When The Stars Come Calling
by lazywriter7

Summary

The man who, fuck knows, sprouted fully formed out of the ground in the middle of the Fort Knox times a zillion highly secured Avengers facility- gaped at the earbuds trailing from Tony's ears. "Is that tiny stick playing music."

A very slow, ominous kind of horror was starting to dawn over Tony's mind. "Please don't tell me you were frozen in ice for ninety years."

"Don't be ridiculous- I was in space." The man said. He plucked a plastic bag off of Tony's counter and proffered it. "Blueberry?"

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Or, how Tony Stark got his groove back, with the assistance of one Peter Quill.
I...don't know what this is. Except I'd had enough of sad Tony, and Steve was taking a very long time making him happy, so I went recruiting XP For the ones who've come here solely searching for the Steve/Tony, they're set in the past and a little of the future, but I'm making no endgame promises and they're really not the main focus here, so you might want to reconsider. For the ones looking for healing Tony who's eventually going to be awesome and be just as independently happy as he deserves...look no further XD Peter is also a dear.
Funny thing was—he hadn’t even been looking for the damn thing.

It would have been optimism of the highest, most deluded degree to try and argue that he’d forgotten completely about it. That it didn’t cling to his thoughts like a particularly reprehensible parasite on certain days (mostly when Ross was being a Class A Dick). Or on darker nights, when the silence was solid enough to settle thick and suffocating on his skin—thoughts of it crept up to swallow his mind and sanity whole, plunging him in a marsh of regret and nostalgia and *angerangeranger* that he thrashed about in but couldn’t. Fucking. Escape.

Considering all of the above...yeah, maybe it was funny, maybe it was fucking *hysterical* to the Powers That Be that Tony had simply been mindlessly rummaging in his drawers for his favourite screwdriver when he was greeted by the sight of a small, innocuous black phone nestled in the corner.

If you could even call that aberration on the face of the planet a phone. Hell, was that shit *Nokia*? Wasn’t that what the T-Rexes used in the Cretaceous era to call on their raptor aunts? Why was his hand stretching towards the one-notch-above-coconuts-connected-by-string phone as if it was trying to pick it up?

Tony stared at his hand in rapt fascination, watched as the fingers trembled and yet inched forwards inevitably. Maybe he’d grab hold of it and take his armour out for a spin just for the satisfaction of chucking the phone from a height of fifty thousand feet. Maybe he’d track the location of the only number programmed on the phone because Tony fucking Stark could pull shit like that. Maybe his hand would develop spontaneous allergies from coming into contact with such ancient, repulsive tech. He didn’t know. It was a world of possibilities.

What he did know was that his best friend had lost his legs and his career and his passion to fly, all in one fell swoop. That his girlfriend had left him, and the people he’d screwed over his girlfriend for couldn’t give less of a shit. That it hurt when Vision didn’t talk, and hurt even more when he did, because those bloody dulcet tones—because even after all this time, it wasn’t that easy to get over the death of a child, even if JARVIS had been just blinking lines of code on a screen. That Tony knew that he’d done the right thing, and the right thing somehow involved selling himself off to people and institutions that he’d disparaged all his life, for the sake of a family that—...that family was a lie, and Obie had tried so hard to teach him that but Tony had forgotten anyway, and in the years that he spent designing rooms in the Tower and better tech and arrows and body armour, his teammates spent hiding life changing secrets from him. Because his worst nightmare had always been that he could have done something more; that he’d let his team down. Never even in those nightmares could he have imagined that things could swing the opposite way.

World of possibilities. Maybe he’d finally call, even if it felt strangely akin to succumbing to a last drink. Anything had to be better than this state of...stagnation. Where he couldn’t move forward and the world wouldn’t let him move back. Where he felt a tiny, sinking feeling of relief when his left arm would go numb.

His fingers brushed the plastic case. He could almost hear the imagined dial tone trilling in his ear, the voice on the other side. *Ste-*
Something slammed into his wrist, hard enough to knock his hand back and send the phone clattering to the floor. Tony grimaced and bit off a swear, turning his head to the side to watch a red-and-gold gauntlet forming around his afflicted hand.

“FRIDAY, what the actual fuck.”

“Intruder breach detected in Avengers facility.” To anyone unacquainted with the …habits and predilections of AI, FRIDAY’s was an efficient robotic monotone like any other. To Tony however, long used to the English butler-like pizzazz of one JARVIS- FRIDAY sounded faintly rattled. “Main common room. The facility is otherwise deserted, except you.”

“And you couldn’t-I don’t know, tell me that and ask to see if I wanted the suit?” The grumpiness was mostly put on-Tony’s heart was already beginning to hammer in his chest. He straightened his other arm to catch the right gauntlet flying towards him with far more grace than the first one.

“There is no one in the facility except you.” FRIDAY repeated, and…strange, while bits and pieces of the suit began to assemble around his body and adrenaline started trickling its way into his veins; a part of Tony’s mind was caught up in the thought that he’d programmed his AI against redundancies. Repetition served no purpose-and yet FRIDAY’s worried tones seeped into his ear anyway.

“Waiting for instructions mean anything to you?” The suit clanked as he made his way across the room-ducked under the doorway and started striding down the corridor. His heart was still refusing to still. The breastplate felt heavy on his chest.

There was something almost….determined, about FRIDAY’s answering words. “Not when I need to make decisions to protect your safety.”

Need. He heard, and his heart lurched and tightened, somehow at the same time. Can something artificial truly need anything?

He turned the corner, just as FRIDAY spoke, “Five hundred metres.” and heard the repulsors power up with a quiet whine. His heartbeat was still a thunderous cacophony in his ears, his mind stripping past a million thoughts per minute-there were so few people who could break into a facility secured by him, maybe…maybe someone who had broken out renegade superheroes from a high security government prison not too long ago. Why would they come here, had he come to finally finish it, take back his self-righteous instrument of justice and bring it down on Tony’s neck like-

The repulsor whine trailed off, light powering down faintly. He blinked, helmet free, chest still caught in a spasm and stared at the…pile of maroon lying on the floor?

Maybe Wanda had forgotten to take her garbage bag along, Tony thought wildly-except then the pile of maroon started uncurling with a groan, limbs unfolding and a hand coming up to rub a gingery head with a particularly afflicted sensibility. It was most definitely a man (though his overall appearance seemed to suggest that the garbage bag theory would have been quite sound)-though not a man that Tony had ever seen before.

His repulsors went right up again, voice colder than a freezing gale. “Who the hell are you?”

“Eh?” The man slowly raised himself to a sitting position, face too scrunched up in what was presumably pain to really make out any distinguishing features. Half open eyes squinted at Tony, then closed again-because apparently his visage was just too affecting.

“Start. Talking.” Or would you like your maroon ass seared to a crisp, served to you on a barbecue
“grill?” He didn’t say it though. Maybe the Tony from eight years ago would have. Or six months.

“Quill.” The man mumbled, in a voice worthy of a thousand hangovers. His eyes flicked open again, and his brows came furrowing down. “No, wait. Lord.” A sequence of rapid blinks. “Peter? Star?”

Tony stared.

The man squinted at his nose, then nodded vehemently. “Quill Lord Peter Star.”

Two strides, and Tony punched him in the head.

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The man had a rather hard head.

So Tony reflected as he watched the man groggily come to, not even an hour after Tony had knocked him out. The colour of his eyes was still a little difficult to pin down, even as they flitted open and darted back and forth—from the manacles clamped on his wrists and ankles, secure enough to hold a berserking supersoldier or a crafty spysassin, to the empty eyeslits of the suits standing in the various alcoves of the darkened workshop—for intimidation purposes of course. In fact, he seemed to be scoping out pretty much everything in the surroundings except Tony, which was foolish and understandable because Iron Man was one terrifying motherfucker when he wished to be.

“I know my workshop is pretty much the closest it comes to a technological Shangri-La, and I’d stare at it all day too; but you’re almost hurting me with the lack of attention, Ginger.”

Ginger, ugh. He really was losing his touch. Fuck, had Cap run away with his ever-enchanting wit as well?

