fun of taking over a spaceport, did'ya?"

"Oh God," Peter groans. "Please tell me that Asgard hasn't declared war on the Ravagers or something. You guys were here to attend my wedding, not get outlawed in Asgardian space!"

"Eh," Kraglin grins, unrepentant and toothy. "Worked out fine. You and the boss still have all your bits attached. And it seems we've figured out that Asgard does have something worth stealing and selling."

"That's right," Yondu agrees, even as Peter makes a strangled sound. "An Infinity fucking Stone. Maybe we can get two paydays out of this situation."

Gamora scowls. "You'll have to fight Asgard, Spartax, and the Black Order for that trinket, Yondu."

"Who said we were gonna fight them? Ravagers steal. Most of us know the meaning of subtlety," Yondu shoots Peter a significant, pointed stare.

"All right, we'll... leave you to that then," Peter says dryly, deciding not to dignify Yondu's implication with any further comment. "So what next?"

"S'pose we land in Asgard, fix any outstanding warrants for our arrest, maybe, get you married, if that's still on the table, then get the hell out of dodge and leave them all to their little war," Rocket suggests.

"Great plan, Rocket," Peter says approvingly. He didn't like wars. People tended to get shot by accident. Also, he was certain now that he didn't want to be in the vicinity of his real father for any longer than was truly necessary. Dick.

"Assuming that it's all that simple," Gamora murmurs darkly.

"You know the Black Order best," Yondu decides, with a look at Gamora. "What do you think that they'll do next?"

"What they do best," Gamora stirs her spoon slowly through her bowl of stew, her eyes narrowed and hard. "Sow chaos."
Chapter 9

I.

"That's... not a good sign," Peter suggests, when they surface into the Asgardian imperial spaceport and see no Ravagers in sight. "Right?"

"Don't land," Yondu tells Rocket, frowning as he pulls off the seat strap and stands up, sweeping the spaceport with a critical eye. "Looks like the boys got overwhelmed. Prepare to dive."

"The other Prince Charming's right over there," Rocket tilts his muzzle to his left. "You wanna try diplomacy, or assume that everything's gone to shit?"

Peter squints. That's right. Thor is striding out towards their ship, though his expression's carefully set, and he's wearing the weird red-cape-and-armour getup in the holodeck that Nova Prime had passed to him. No stupid helmet though. That's maybe something. "Can we get audio out?"

"No problem." Rocket sweeps out a paw, curling it in a complex gesture. "All right. You're live."

"This is Peter Quill," Peter says, trying to keep his voice brisk and matter-of-fact. "Are we cleared to land?"

A small grin jumps briefly to Thor's mouth before he goes expressionless again. "Aye. You may land." His voice is dry, almost curt. "Welcome to Asgard. Again."

Rocket makes the same gesture, and snorts. "Wow, what crawled up his ass and died?"

"That is disgusting," Drax observes from the back of the flight deck. "Perhaps surgical measures will be necessary."

"Taking over a spaceport and stealing a ship will probably do that to you," Peter decides, and sighs. Things weren't exactly looking... good. Peter has been arrested across twelve different galactic jurisdictions, sometimes by accident, sometimes through mistake, and he's developed a well-honed instinct for trouble. Right now, he knows there's trouble.

"So... we should leave?" Rocket asks, tail twitching against his thigh. "We could do a half-turn and blast a temporary hole through that containment shield-"

"Nope. Let me off."

"So, we should let you off and then leave?" Rocket drawls, but he grins a sharp-tooth grin. "Kidding. But if I have to rescue us out from within an Asgardian lockup, I'm going to be pissed."

"I guess I should at least try and figure out what happened to the other guys," Peter grumbles, trying not to look at Kraglin or Yondu.

"Just in case," Yondu says mildly, "Kraglin's going to stay on the ship."

"Boss-"

"Yondu-"

"Not that I don't trust your shiny red-caped friend out there," Yondu cuts into Kraglin's and Peter's protests, "But don't you remember Corvus bragging about how he's got people everywhere in
Asgard? Kraglin's going to drop us off and skip out. Call in the fleet."

"And that's not going to raise any eyebrows, is it?" Peter asks dryly.

"It'll take a week or so for them to get into Asgardian space," Yondu shrugs. "By that time, you'll either be married, which then, hey, no skin off anyone's nose, or this world will be on fire and they'll be our cavalry."

Trust Yondu to always think of the worst case scenario. "Fine. Sounds good."

"I wasn't asking for your opinion, boy," Yondu drawls. "You know how to fly this piece of junk, Kraglin?"

"Sure. Mostly." Kraglin looks a bit dubious as Rocket vacates the pilot's seat, picking up Groot's pot as he goes. "I'll try."

"See you in a week," Yondu slaps Kraglin's shoulder.

If Thor's at all annoyed at the sight of the stolen ship lifting off and jetting back to dive out of containment, he doesn't show it, expressionless as Peter trudges up to him. "Hey, uh," Peter starts, which is as far as he gets: Thor abruptly tugs him closer, until they're flush together, in public, and Peter tries not to blush like a schoolgirl, but he can feel his ears burning. "Thor."

"Are you well?" Thor asks, and there's concern in his eyes, at least, as he presses a thumb lightly over the faint scar on Peter's neck, where Corvus' blade had bled him.

"I'm not dead, I guess," Peter points out, puzzled by Thor's reaction. "Rocket and the others got there in time." The rest of his words are muffled into a squeak as Thor kisses him, open-mouthed, but this isn't the playful, hungry sort of kisses that Peter's gotten from Thor to date: this one's almost formal, definitely measured, and Peter's blinking when Thor pulls back, pressing a hand over the small of Peter's back and pushing slightly.

Frowning, Peter walks with Thor, trying not to stiffen up as an honour guard of shiny gold-plated Asgardians flank them, escorting them out of the imperial spaceport. "Your friends must be tired," Thor notes, once they're outdoors. "They will be taken to their quarters."

Peter looks at Yondu and the others a little helplessly, and Gamora lifts her shoulder into a slight shrug while Yondu raises his eyebrows a fraction. "Sure, I guess," Peter says warily, then he yelps as Thor's arm curls firmly around his waist and they're suddenly flying, what the fuck, he probably let out a decidedly girly squeak at that point, but the wind steals his voice-

They end up in the horse field, of all places, with Peter struggling to control his dizziness and disorientation, stumbling a little when Thor lets go of him. "What the hell," Peter chokes out. "Warn a guy next time! You're lucky I didn't throw up all over your boots."

"My apologies," Thor gives him a small smile, the sharp line of his shoulders relaxing. "I could not be certain that we were not observed."

"Observed? What? What is going on?"

Thor sighs, sitting down on the grass, and after a moment's hesitation, Peter sits down a little awkwardly as well. They're looking out towards Asgard, except this time there's no empty mead barrel in the way. It's almost... peaceful, if Peter could overlook the tension in the clench of Thor's fingers over his knees, his armour, the quiet.
"Thanos has been playing a dangerous game," Thor says at last.

"Corvus might be controlling the Vanir. He's definitely controlling some Asgardians."

"The Vanir are not a war-like people," Thor disagrees. "They are in hiding. The survivors."

"You don't need to be war-like to want change," Peter mutters, and when Thor arches an eyebrow at him, adds hastily, "Don't know if it was right, but Corvus was going on about how there's been resentment or something. People don't like to have to work forever."

"Ah." Thor relaxes a fraction. "Thankfully, that may not be a problem for very much longer." At Peter's blank expression, Thor adds tightly, "Two days ago, Mímameiðr was burned."

It takes a moment for Peter to place the name. "That huge tree? What the hell for? How?"

"Security was skeletal after the invasion force was deployed to Vanaheim." Thor says quietly. "The Black Order took advantage. Tried to steal the Tesseract in the chaos that ensued. Father returned me to Asgard immediately, in time to stop the theft, but it was too late for Mímameiðr."

"Well, that's... horrible," Peter says helplessly, "It was a nice tree, but-"

"It is - was - the key to our immortality, Peter Quill. The seed of Asgardian immortality lay within Mímameiðr's sap. It is a crucial ingredient that we have never, for all our technology, been able to replicate. It is said," Thor notes tiredly, "That Mímameiðr was sprung from the blood of an old Celestial, of the same breed as the one whose head forms the outlaw city of Knowhere: save that the organic matter from the celestial's skull is dead. That was not so for the Tree."

"So you're... not immortal any more?" Peter struggles to understand. "Were you drinking this special thing every week or something?"

"It was a yearly transfusion, available for free to any Asgardian, any of the Vanir," Thor says quietly. "It was, in many ways, also the bulwark of Asgardian wealth for centuries. Burning Mímameiðr..." Thor shrugs stiffly. "The city is in shock. Odin fears the unrest to come."

"Well, uh," Peter blinks slowly, opens his mouth, hesitates, then sighs, tentatively reaching over to squeeze Thor's palm. "Hey. Being mortal - maybe it's not so bad a thing. Just saying." When Thor narrows his eyes, Peter adds hastily, "Well, maybe not the possible collapse of your economy, or, uh, the shock and unrest, but, um, okay. I'll be quiet."

Oddly enough, however, Thor actually starts to grin, with something of his old playfulness, and Peter lets Thor tug him closer and up, until he's straddling Thor's lap a little awkwardly, knees pushed into the grass beside Thor's hips. It should be uncomfortable but it isn't, not with Thor looking at him like this, his amusement dropping away, his gaze growing sober as he tucks big fingers up behind Peter's skull, carding through short hair.

"I thought that Corvus must have killed you," Thor says finally, and his hands twitch briefly against Peter's skin, echoing the flash of temper in Thor's eyes. "I would have avenged you."

"Thanks, I guess?" Peter presses his hands clumsily over Thor's shoulders, curling his fingers curiously into the thick red cloak. "Did you guys find him?"

"No. Our allied forces encountered heavy resistance in Vanaheim, mostly Thanos' phage tech, enhanced with stolen Asgardian tech. Several Black Order positions have been taken. The rest are still being contested."
"Corvus wanted to gauge Spartax strength."

"As the All-Father surmised. The Spartax fleet have stayed out of the conflict for now." Thor's lip curls sharply. "King J-Son needed little convincing, and is currently still residing within the Asgardian palace."

"He's a dick," Peter says, a little challengingly, and Thor flashes him a quick grin.

"Thankfully, his son does not seem to take after him."

Thor tugs up one of Peter's hands, pressing a kiss against his palm, whiskery and ticklish, then against the underside of his wrist, and Peter leans forward, curling his hand into Thor's hair and pulling him over for a kiss, dry and chaste at first, until Thor lets out a soft sigh and Peter chases his advantage, licking demandingly into Thor's mouth, and yeah. This probably stopped being weird for Peter after the last time that he was in this field, and he can't say that he misses it.

"I admit," Thor adds, when they're both breathing a little harder, and Peter's curiously exploring the bristly line of Thor's beard down his jaw, "I had strong words with your father after his exchange with Corvus. Unfortunately, my father had us separated."

"Or fortunately," Peter nips, and Thor's breath stutters under his lips. It's a surprisingly gratifying thought, that someone's tried to stand up for him like this, even in the face of intergalactic peace and empire, and he's settling flush against Thor, and - yeah, that's definitely not some blaster stock, pressed firmly against Peter's ass. "If you had punched him in the mouth, he might have faffed off back to the ass end of space, and then we'd have to call off the big party." When Thor doesn't even grin at that, Peter hesitates. "Or is that no longer a done deal?"

"Our treaty of alliance with Spartax was renewed posthaste after Corvus' transmission," Thor says softly, and his big hands drop to Peter's hips, squeezing lightly. "No one anticipated that you would return to Asgard alive."

"So we're... done here," Peter says, rather incredulously. "Seriously? After all that? We can just 'port out of here and leave you guys to it?" He isn't entirely sure what he feels about this. Instead of the relief that Peter had expected, it all feels like a letdown, somehow, like disappointment. The life-changing left-of-field event that he's been bracing for since Xandar has gone away with nary a whimper.

"You are still the Crown Prince of Spartax."

"But I guess if the whole wedding thing is now optional," Peter frowns at Thor, then he forces a grin, "That works out for the both of us, right?"

"Does it?"

"Without a dire political reason to do it," Peter says dryly, "Why the hell would you want to get married to me?"

It's Thor's turn to frown at Peter, for a long moment, then he snorts, and in a split second, Peter finds himself pinned to the grass on his back, Thor's thick, tawny mane spilling over either side of his solemn, handsome face.

"Peter Quill. Even if you were not Crown Prince of Spartax," Thor says, so very seriously, "Any person should be proud to bind their life and their honour to yours. And so," he adds, when Peter starts to squirm uncomfortably and flush, "Even if matters are now truly 'optional', as you put it, I should hope that... eventually, you would be willing to bind yourself to me. Even if the fate of the
universe does not depend on it," Thor notes, his lips quirking briefly upwards.

Oh hell.

"... Nothing here has been anything like what I expected," Peter says finally, when Thor shifts his weight off Peter's wrists, supporting himself on his elbows off the grass instead, allowing Peter to slide his hands tentatively up Thor's massive arms to his shoulders, up to the catches of his cloak.

Thor grins at him, amused again. "Which part? Asgard? Getting married to someone male? Or your impromptu adventure to Vanaheim?"