“I’d dare say he’s befuddled at waking up in someplace other than a cell, Mr Stark.” FRIDAY’s tone was downright flinty. And Mr Stark—double ugh. Someone wasn’t doing a very good job of hiding their disapproval.

Which was stupid, because no sensitive information was on open display, Ginger was chained to a chair and preliminary tests indicated no…foxily hidden abilities. Also the teensy little fact that Tony’s heart was racing at a million miles per hour again and his workshop was pretty much the only place he felt marginally safe these days.

“Mr Star—” Ginger’s mouth curled into a bleary, lopsided grin. “Hey, we have the same last name!”

….which wasn’t exactly the predictable response for a man hearing a disembodied voice for the first time, even if Tony’s AI were public secrets now. This was getting more and more suspicious by the minute.

“I’ll take the name change under advisement, but I’ve always rather hated stars.” A quick, rapier-sharp smile, and Tony was raising a charged up repulsor again. “You were caught trespassing in the Avengers facility. How did you get through security?”

Those reddish-brown brows were furrowing in confusion, even as Ginger straightened in his chair and finally established eye contact. Damn, the man didn’t look scared at all. “Is that….on Terra?”
“…what.” Flat as his voice could go-Tony was beginning to lose patience.

“Um.” More scrunching up of the brows. “…Earth. Yeah. Is this facility on earth?”

The whine of the repulsor was reaching levels beyond human hearing. Fuck, was this how his opponents felt every time he spewed gibberish during fights? It was freaking annoying. “No, we’re on the fucking moon.” Because we’re a bunch of elitist prigs who consider themselves superior to everyone else, apparently.

Ginger blinked. “Which moon?”

And…snap. That was the sound of his patience fracturing. “Look, I absolutely refuse to believe some mind-addled whackjob was able to break through my security systems so you better start spilling on how you did it and who sent you otherwise I’m going to start frying off body pa-”

The man’s eyes widened-finally, some form of reaction. “No, wait, I didn’t mean to-I don’t even know who you ar-”

Tony barked out a short, biting laugh. “Or maybe you really are addled. You could have gone for literally any other lie-”

“No, seriously, I do not know who you are-”

“You’re being held up at repulsor point,” Tony interrupted, aggravated and utterly not in the mood, “by Iron Man and you expe-”

“Iron who now?”

Tony stared at him.

“…ah, is it a code….sorry, outlaw name kinda thing? Sorry man. Iron Man, gotcha.”

“You’re telling me,” Tony began, slow and more than a little scathing, “that you have no idea who Iron Man or Tony Stark or the fucking Avengers are-”

Ginger fidgeted a little with his manacles. “I’m sensing yes isn’t the correct answer here?”

Tony stared some more.

“…ah, is it a code….sorry, outlaw name kinda thing? Sorry man. Iron Man, gotcha.”

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“…you guys are famous, I’m guessing? Is it a band? Sorry man, it’s just that I’m into a bit of old timey music and I’m not really keeping up with the….Revengers or whoever the latest Terran rage are-”

“You know who the Avengers are. People living under rocks and inside wells and on the top of mountains know who the Avengers are, you know who I am.” Tony’s voice was taut, and vibrating. He could feel his knuckles whitening under the strain of clenching too tight-why was he getting so affected by this?

“-you’re probably the drummer, I like drummers man, they seem like very cool people even though people don’t know their names very well.”

“You will stop talking right now.” Tony gritted out and the man snapped his mouth shut. Huh, that was almost gratifying. If only he wasn’t pissed (panicked panicked who the fuck was this guy) out of his mind.

“Sentry mode.” He finally managed to say, and attempted to step out of the suit. The suit remained
firmly non-cooperative.

“Decisions to protect your safety.” FRIDAY reiterated stiffly. Tony would facepalm if hitting a metal helmet with a metal gauntlet didn’t feel like sticking his head into a vibrating gong.

“You should probably listen to her.” Ginger affirmed, nodding his head agreeably. Tony might have let out an audible groan of despair at that. *She’s trying to protect me from you, you idiot.*

“Maybe he’s got Iron Man all mixed up with the Optimus Prime’s of his childhood, he’ll know my face.” And now he was making poor excuses at his AI. Goddamn this helmet, he needed to breathe. He needed to know how the hell this man sounded so sincere denying his knowledge of superheroic fuck up Tony Stark.

His faceplate slid up with a little snick. “Satisfied?” FRIDAY returned, tone arch and cool.

Meanwhile, Ginger was gawking at his face—thank god, Tony was beginning to feel all hurt in his massive little ego—“….so you *are* human.”

“Of course I’m human.” Tony snapped back. “Wait, is this some sort of screwed up hero worship thing because boy have you picked the wrong target…” Though maybe he hadn’t. Tony could do with some self-worth affirming, he definitely hadn’t had the reverent kind of sex from the right one-sided direction in way too long; no, no *no*, he was relapsing, he’d promised himself he wouldn’t succumb to every expectation and do the self-destructive thing *again*, he was better than this now.

(He had to be. Otherwise, he was stuck in square one, ground zero. The arms dealer who couldn’t do right even if the lives of everyone else depended on it.)

“Nah, it’s just Terra might have easily been colonised by other…” Ginger started, then paused himself midway as if just comprehending how much his words sounded like ‘hogwash’ and ‘balderdash’, with a little bit of ‘jabberwocky’ thrown in there. Wow, Lewis Carroll references; Tony’s brain was literally unsalvageable now.

Ginger gave his head a little shake. “Anyway, that obviously didn’t happen. You’ve just got a mechanised suit of…armour? Like a Knight?”


“So the helmet has life support right?” Ginger continued with the questions, sounding almost eager. His hands were loose and relaxed within the manacles, like wearing them was an everyday occurrence. “So you’d be able to breathe in space?”

“…this model of the suit, yes.” He was startled into a response, that was it. The man’s lack of consternation at his situation was making him all frazzled. “Earlier ones, not so much.”

“Boss.” FRIDAY’s voice cut in, disapproval reaching dizzying heights.

Ginger seemed not to notice. “And I’m guessing the glowing lights at the centre of your gauntlets have propulsive properties as well as doubling as weapons.” The rest of the sentence dwindled into murmurs. “Too bad I only have the boots, hands would increase manoeuvrability like shit…”

“FRIDAY.” Tony asked and her voice chimed in dutifully, repeating the words that had gotten lost in the mumbles. “Yondu never said Terran tech had gotten so advanced.”
Ginger glared at him in indignation, Tony responded with the smuggest shrug he could muster. But honestly, enough was getting to be enough. “Okay, either I’m a Muggle or you’re completely off your rocker. Whichever way, you’re speaking absolute gibberish to me and my last reserves of patience ended…two minutes ago. FRIDAY, tell me some ways to make this guy sing?”

Disapproval set aside for the minute, FRIDAY chirped back like the loyal, dependable soul she was. “Torture usually yields unreliable info. There’s always sodium pentothal-truth serum for the uninitiated.”

“That was for your benefit.” Tony added. “FRIDAY is very helpful by nature. Thesaurus, bodyguard and private butler in one. I bet if I asked real nice, I could have her fly in a vial just for you. Don’t you feel special?”

That was for Ginger’s benefit too. Though of course, FRIDAY was indeed very helpful, and smart to boot because the tinny murmur from the helmet’s speaker reached only Tony’s ears. “Unreliable, otherwise we’d use them for witness questioning all the time. Polygraph’s the same.”

The charade obviously wasn’t helping much though. Ginger still had yet to look more than mildly perturbed; in fact, his next face was downright considerate. “Look, I’m not here to do you any harm. Just let me go, outside of the…facility, you said? I promise I won’t return and you can go back to talking to your computer and stomping around your own house in armour—”

I don’t stomp, Tony wanted to say, though something probably stupid like this isn’t my house or it keeps me safe would have escaped his lips instead. Thankfully, Ginger had to interrupt with, “Also, sodium pentothal doesn’t work the way you think. Sorry if you guys hadn’t figured that out yet.” And he actually sounded apologetic about it too.