"I guess," Peter admits candidly, with a sharp grin of his own, "I didn't really expect to like you. And," he continues, tugging Thor a little awkwardly down towards him, even as Thor lets out a low and rumbling chuckle, "I really didn't expect to want you."

They kiss on the grass until they're both breathless, hands tangled in each other's clothes, their hair, fingers, with an urgent intimacy as old as time, as visceral as life.

II.

"So the wedding's off?" Rocket asks incredulously, as they squeeze past the security cordon, trailing Drax behind them. Peter's carrying Groot's pot today, because Groot's been growing steadily too heavy for Rocket to handle for long periods of time: he's just about to outgrow his pot, by Peter's estimate.

"Yup," Peter confirms, as they get through a second line of suspicious gold-plated Asgardian guards. "Kind of. Maybe."

"So this was all a waste of time?"

"You got to fly an Asgardian ship," Peter points out. "And Drax got to shoot a Black Order general with your anti-moon whatsit."

"That was fun," Drax rumbles agreeably behind them.

"Okay, true, but still, kinda a letdown after all this, isn't it?"

"Seems everyone thought I was going to die in Vanaheim and decided to re-sign a treaty over my supposed dead body," Peter says dryly.

"Well yeah, that makes sense." Rocket makes an open-pawed gesture, miming a weighing scale. "Squishy half-Earther, Black Order General, hm. Guess they hedged their bets. But hey, this is good for you, isn't it? No more bitching and moaning about whatever it was that you were bitching and moaning about. I tuned you out."

"As did I," Drax notes.

"... Never mind," Peter sighs, glancing down at Groot, who waves at him, then stiffens and peers around as they step into the burned shell of what had once been the chamber of the Ever-Living tree. The solar mainframe has crumbled into juts of broken metal and slag; steelglass crunches underfoot, and they're ankle-deep in ash and rubble. Before them, the once gigantic tree is a charred hulk, half of it burned away, the rest all jagged coal, and there's still a lingering stench of ash and something sickly sweet in the air, thick and choking.

"Wow," Rocket says softly, breaking the shocked silence. "What assholes."
"Yeah." Peter's not really sentimental towards plants - sorry Groot - but being in the presence of Mímameiðr for the first time had been one of the few, awe-inspiring events of his cynical and jaded life. In his arms, Groot starts to twist, tugging at the edge of the pot. "Hey, Groot, hey calm down, buddy."

"Groot, you're not ready to get out of that pot yet," Rocket glances up irritably. "There's glass and shit all over the place, **hey!**"

Ignoring them both, Groot heaves himself out of the pot, somehow managing to dodge both Peter's grab and Rocket's lunge, landing awkwardly on the ashy ground. His first step with tiny, stubby feet stumbles, until he sinks little roots into the ground, then Groot darts with surprising speed towards the dark hollow that had been blasted into the trunk of the tree.

"Groot!" Rocket leaps after him, and cursing, Peter pushes Groot's pot into Drax's arms before stumbling after them both, tripping over dead roots and having to pick himself up a couple of times. He's sooty and a little irritable by the time he gets to the trunk of the tree, just in time to see Rocket grab Groot and haul him up.

The sickly-sweet stink is far worse within the tree, compounded with some acrid scent that reminds Peter of used explosives. It's near pitch dark, but even as Peter fumbles for a light sphere, Groot solemnly releases a handful of tiny, self-illuminating flowers into the dark.

Peter will never get tired of this trick. The interior of Mímameiðr is huge, like a cathedral of burned coal and bark, solid and cavernous even in death: the few flowers that spiral upwards barely reach the halfway mark between the burned ground and charred roots under their feet to the yawning maw above, where the crown of the tree had once been. With the solar mainframe destroyed, all that Peter can see of the rest of the tree is a dim outline cast from the tiny lighted flowers.

"Smell that? They managed to seed the trunk with ksyanthremalm," Rocket grunts. "That shit goes high-explosive on contact with organics. The tree burned up from the inside."

"Wonder how they got so close," Peter murmurs.

"This place is open to the public, remember? Fucking Asgardians. Probably didn't expect anyone to be so crazy."

"I don't think that it was that easy. And they haven't caught the culprits." Peter shoves his hands into his pockets, shuddering. "Just let him down, there's no glass in here. And any explosives probably burned out ages ago."

Rocket glowers at Peter, engaged in struggling with a branch-sprouting, twisting and waving Groot, then he exhales loudly and lets Groot down. Surprisingly enough, instead of running off, or inspecting the walls, Groot merely walks to the centre of the hollowed-out trunk, and settles his roots into the ashy ground.

"This isn't a great place to be for plants," Peter suggests uncomfortably. "Hardly any light, it smells, this big thing might collapse at any time... let's just head back out, Groot."

"Yeah. We can go to the garden," Rocket adds hopefully, obviously trying to sound comforting. "I know you're upset, but we can't change it. It's gone."

"Let him mourn," Drax says quietly, at Peter's shoulder, and steps in, setting the pot down carefully beside Groot, then sitting down beside it. Rocket glowers at Drax for a moment, then he sighs, and sits down carefully on a burned jut of wood. Groot looks at Peter, and Peter shrugs, settling down on
Groot's other side, stretching out his legs.

"It was a nice tree," Peter says awkwardly. He's never really had to say an eulogy before, let alone for a tree. "I guess it's gone to the Big Garden in the Sky. Or wherever trees go." He looks to Drax for support, but Drax merely eyes him with mild surprise.

"There is no garden in the sky."

"It's a *metaphor*," Peter hisses hastily. "The thing that is like cake?"

"Ah. Yes."

Thankfully, Rocket's a touch more forthcoming. "Yeah. Uh. I'm sure it's... happy wherever it is now, Groot."

Groot tilts his head, as though considering Peter's words, then he solemnly sprouts a little black flower, and, bending, buries it in the ash.
Chapter 10

I.

Peter is not avoiding his dad. He's not.

He's just... busy, that's all. Gamora's been advising the Asgardian Security Council on anti-Black Order tactics. Drax has been... doing whatever Drax does during his downtime, Rocket was back in the Asgardian labs, which meant Peter was stuck with baby... er... plantsitting Groot. And making sure that Yondu and the others didn't get into trouble again.

Groot had refused to budge from within the dead trunk of Mínameiðr, and the Asgardians had helpfully set up two miniature solar mainframe bars, cables and wiring snaking off like silvery artificial roots to a leyscale outside. There was even a jug of water off to a side, and a couple of bags of fertiliser that Rocket and Peter aren't quite so sure of.

"I have no idea why," Peter tells Groot, as he squints at the neat little rows of runes at the back of one of the bags. "But you're a celebrity to these guys."

"He is a Flora Colossus. The last of his kind."

Peter nearly fumbles the bag, but thankfully, he somehow finds the coordination to set it down and straighten up, glowering at the visitor. King J-Son is still in his Kevin Bacon form, standing at the burned opening of the trunk, apparently alone. "Hi Dad," Peter says sarcastically. "Funny seeing you still here. The treaty's done and dusted, isn't it? Thought you guys would've jumped ship."

J-Son spreads his hands wide, palms up, in a surprisingly human gesture for a ball of light pretending to be Kevin Bacon. "It would be impolite to leave in the hour of our allies' need."

"Wow, because you guys are totally helping the Asgardians right now with their problem," Peter says dryly.

"Spartax imperials were within the task force led by Prince Thor that defended the armoury, even if we could not deploy our ships," J-Son notes mildly. "Two of them lost their lives."

Now Peter does feel a little like a dick, but he's unwilling to let go of his temper. "So what do you want? The treaty's signed. You don't need me any longer."

"You are the heir to an empire whether you like it or not, Peter," A touch of steel inches into J-Son's voice. "Like Thor, you will have responsibilities."

"... Even if I was willing to help out, which I'm not," Peter retorts flatly, "Isn't it just... impossible? You guys are 'paradimensional' creatures, or whatever that is. I'm not."

"You are. But not entirely. Still, I can see the echo of your passing and your presence in the planar realms. As you are now, the realms are not fluid to you, not as they are to us, but I think perhaps it will be a matter of time." J-Son holds out a hand, palm up, and for a moment, the semblance of flesh strips away, like jigsaw pieces dissolving into the air, and a wavering, dim glow is left, that throws no shadow.

Peter shivers. He can feel that, somehow, like a tuning fork dragged across existence, like a dull and irritating echo in his mind. Beside him, Groot rustles, a little agitatedly, and J-Son's hand is abruptly 'flesh' again, as he inclines his head. "My apologies. The Flora Colossi are sensitive to planar..."
disjunctions."

A quick, worried glance at Groot gets him a reassuring wave, and Peter growls, "Well, whatever you think, I can't do *that* light trick."

"Not yet. In time, with training, I think that you can. Return to Spartax with us. Take your place."

"You guys did fine without me so far."

A ripple of irritation passes over J-Son's face, then it passes, and he folds his hands behind his back. "Peter. You are the first Spartax child - half-blooded or not - born in over a thousand years. Our people fade. A solution must be found, and you are but the beginning of it. For when we are gone, no barrier will divide the planar realms from the Prime. The world-eaters will come."

"... You can't just *drop that kind of shit* on me, God," Peter snarls, "This is just like on Xandar! What is wrong with you?"

"Speech is... slow, on the Prime," J-Son allows, though he's utterly unrepentant. "It is nonfluid. We are... unused to singletonal self-expression."

"If I'm so important," Peter retorts, "Then why did you tell Corvus to kill me?"

J-Son sighs. "You have seen firsthand the destruction that one of the Infinity Stones can wreak in the wrong hands. Can you still fault my decision?"

Peter scowls. J-Son has him there. "You didn't have to be such a *dick* about it. How the hell did you even get with my mom? Did she just have a Kevin Bacon fetish or something?" Ugh. Not that Peter really wants to know about his sweet, late mother's fetishes, if any.

This time, J-Son hesitates for a moment before answering. "The Spartax people are on the... end arc of their evolution, Peter. We are one of the First Races: the *only* First Race remaining that still *has* a civilisation. There are very few of us. And we are, effectively, incapable of creating young by ourselves. Functional immortality has combined with the warp energies of planar transit to create an form of 'self' that is beyond flesh, gender, even form. We are a thought-species, discorporate. We guard the Prime against incursions across the planar realms. And we are losing ground."

"So how did *I* come about?" Peter asks, with a sort of horrified fascination. "Do I want to know how you can 'discorporately' impregnate a human woman? Or is this the kind of conversation that's going to end up breaking my brain?"

"Your mother was not the... first. But hers was the only pregnancy that was ultimately successful - across attempts with the Vanir, Asgardians, the Kree, the Sh'iar, more. She is special."

"Was," Peter corrects, his tone edged. "She died. Some sort of wasting disease. The doctors didn't even know what it was: they said it was maybe some new, rare sort of cancer. *You* could have saved her," Peter says bitterly. "Spartax tech is the best in the 'verse, isn't it? *You could have saved her*, instead of paying some pirates to come snatch me up on the night of her *death!*"

"The... Ravagers' schedule was not... anticipated," J-Son says, his tone neutral, his expression still bland and clinical as ever. "As to your mother's death, that was not unexpected. Prior attempts to cross our paradimensional cortices with creatures of flesh did tend to result in... various debilitating side-effects. Some manifested immediately, but most - over time."

"... so you're telling me," Peter growls, his voice shaky and sounding even distant to his ears: he's never been *this* angry, to a point past anger, to an icy, endless calm, "That *you* killed my *mother.*"
"Perhaps. Or, very likely, it was the end product of the process of carrying you to term, stretched over years." J-Son replies, calm even in Peter's open fury. "A civil war curtailed any further investigations. An older guard of the Spartax people were resistant to what they saw as a devolution of our species-

Peter isn't listening. He's already swinging a punch, blood roaring in his ears, and at the last second, before he connects, J-Son flickers, his outline growing dim, and Peter's overbalancing, falling through J-Son as though through a ghost, rolling as he gets up, fumbling automatically for a blaster that isn't there. Dimly, he can hear Groot waving and rustling agitatedly, but he doesn't care, snarling as he throws another useless punch, then another, until all the rage and pain is burned out of him, his breaths gritty in his lungs.

J-Son watches him, hands folded behind his back, expression still carefully blank. "Finished?"

"You know what?" Peter presses his palms against his knees, still breathing hard. "I'm glad that Yondu and Kraglin got cold feet. I'm glad that I grew up with them, and not with you. Stay away from me."

"Hate me all you like," J-Son says quietly, "But you have responsibilities."

"What," Peter sneers, "Help you lot make a whole lot more half-bloods like me? Infect a ton of unsuspecting Earthers with cancer? No-fucking-thanks."

"The sacrifices of the few-"

"Sacrifice?"

"Your mother knew what she was in for," J-Son says evenly. "She was infertile. She had no mate. She wanted a child - a son - desperately, with all her heart. When I arrived on Earth, fleeing the vanguard of a civil war... it was pure chance that I met her. But your birth was not chance, nor her death."

"A gods-damned angel," Peter says bitterly. "Angel of death, more like it. Why didn't the Asgardians stop you? Isn't Midgard their stomping ground?"

"As is Vanaheim, as is Asgard. The Asgardians know the stakes, Peter Quill." J-Son glances around them, his lips thinning briefly. "Stakes that have been raised. Thanos may well have just caused the end of the Asgardian empire, for all our treaties and our tech. You are angry, and you are right to be angry. But I invite you to look beyond yourself, beyond individual lives, to look across eternity and the vast oeuvre of sentient existence."

"Ronan named you and your friends the 'Guardians of the Galaxy'," J-Son continues, as Peter glares at him, jaw clenching. "If you intend to live up to the title, I suggest that you look beyond petty concerns."

Peter sits down heavily next to Groot when J-Son leaves, exhaling loudly from behind clenched teeth, and he flinches when he feels Groot touch his knee. "Yeah," Peter mutters. "He's a fucking jackass."

Groot pats him again on the knee, and beckons. Frowning, Peter squirms around until he gets on his elbows, his ear on level to Groot, and Groot pets his hair comfortingly for a moment before whispering, almost inaudibly, "We... are Groot."

"Yeah." Peter sighs, and rubs his palms up over his eyes. "I get that too."
Thankfully, the Spartax delegation seems to decide to keep to itself, which means minimal contact with King J-Son. Along with whatever's happening in Vanaheim, civil war breaks out in Lyngvi, with the Black Order occupying the spaceport, the district and key positions along the border.

Gamora helps with the defensive lines, and after a couple of days, Drax tags along, with Rocket and an armload of Rocket's contraptions, at which point, Peter decides to get off his ass (as Rocket put it) and pitch in.

"I'm having an existential crisis right now," Peter complains, as he helps Rocket set up one of his jury-rigged pulse artillery on the ramparts of the Gold-Plated Observatory, which has, over the past week, apparently been reworked into some sort of forward command base.

"Yeah?" Rocket grunts, critically eyeing Peter's work and occasionally climbing up to make a quick adjustment. "Nothing cures a crisis like shooting one of these babies into the enemy. Bam! People die. Then you feel better. Crisis averted."

Peter pulls a face. "I really don't think that murder and mayhem will solve anything."

"Works for me," Rocket clammers up along the artillery, sighting critically down its chrome barrel. "That'll do. Next."

"I kinda wish we did Plan C, and jetted off to the other end of space," Peter continues, determined to hold on to his grudge, even as he trudges along behind Rocket, dragging the second artillery contraption behind him. "And what the hell did you make this out of? Rocks?"

"Ley-forged chromatite, if you really must know," Rocket tells him loftily. "And boo-hoo, so your dad's an asshole and your mom died. Y'know, that's probably what happened to my parents too! In a lab! 'Cept that I never knew them, and even if I did, they were probably just a couple of dumb animals whose genes got spliced into... whatever I am. Or maybe they were just a set of DNA samples in test tubes." Rocket darts up onto the ramparts, squinting briefly out over the front lines. "At least you had your mom for a few years, and she sounds like she was a real nice lady."

"Jeez, Rocket," Peter says uncomfortably. "When you put it that way... I'm sorry."

"Sorry? For what? You weren't the guy who spliced me together," Rocket snorts. "All right, set up here." He pats a section of the ramparts with his foot, and steps aside. "The thing is, Quill... life sucks. It sucks for everyone. For some people, it sucks major balls, for others, it sucks a little less. The way to tilt the balance on life sucking as much as it does, is to make sure that it sucks more for someone else. Like them."

Rocket waves a paw out over the front lines. Street fighting has been hard on the wide, beautifully paved Asgardian roads: some of the sleek and graceful buildings are smoking rubble; others, torn into makeshift barricades, reinforced with stasis fields, like ugly bluish blisters over the once elegant cityscape.

"Rocket's theory of How to Make Life Suck Less?" Peter asks dryly, even as he obligingly starts to clamp the artillery to the old stone.

"Yup. I could write a fucking book. Maybe when I'm older." Rocket slaps Peter reassuringly on the shoulder. "Lighten up. Life could be worse. You could be dead."

"Thanks. I guess."
"No problems." Rocket settles down on the ramparts, watching the untidy lines of rebel Asgardians and Black Order soldiers with a sort of gleeful anticipation. "You sure Groot is OK?"

"Yep. Sif is on plantsitting duty."

"Oh. That's fine then. Groot kinda likes her." Rocket relaxes a fraction, though he flattens his ears briefly. "I've never seen Groot get like this before. He hasn't moved from that spot for days. I couldn't even coax him to the garden yesterday, when it was warm out and I had some time. I don't like it."

"Did you talk to him about it?" Peter grunts as he slots the heavy chromatite barrel into place, waiting for the dull click.

"Yeah. He tried to explain it to me but I didn't get it. Something about communing with the spirits. Crazy talk." Rocket lets out a deep sigh. "What if he wants to stay there forever? It can't be good for him. The trunk's not really structurally sound, it's dark in there, the ground's mostly ash."

"Rocket, Groot survived re-entry and a crash landing, all the while keeping us alive, regrowing from a stick," Peter points out. "I really don't think we should be worried about him. He'll be fine."

"He better be," Rocket grumbles, "Or I'm going to drag him out of there and back to his pot. Eh," Rocket sighs again, tail drooping. "Maybe he'll be over it by the time we're done with this place. Why are we still here, anyway? I thought we were done with this joint, since the wedding's been called off."

"Well," Peter double checks the clamps, then sights down the barrel, "Gamora wants to help the Asgardians take Corvus out of commission, Groot wants to sit in the remnants of the big tree, Drax wants to avenge the big tree, Yondu and the others are still convinced that there's an extra payday around somewhere... and I guess the both of us are just along for the ride. Though I would like to shoot Corvus again in the face, even if it doesn't work," Peter adds feelingly. "You're right. Maybe it will help with my existential crisis."

"'Course it will," Rocket taps him on the arm again, this time rather patronisingly. "I'm always right."

"What happened to the scientists that did whatever it was to you?" Peter asks, as a thought occurs belatedly to them. "Maybe it'll also help if I shot them a few times as well. In several places. Maybe this kind of therapy should be an ongoing thing."

Rocket shoots him a brief look of surprise, then he grins a toothy grin. "Eh, I took care of that a long time ago, Quill. But thanks for thinking about it."

"Well," Peter points out, "That's what friends do."

"Murder each other's enemies?"

"I guess?"

"I could live with that definition," Rocket decides, clambering over the artillery muzzle. "Though, that means that we'll have to get Thanos for Gamora."

"Thanos... probably hates the rest of us too," Peter points out, as he starts dragging the last set of jury-rigged artillery along the seemingly endless, wide arc of the Observatory balcony. "So it won't just be for Gamora. It'll be like a bonding exercise. In collective craziness. Which I am in no way suggesting we engage in as yet, at least until we get our hands on some sort of anti-Thanos Doomsday device." That would be cool.
"I guess that's what friends do as well," Rocket says, pattering around nimbly to a section overlooking the western approach, and tapping a spot on the ramparts. "Share impossible enemies. Speaking of paydays, though... we never did get any of that four billion cred payday, what with the Collector's base blowing up, Ronan crashing the party, and then us handing over that purple rock to Nova Prime..."

"Hey, that wasn't my fault," Peter protests, even as he manages to lug the pieces up to Rocket's position. "Circumstances. You were there during said circumstances."

"Yeah, that ship's long jumped out of port. But seeing as you're the Crown Prince of a civilisation and all now, maybe friends also share out creds to friends, just saying." Rocket grins at him. "Spartax is an Elder civilisation, isn't it? Their treasury's got to have loads and loads of creds. Even if it's at the ass end of the universe."

"Friends are also sometimes tempted to toss friends off fortifications for pushing it," Peter says dryly.

"Spoilsport."
Chapter 11

I.

The Black Order retaliates with necrophage craft on the second day of stalemated street fighting, the gritty, ugly phage craft warping in by the hundreds into Asgardian airspace. Asgard reinforces its atmos shielding with stasis, which, according to Yondu's bland analysis, 'probably won't hold for jack shit'.

Also, Peter discovers to his surprise that Asgard does not, in fact, have a large space fleet. Or any real space fleet at all, other than the freighters that bring in crops from Vanaheim, or lightly armed science obs vessels. How even? "... you guys phased out spacefaring tech because of the Bifrost?"

Thor nods absently. The surviving Asgardian imperial craft from the day's skirmishing are aligned in glittering rows around the Asgardian palace, which, in Peter's opinion, is kinda asking for trouble. Hello? Asgard is more than just a palace, isn't it? This probably wasn't endearing Asgardian royalty to the general populace.

As Peter performs a quick checkup on Rocket's Observatory artillery, Thor murmurs, "Our weaponry allows us to traverse space safely. As such, spacecraft itself became irrelevant."

"Not so irrelevant now, huh?" Peter asks dryly, jerking a thumb at the arrays of necrophage craft circling beyond the stasis field, around a monstrous, cubical mothership that reminds Peter rather like a more compact version of the Dark Aster. Or, come to think of it, of a particularly nightmarish, black, and knobbly version of a Rubik's cube, forever trying to solve itself.

Thor flashes him a brief, sharp grin, and pats Mjölnir's shaft pointedly. Whatever 'star iron' was made of, it had smashed easily through enemy stasis fields and phage craft alike during the day's fighting. If Asgard could clone Thor and Mjölnir forthwith maybe twenty times or so, give or take, the war might even be over. As it is, however, Thor was just one Asgardian. Albeit a fucking scary one.

"We will hold out," Thor says complacently. "The Spartax are reinforcing the stasis tech with their own shield tech as we speak."

"Right." Peter scowls, irked at any mention of his dad or the empire that Peter had been born to rule, of all things. Thor eyes him for a moment, then steps over, rubbing a palm gently up Peter's spine, soothing and careful. When Peter straightens up, with a shaky sigh, Thor leans over, and Peter hastily claps a hand over his mouth. "Wait. What if something happens? You don't know what my genetic material could do to you."

Thor narrows his eyes briefly, then lets out a rumbling chuckle, and kisses Peter's palm, tugging Peter firmly against him. "A little late for that, is it not?"

"Don't remind me."

"Peter," Thor says dryly, "I'll be fine."

"You're no longer drinking the magic immortality juice."

"When Odin All-Father gave the Spartax... permission to conduct their reproductive endeavours on willing test subjects," Thor says carefully, "We tried to save the volunteers. We studied them. The side-effects are not caused by any sort of genetic transfer, Peter."
"People volunteered for this?" Peter asks, frowning. "Really?"

"The needs of one," Thor brushes a light kiss on Peter's forehead. "Weigh little against the needs of many, Peter. It is hard to accept, yes. But Asgard has battled the world-eaters before, those that have slipped past the Spartax's failing defences. The effects of such wars have been costly - and devastating."

"Maybe there's another way," Peter mutters, though he lets Thor press another kiss, lower, between his eyes, and then a playful one on his nose that gets Thor a swat. Thor grins at him, unrepentant, and kisses his jaw, bristly and ticklish. "Maybe they can make tech that can phase people over to... wherever they're fighting their war. Something like that. Or better weapons that can be used on this side."

"Asgard has been exploring both of those latter options for a few centuries. Others, beside those," Thor admits. "For such matters, there is never any simple answer. But I do hope that there is a better way, and Asgard has not stopped looking for one. It is one thing to understand that war has, sometimes, a necessary calculus. It is quite another thing to accept it wholeheartedly."

"Yeah," Peter agrees, and exhales all in a rush. Thor is taller than him, just bigger everywhere, and a little bit of Peter will never get over the primitive bit of his hindbrain that keeps yelling at him to flee giants. Right now, however, it's comforting to rest his cheek against Thor's shoulder and breathe deep for a while, take in the strange scent of leather and sweat and ozone, take in the warmth. Thor's hand creeps up from his hip to the small of his back, and Peter mutters, "I thought maybe I was going crazy."

"Oh?"

"Talking to my... to J-Son, then to Rocket and some of the others... I was starting to wonder whether I was the asshole in those old films stuck between, you know, doing something where he'll end up dead but save people, and doing something where he'll be alive but everyone will be dead, and chickening out of the right thing to do." Peter trails off, awkwardly aware that he's started to ramble. "I guess it's just good to hear that I'm not alone."

"Ah," Thor presses another kiss between his eyes, almost making Peter grin from the bristly feel over his nose. "Know this, Peter Quill. Honour is not a set of guidelines set in stone, but the compulsion to always do better. To sometimes choose the harder way. But even so," he adds gently, "Know also that it is... very Midgardian, this instinct of yours to judge an utterly different species upon your own moral dictates. It is not purely a Midgardian sentiment," he adds, when Peter stiffens, "But it is a sentiment common to pre-spacer civilisations."

"Us monkeys still aren't smart enough to play in the big leagues?" His question comes out a little more bitter than Peter had expected, but Thor merely smiles gently.

"Peter, the Spartax empire consists of a 'people' for whom the designation is rather looser than that of any Prime species. They are not flesh at all. No one knows how they even form thought, let alone the basis of their moral structure, their communications, their philosophy and culture. For the most part, they do not exist in the Prime at all, but in a planar space difficult to conceive of, for even post-spacefaring civilisations."