Right, enough games. “You’re not leaving until I find out how you got in.” And then, he’d be delivered right into Ross’ hands. Technicalities were nice that way.

Ginger exhaled an annoyed breath-annoyed, fucking hell, annoyed, like he’d been taken captive by Super Strength Guy #207 instead of being threatened by Iron Man, maybe Tony needed to re-evaluate torture as a viable option-and forced out, “Okay, fine. My friends were being assholes…”

Well, isn’t that just the universal truth.

“…and we were having some down time so they thought I needed to ‘face my past’ and ‘secrets weigh down on your soul, Star Lord’ and ‘you’re being a pansy-assed coward, Quill’ and baby Groot hasn’t quite mastered his vocal cords yet…”

“Do I normally sound like this?” Tony threw as an aside to FRIDAY, just for curiosity’s sake. It would explain all the assassination attempts. FRIDAY chose to wisely remain silent.

“…except facing my past kinda involves being back on Terra so they freaking beamed me down in my sleep…”

“Wait, like Star Trek beamed you down? Scotty, energise?” The scorn was a little difficult to disguise; Tony didn’t quite bother to put in the effort. Maybe the man was a pathological liar. Still sounded better than a moron breaking into the Facility’s security.

Ginger’s eyebrows pulled together in consternation. “I’m not quite sure I know what you’re—” except then his eyebrows straightened right back up, and jeez, it was like someone had switched on a light bulb in his eyes, they got so bright. (Tony wasn’t a poetic kind of guy, sue him. It would be disquieting if he got all poetic about the eyes of a delusional cat burglar anyway).
Meanwhile, Ginger was all aflutter with good cheer. “Wait, I remember that! Space: the final frontier, right? Is that still going on?”

Christ on a pogo stick, they were just getting absolutely nowhere. Tony jabbed two metal fingers into the pressure points above his eyebrows, in a vain attempt to hold off the steadily building headache. “Right, okay. I’m hoping you got high after you broke into the Facility-”

“Accidentally.”

“-not helping.” Tony pressed his teeth together till his jaws grew numb, took a deep breath and restarted. “Yes. High after you reached. Or pretending to be an imbecile. Pick one option, and I’ll be back for you after I send alerts to War Machine and Vision-that’s the guy with the God voice and the head laser beams-in addition to the Feds, CIA, NYPD…provided I can coax them off their individual tv shows. Or…you could choose to be nice and cooperative and tell me everything, and you won’t end up in a room without doors for the rest of your life. Understand me?”

“Of course.” Ginger said, nodding in agreement.

Tony swivelled on his feet (much harder in the armour than you’d think) and clanked out of the room, leaving a tied-up Ginger and far too many questions than his overtaxed brain had the capacity to deal with. He had thrice-damned paperwork to do, ill-advised decisions about antique flip phones to be made. This was mucking up his schedule considerably.

“I don’t suppose you’ll actually be contacting Colonel Rho-” FRIDAY began dryly.

“He has better things to concern himself with.” Like his rehabilitation. His precarious position within the Air Force. Whether it was worth holding on to his precarious position as an Avenger. Anything other than his irresponsible bes…irresponsible friend, who couldn’t keep him goddamn safe in a bloody scrimmage for heaven’s sake-

“He’d want to know, this could pose a considerable threat to your wellbeing-”

“All the more reason to keep him out of it.” He’d reached the main floor of the Facility; a couple of turns and longish corridors later, he was making his way across the darkened common area, headed straight for the refrigerator. He pulled the door open, surveying the empty racks with only bottles of water stowed at the bottom with an exhaustion unwarranted by the situation. He was fine. He was hydrating himself. Food was for the weak. Friends were for the weak. He was fine.

He should stop staring and start drinking from that bottle sometime soon. No wait, bad phrasing.

Fine motor control or not, holding a plastic bottle in a superhumanly powerful metal gauntlet was just asking for trouble. “Sentry mode?” He asked again, this time a little archly and inclined his head in mock gratitude when the suit opened right up. “Much thanks.”

“Only here to help, boss.” FRIDAY snarked back and Tony felt the shadow of a smile prod tentatively at his lips despite himself. Unscrewing the bottle cap with the twist of a thumb and the index finger, Tony tilted his head back and drained the contents; water glugging peacefully down his throat, the motion almost meditative. Once the bottle was empty and he’d wiped the last clinging drops from his chin, he almost felt better.

Only one thing guaranteed instant mood upliftment: eighties rock. Out of respect to the neighbours, who were basically all of Snow White’s feathery friends that squatted around the Facility and probably wouldn’t appreciate being deafened, Tony opted for the MP3 player and trailing headphones instead of the surround sound speakers. Insane guitar solos, here we come.
... Hello? Is there anybody in there? Just nod if you can hear me...

Even as Tony started pacing down towards the workshop again, he could catch traces of FRIDAY’s voice over familiar beats thrumming in his eardrums. Just the basic facts...can you show me where it hurts? Probably something about wearing the suit before going down again. She’d get over it eventually. She had no choice. Wasn’t like she could leave.

I can't explain you would not understand...this is not how I am.

Maybe that was an issue. Maybe he should ask. She had as much right as anybody to give up on him.

The door to the workshop slid open and Tony drifted inside, rubbing his hands together. I have become...comfortably. “Alright Chucky, I will have your confession in writing, preferably double spaced and twelve-point font—”

From whereon he would have proceeded to even pithier remarks, Pink Floyd serving as pleasant accompaniment; except for the tiny part where Ginger was no longer tied down to the chair-in fact, he was standing with one broken, smoking manacle hanging from his wrist and the other, and this part is the kicker really- and his other hand enclosed in an Iron Man gauntlet.

Fuck being jealous of Barnes, this was a whole new level of possessive rage. The words were as cheery as ever, except of the part where they’d been leeched out of any kind of human warmth. “Yeah, you clearly don’t know who I am. Otherwise you’d know to keep your hands off my stuff.”

The mild consternation in the man’s eyes-yeah he was the man again, screw cutesy nicknames-finally upgraded itself to some real alarm. Probably by the very, very real murder in Tony’s own eyes. “Look, I don’t want to cause any trouble, I’m sorry for this—”

His hand twitched upwards, probably to point the gauntlet at Tony’s face and fire his own repulsor at him, oh he could just try- except that motion aborted just as quickly as it had begun, the man’s gaze caught by…the earbuds trailing from Tony’s ears?

The fuck?

“Is that tiny stick.” The man began in a measured tone, but it didn’t stay that way very long. “Playing music.”

…and it started to trickle in slowly, a horrible sort of realisation creeping up in Tony’s brain that needed to be deprived of its genius card immediately- the questions, the ignorance of facts that would be common knowledge for any reasonable person living in this world, the almost puppyish excitement at recognising Star Trek that called back almost too easily to I understood that reference, all of which built up to an awful kind of déjà vu and an even more awful conclusion…

“Please don’t tell me you were frozen in ice for ninety years.”

“Don’t be ridiculous- I was in space.” The man grinned weakly, then startled slightly as the gauntlet on his hand depowered with a whine. FRIDAY to the rescue.

“Well, drat.” The man kept grinning, though it was getting weaker by the second and a lot more desperate. His eye darted to a little pouch on the nearest counter, one that he made a grab for a second later.

Tony stared at the red-and-gold fingers holding the plastic bag aloft. The man made another valiant attempt at a smile.
“Uhm, blueberry?”

Chapter End Notes

...considering that updates to this are going to solely depend on reader reactions, comment if you liked, pretty please?

Also, song lyrics taken from Pink Floyd's Comfortably Numb.
Stuck In The Middle With You

Chapter Notes

A nice, unbeta-ed chapter, because you guys are just being so goshdarned nice XP Also apologies for the joke right at the end, Tony can get a little irreverent.

Title taken from Stuck In The Middle With You by Stealers Wheel, and damn if it doesn't suit these guys to a tee.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Alright. Tell us what we got.”

He spun around on the whirly chair- that’s what it was, it was a chair on wheels that whirled around and he’d named its kind when he was eight, it needed no real names. What he needed after the past six hours was to tilt his head back on his whirly chair, call up the holograms to the air with a clap of his hand and have FRIDAY give him a couple of fucking answers.