"And while the Asgardian people are - were - functionally immortal, the Spartax people are immortal, Peter. They are one of the Elder races. Their race had touched the stars before life first crawled out of the sea on your homeworld, before fire was discovered as a tool on Asgard. The way they live, think, exist, is far beyond even Asgardian scientific understanding."
"And so I shouldn't judge," Peter summarises, frowning.

Thor's lips quirk briefly, amused again. "Not judging other species is to accept the ravages of some. The Badoon. The Brood. Other alien species bent on violence and death. In Asgard, we judge other species by the consequences that they cause. But we also try to understand them. To see further from the narrow scope of our own values."

"I think," Peter notes, "That when Earth finally gets around to a collective realization that there's a whole wide universe out there..." He hesitates, then lets out a wry laugh. "I don't know. Seeing 'further than the narrow scope' of values isn't something that most Earthers are very good at doing. Earthers love jumping to conclusions about each other, just based on shit like skin colour. Can't imagine what they'd think about the rest of the 'verse."

"My presence on Earth was hardly hidden," Thor points out, stroking Peter's flanks absentely, large fingers rubbing up over his ribs and back down, "But yes, Earther reaction tended to run from denial, to violence, to wonder... even to the very strange."

"People tried worshipping you?" Peter guesses. When Thor chuckles ruefully, Peter adds, "I wouldn't blame them." *That* had also meant to be sardonic, but somehow it had come out rougher, with a hitch to the tail, maybe because Peter's libido had finally clued in on the situation and stirred. Thor arches an eyebrow at him, then grins and pulls him into the Observatory, past the disciplined activity of the guard change for the night and through into one of the now-abandoned lab rat offices. Peter starts to laugh, and the laugh gets muffled as Thor presses him against the locked door and kisses him, and it's like falling down a gravity well; like going on a slow burn through the stars.

II.

Yondu's estimate of the stasis shield ratchets into a sort of grudging admiration two days in, when phage lasers, divebombing attacks and gauss artillery don't even put a dent in the shielding. It seems that the Spartax delegation had helpfully decided to pitch in on the shielding or something, which meant that the Asgardian ships could head in to the frontlines.

Asgard's nowhere as big as a (non-fragmented) planet, but it's still rather fucking more territory than Peter's used to being on for more than a few days at a time. Most spacefaring civs hold their criminals in offworld lockups, after all. After two days, Peter really, really misses the *Milano.*

"It's more than a ship to me," Peter finds himself telling Drax, during a lull in the day's fighting.

They're pinned down in what their shared Asgardian wristcomm pings as Sector i8-1 but what Peter has mentally termed Bugfuck Fern Park Gully With Cafes, and Drax is methodically wiping down his blades even as the whistling thrum of smuggled Black Order gauss artillery shells whine overhead.

Drax makes a noncommittal grunt, not even looking up, his huge blue shoulders pressed comfortably against gold-plated stone berths. The trees that once sat in the beautifully curved stone wells have long been splintered by gauss shells, and even in the acrid stench of ozone and amplifiers and the burnt-rubber smell of overheated phasers, Drax looks absolutely at peace.

"I mean," Peter tries a little harder, even as he double checks his phasers and switches in a new chamber charge, "It was my home for *years.* Really my home. The moment I talked Yondu into giving me a Ravager ship of my own, I never lived anywhere else. *I love* that ship." The *Milano* may have been more or less extensively rebuilt by the Nova Corps, but in Peter's mind, it was still one and the same ship.
"I understand love," Drax says mildly, wiping down his other blade. "When I was twenty cycles of age, I ruined my life."

"What?" Peter blinks, having not actually expected Drax to contribute very much at all by way of conversation. "You, uh... the scars?"

"I got married," Drax says calmly. "And then Hovat and I had a child. Children do not so much change a life as ruin it."

"...Okay," Peter says slowly. "Somehow I thought that... well," he says helplessly, when Drax shoots him a puzzled glance, "Well, you fought Ronan for your murdered wife and kid, Drax. I thought-"

"When I met Hovat, it was... I was pulled into her orbit. Nothing seemed more important in the universe than her happiness," Drax continues to polish his blade. "But when Kamaria was born... that was when I first understood fear. You will not understand what it is like to be truly... hungry, Peter Quill, until you beget children. To know that you have been destroyed and reborn. To always want to watch over her, to guard her. To be afraid that you can never be good enough a parent to give your child joy. And it was so."

Peter has to look away for a moment. Drax's tone did not change in the least, but the rawness of his words seem worse, so far, in their matter-of-fact delivery. "Wow," he says finally. "I don't know if this helps, but I think that in the time that they - that you had with them, you were probably a damned good dad."

Drax snorts. "I still failed them," he says simply, and peeks over the stone well that had once housed a tree. There is nothing but a flat and calm sense of acceptance in his voice. "The rebel forces are drawing back to reinforce the gated wall."

"Well, uh," Peter frowns. "You had a few good years with them, didn't you? I mean, that's more than what some people get. I'm thinking that you probably made them real happy when they were still there. You're the most single-mindedly focused person I've ever met, so I bet you did. That's still something, Drax."

Drax eyes him in surprise. "We are engaged in battle, Peter Quill."

"Oh, yeah. Uh. Maybe not a good time. Right. Gated wall."

"But," Drax adds thoughtfully, "I will think on this. Thank you."

"Course. And, uh, maybe if you ever want to talk about it, just feel free. I'm not a dick, after all. No matter what Rocket might think."

"Of course you are not a male sexual organ," Drax starts to frown. "Peter Quill, you are my captain and my friend, but I am disinterested in engaging in relationships with-"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa there," Peter yelps. "No one is talking about the R-word."

"-you," Drax continues, as though he hasn't spoken, "And besides, to fight that one for the krx-t'yaaha will be too challenging."

That one? Peter peeks up again, and doesn't get his hair parted by a gauss round. That's probably because Thor has, yet again, landed out of nowhere, and judging by the snarl of lightning and the answering boom of thunder, he's giving the gauss artillery team hell. A roar of furious wind whorls around Thor as he throws the hammer, and the crazy thing crackles with lightning as it goes,
smashing through the necrophage artillery in the arrow-line of its passage.

It also, quite randomly, abruptly starts to rain.

"He scares me too," Peter admits, watching as Mjölnir wings its way back to its master, its trajectory knocking out a couple of rogue Asgardians and a necrophage guard as it goes, but he's talking to thin air. Drax has leaped out past the stone well, roaring some sort of battlecry as he charges the breaking necrophage line, by himself, crashes into the first two hapless heavily-armoured zombie-like aliens, and more or less bats them aside with the ferocity of his one-man, low-tech attack.

There's a stunned silence, then Peter glances over to the huddled lines of Asgardian guardsmen whom had been following their dubious lead. "I guess this is the bit where we join in," he tells them, and activates his visor.

It doesn't take much longer after that to get the rebel Asgardians into custody and poke over the necrophage bodies for anyone trying to fake death (and any valuables of course). "Sector secure," Thor reports, into seemingly thin air, or maybe into subdermal implants, but Peter really doubts it. Whatever Heimdall really is, he's also almost as fucking scary as Thor.

"Do you mind?" Peter points up. The downpour's still going strong, out of nowhere, as far as he can tell: Asgard doesn't actually have a real climate or atmosphere.

"Ah. Of course." Just like that, the rain seems to switch off.

Fucking scary.

"How's the rest of the fight going?" Peter jerks his thumb to his side, trying to keep his voice light, as though he watches other life forms randomly switch climatic changes on and off all the time on will.

"Passing well. Heimdall has retaken Askala... ah, Sector 8-2, and the Warriors Three have led a spirited defence of 70-4." Thor's grinning, all fierce battle-lust, and Peter tries not to flush a little as he feels himself... warm up. It's weird. "Your friend Gamora is giving the necrophage lines hell over at the cyclic terminals. Rocket is overseeing further artillery reinforcements."

"So we win? Soon?"

As if to puncture any sort of relief Peter might have felt over Thor's report, a fresh wave of necrophage divebombers splash over the stasis field, causing a rippling effect that shimmers over the dome, as though Peter's underwater, watching stones drop and bounce over the water. It would have been pretty, if he hadn't been over Xandar when the Dark Aster had come. Even after, when he had gone to rim space and returned, Xandar still bore scars.

"That would depend," Thor says mildly, "On how quickly the Spartax can convert leyscale manipulation to support their tech."

"Which means we're fucked?" Peter hazards.

"Not yet." Thor frowns over at the enemy lines, engaged in an orderly retreat. "Corvus is on Asgard. So the All-Father believes. Vanaheim is almost secure, but he is nowhere to be seen or heard."

"Or maybe he's gone back to Thanos with his tail between his legs," Peter suggests hopefully.

"He would not commit his Black Order legion to such an attack simply to cover a retreat, Peter," Thor points out. "Corvus cannot die."
"But he can still be, I don't know, stuck full of pins and then deep frozen or something," Peter grumbles. "Stash him in a 'fridge in a dark hole forever."

"I should like to meet this unkillable monster," Drax says firmly.

"Nope, I think you don't."

"Of course I do," Drax scowls a little. "It is unkillable, but what is to happen if I were to cut off a leg or so? Or keep its head and its body apart? Can it not be disassembled?"

"...Drax," Peter says reverently. "Sometimes, I really like how you think. When you're not flagrantly abusing comm privileges."

"Thank you. But I am still not fighting this one for the krk-t'yahe," Drax nods at Thor, and strolls off in the direction of the enemy lines. At Thor's gesture, the Asgardian royal guard hurry after Drax, even as the medical evac crew come in on their heels to take stock of the dead and injured.

"What have you been telling Drax?" Thor asks, amused.

"Metaphors, obviously. I keep forgetting that he can't process them." Peter pauses. "I'm not sure if he's been processing his grief well, either. Ronan killed his wife and kid. Usually people get... massively drunk, and depressed, or move on, or go into counselling and stuff. Drax's kinda gone as supernova as a person can get, with knives."

"As long as he processes his grief on your enemies," Thor says, watching as the enemy line actually starts to retreat a little further under Drax's unhurried approach.

Yeah. Maybe Yondu's a little right. His friends are kinda crazy.
Chapter 12

I.

It was all going so well.

The Black Order’s defensive lines had been pushing back, slowly and steadily. The orbital drops had been - barely - held in place by the Spartax-reinforced shield. By the end of nearly a week of fighting, the Black Order held a few pockets of heavy resistance and Lygnvi. Most of the non-Asgardian spacers had opted to stay neutral, or skip out to avoid the conflict. The Asgardian spacers were either sitting tight, or had blown up.

Or rather, it had been going so well, until, in the Gold-Plated Observation Artillery Post, Peter had peered over Yondu's shoulder at the holomap showing a mass of green dots surrounding a few red dots, and had said, offhandedly, "I think we're winning."

An alarm klaxon goes off.

Yondu closes his eyes, and sucks in a deep, slow breath. "PETER."

"That was in no way causally my fault," Peter complains, even as the makeshift war room around them bursts into a hive of frantic activity. "What's happening?"

"Maybe you should just go outside and shoot yourself," Yondu tells him, and shoulders through to the comm banks, frowning at the floating, ultra high-def vidlink that was showing a grand total of nothing. "Fill me in."

It's been decades, and Peter still has no idea how Yondu does this: insert himself into a volatile room full of antsy, highly armed military and somehow command the scene like he was born for it. It's probably the main reason why the rag-tag band of Ravagers that Yondu oversaw like a cat-herder, tyrant, manager and den mother all at once was so successful.

"Comm systems went dark in sublevel 0-3."


"Any reason that might not just be a localised blackout?"

"It's the access level that leads to the armoury." Under Yondu's million-yard stare, the Asgardian guard even tacks on a yelped, "Sir," at the end of his statement.

"That's not good," Peter points at the holomap. "Most of the green dots are out here, corrailling resistance pockets. As are their weird gold-plated aircraft. Those still flying, anyway." This morning, the remaining necrophage artillery had abruptly and, in then-Peter's opinion, rather belatedly started firing on the rather pathetic Asgardian hover fleet. It had caused a lot of property damage, but not a lot of casualties: a lot of the fleet was remotely operated.

"Bastard snuck through," Yondu sums up, with a grunt. "And he's going after the Infinity Stone."

"Or maybe there's a localised network failure," Peter suggests hopefully. "There are guards at this armoury, aren't there?"

"Apparently mattered fuck all the last time." Yondu spits, then squints as, through the open balcony,
they see an unmistakable red-caped figure speed past, high over the buildings. "Well, there you go. Prince Thor to the rescue, like the last time. Good for him... boy, where d'you think you're going?"

"After him," Peter explains, activating his visor and jogging over to the balcony.

"What the fuck do you think that you can do?" Yondu yells after him, but Peter's already made the first jet over to the nearest rooftop, burning as fast as he can towards the Palace.

That's right. If Thor's going to head off Corvus - or whatever it is - what can Peter do? He'll be at best a bystander, at worst, he'll get in the way. But still. He goes.

He's halfway along the way by the time something heavy lands on his back, and Peter yelps, twisting automatically to roll, before sharp little paws dig against his neck and Rocket snaps, "Will you cut that out and keep going?"

"Rocket?"

"What were you expecting? A zhargat fairy?" Rocket snorts. "Got some new little toys I thought up. Might help." He taps the modified phaser at his hip meaningfully. "Set to engineer instant cellular degeneration or stasis. Thought it might be helpful in therapy."

Peter glances to his left - he's on the building of one of the artillery arrays, now manned by a skeleton crew since it's some distance from the frontlines. Rocket must have climbed up and jumped out at him from the watchtower. Shrugging, Peter jets to the next roof. "You heard?"

"Every-fucking-one heard. Gamora and Drax are coming too, but I told them I'll hitchhike a ride there."

Rocket's matter-of-fact assertion causes a bloom of warmth in Peter's chest that he has to cough to hide. So everyone's coming, even in the face of crazy odds. Again. "You're fucking heavy."

"And you're as ungrateful as ever, Quill." Rocket shifts his grip, perhaps pointedly digging his heels into Peter's back.

"I'm also glad that you're here," Peter confesses, because if he's about to do something maybe completely idiotic, then it's nice to have all his friends there too.

"Don't mention it. All right. After the next twelve blocks, if you jet off to the left and off the side you should be able to drop down to a balcony that should take us more or less where the blackout started."

"Off the side?" Peter remembers the awful drop from the balcony, looking all the way down into what seemed like the endless heart of space.

"You've got jetboots, don't be a baby." Rocket consults what looks, in Peter's peripheral vision, like some sort of Asgardian hand-comm, the normally sleek bracer somewhat ungainly on Rocket's wrist. "Last time, the automatic defences in and around the armoury apparently slowed down Corvus and friends enough for Thor to drive them all off. This time round..."

"Let me guess, Corvus managed to figure out how to switch off the defences?"

"Yup. Remember that arrow-stopping weird EMP trick that Corvus did? I think he's figured out how to upscale it. That's my theory, anyway. Could be worse."

"Could be worse?"
Rocket shrugs. "I've got a real active imagination."

"Can we... switch it back on? If it's still working?"

"That's where I come in," Rocket says confidently. "We're going to let Thor whale on Corvus and the others, while you get me to one of their mainframe nodes. If I reboot the system and do a bit of improv, there's no reason that we can't give the Black Order a nasty surprise."

"Won't he just switch the bots and things back off again?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. He used that trick on the arrow as a sort of last resort - didn't bother to use it off the bat or you guys would'a been fucked. Maybe it's unstable. Maybe it needs a lot of juice. How should I know? You got better plans?"

"Not particularly," Peter admits. "If Thor can remove Corvus from the immediate vicinity, the defences could maybe take out the other guys. Or stall long enough for backup."

"There's a thought. I'll ping Thor on this handset."

"Thor uses handsets?"

"Think he has implants. Most of the Asgardians do. What, did you think they communicated through telepathy? They're pretty advanced, but not that advanced."

Peter had personally thought that it had all had something to do with Heimdall, and hadn't really wanted to ask. "That's right. Implants."

"You totally thought it was telepathy," Rocket drawls. "Earthers. That's fucking hilarious."

"Rocket..."

"Say, didn't your people use to worship Thor as a God? Along with his family?" Rocket continues conversationally, as Peter uses the sleek flank of a tower as a brief jumping pad to the top of a walled garden, and forward onto the dome of a library. "That's got to be real awkward to explain away on the homeworld."

"Shut up."

II.

0-3 was crawling with Black Order guards, which wasn't a good sign. Where was Thor? Frowning, Peter sneaks around the patrols, thankful for the ostentatious giant gold-plated pillars for once, and gets Rocket to the mainframe node: a circular room that, as far as Peter can tell, is really a set of ley points and nothing else. If Rocket hadn't directed him in, he would probably have thought that it was some sort of storage unit.

"Possibly why the Black Order guys left it alone," Rocket agrees, when Peter says so, as he jumps off Peter's back and presses his paws to the nearest leyscale. Nothing happens, for a long moment, then Rocket curses and makes a gesture with one paw, and grunts. "There we go," he says, as the door seals shut behind them, and a holo array swirls up.

"Wow," Peter adds dryly, after an awkward moment as Rocket looks up and curses. "They sure didn't think over the height level of these things."

"Laugh away, Earther," Rocket grumbles, as he clambers heavily up to Peter's shoulder and to the
crook of his arm. "Now move closer, idiot."

It takes a bit of awkward manoeuvring and a lot of grumbled swearing from Rocket, tapping away at the console array, and just as Peter's arm starts to cramp, Rocket grunts again. "Here we go. We've got eyes back on the ground."

Holovid screens pop up all around them: views of the corridor outside - still full of patrols - and of the corridors beyond, either empty, littered with necrophage and Asgardian bodies, or...

"That's the one near the vault," Rocket points unnecessarily. In the holovid, Thor seems to be fighting a lineup of metal giant things, dodging as they shoot orange lasers at him from where their heads should be, weaving around pillars as they lumber after him with deceptive speed. "Huh."

"That doesn't look like necrophage make."

"Yup. Corvus must'a managed to rewire the Asgardian defence systems somehow. And I see it here," Rocket starts typing again, frowning as lines of code tick up over the screen closes to his muzzle. "Pretty clever. Most Asgardians access the mainframe via leypoint manip. They've got a DNA code access that lets them link up straight to their tech through their brain. Most of the 'magic' shit that you see from them is really very complex ley code. So I guess maybe they forgot to allow for code-based malware. They probably haven't been hacked like this in centuries."

"...Okay?" Peter blinks. "What 'magic' shit?"

Rocket rolls his eyes. "So they think of something that they want to happen, like, say, a star iron hammer smashing through a gauss artillery setup, and it happens."

"Then any Asgardian can wield that hammer?"

"Nope. That thing's got quite possibly the weirdest and most complex ley lock on it that I've ever seen. I took a peek the last time I was in the labs. Seems like the Asgardians don't even know how they made it. But the laser stuff that their spears make, their flight craft, even the Bifrost? That's all leypoint work. Weird right? Asgardian tech. It's all keyed to their YMIR battery. Force-of-will stuff. Some of their weaps have really complex energy stores that let them run for ages outside of Asgard, but not all of them-"

"Rocket," Peter says slowly, "You've totally lost me. But can we at least stop those metal things from flattening Thor before Corvus and friends over there do whatever they're doing to that heavy-looking door?"

"Working on it. Geez. Slave-driver."

As Peter watches, tense, one of the silver bot-things gets in a lucky hit, and Peter flinches as Thor gets punched through a pillar. That only seems to slow him down, however: Thor grimaces and rolls as a beam scorches up the space he'd landed on.

"Where's Mjölnir?" Peter asks out loud.

"Working on that too, Quill!"

Peter squints at the holovid, and finally spots it - near the door, Mjölnir's pinned to the ground, as though held down by... one of... Peter's Ravager grav traps... "That's not possible. Those things only have juice for like five minutes!"

"So the Black Order probably gave it a little upgrade. Juiced it up. When you get your toy back, you
should thank them."

"It can't hold down teched-up Asgardian star iron. Can it?" Then again, it had saved its ass more than once, through creative usage.

"How should I know what the Black Order did to it? Can you stop blabbing? I'm concentrating here."

Peter sulks, but shuts up. On the holovid, the giants get in another hit, throwing Thor into the closest wall hard enough to crack it, but even as Thor gets to his feet, one of them grabs hold of Thor through his cape and hauls him off balance. "That's why normal people don't fucking wear capes," Peter whispers, and realizes belatedly that he's been holding his breath all this while: he's shaking a little, hands clenched so tight that his palms hurt.

Forcing himself to breathe in and out normally doesn't help, and it feels like forever as Rocket frowns at the data stream and makes corrections, amendments, adjustments. As one of the giants holds Thor against the wall, and another one powers up its laser beam thing, Peter closes his eyes. He can't watch. He can't-

"Oh, fucking here we go. Nasty, clever little bug. All those Asgardian scientists who bitched about having to setup a universal access board for me can go eat their fucking gold-plated shoes," Rocket snarls, as with a flourish, he straightens up from the console and peers at the holovid.

The giants have frozen still, like mannequins, for a long, silent moment. Then the one holding Thor drops him, and as one, they turn to the door.

"Can you take over those bots?"

"Maybe. Why?"

"Get some of them to clean up outside us. I'm going in."

"Yeah? And how am I supposed to manipulate them while you're gone? Float?"

"Just set us on friendly, get some bots or whatever to help us clear out this floor, and then we can go down to the vault and shoot some shit up. Get some therapy all over our afternoon."

"...True. This tech thing is just a hobby anyway."

III.

By the time they get down to the corridor leading to the vault, the Black Order guards have disposed of the giant bots that had been left with Thor, and have pinned down Thor behind a pillar from their firing positions. Thor grins at Peter and Rocket as they scuttle in and take cover behind pillars.

"You're unarmed and still here?" Peter yells at him. Thor shrugs, eyeing the Black Guard firing line as though thinking of a way to charge them bare-handed.

Insanity has to be catching. Rolling his eyes, Peter squints and squeezes off a couple of shots at Mjölnir. It takes a few hits, but eventually, he manages to slag the grav trap, and as Thor raises his hand, the hammer jumps back into his palm as though it had never left.

"My thanks," Thor offers, and strides out from behind cover.

"Thor wait-"
Mjölnir parts the first entrenched firing position like wheat, slamming the Black Order out of its wake with a thunderclap. The second scatters, and Rocket snarls from behind his pillar, laughing his hoarse, maniacal laugh as his blaster shots catch one of the Black Order guards in the skull. Firing, Peter manages to clip one and down another, but it doesn't seem to matter - beyond them, as though he hasn't noticed any of the skirmishing at all, Corvus sets his palms on an ugly cyst of necrophage tech attached to the doors like a semi-organic black tumour, and pushes.

There's a horrific, grating sound, so squealingly loud that Rocket's paws jump to his ears and Peter's visor auto-compensates by temporarily blocking out the sound, and the door grinds open. A fraction, at first, then a hand's breadth. Thor shouts, summoning Mjölnir to himself, but Corvus is already slipping through, already-

"Well," Peter mutters to himself, as he sets the rocket boots to full thrust, "Time to be a fucking hero." Again.

He makes it through the door in the narrowest of margins - when the huge doors slam shut behind him and Corvus both, it shears a sliver off the heel of his jetboot, sending him crashing into one of the glass displays set on plinths in the ... yes... gold-plated armoury interior.

Corvus frowns at him, crouching into a combat-ready stance for a moment, then he laughs, hissing and low. "Peter Quill. I should have known."

Peter starts shooting in response, but Corvus casually raises his spear, and the shots ripple into a forcefield before him like raindrops. Crabbing quickly behind a plinth for what little cover it offers, Peter warns, "The cavalry's right outside the door, you know."

As if to punctuate his words, something - Mjölnir, likely - strikes the door like a gong, the impact shuddering through the frame, but the door holds fast.

"Perhaps. And they will break through, I am certain. But too late." Corvus starts to stride down the stairs, heading towards the final plinth - some sort of weird metal-framed blue cube, within which seems to flicker and rage an intense electrical storm.

The Infinity Stone.

"I won't let you take that," Peter warns, firing again, even though he knows it's probably useless. Either Corvus has upgraded his gear, or only the phage rifles can get through: again, his shots only result in that rippling effect, not even slowing Corvus' stride a fraction.

"Stop me then, Prince Star-Lord," Corvus says mockingly, pausing and turning around, and using jet thrust, Peter goes for a rugby tackle.

It works, maybe because Corvus had been expecting him to keep firing rather than jump at him, and Peter even manages to clock Corvus heavily across his jaw with the butt of his useless blaster as they go tumbling and rolling on the ground. As Corvus hisses and snarls, wriggling free, Peter manages to grab hold of the spear and hang on, trying to drag it free of Corvus' grip, wrenching it back with all his strength.

Skinny as Corvus is, he's monstrously strong. The Black Order General lets out a guttural roar, and lands a punch, then another, trying to get Peter to let go. Peter hears bone cracking and gits his teeth, twisting to headbutt Corvus as viciously as he can, feels the impact and Corvus' startled grunt and then they're just wrestling and struggling over the floor, swinging wildly at each other.

Then - what do you know - the same trick works twice. Sort of. Peter manages to slap one of the
boot thrusters onto Corvus' back, and activates it: the thrust drags them both up, vertically, slamming Corvus into the ceiling and nearly wrenching Peter's arms out of his sockets - then they're both falling, tumbling, but Peter manages to land on top of Corvus and then scrambles away madly, gasping, as he finds that he has the spear, that Corvus is twisted on the ground, twitching.

Staggering to his feet, Peter takes in a breath, holding the spear two-handed, intending to pin Corvus to the ground with his weapon, when behind him, a tinny voice announces, "Intruder detected."

He's edged too close to the fucking Infinity Stone.

The laser blast from the silver robot takes Peter high in the back and sends him spinning across the ground, the spear clanging out of his grasp as he fetches up against one of the plinths, gasping, the smell of his own cooking flesh a sweet stench in the air.

Dimly, Peter can hear Corvus laughing, getting to his feet, and through his wavering vision, he watches Corvus pick up the spear, dodge a laser blast nimbly, and swing. The scythed edge cuts the bot in half, and it goes quiet and still. Corvus turns to the Stone, even as Peter coughs wetly and tries to claw over, then the Black Order General pauses, and steps back towards Peter.