What made the past six hours so excruciating you ask? It could have been any number of the currently shitty things in his life. It could have been anything in his life period, ‘shitty’ qualifier excluded, since it being his life-everything was sort of shitty by default.

Drowning in his personal cesspool of self-generated pity. So attractive.

The general kind of shittiness though, had somehow grown exponentially in the past six hours-a third of which was spent prying his own damn gauntlet off a stranger’s hand. Not only did the guy manage to get out of his restraints without FRIDAY unleashing the furies of hell and StarkTech security on him, he somehow managed to squiggle around the numerous barriers separating him from one of the suits and actually put a part of it on. And almost fire it at Tony.

(An image flashed before his eyes-there and gone, a missile casing crouched in the blood-streaked sand, STARK embossed across the gunmetal grey in earth-shattering letters…)

Tony blinked sweat-laden lashes, heart thundering to life under his rib cage. Right. Time to get the fuck over himself.

“Start with how the hell our systems missed him getting out of his chair and accessing one of the suits.”

“Well, I.” FRIDAY began tentatively, like she had the past six times he’d asked the same damn question. “I’m yet to find out, boss. There’s a blank in my records from 21:43...”

“-to 21:58, yeah, I got that.” Tony kneaded his eyebrows with rough knuckles, then let his arm fall with a thump to the side. “No backups? No methods of retrieval?”

“No signs of deletion. It was like the data had never even been recorded to be backed up in the first place. There’s just a…void.”

Tony cursed under his breath, then spewed a couple of choice words out loud for the sheer freedom of it. Not like there was anyone to nag him about it now. He dismissed the thought with an irritated
jerk of his head, like an errant fly.

“We have completed analysis on the tech discovered on his person though!” FRIDAY rushed to fill in, something almost agitated about the mechanised words, information flowing rapidly. “The headset almost certainly folds out into a helmet like structure, similar to a gas mask. The boots have been fitted with devices that on superficial examination appear modelled off rockets, with propulsive abilities, though not repulsor based. We’ve identified a switch like device that gives off a disruptive field on activation, presumably what shielded some of these devices from discovery on preliminary scans. There are a couple of odds and ends we haven’t quite managed to determine the function of yet-”

“Discovered too late.” Tony muttered, eyes scanning through the hologram projections of said objects quicker than many a computer processor, distracted hand gestures rotating the images one way and the other. “Bastard probably used these ‘odds and ends’ to hack into my system and the suit.” Archimedes fuck him sideways, at this rate he wouldn’t be surprised if the power sources for these were goddamn Tesla coils.

“I.” FRIDAY began again and stopped, Tony too mired in his frustration at the mindboggling scans to truly pay attention. This was ridiculous. This was like cracking open a plastic toy gun made for a kid, seeing nothing but a couple of springs and a bright red LED, but being told that the thing was a bloody murder weapon. He was missing something. Rather, he was missing everything because he wasn’t seeing anything that could have actually accomplished the things that the man had to have done. He wasn’t…he wasn’t seeing things right, his framework, his assumptions, something was off…the very engineering of these things was alien-

“I’m sorry.” FRIDAY said, and Tony’s thought process slammed to a halt on its heels.

“I’m your preliminary line of security but he somehow got past me anyway…that was dangerous and he could have really hurt you.” The words were coming quick and clear, almost like FRIDAY was trying to be professional and matter-of-fact about it. It was oddly reminiscent of Pepper, when she was trying not to hurt Tony too badly. When she was hurting a lot herself. “I keep running scans on his tech and they keep coming up inconclusive. I understand that in JARVIS’ time, no one had ever seized control of the suit and I’m…I’m trying but I haven’t been active and online that long, my development is still in its initial stages which is not an exc-”

“FRIDAY.” Tony interrupted. His voice was far stronger than his heart felt; a weak thing cowering behind his ravaged sternum. He…didn’t quite know what he was feeling right now. “You know the first rule to dealing with Tony Stark. Don’t just take any shit from me.”

You being here makes life less shitty, he didn’t say. He wasn’t the kind, not anymore. Probably never was.

There was a little rustle of static behind the speakers, and a part of Tony imagined FRIDAY smiling, quiet and tremulous. The words came slower, a little more confident. “In the interests of that endeavour, I might bring to your attention that speaking of yourself in third person usually comes across as fairly arrogant-but you’re always so harsh on yourself when you do.”

“I believe in giving people what they deserve.” Tony smiled in turn, sharp and unremorseful. “Fine, screw the doodads. Tell me what we know about Star Man.”

“He attests his name is Peter Quill.” FRIDAY answered promptly, the little emotional tangent from seconds ago brushed away to the corner efficiently. The images of Ging-Quill’s devices winked out, transparent blue screens of hospital and school records, birth documents and police reports shimmering to life in the air instead. “Records show a possible match for one Peter Jason Quill, born
8th July 1980 in Joplin, Missouri. Reported missing at age eight by his grandfather. Case closed a year later when no further leads were unearthed.”

There was precious little information available: Quill had been born in the dark ages long before the enlightenment of the internet age, and aside from a couple of dental records, visits to the hospital for the setting of broken bones—wow, that was a lot of bones, Quill had kept busy in his childhood—and grade reports from Emerson Elementary, there wasn’t much out there. Provided this was Quill in the first place. The surface physical features seemed to match, what with floppy ginger-brown hair and hazel eyes of the pasty-faced boy in the pictures.

“Why oh why do we not have DNA samples to verify this moron against.” He flicked his finger to skim through screens, committing the information to memory, useless as it was. “Wouldn’t even have to attack his bodily integrity or whatever—just test the pile of drool he left on the carpet.”

“Possibly because keeping the DNA of every child born in the country would be an invasion of privacy and a gross ethical violation.” Now that she wasn’t tiptoeing around him, FRIDAY appeared to have no qualms in responding to his rhetorical questions with cheery facts. Ethics, blah. Ethics had screwed over his life.

“And there really were no further leads?” Tony pressed, futile as it was. “Nowhere this guy’s name cropped up later, no juvenile records under another name, no piss poor street-cam footage of him breaking speeding limits?”

“I am unaware of any such records.” FRIDAY replied primly. Then, after an almost careful pause. “It would seem indeed, that he vanished off the face of the earth after that night.”

“If you tell me you actually believe his story—”

“It isn’t like we haven’t come into contact with alien life before.” FRIDAY reminded him of the big elephant in the room quietly. “Mr Odinson has spoken often of the different planets and the species that occupy them, regardless of how isolated Asgard might have kept itself.”

“See, it would be easier to believe he was an alien.” Guttural, foreign screams. Electric blue eyes. A shark like smile. A bluer hole in the sky. There was a minor tremor in Tony’s hand as he flicked to the next screen; yeah, this ‘getting over himself’ project wasn’t working very well for him today. “But he says he grew up in godforsaken Missouri and then was abducted by a flying saucer. And twenty-eight years later, his space buddies conveniently dropped him off in the middle of the Facility for closure.”

“A Facility run by an incorporeal voice and a man who once built a suit of robot armour in a cave.” FRIDAY said mildly. “Yes, I can see how that would be a hard story to believe.”

See? That’s what happened when you were nice to people and AI. They went ahead and sassed you for all your efforts.

“Weren’t you the one playing bad cop and being suspicious, asking me to call Rhodey not six hours ago?”

“I still think you should call Colonel Rhodes.” FRIDAY returned, voice as serious as it came. “That does not preclude admitting the possibility of Mr Quill’s story being tr—”

“Oi, he’s not a guest. He doesn’t get the ‘Mister’.” No, it wasn’t childish. It was well deserved, because no one got to steal bits of his suit and try their hand at the repulsors and got treated with respect. Hey, he could totally order FRIDAY to call the guy Convict, right? Convicted of the crime
of being idiotic enough to think he could touch Iron Man and escape with his hands intact.