Another heavy boom shakes the door as Corvus tips Peter onto his back with a boot. "You fought well, Earther," Corvus says, his tone flat and emotionless again. "Better than most. But all things must end."

The scythe swings down-

-and blinking, Peter finds himself floating in space, in some star system he doesn't recognise, it's so heartbreakingly, painfully beautiful, a riot of colour, packed impossibly full of nebulas, and Oort clouds, and star systems and... no. He does remember this. The memory

*blooms*

"Take my hand, Peter"

*my God, it's full of stars*

"but this time Peter is alone, floating, *is this death*, he thinks, blinking, holding out a hand, as though through doing so he could touch the nearest planet, the nearest white dwarf, the nearest sun, burning yellow, the next, going huge and red, the

*PETER*, the void says to him, and Peter laughs, a little shakily. It swallows the sound as completely as he thought it would, but he tries to talk anyway.

"Oh my fucking God, even when I die, I can't escape you, Dad."

*YOU ARE NOT DEAD*, says J-Son, and after a moment, Peter sees *something* coming, forming, growing shape. It's not Kevin Bacon this time, but something formless, vaguely humanoid, but featureless, a pale glow of light, save that from its shoulders grew two gigantic spans, like great, impossible, amorphous wings.

"Dad?"

*Peter*, J-Son says, and this time, it seems softer, gentler, less like shaking Peter's bones to pieces. *The realms are now fluid to you? When?*

"This is me dying, Dad," Peter says irritably, exasperated that even in his life-passing-before-his-eyes
moment he was going to be endlessly corrected by his dickwad of a father. "It's happened before, when I touched the other Infinity Stone."

No, J-Son says, and reaches for him, a hand with no fingers, and Peter tries to flinch back, but it touches his face and all of a sudden

Peter knows.

The link, form-to-form, is effortless, the thought-chain unbroken as Peter reaches further, from J-Son, through him, to K-Lath, to S-Avi, to all the other Spartax envoys who have come, form-to-light, to this pocket of the plane. They meet him, form-to-form, some whom look like J-Son, some stranger, like a meld of various life forms cobbled together, some shapeless altogether, but all the same.

They are many, and one.

He rebuilds, flesh-to-form, amends, changes, and reaches past, with the hive-knowledge of the Spartax, through into the Prime, and reaches for the scythe blade of the spear embedded through his flesh-to-form. It takes a few tries, his hand-not-hand seeming to glide through the dual space as though slipping through jelly, then through the scythe, and back up again when he tries to adjust, until he feels his flesh-to-form correct itself, using J-Son's understanding of the process.

It takes only a heartbeat in true-time, using H-Ree's knowledge of subatomic particle physics and C-Ru's expertise in disjunction theories to rearrange the chemical bonds in the molecular makeup of the spear, to change them, until what he touches with his flesh-to-form hand turns to air. Then he reaches out, for the flesh-to-form of Corvax, whom he can vaguely sense in this alternative world, who must be killed and

No, whispers the hive mind, and starts to break apart.

"Wait!" Peter calls to them, sends to them, desperately. He still needs them. He needs their strength.

Never use this to kill, J-Son whispers, when he is the only Spartax 'left', and when Peter rounds on him, J-Son sends, a welter of regret-knowledge-knowing, a payload that sends Peter's form-to-form staggering.

"You killed my mother like this!" Peter yells, into the void, but J-Son is fading, even as his other hand reaches out now, his 'hands' slipping down to Peter's cheeks, and

Peter knows.

Slipping back into the Prime is like sinking underwater. Peter staggers back, gasping and flailing, and then struggles as he steps right into something immovable and warm that catches his wrists gently and holds him until the world focuses and stops tilting and he can sort out his senses again. Just five senses again. Nausea comes in an a sudden and unwelcome tilt, and Peter has to spend a long moment just breathing deeply until he gets over it.

Then the panic comes back. Peter jerks, and the thing holding him says, soothingly, "Calm down, Peter. Calm."

Thor.

"Corvus?"
His still swimming vision belatedly picks up Rocket standing over what looks like Corvus' body, smoking blaster still in hand. "Sorry," Rocket offers. "I got ahead on the group therapy session."

"Corvus can't die, he'll come back, we'd better-"

"Nope. Definitely dead." Rocket prods the body with a foot. "That thing you did when you magicked away his weapon what was sunk in your chest? Seems to have done away with whatever kept making him get up again."

Peter shudders. The memory of the void - the *planar realms* - is already starting to fade, like a vague dream, and Thor holds him closer, a question in his eyes, but thankfully, he leaves it unsaid. "We will dispose of the body."

"With a lot of fire?"

"Aye."

Peter clenches his jaw, and straightens up. "The Infinity Stone? Is it safe?"

"Still there," Thor says gently, and Peter blinks at him, puzzled at the soothing tone, then at Rocket, who shrugs.

"Prince Charming over there got a bit upset when we broke in to find you possibly in the midst of dying. I mean. You looked like you were, what with Corvus sticking you through and hauling you up with the blade like meat on a stick."

This time, Peter fights the shudder, and manages a grin. "Aww, I'm sure you were sad too."

Rocket snorts. "This is the second time you've cheated certain death, Quill. I would've put my money on you anyway." His ears twitch, however, and abruptly, Rocket fires another blaster round into Corvus' body. "Okay. I'm done. Therapy over. Let's go tell Drax and Gamora and Groot that they totally missed the party."

"Right," Peter says, a little dizzily, staring to walk forward, then he blinks as Thor slips an arm around his waist, with a soft breath like a stifled sob, his eyes a little wild as his free hand jumps up to press against the rent in Peter's jacket and vest. Behind it, the skin's totally healed, unbroken, and Peter looks up at Thor, breathing out slowly. He doesn't know what to say. How to explain.

"I hate to be the party pooper," Rocket says mildly, "But maybe we should dispose of the evil Black Order corpse before you guys move on to kissing and making up, just saying."
Corvus' body burns on the pyre with an oily black smoke, and the air stinks of rot and accelerants. Gamora steps back, handing over the flamethrower to a waiting Asgardian guard, and folds her hands behind her back as Peter edges up to stand next to her.

They're in a courtyard in the Asgardian palace, and above, the atmos shield is still shimmering: the necrophage ships are still divebombing it in waves. The death of their leader hasn't affected their last imperative. If she doesn't look too hard, the burning necrophage ships might even look like falling stars.

"So, one down," Peter says, with a quick grin that invites her to laugh along, to find the joke. Gamora supposes that that's one reason why she's always instinctively liked the Earther captain.

"The rest of the Black Order will be just as dangerous."

"There's four more of them, right? I guess the rest of us can have one each, then." Peter says, all playful bravado. "Since someone shot the crap out of the last one instead of sharing."

Rocket snorts, and spits rather accurately into the pyre, sitting on a rock to Gamora's right. "Peter was off in... god knows where, he was glowing and stuff. Everyone else was late. Bad show, guys."

Drax grunts, lumbering up to stand on Gamora's flank, opposite Peter. "We should share. If there are four more, that is four kills. For me, Peter, Gamora and Groot."

Despite herself, despite knowing the danger, the madness of Drax's casual assertion, Gamora starts to smile, the smile widening when Peter grins at her, laughter in his eyes. "And then? What next?"

"I guess we can all take part in whacking Thanos," Peter says off-handedly. "When we find an anti-Thanos doomsday device. Speaking of which," he adds, more soberly. "The Spartax haven't really thought about such a thing. They don't really handle Prime affairs."

"You asked your father?" Gamora asks gently.

"No, I..." Peter hesitates, and frowns at his feet. "I just know," he says at last, a little uncomfortably.

Whatever had happened to Peter in the armoury had been miraculous - and mysterious. Peter had absolutely refused to talk about it, and Rocket's descriptions had been equally mystifying. It seemed that for a second or so, Peter's skin had turned translucent and had glowed with a pale light - and then Corvus' apparently unbreakable weapon was gone, making its keyed owner vulnerable. And, more importantly, Peter's mortal injury healed itself on the spot.

"Whatever it is," Gamora decides, softly, "I am glad that you are alive, Peter."

"You and me both," Peter says, a little pensively, staring into the flames. "You and me both." His mood clears quickly, though, as Gamora knew it would: Peter is one of the most irrepresible people she has ever known. "But hey, one down, yeah?"

Gamora looks at Rocket, who shrugs, and she glances up instead, to where the black smoke is drifting up, higher, to the atmos shielding, to the vast dome of the stars beyond. Somewhere out there, her most implacable enemy is still waiting.
Today, it feels like Gamora's come a step closer. Brought a dagger just that bit nearer to Thanos' neck. And for now, for the first time in longer than Gamora can remember, she is without fear. She can hope.

"One down," Gamora agrees, and sets her hands on the hilts of the blades by her hips.

Yondu

The Ravager fleet finally jumps in when the shielding's starting to get rather thin around the edges, and in true Ravager fashion, purge the remaining necrophage fleet with a whole lot of irrelevant comm chatter, chaos, near-collisions and asshattery. Yondu's so proud of them that he's grinning when Kraglin finally lands with a few other Ravager ships in the cleared Asgardian Imperial spaceport.

"Wedding's off," he tells Kraglin, as the boys who'd originally come with them through relay start filing off into the ships.

"Really?" Kraglin frowns past Yondu at Peter, who's walking up to meet them. "Who dumped who?"

"It's complicated," Peter says, even as Yondu grunts, "They signed a treaty when they thought we were dead."

"Ah. So we're not gonna be setting fire to anything." Kraglin sounds a touch disappointed.

"Nope."

"Why would you be setting fire to anything?" Peter asks, mystified.

"Well," Kraglin says, "First, it'll be fun. Secondly, nobody dumps a Ravager contract without consequences. Even if it's a marriage contract. Third, the loot in this place would'a been shit hot." He pauses, when Peter blinks slowly at him. "Aw hell, boy, it was obvious to everyone and then some that you're sweet on the other Prince. If he'd dumped you, that would've been a dick thing to do. Even by our standards."

Yondu grins at Peter's open shock. After all this time, the boy still doesn't quite cotton on. Sometimes, he isn't sure if it's because Peter's half-Earther, or because he's half-Spartax, or because he'd gotten one too many knocks when he was a little kid still learning to move in zero-g.

"So... you're all leaving now?" Peter hedges, with a little frown. "Going away?"

"Almost." Yondu claps Peter on the shoulder, turning him around and just about frogmarching him back across the spaceport, to where Thor and a knot of shiny gold-plated Asgardians are watching them with a sort of wary curiosity.

"Yondu," Peter starts, then he sighs. "Is this about 'my' debt?"

"That's right." Yondu grins at Thor. "I reckon it's about time we collected. Seems the Spartax people aren't heavy on the creds right now, and they've used most of their tradable tech to patch up bits of your defences over the last few days. So."

"Yondu," Peter growls, "Asgard lost their immortal juice tree. They're just about recovering from civil war. Their economy's shaken and-"

"Quiet, boy, this isn't your gig," Yondu interrupts. "I'm thinking the wear and tear's gone up, and
"we're all also due some hazard pay."

"What is your price?" Thor asks, raising an eyebrow.

"We want access to Asgardian space," Yondu says blandly. "You guys got a zero tolerance policy that rather unfairly targets space-faring entrepreneurs trying to make a living. Don't worry, we won't be caught doing anything illegal."

Beside him, Peter makes a choked and strangled sound.

"Done. Anything else?" Thor asks dryly.

"We also want you to pay for repairs and replacements of all the ships we lost fighting the necrophage threat."

"Asgardian shipwrights are more than capable of making the relevant repairs, which we will be happy to conduct for free," Thor counters. "As to ships, unfortunately, as you may note, we do not have any truly weaponised space-faring ships, but you are welcome to any of our surviving craft should you wish to make replacements."

"You're twisting my arm here," Yondu complains, and sighs. "Now about Peter's debt."

"I understand that King J-Son paid the Ravagers in advance," Thor notes blandly, with a faint quirk to his mouth. "And you are seeking further payment over room and board, wear and tear and expenses. In fairness, Captain Yondu Udonta, you should itemise these costs, less the earnings that Peter has brought in over the years, working as one of your employees."

Peter blinks rapidly for a moment, then he starts to grin, even as Yondu shakes his head and blows out a sigh. "Ah, Prince Thor, you're a hard one. But I seem to remember you offering to cover Peter's debt, back when the both of you were still going to get hitched. Fair had nothing to do with it."

"A reasonable debt, yes. And the offer stands."

"Yondu."

"So it's this," Yondu claps Peter on the shoulder. "The boy's sweet on you-"

"Yondu!"

"-and all right, he's a bit of an idiot, but he's still a Ravager. His dad's a jackass. So I want you to give me your word that this said jackass doesn't get to haul Peter off to the ass end of the universe just on the jackass' say-so, political expediency or not."

"... wow," Peter says, blinking. "I didn't expect that."

"Of course," Thor inclines my head. "You have my word."

"And what with some early misunderstandings back when we were still feeling our way across the 'verse, and your aforementioned zero tolerance policy, I kinda understand that we may still have a few outstanding infractions in Asgardian territory...?"

Thor grins, clearly amused. "Any 'infractions' committed by the Ravagers in Asgardian territory to date are hereby forgiven, Yondu Udonta. But do try to respect our laws when you travel through Asgardian space in the future."

"One more thing," Yondu adds, almost as an afterthought, "If you break this kid's heart, we'll come
back and slag your shiny gold palace. See you around, Quill. Remember, when you're done playing
with your crazy friends, come back to the fold. You weren't half bad as an operative."

He leaves Peter staring open-mouthed at his back as Yondu wanders back over to Kraglin, hauling
himself into the ship, heading up to the flight deck and strapping down as Kraglin settles into the
pilot seat. Thor gives them a little wave as the ship powers up and takes off, diving out of
containment and back out into open space, to join in the fleet of Ravager M-class ships heading back
into his cruiser-class Eclector.

"Check which ships need serious repairs. Don't think there's any that can't be patched up from within
the Eclector itself, but if there are, we've got a free repair offer from Asgard," Yondu informs
Kraglin. "One that I don't really want to take up."

"Copy that, cap'n. Pity about the wedding," Kraglin notes. "I was looking forward to a party."


"Was a shitty holiday," Kraglin points out. "What with the civil war and you getting kidnapped.
Boss."

"Eh, I'm not one for lying on beaches," Yondu shrugs. "We came here to see the boy grow up a little
and scope out the land. Turned out their 'artefact' wasn't really worth the hassle. As to the boy, I
suppose I'm not sure if he's grown up, but he's got crazy - but loyal - friends. And that other Prince."

"Yeah." Kraglin sighs. "Still, Asgard served pretty good grub, and the rooms they gave us were right
decent."

"Almost sorry that we gotta leave?"

"Yep. Before someone realizes that we stole one of them Spartax ships when everyone else was
watching the boys chase around them necrocraft."

Yondu allows himself a chuckle. Maybe a little cackle. "Eh. The owner was a jackass anyway."

.Rocket and Groot

"Hey Groot?" Rocket asks softly, as he pads into the dead hulk of the tree. "Sorry I haven't been by.
The last couple of days have been pretty crazy. Groot?"

Peter strides past him, damn these Earthers and their long legs. "I don't see him," Peter says
worriedly. "Wasn't someone meant to be watching him?"

A thud of panic curls inside Rocket, and he starts darting around before he can help himself. "Groot?
Groot? Where are you? Groot?"

"Hey, calm down, Rocket," Peter says firmly. "He pulled himself up and went walking. See these
prints?"

"Went walking? Then he could be anywhere! What if he fell off the side of one of those fucking
balconies, or, or, walked into the fighting or something?"

He leaves Peter to interrogate the puzzled Asgardian guards who had been stationed outside the dead
tree, tracking the scent of ash and a few prints around the trunk and, depressingly, out of the chamber
itself into a corridor of the palace.
At least the prints are easier to follow on the pristine Asgardian floors. Rocket darts along the tracks, not even really looking forward at where he's going, and he's a little out of breath by the time he stumbles out, heart hammering within him, into the guestrooms' garden.

Out over at the fountain, Groot looks up guiltily from where he's drinking from one of the ornamental sprays, and rustles defensively.

"I totally saw you," Rocket manages, and then he exhales in sheer relief, and trundles over, climbing up to sit on the marble. "Fucking hell, Groot. You nearly gave me a fucking aneurysm."

Groot whispers a not-very-sincere apology to him, and jumps down to toddle through the grass, to the Groot-pot that had been left discarded near a trimmed shrub. Frowning, Rocket slips off the fountain, padding over, ears twitching. "You're a little big for that pot now, Groot. If you want another one, I'm sure that the Asgardians can probably make a nice big pot for you. It's just going to be a problem if you don't want it to be gold-plated."

Groot ignores him, carefully patting down the soil, and Rocket belatedly realizes that there's a tiny little wooden shard in the earth. It takes him a whole moment longer to understand what that means, then he looks around quickly. Peter's nowhere to be seen, damn him. The captain's better at shit like this.

"Uh, Groot," Rocket says softly, "Most plants don't really work that way. You're pretty special. Hell, you're really special, if the Asgardians are to be believed. So, uh, we'll just leave it here, all right? And, uh,-"

Groot shoots Rocket a surprisingly reproachful look for a creature that was effectively a mobile plant, and sprouts another black flower from his palm, carefully burying it next to the shard.

"Uh... or are you making art, or something?" Rocket tries, but Groot just keeps sprouting and planting little black flowers into the pot, until the soil's uneven, with the occasional black petal sticking out. By the time Peter catches up, Rocket's sitting down, watching with bemusement, and Peter blinks slowly for a long moment before coming over.

"Um. Is that a tombstone?"

Groot rustles at Peter, and he frowns. "Well, I can't say that it's particularly... um, I guess, starting the grieving process is a pretty good first step, and-" 

Peter's interrupted by a whispery, squeaking noise from Groot, who carries the pot a little awkwardly for a moment and then has to set it down, looking frustrated. Peter obligingly picks up the pot, and winces a little as Groot clammers up his arm as he does so, pointing impatiently until Peter doubtfully moves the pot out over the fountain, to catch a little of the spray of water, drenching the soil.

"Okay, now, uh," Peter begins, then yelps, "Holy shit!" as a golden leaf sprouts out from the shard.

Groot whispers something that even Rocket can't quite catch, satisfied, and leaps off Peter's arm, ambling over to a sunny spot on the grass and rooting down contentedly.

"Rocket, is this...?"

"Yup." Rocket finds himself grinning, inarticulately, powerfully pleased all of a sudden, his toes curling in the grass. "Better put it down somewhere safe before you go tell the Asgardians they'll have their magic juice again. Give or take a couple of centuries, maybe. Dunno how long these things take to grow."
Peter gingerly sets the pot down near Groot, as if afraid that it will shatter at any moment, and darts off excitedly. Rocket glances at Groot, who waves, then yawns, and closes his eyes.

"Man," Rocket says, still grinning, "I'm never going to be able to stop you from drinking fountain water ever again."

Drax

Lying in the garden attached to their guestrooms is... restful, Drax decides. He had grown up on a planet with higher gravity than Asgard, and the lower grav feels a little like floating, even when pressed to the soft grass. He stares up at the uninterrupted dome of stars above, automatically as always trying to pinpoint his now-destroyed homeworld, even though he knows it's out of sight from the Asgardian system.

Peter had said that they would leave Asgard on the morrow, having tired of being 'hounded' around by 'everyone', and Drax decides that he was probably going to miss this beautiful city. Even if the architecture was all too bright.

He lifts his head slightly when he hears a faint movement, and leans back down when he recognises Gamora, picking her way out to sit cross-legged on the lip of the fountain, her legs tucked beneath her in a practiced way that would allow her to spring into a combat-ready crouch on a second's notice. Life with Thanos has marked her, even as it has marked Drax: only that all of Gamora's scars are on the inside.

Drax doesn't expect Gamora to speak: she barely does, when in his presence, but tonight she does. "Keeping Groot company?"

A glance to his right indicates that Groot is still resting. Doing whatever he had done to the pot had exhausted the little plant-based creature. "He rests."

"It makes you wish that it was that easy, does it not?" Gamora asks, and when Drax looks at her, he sees that she's staring up at the stars. "Making something come back to life again. Makes you jealous."

"Plants are different," Drax points out, a little puzzled. "What is there to be jealous about?"

Gamora doesn't answer for a long time, then she murmurs, "When Thanos took me away from all that I had known, I was eight cycles old."

Eight. "Kamaria was... five, when Thanos came to my homeworld." Drax hesitates, almost expecting to feel the usual burn of pain, of grief, but the night's peaceful, and he's in the presence of friends, and a small miracle besides. Tonight, he feels calm. A little sad, perhaps, as he remembers Kamaria, but no rage.

"For the first few years," Gamora says quietly, "I tried my best to please him. I wanted to be the best at everything. At war, at studies, all of it. I thought, since Thanos is the most powerful thing in the world, that if I made him happy with me, he would bring my parents back to life."

"That-"

"Or even... even just one of them," Gamora continues. "My mother. Or my father. I begged him, once. I told him that I would be loyal to him forever. That I would never give him a reason to doubt me, that it was all that I would ever ask from him. And he laughed," Gamora notes, her voice still even, flat. "He laughed."
"There were more of you. Other stolen children. That girl, Nebula."

"Her, and Corta, X'Xir, a few more," Gamora agrees. "All of us stolen. I don't know. Nebula wasn't that crazy. I think of all of us, she had the best idea of how to get around to killing Thanos. She just didn't care what else got in her way."

"Thanos' children would turn on him, then."

"Not all of them. Corta likes what she's doing. Hopes to be named Commander of the Black Order someday, even. I've never spoken very much to the others." Gamora shudders, and now she looks directly at Drax. "They've never been my family."

He nods at her, and turns to look back up at the stars. He wonders, for a moment, where Gamora's planet was, and what her parents were like, for her to have loved them so fiercely that it had caused a hatred within her of Thanos that had been as great as his hatred of Ronan. That hatred, until meeting the Guardians, had been all that she had lived for. Gamora was kindred, even if she was not blood. Family, even if she was not blood. And Drax would not give Thanos any more of his family.

"Your homeworld," Drax says finally. "What was it like?"

Gamora blinks, and looks up with him, her shoulders loosening, and she turns this way and that, then finally points, up at one dot of light in the constellation of different stars. "It's over there," she says softly. "And right now, it would have been the harvest season..."

.Thor

The Nova Corps watch him uneasily, huddled close to the processing chamber attached to launchpad 4/11-3. Thor offers them a reassuring smile, but they huddle a little closer, and he decides to ignore them. Xandar was one of Asgard's first bioseed experiments, with modified evolutionary engineering, unlike control group bioseed planets like Zen-Whoberi, and the space-faring sentient species that had evolved, the Xandarians, looked almost identical to Asgardians.

And Midgardians.

Thor had not yet been born when Midgard had been seeded, but he had visited it when he had first come of age, out of curiosity. It had been a strange and unsettling trip, one that had left him painfully relieved to have been born Asgardian, and he had not stepped foot in Midgard since - not until the trouble with his brother had begun-

The kick of air followed by the whine of reactor-powered engines distracts Thor from his darkening thoughts. The Milano lands neatly on the platform, a bright orange-and-silver bird coming to roost, its sleek, streamlined design created for the sole purpose of jumping from planetside to space as quickly as possible. A smuggler's ship, built for manoeuvrability and speed. Thor finds himself grinning as the airlock cycles, and the Milano's crew starts to disembark: Drax first, then Gamora, then Rocket, with Groot last.

Drax nods at Thor as he passes, and Gamora offers him a slight smile, Rocket a snort and a knowing leer. Groot - taller than Rocket now, almost as tall as Gamora, and with a longer stride, merely murmurs, "I am Groot," and nods gravely as Thor inclines his head. Once they are past, through to processing, Thor steps over to the landing pad, and hauls himself up into the airlock.

Peter's waiting for him, leaning against the hull and smirking, looking a little disheveled, a little tired, but playful all the same. The air smells of the plastic-and-heat of air recyclers, and Thor breathes it in, strides over, and pulls Peter to him for a slow, thorough kiss.
"I do believe I have found a stowaway," Peter murmurs, as he slips his arms up around Thor's neck and grins impishly at him.

Thor pointedly slips his hands down over to Peter's decidedly pert ass, over his coat, and squeezes, getting a gasp. "And what do you do with boarders?"

"Flirt with them, apparently." Peter's grin turns into a smirk. "When did you get here?"

"Two hours ago."

"So Nova Prime's only been freaking out for maybe one hour and fifty minutes?"

"Give or take," Thor agrees.

"Someday, maybe, you should just ring ahead and tell her you're coming, instead of just 'porting in and walking up here to stand quietly by yourself and smile unsettlingly at everyone."

"The Xandarians have no sense of humour about unannounced royal visitations."

"I've heard that about Asgardians and pirates," Peter challenges, promptly stealing another kiss. They've done this dance more than once now: Thor ends up cycling the airlock closed one-handed, and then backing Peter over to the Captain's bunk, stumbling and shedding clothes until they tumble back onto the padded surface, Peter missing his boots and coat, Thor his vest and belt.

The bunk's far too small for them both, but Thor doesn't care, not when Peter's wriggled up on top of him without breaking the kiss, hands locked in his hair, a low and hungry sound building at the back of Peter's throat. Thor licks into Peter's mouth in response, dragging off Peter's belt, then undoing the clasps on his vest, his hands going jerky when Peter lets out a low chuckle and bites down playfully on Thor's lower lip.

"Someone's impatient today."

"It's been a while."

"We've both got life spans to match. Probably." Peter rears back a little, studying him closely. "That tree works, right? Whatever Groot made?"

"Aye. But it will not be... soon enough, for some," Thor says soberly. "Peter, my father intends to name me King."

"Well, he's um, probably kinda... probably good for retirement by now," Peter says slowly, trying to gauge the situation. "Right?"

"The Odinsleep cannot be perpetrated further without synthesized sap, and we have used the last of our stores," Thor says softly. "Perhaps in a year, or less, my father will die. He will be the first to die of age on Asgard since we survived the supernova."

"Can't he be... well, can't you put him in cryostasis or something? Until you get more sap?"