“Very well then. May I suggest you speaking to the man in your basement to ascertain the truth of, and get the full extent of his story.” If sighing had been installed in FRIDAY’s vocal functionality, she would probably have indulged in one right now. “It’s still unsafe, but since you insist on doing this by yourself—”

“That’s more like it, FRIDAY. Living with what you’ve got.” Tony threw out lightly, before cracking his knuckles and propelling himself out of his chair. A downward slash of the hand and the holograms blinked out of existence. “Let’s see if Porcupine Hair can be convinced to blab a slightly saner story.”

The man was asleep when Tony entered the workshop again, manacles back in place, three sentries of the Iron Legion standing guard. A section of his hair was flattened under his cheek, another sticking out over his forehead—an impeccable display of bedhead somehow without the bed. A bubble of drool was quivering over the left corner where his lips joined, breaths falling steadily. Trustingly. Like being held captive against his will and being repeatedly threatened counted as an amusing diversion before Thursday brunch.

Tony stared at that rise and fall of chest for a few seconds, heard those steady breaths filter through his hearing. His own standards of paranoia aside, this was undoubtedly one of the most unconcerned people he’d ever had the misfortune to meet.

Tony let his lips flicker upwards briefly before snapping the fingers of his right hand.

A medley of guitar and drums blared out of the speakers as AC/DC rampaged through the air, starting somewhere in the middle of Highway to Hell. The man jolted out of his peaceful sleep, knees jumping up in a startle, loose chin knocking hard and unceremoniously against his clavicle. Tony watched his skittish movements, his widening eyes and head that turned back and forth in an attempt to situate himself, with increasing satisfaction.

Guilt died a fast and ignominious death before it could even spark into existence. AC/DC was a goddamn fantastic way to wake up, if he said so himself. The man should feel privileged.

“The fuck.” Quill rumbled from somewhere deep inside a sleep-clogged throat, blinking blearily in an imitation of the first time. He apparently didn’t feel as charitable towards the death defying music as Tony did. “Why am I awake.”

“To answer my questions.” Tony smiled graciously. “Die asshole die. No coffee for you. Now that you’ve had some time to reflect on the wisdom of your crazy story, I thought you might be in the mood of dropping the addled routine—”

“What time is it?” Quill interrupted unceremoniously, all groggy eyed.

Tony felt annoyance like a sharp blade, slicing through him and all pretences of courtesy. Fine. The asshole wanted to know what time his beauty sleep had been interrupted at, he could very well find out. “Sometime around three, last I checked. Fun fact-jail cells don’t have clocks. Just so you get into the habit for later.”

Quill stared at the chest plates of one of the Legion armours for several seconds, as if psyching himself back to the land of the awake. When his slightly more alert gaze flicked up to look at Tony, the look in those eyes wasn’t fear or anger or anything predictable. “Why the hell are you awake?”
“Wha-” Tony stopped short, annoyance flaring up even stronger this time. Did this guy have any sense of self-preservation at all? Would FRIDAY help him hide the body if he blew that squat head off those broad shoulders right now? “What does it even-I’m here to interrogate you. Does it look like I care for your sleep schedule?”

“Do you care for yours?” Quill retorted and-what. What even was that. “I’m clearly not going anywhere. I’ll be here in the morning.”

“My dark circles will live to see another day.” A careless gesture of the hand and the armour closest to Quill powered up its repulsors with a quiet whine, Quill’s spine straightening and shoulders pulling back to the chair in response. Fucking finally. “Now, not that the concern for your would-be captor isn’t incredibly touching and all-” Tony bared his teeth in a smile that sported no amusement. “Tell me why you’re here.”

“I already told you.” Quill forced out through a tightened jaw-seemed like the sleep deprivation and baring of weapons in his face was finally wearing on the man’s good cheer. “My friends sent me down. Because they’re jerks.”

Nothing on you, though. His baleful eyes seemed to say, which was mildly surprising because Quill seemed like a man who came out and said that shit to your face instead of confining himself to the subtleties of murderous expressions.

“Fine, tell me about your ‘friends.’”

Quill huffed a breath. “Well, there’s Gamora who’s the adopted daughter of the Mad Titan and Groot-”

“Fascinating.” Tony intoned, and topped it off with a smile to add insult to injury. “Let’s try that again, except-less twaddle, more sense. Go.”

Quill stared at him. Two beats of silence, and then his tone morphed, turning almost amiable. “Sure. First, there’s Gamora. She’s green and cybernetically modified-”

“Green.” Tony cut him off at the outset, resisting the perennial urge to knead at his eyebrows. “As in jealous girlfriend, ten commandments, thou shalt not covet- that kinda green?”

“Nope.” Quill’s lips curved up in a smile, all amicable-like. “As in evergreens, apples, frogs, her melanin likes its options-that kinda green.”

“Right.” Tony’s lips doled out a smile in return, though it felt remarkably tight. “Everyone has a green friend or two, we welcome all colours here. Continue.”

“Groot is also green.” Quill’s manacles didn’t have enough slack, otherwise Tony got the distinct impression that he’d be raising a thoughtful finger to tap at his chin. “Though that’s mostly because he’s a plant.”

“I already got a sense of your sad social life from your sparkling personality-quick tip, down here, we count friends as the kind that can actually talk back.” Tony slowed his words down for extra comprehension; it actually felt liberating being an asshole after all these months of political gladhanding. “Feel free to keep pet rocks and plants out of your retelli-”

“Oh, he can talk back alright.” Quill chirped back, then paused for a moment of exaggerated thought again. “Though it’s usually only his own name.”

“So he’s a Pokemon.”
Quill blinked back at him. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

The urge for strangulation had never been so strong. Hell, he’d killed so many people, what was another body in the basement, right? Try as he might, he couldn’t his words to sound anything but flat. “So he’s a plant.”

“Yep.”

“In space.”

“A space plant, yep.”

Tony smiled again. It felt like it was going to rip out his face. “Does he have a pot?”

“Yeah. He was really attached to it in the beginning, but he’s learning to let the safety blanket go, you know?” Quill’s spine was beginning to uncurl again, shoulders slouching in relaxation. There was a smile playing at the corner of his lips, all insouciant and unashamed. “Rocket’s been carting it around for a couple of months, letting baby Groot stretch his legs a little more-”

“Rocket?”

“The talking raccoon.” Quill replied, and grinned like the fucker he was. “Sure, he’s got a bit of a drinking problem, but when you think about it, it’s really touching how much he cares for his pal-”

“The raccoon with a drinking problem.” His voice had never been flatter. If not for the overwhelming sense of how incredibly unimpressed he was feeling right now, he’d almost pat himself on the back. “You know, I’m sure that computes as a really sick burn in your tiny brain, but I’d hate to rain on your parade and say-”

“Burn?” Quill’s eyebrows shot up in confusion, before clearing up. “Oh, you mean the raccoon part-sorry man, completely unintentional. Though if you’re really that sensitive about your dark circles, you should get some more sleep; I did tell you at the beginning.”

“You know what, screw your friends.” Tony took a step forward and the Iron Legion sentries all raised their arms in conjunction, palms glowing. Quill stiffened immediately, though his posture was still mostly open. “Let’s go back to the first bullshit story you concocted. So you were born on earth and lived in Missouri for eight years before being…what? Kidnapped by aliens?”

“Ravagers.” Quill elaborated. “They go around the galaxy, doing jobs for money: picking up and dropping off shipments, stealing, scaring and blackmailing…”

“Space bandits. So glad you cleared that up.” Tony spared a second to roughly knead at the bridge of his nose before looking up to pin Quill’s eyes down, bullshit smile discarded somewhere by the wayside. “You know this is going nowhere. Give me one reason why I shouldn’t throw you to any number of authorities who’d bury you deep enough that you’d be at risk of popping out the other side.”

“I haven’t told you anything but the truth.” Quill cocked his chin, humour intact but eyes unreadable.

“So that’ll be a ‘nada, zilch, nothing’ on the reason, then.” Tony pivoted on his feet, tossing an arm out carelessly. “Fine. I’ll call the Secretary of State to drop some state-authorised goons to pick you up in the morning.”

“I gave you a reason hours ago.” The voice rang out strong, and Tony couldn’t help the reflexive move of turning back to listen. There were traces of smugness still feathering Quill’s overall
countenance, but that seemed to have subsided in favour of a new, implacable assurance. The teasing hazel of his eyes had turned brick hard. “Maybe the first couple hours were just to satisfy your own curiosity…but you’d have never kept me here this long if you’d intended on handing me over in the first place. You were shocked enough that I didn’t know you, and have enough…” Quill gestured to the nearest armour with a tilt of the head. “Fancy toys to make me think that you’re king of some mountain. So if I can break through your defences…” And the humorous smile was back again, except this time it wasn’t playing any games. “You really gonna trust anybody else to keep me locked up?”

And that…that was the thrice-damned crux of it all, really. He’d half hoped Quill wouldn’t be able to figure it out, but looked like he was betraying far too much of his personality if the idiot was playing him that easily. Because this was a play, as simple as anything else-and Tony knew himself too well to think he could win. Paranoia and control issues: 1, sensible decision-making: a minus thousand.

“Nice talk.” Quill nodded amiably, before leaning his head back and closing his eyes. He’d probably never know how close he was to death in that moment, the lucky bastard. He was still pushing it though; face lifted to the ceiling, musing out loud. “Iron Man of the…ah, Revengers? Yeah, definitely some kind of hotshot…though you should probably have taken consultations on the name-”

He had a million better, smarter comebacks-but only one could hitch at the back of his throat, small and cold. “Avengers. We’re the Avengers.”

Quill cracked half an eye open, looking at Tony. “Where’re the rest of you, then?”

And then there were no comebacks at all. Tony stared on, eyes wiped blank, before pivoting on his heels again and feeling the floor rise against his steadily falling feet as he walked away. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Quill straighten up, eyes flickering open and brows pulling down together-too cool to be concern, but something you might sport on seeing a stranger stumble on a train.

The door slid shut and the workshop fell into darkness behind him; the man could sleep however much he liked. Tony felt his feet climb the two flights of stairs leading to the main floor, exhaustion dragging at his heels like a wraith that hadn’t quite gotten the message. Two more minutes of tired blinking, and he found himself stepping over the threshold into the main study, stark lighting shooting across the walls and chasing away the shadows.

He hadn’t changed it much. At its bare bones, it echoed any other room in the Facility- clean, functional lines, neutral shades, sleek and spacious. People left their marks on rooms though, and with time and other inhabitants-the place had transformed. A heavy, carved teak desk occupied pride of place now-sturdy, antique wood standing amidst all the metal and chrome. And there were tinier details too. Pens and pencils mounted within a repurposed beer can on said table; probably the work of someone not used enough to the current Western ethic of having manufactured items for every little purpose, habituated to repurposing things that any man accustomed to privilege would throw out. A little hair tie lying askew next to the can, red strands of hair still clinging to the black elastic. Drawings up on the walls, held up by blue tack because duct tape apparently damaged the plaster.

He hadn’t changed it much. He’d nudged his papers and files between the other paraphernalia, maybe relocated some of the loose sheets of paper, training schedules and reports to the drawers. One of the sketches was slightly askew on the wall…he hadn’t even fixed that, because he’d touch it and touching would turn to crumpling to ripping and…he didn’t know where he’d stop. He left things as they were and didn’t think ‘just in case’, because he had to partake in make-belief recovery. In unaffectedness, in ‘moving on’, in a kind of emotional resilience that somehow persevered in the
face of being let down again and again.

Tony brought his hands together, meat of his palms colliding in a dull smack; calling the holograms back to life. Blue light danced back into his vision, the screens he’d been perusing populating the air again.

The room still looked empty.

He walked around the desk and dropped into his chair again, a dull shock throbbing up his tailbone. Ah, old age, that dastardly prick. With absent flicks of his fingers, the images of items recovered from Quill’s possession started scrolling before his eyes again. His mind was barely engaged, blue swarming his aching vision…damn, maybe that ass was right. A couple hours of shuteye wouldn’t be that horrible…he still needed to get to Washington in the morning but he could theoretically take the jet and reach nearly on time to…

Wait.

He’d already skimmed past it—he pulled the image back to the fore with an impatient jerk of his fingers, eyes glancing over it restlessly. “FRIDAY, tell me what you see.”

“Sony TPS-L2.” FRIDAY faithfully chimed. “A sample of the first Sony Walkman, made in 1979. There are several scuff marks, all of which appear to go back several years—it’s clearly been taken well care of since.”

“First Sony Walkman.” Tony normally exaggerated his cringing from ancient tech; truth be told, it usually set off his nostalgia sensors. This music player was…definitely from way back in the day. That wasn’t the curious part about it though. “Correct me if I’m wrong, which I’m not—but Sony wasn’t nearly high tech enough to use…what is the power source for this anyway?”

“The original model appears to run on double A batteries, but it seems to have been modified since. I…can’t quite identify its present source, it bears similarities to the boots but appears to be wired and routed in a completely different—”

“Does it still work?”

A couple of seconds of silence, and then faint music started trickling in from the surround sound speakers embedded in the walls. O-o-h child things are gonna get easier…o-o-h child things are gonna get brighter…

“Well that answers that.” Tony’s palms fell with a thump on his thighs, he pushed his shoulders back against the back of the chair and looked at the ceiling. “On the one hand, this could just be an earthmade device that’s got some….seriously fabulous shelf life, and an energy source we don’t understand yet.”

“An energy source in the world you don’t understand yet? Seems like a bit of a reach, boss.”

“Well, ego’s come to bite me in the ass before.” His eyes were flitting over non-existent cracks in the ceiling, jumping from one point to the other, creating and discarding patterns. “It…could also be an alien device, running on an alien source. Which we have no understanding of. That has eighties Chicago soul music on it, for some reason.”

“Or it could be an earthmade Sony Walkman, that was used in eighties. And got upgraded by alien technology.” FRIDAY voiced quietly, and…yeah. Yeah that did sound about right. Eliminate the impossible, whatever remains must be true, yada yada.
“I don’t trust him.”

“Astute choice.” FRIDAY assented without argument. “But maybe we’ve been going about this the wrong way. Maybe Mr Quill would be a lot more forthcoming about his arrival and intentions if we were a little less…sceptical.”

_Someday…when the world is much brighter…someday, we’ll walk in the rays of a beautiful sun._

Tony looked at the beer can on the table, and the hair tie entangled in red, and the charcoal drawing of Mjolnir in an elevator up on the wall. Several seconds, while his eardrums caught nothing except the hum of machines running in the background and his own laboured breaths.

Compared to the ghosts that haunted his living space, a space plant and an alcoholic raccoon seemed almost welcome diversions.

“Make sure we’ve got omelettes and bacon fresh from the pan, ready for Mr Quill when he wakes again.” Tony stretched his arms over his head, feeling his shoulders release with painful pops. “I need to go practice my ‘listening to Jehovah’s Witnesses’ face.”

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics taken from 'O-o-h Child' by the Five Stairsteps.
(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the stupidly long hiatus, was preoccupied with my other WIP's. Enjoy!


See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The man’s nose was awake before he was.

Tony watched it with a bizarre kind of curiosity, the nostrils flaring and scenting the air for that inexorable smell wafting through the room. He may have batted the air above the steaming plate he was carrying just to see if he could hear actual sniffing.

Quill’s eyes snapped open.

(Huh, this was far more effective than AC/DC).

“Bacon!” Tony announced cheerily, holding the plate aloft. He was starting to have a good feeling about this.

Quill’s gaze… honed in on the heap of maple-glazed gloriousness, like a man glimpsing light at the end of the tunnel. His voice was still hoarse from sleep (how much did that douche sleep anyway, eight hours a night and everything? Disgraceful), feeling the word out slowly. “Ba…bac…on?”

Tony nodded, for all the good that that would do. Quill wasn’t looking left or right, unblinking eyes stuck to the plate. He still kept up the helpful commentary, on the contingency that Quill’s eardrums were still functional. “Meat product, made from pork. And salt. Lots and lots and lots of yummy, unhealthy salt. It can be eaten smoked, boiled, fried—”

“Bring it over here.”