"To tell you the truth," Thor notes, a little sadly, "I think the All-Father is tired. I had an... adopted brother. He has attempted two coups to date, and has been successful each time - if not for long. Age has given my father wisdom, but it has also given him blindness, and through this, a great deal of suffering was wrought on my people."

"... Okay," Peter says finally. "Wow. I guess... maybe I'm not going to congratulate you then. Uh.
"My condolences?"

"It was a matter of time," Thor assures Peter, kissing his forehead, then his nose, until Peter wriggles a little over him with a soft yelp. "What did you find in Spartax space?"

"A whole lot of weird shit," Peter admits, nuzzling Thor's jaw, then his neck. "It just made me profoundly fucking depressed. I don't want to talk about it yet. Can we get back to whatever we were doing before I killed the mood?"

Thor answers with a rough kiss that gets a moan pressed up into his mouth, and then it's a competition to see who can shed more clothes first. Peter wins, by a wide margin, if only because Thor's mind derails considerably when Peter shimmies out of his undergarments and breeches to reveal - by the Realms - a large black plug, pressed snug within him, held in place by soft leather straps.

"Look at your face," Peter laughs, as Thor traces the straps with fumbling fingers, wide-eyed, and keeps laughing even as Thor growls and drags him down to take his mouth again, thrusting his tongue inside as he slips his palm down between Peter's thighs to press the plug in deeper. Peter jerks, with a low and urgent whine, and Thor gasps in return, arousal a hot, sweet burn in his gut and an equally urgent pressure between his thighs.

"How long?" Thor asks, and his voice is thick even to his ears.

"Mm, long enough that we probably don't need prep for you to get this inside me," Peter drawls, and presses his palm pointedly over Thor's cock, which pulses under the exoweave fabric of his breeches, and Thor's next breath chokes in his throat. "Though I think Gamora must've guessed at the end, because she is evil."

Thor doesn't answer, and Peter's wicked grin melts into a slack gasp of pleasure when Thor rubs a thumb over the stretched rim of flesh around the toy. He can't quite believe it still, that it's come this far between them in the space of a few years. "When we first met," Thor notes mildly, "I had doubts."

"That we would get this far?" Peter asks, his smile sharp this time, the humour bright in his eyes. "Even for this," Thor brushes a kiss over Peter's mouth. "Earthers-"

"You were pretty persuasive," Peter admits. "You know, on Earth? You weren't just the God of Thunder to the Vikings. They also thought you were a God of fertility." He grins again at that, and rubs his cock lazily against Thor's breeches, over his thigh. "Can't say I blame them."

Thor drags his breeches down so quickly that Peter laughs, warm and hitching, and then, holding Thor's heavy stare, he slips off the straps and slides out the toy with an audibly wet, obscene sound. Making as if to toss it aside, Peter hesitates when Thor grasps his wrist, stopping him, and it ends up somewhere on the bunk instead, Thor can't quite see where. Not that he cares, when Peter shifts up, one thigh pressed tight between Thor's bulk and the hull, the other dangling off the bunk as he positions himself and sinks down, the breath whistling out from his clenched teeth. Nine Realms, but Peter Quill is beautiful.

The stretch from the toy isn't quite enough, but Peter doesn't care, groaning and letting out stifled whimpers as he braces himself against Thor's shoulders and grinds himself down, flushed and gasping as Thor strokes his palms up and down Peter's thighs reassuringly, gritting his teeth to make sure that he doesn't buck. The heat, the sweet tight clench of it is euphoric, the best drug that Thor's ever taken, and it takes all of his control not to just reach out and take, to roll them over and drive..."
"So out of practice," Peter grits out, finally seated, and grins his sharp, mischievous grin; the next breath rattles in Thor's throat as his hips twitch up, despite himself, and Peter winces.

"My apologies."

"Don't worry about it. Just need a sec. Then you should go to town."

"Or you could ride me. Your time." Thor manages to grit out, and Peter smirks and lazily strokes himself, slow and playful.

"You want a show, your Highness?" Peter doesn't wait for an answer, stroking his hands just as languidly up his trim body, in a deliberate tease, thumbing his own nipples, chuckling when Thor growls and shifts against him. "Slow down there."

"You are... a very fast learner."

"Not really. Some girls like a show before we get down to business," Peter shrugs, one of his palms setting briefly over a strange scar over his ribs that Thor had never questioned, then he lets out a shuddering breath and rolls his hips. "Mm. I think I'm good. Sure you want me to drive?"

"Whatever you like. In the first round," Thor adds, with a smirk of his own.

"God, I love alien biology."

Peter never starts off rough: it's always tentative at first, as though he's still wondering if what he's doing is right, or real, but today, Thor's control is pressed closer along the seams than usual, and he tugs pointedly at Peter's hips when he rolls them again, far too slowly. Laughing, Peter obliges, shifting to take more of his weight on his braced legs and the next thrust is sharp enough to make Thor moan, hard enough to grind them both against the bunk and make the reinforced welding whine and creak.

"If I break my bunk," Peter says breathlessly, "You're so paying for it."

"Move, Peter," Thor groans in response, and Peter snorts and lifts himself up again, gritty and teasingly slow, just to be contrary, and Thor loves it.

It doesn't last, of course: Peter's as hungry for Thor as Thor is for him, and he ends up riding Thor so hard against the bunk that they almost do end up breaking it, their percussion gasps and moans echoing back through the empty ship as Thor shifts his palms up to Peter's weight and adds his enhanced strength to Peter's rhythm, chasing the edge of his pleasure. When he reaches it, in a dizzying rush, he shifts up to bite down over Peter's shoulder, pumping Peter's cock through the shock of pure sensation, until Peter keens his name and sinks blunt nails into Thor's arms, spilling over his fingers.

"Wha-" Peter murmurs, dazed, as Thor gropes behind him for the toy, then whimpers, "Ohfuck," as the plug gets pushed back into him even as Thor slips his softened cock out. The fit's loose now, but Peter whines and clutches at him, open-mouthed, pliant as Thor slants their mouths together.

When Peter's brain reboots again, he shifts up, pressing a button on the strange Midgardian tech embedded into the hull of his cabin, and turns the volume down as the song starts up. Thor knows this one by now - he knows all of the songs in Peter's 'tapes', and he's absently humming the melody as he tucks Peter up against him.
"Round two?" Peter suggests, though he's still soft against Thor's hip, and as Thor arches an eyebrow, Peter grins at him, with that beautiful wild mischief. "Suck me off until I get hard again."

Thor grins back, and sits up, pulling Peter along with him. For these single perfect moments stolen from time, he forgets all of his cares.

.Peter

Peter waits for the guard patrol to clear the corner, then jets up as quietly as he can to the flat landing above, latching on a little awkwardly to the stonework and hauling himself up. For a moment, his heart plummets as he nearly slips, but then he gets his footing back under him and drags himself, cursing under his breath, up over to the next level, and through a high arched window into a large chamber with a vaulted ceiling. Stealth-rigged boots make no sound on the polished floor, as he sidles over to his target, his hand reaching out-

Thor's breathing changes note, and Peter yelps as he finds himself abruptly pinned on the bed, Thor frowning for a moment before his consciousness catches up, and he lets Peter go, raising an eyebrow. "Peter?"

"No, it's a godsdamned assassin. Seriously, your security sucks."

Thor chuckles, and sits up, somehow managing to look utterly gorgeous even when right out of sleep and, yeah, sleeping naked definitely helps. Peter's libido very unhelpfully revs into high gear, and he shifts uncomfortably. "You could have come through the front door."

"More fun this way," Peter admits, and deactivates his visor. "Happy birthday. Um. You guys call it a 'name day', right?"

Instead of the reaction Peter was expecting, Thor frowns a little. "My name day is not for another fifty-six years, Peter."

"Fifty... wait. You guys count your birthdays in centuries?"

Thor shrugs, though he's grinning now, leaning over to brush a kiss over Peter's temple, then over his mouth, and the Asgardians have even managed to cheat on this part of bioengineering. Thor doesn't taste of sleep breath or anything sour at all. "I appreciate the sentiment."

"Well, I'm going to give you your birthday present in fifty-six years, then," Peter can't help but scowl, but his irritation fades as Thor hauls him up for another kiss, chuckling softly as Peter mock-shoves at his shoulders. In the dim light of Asgard's artificial night cycle, Thor's tawny golden mane looks obviously different. There's silver in it now, and a knot of worry curls inside Peter as he picks up one of the strands.

Thor gently pushes Peter's hand away. "The synthesis program is close to restarting in full."

"The tree's big enough already? What's the new one called?" Peter tries to keep his tone light. "Mima 2.0?"

"Iðunn," Thor reminds him, amusement in his eyes. "Perhaps you should try an infusion as well, for your memory, svass."

"My memory's fine, thanks," Peter retorts, as he pulls off his boots, and starts with the clasps of his coat. "It's just you people who like weirdly difficult names. You're worse than the Xoxans."

Thor snorts, leaning close, and against his back, the furnace heat of Thor's body is palpable even
through Peter's vest, as Thor nuzzles the nape of his neck. "How was the trip?"

Peter pulls a face. "It's getting worse out there. The Spartax have been preparing their failsafes in their weaponised planets and gadgets - Spartax empire my fucking foot - for a billion years or whatever, but I'm not sure it's going to be enough during the breach."

"So it will come," Thor says quietly, resigned.

"Maybe. I've been working with the hive mind on a couple of other solutions. We'll see how those pan out. The Milano's been jaunting around the 'verse, collecting possibilities." Peter flashes Thor one of his sharp, mischievous grins. "We were on Earth for a bit."

"Oh?" Thor kisses Peter's cheek, then his shoulder, as Peter starts to unclasp his vest.

"Yeah. You're quite the heartbreaker. Seems you ditched some Earther girl back home when you had to come back to Asgard to deal with your adopted brother's shit, then stayed around Asgard and never wrote back." When Thor sighs, Peter adds, "Your friend Tony Stark blabs like a Yga spice trader when he's drunk. Worse."

"And this bothers you?" Thor asks. There's something a little tight in his voice, and Peter doesn't want to turn to look, to see if it's anger or resignation or worse: regret.

"Well, no," Peter admits. "Pot calling kettle. I've got a way, way worse track record than you. Probably," he adds, when Thor starts to laugh. "Or maybe not, if you've been kicking around for a zillion years and Asgard is post-gendered or whatever you're calling it."

He hadn't meant to sound peevish, but Thor gently turns him around to kiss him, and the irritation that had been welling slowly up within Peter fades into a background buzz. Thor's full attention is like a drug, and although Peter will never admit it, he craves it. He had felt vaguely sorry for the Earther girl... but hell. Thor had a lifespan whose name day intervals measured as long as an Earther life, responsibilities that decided the fate of billions.

Still. Thor's past wasn't any of Peter's business, and when they break for breath, he says softly, "Happy birthday anyway."

Thor grins at him. "I appreciate the visit. Even if you are too early."

"You're an ungrateful asshole," Peter tells him, with mock indignation, "And I should probably withhold sex, except that I'm fresh off a trip to the ass end of the 'verse and it's been a long and boring jump."

Thor laughs, and pulls him down, until they're curled against each other on the bed. "How long are you staying?"

"Probably a day or so, especially since my husband seems so fucking bent on being ungrateful," Peter drawls, and nips Thor's shoulder for good measure.

"Stay longer," Thor instructs him, still as arrogant as ever, and as Peter sucks in a breath, Thor pulls him closer, tucks Peter's head under his chin, and Peter grumbles for a moment before he settles, to press his ear up over Thor's chest, to hear the steady drumbeat of a heart that has run longer than much of human civilisation.

It feels like Peter's listening to the heartbeat of the universe itself, of eternity, of time. He can't describe it. It feels a little like floating in the void, like flying through space in the Milano, like visiting a planet he's never been on, like getting away with a good score. Peter holds the kernel of
suffusing warmth jealously close, his eyes squeezed shut, allowing himself to be lulled to sleep as thick arms curl around him.

When he dreams, he dreams of the stars.

End Notes

Thanks for reading! :)

twitter: manic-intent
umblr: manic_intent

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Some notes:
A big thank-you to readers who supported this fic, pointed out inconsistencies and just kept me going while I wrote. I don't use betas (personal quirk: once I lose momentum in a chaptered fic I get bored of it), so editing does tend to be a rather collective process :)

Long-term readers will already know that I am, in many ways, a lazy researcher. Wiki is pretty much it: the rest of the details, I prefer to make up myself. I don't really read Marvel comics, and I loved but didn't really repeatedly watch the Thor films. As such, a great deal of the world-building is made up, often inspired by other sci-fi genres: Asgardian bioseeding from Prometheus, alien culture/morality, tech and politics from a range of sci-fi books. My current recs if you liked this fic: Orson Scott Card's Speaker for the Dead (yeah, Card is a homophobe. But Speaker is also a really seminal work on alien contact and morality... and if you google the title with '.epub' you can prob find it off the net), Dan Simmon's Hyperion Cantos, James Corey's Leviathan Wakes, Isaac Asimov's books (esp his Robots work)... and lots more out there that I can't recall offhand.

As with all my work, it's creative commons. Use the details if you want, or the 'verse, anything. I don't care. Just have fun!

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