“-baked, grilled-ooh, that’s a good one, I once had a rasher of grilled bacon that tasted like you would not believe, heaven in a mouthful, God would agree—hey is there religion in space—”

“Bring. It over here.”

“Anyway, bacon! Belly bacon is obviously the best, though a heart patient like yours truly usually needs to stick to the Canadian version, that’s a leaner cut—”

“Didn’t know you were a butcher.” Quill parsed out through gritted teeth. His fingers were flexing in his manacles, the poor sod. The sniffing was a little less obvious, but still hadn’t stopped, like he was desperate enough to get any molecule of bacon into his system, no matter how torturous.

Tony’s smile was incandescent. “I’m just very passionate about my breakfast foods.”

A beat. Oh, how he’d missed this moment. The shining pearl of a moment when you knew everyone
in the room would saw off their right arm to murder you, but could do absolutely fuck all about it.

(More accurately, the source of pleasure was in not giving a shit about what the people thought. And that’s what he’d missed more than anything. And now he was going to pull the brakes on this train of thought before it drove straight into depressing land).

Quill tried to match his expression, and failed miserably. “So what say we skip talking about the food and jump straight to eating?” At this rate, Tony should just have bypassed all the threats and gone straight to holding a plate of bacon over the man’s head, demanding answers.

“You look like Robinson Crusoe about to have his first bite of pork belly after decades.” The plate in his hand wobbled a little, Quill’s entire body snapped forward in reflexive terror. He looked like he was about to have a stroke. “Which…space marooned. Of course, my bad. D’you want to start now or wait for the pancakes?”

Quill froze in place. “There are pancakes?”

Tony sighed. “You poor, poor man.” And then, because he was a vindictive bastard who had to get back for the space plant jab- “Do you remember how they taste?”

Quill’s features went through some impressive acrobatics in the course of a few seconds. Homicidal rage flipped to misery flipped to desperation flipped to rage again, followed by something weary and wistful. “They’re…sweet?”

“Poor, poor man.” Tony concluded. “FRIDAY, unlock his manacles.”

Quill froze again. The constant hum permeating the air of the workshop was conspicuously absent.

Tony resisted the urge to sigh again. “FRIDAY.”

“I don’t think that would be wise.” FRIDAY pronounced stiffly. Then, as a not-forgotten-at-all, very pointed addendum. “Sir.”

“How do you expect the man to eat with his hands tied?” It was a logical question. It definitely did not warrant FRIDAY harrumphing at him like he was a class A moron.

(…did FRIDAY just harrumph at him?)

“He’s a prisoner in this facility.” FRIDAY delivered with even more stiffness, amid his, “way to soften the blow, jeez”. “Prisoners do not go about without restraints. He tried to fire your own gauntlet at you, boss.”

A residual flare of annoyance. It was a nice try, truly. FRIDAY should’ve thought of that before her you should totally be less sceptical of him and display some trust spiel though.

“Not that this isn’t extremely relieving or anything…” Quill interjected like the ass he was. “but where exactly is this coming from?”

Tony smiled again. It was this new pretend to be zen and zen will get the message eventually and follow approach he’d been trying. “I trust your sto-”

“No you don’t.” Really, what an incredible ass. He couldn’t really blame zen for running straight in the opposite direction.
“I trust. Your story.” Tony pressed on with the eerie smile. Close your lips tight enough, and you couldn’t see the gritted teeth. Perfect.

Quill shot him a ‘*bro, please*’ look. “The part about the talking racoon or being raised by a blue space bandit with a sentient arrow?”

“…I don’t think you’ve actually mentioned the sentient arrow before.” And then, because he actually did have other things to do with his day. “FRIDAY, either you unlock those manacles or I can go over and do it myself, close range, unprepared for sneak tech or berserking limbs..”

Click.

Tony set down the plate on the workbench next to him. “Enjoy.” Great. Now that that was done with, he’d have to check up on the jet—he had an hour tops, and counting all the time gladhanding the bigwigs the actual meeting wouldn’t start till...

“Wait, where’re you going?”

An ass and self-sabotaging to boot. “Out.”

Forget grateful, Quill was sounding dubious at best. Hell, he had his precious bacon now, couldn’t he just stuff his gob full and shut it? “Just leaving me…open?”

Tony turned again, and made another gander at a saccharine smile. “Why, are you going to rip up the curtains and pee on the carpet?”

“..Noo.” Quill let out slowly, almost like he was thinking about it. “Are you sure?”

“Look, Carrot Top.” Was this level of sheer hopelessness real, right now? “I don’t know what kind of vibes I’ve been giving off, what with all the precious nicknames. But I don’t like you. The bruises on your wrists tell me that you’re not too hot on me either. So I leave the house, and you kick around outside the chair a little—are we in agreement?”

Quill stared at him. Then, like a flash of lightning, his hand snatched up three rashers of bacon and rammed them into his mouth.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” Tony started walking away for the third time, and a bit more successfully, thank god. The sound of crunching was very loud.

“The’no-” Shitting hell, Quill was talking again. Tony paused at the foot of the stairs leading to the higher level, and refused to turn.

Clear sounds of swallowing. “There’.there’s no religion in space.”

Tony’s voice was flat. “Nice.”

“Coz.” Quill swallowed down a particularly stringy piece, you could tell by all the chewing. “There’s no bacon. In space.”

His lips curved up, just the slightest. No one needed to know.

He resumed walking, step after step, one foot after the other. The following words were but a murmur, “Don’t think I haven’t noticed that you’re ignoring me.”

FRIDAY’s voice could have chilled a cup of piping hot tea. “I only do as I’m told.”
“Well, stay with me for awhile yet.” Tony reached the common Facility level and felt the good humour drain out of his system at the thought of the prospective day. If it had ever been present in the first place. “There’s a party at Washington we gotta get to.”

~

“-the Security Council cannot have the ultimate call on deploying the Avengers, not with the bureaucratic hoops to jump through and Russia vetoing things left and right and-”

“I see the party started without me.” The smile rose much easier to the surface than it did with Quill, and what did that say about him, really? It was like slipping into an old pair of Oxfords-the tip still pinched, but it was a familiar pain. At this point Tony had developed a callus for diplomatic asshattery.

Half a dozen grey heads turned towards him simultaneously, expressions on those well trained faces barely flickering. Tony could still glimpse a spark of annoyance in the jerked straightening of a starched collar, a little huff of a breath from Professor McGonagall in a pinstriped business skirt over in the corner. The crowd overall looked mostly resigned though. Maybe even a small touch of relief.

…what had the world come to, that politicians were relieved to see him?

‘A world Captain America doesn’t give a fuck about’ came the prompt response from his brain. His brain could go take a goddamn hike. Tony presented his smile again, shoes squeaking against the gleaming concrete floor as he made his way over to the gaggle of bureaucrats and security officials and intelligence officers and diplomats and ‘I cater for the White House, so you bet your ass I’m going to have a fucking say in this like a bajillion other people’. “There a reason we all lined up outside the door? Bouncer says you’re not dressed cool enough for the VIP room?”

…and there went the relief. Thank fucking god.

McGonagall sniffed lightly; thin, Revlon-ed lips pressing into an impeccable smile the likes of which Tony could never aspire to. “We were just waiting on you, Mr. Stark.”

“Heyyy, that’s what the Maxim model said when she couldn’t get into the nightclub either!” The temperature in the room dropped by several degrees. A little spark of petty triumph lit itself in Tony’s chest-just because he had to play nice with the politicos, didn’t mean he had to play nice.

McGonagall—screw it, she wasn’t nearly agreeable enough—Nurse Ratched maintained her untouchable smile, chilly silver eyes regarding a recalcitrant child. “After you.”

“Careful with all the gallantry, it might just turn my head-” Pushing the door open with a hand, Tony was halfway into the room already when he came to a standstill, words draining dry.

Oh. Right. This made more sense now.

There was a figure silhouetted against the far wall, looking upon the panorama of blue sky and skyscrapers through the sheer ceiling-to-floor glass. Daylight glinted off the maroon…skin, catching on the silver plating over smooth skull, the gold detailing on the ultramarine suit gleaming dully. The fall of the cape was pin-straight and parallel, the hem bunched around the heels of scuffed boots, motionless on the floor.

“They’re unnerved by me.” The Vision said quietly.
There was something curious about the things that he chose to say. Topics that people would shy away from, things people would think and not speak aloud—yet always phrased in an inoffensive, unfailingly diplomatic way. Because while Tony wouldn’t have dreamt of calling out loud the unease of… the general human race with the existence of Vision in front of him, he wouldn’t have used a word as mild as ‘unnerved’ either.

(Vision would have made a good politician.)

“And their empty, gimlet eyes give me the heebie-jeebies, but you don’t see me complaining.” Vision’s expression showed no sign of response to that spectacular bit of imagery. It was so much harder for Tony to gauge people’s minds if he couldn’t see them react.

“I am not required here.” Vision said, eyes still fixed somewhere on the vista of the American capital city. Maybe his mind wasn’t that difficult to gauge after all. His every interaction derived from imitating humanity, and people established eye contact when they talked.

“You’re an Avenger.” Tony said, and the word tasted cold on his tongue. “These decisions affect your life.”

“It was easier, before.” The cape rustled against the floor as Vision turned, eye contact still withheld. Tony couldn’t hear him breathing. “When decisions weren’t mine to make. When I could just watch.”

“Unfortunately, the device that is keeping you alive is also killing you. Miss Potts is coming, I recommend you - ”

“Decisions suck.” The air escaped him on a breath. “Did I ever tell you about my sixth birthday?”

“You made your first engine.” The words softened into something quieter. Tony hadn’t told him.

“I also set my father’s first diorama of the energy efficient city on fire.” He pulled the air back into his chest on an inhale, lungs rattling. “I’ve blown up a lot of things in my life, including a Chitauri mothership. Nothing’s stuck with me as hard as those charred bits of Styrofoam.”

Cyan-hued eyes rose to meet his. Tony didn’t blink. “Point is, you always remember your first fuck up.”

Vision remained silent.

(What was this, even? I made my own AI to be my father figure. And now he’s dead and you’re here and I’m giving you sucky life advice.)

(Whatever this was, he couldn’t mess it up.)

“Wanda wasn’t yours.”

“I know tha-” Vision’s moving lips stilled, his shoulders straightening automatically. For a second, all signs of wisdom and serenity and other two dollar words were stripped from his face. His eyes looked painfully human. “Colonel Rhodes.”

Tony turned.

Rhodey was by the door, wan face and signature military bearing stamped by the sombre lines of a black suit. His uniform was conspicuous by its absence. “Peanut gallery’s waiting outside.” Took a mincing step forward, a smiling grimace lifting his lips accompanied by an acknowledging nod.
“Vision.”

Fuck, Rhodey was even worse at this than he was.

Tony swivelled his head back to the front, but by then it was already too late. Vision had already
stepped to the side, forehead creasing and lips pressed together tightly. So the ever reigning
equanimity hadn’t been a lie—anyone could take a look at his face now and tell that no one had ever
taught him to hide his emotions.

“I’ll be taking your leave, Mr Stark. I’m sure you’ll handle it all admirably.” Vision ducked his head,
followed by something that must have started off as a smile, but only made Tony’s jaw wind up
tighter. “Give my regards to DUM-E and the rest.”

Three strides, and he was out of the room. Tony could hear the responding clamour from the corridor
outside.

Rhodey was still standing motionless by the door. Tony’s hands flexed by his side uselessly. “Go
after him.”

The reply was implacable, something like a quiet plea in those dark eyes. “No.”

The breath left Tony’s chest in a rush. Useless, useless, useless. “You don’t know what it’s like to
fuck up so bad and not know what the hell to do to fix it.”

Unlike Vision, Rhodey didn’t hesitate in meeting his eyes. “You’re the most important relationship in
my life and you’re miserable. So yeah, I have some idea.”

A stupid, hitching breath. Stop it. “Can we—can you handle this today?”

Rhodey’s brows furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“They, the meeting.” Shut up, you selfish fucker. But something had happened between the cheery
morning and this moment, something in the past five minutes, that made Tony feel like his joints had
turned to cement and his head throbbed and the world didn’t have a quart of peace left in it.
Something that reminded him that all cheer was a sham and the listlessness was never too far behind.
“I don’t…I can’t do this today.”

Rhodey’s face was stiff, all for that he looked like he hated every word he had to say. “You just got
here. And they’re here to negotiate with you.”

“I’m tired.” And it was like failing all over again. “Just, just this one ti—”

“Mr Stark?” Their heads turned simultaneously—Melanie Verouth had pushed the door half open,
white tipped nails braced against the gleaming steel. Her silver eyes flitted from Tony to Rhodey to
the space in between, murmurs from the rest of the gaggle growing louder behind her shoulder. “Are
we ready to begin?”

From this angle, Tony could see the veins standing prominent against the ashen skin of Rhodey’s
throat, the rigid shoulders, the clenched knuckles hiding the nails digging half-moon shapes into his
palm. The posture that refused to hunch in spite of all of these. From there, Tony’s gaze darted back
to the woman at the door he’d bestowed a thousand nicknames on. Verouth’s mouth rested neutrally,
regard cool and patient. The message was obvious—I think you’re an irresponsible cad but this is
more important than what either of us think.

Tony smiled, and did much better this time, he thought; for all that his reply was armoured with
hollow confidence. “Always.”

~

He staggered a bit as he hit the ground, left ankle twisting as the repulsors cut off. Should’ve taken the jet back instead.

*Flying solves everything,* he’d thought, like an imbecile of the highest order. Nothing solved everything. Because eventually, he’d have to land.

A snap of the fingers and the faceplate snapped up, Tony lapping up lungfuls of crisp evening air. That was the only drawback of the suit—that he couldn’t feel the wind gusting past his hair, chilling his sweat, flaying a layer off his nose. Breathe the thin air that he inhabited for a couple, precious hours.

He clanked across the landing patio, glass doors sliding open at his approach. The residential area of the Facility was located in a separate wing from the administrative, which meant the rooms coming alight at his presence were absolutely quiet; though of course, at this time of day the other wings would be deserted too. Lone soul for hundreds of acres.

“FRIDAY, shut off all preset alerts except emergency alarms, all simulations, I don’t even want a hum in the background when I hit the sheets.” Four doorways, and he still wasn’t at the living room yet. Stupid planning, to have the landing area so far…except for the fact where he hadn’t planned to ever live here. New Avengers facility, designed specifically for the abilities of the new team. Brilliance.

“Boss, I think you may be forgetti-”

“Ugh, I wish.” Two more rooms. Duck beneath the doorway, turn, stride. And stride some more. “’M getting old Fry, and I could do with some convenient memory loss. Alzheimers…that’s a thing with age, right? But wait, these would probably be famous last words or something. D’you think Ross would buy it if I told him I had Alzheimers?"

Tony stepped through into the living room and stopped in his tracks.

*Crunch.*

“You.” Tony said. There was a you. Of course there was a you. How had he forgotten? The you was the reason he’d been exhausted enough to have an entirely wobbly flight from Washington to upstate New York. “You…still have bacon.”

Quill blinked at him from the couch he was camped out on, a truly gigantic bowl balanced on the adjacent coffee table (and when *Tony* marvelled at the size of something, you knew it had to be spectacular). “I made some more.”

*Crunch.*

“FRIDAY, why does he have a laptop.”

“Because you insisted on letting him out of his binds this morning and you don’t keep your electronics under lock and key. Sir.” So….AI could sound pissy. Noted.
“Y’m’e an,” Quill swallowed his next mouthful, gulping noisily. He waved at the sleek machine propped on his thighs, “This quaint thing?”

“He called it quaint. He called Tony Stark’s personal laptop quaint.” Tony was definitely producing words right now, but they were fast and rambly and he was exhausted and he didn’t know if they were making much sense. “FRIDAY help me, I might actually be feeling a little faint here.”

“Personal lap…” Quill squinted a little, before his brows cleared up in realisation. “Oh. Because you put it on top of your lap.”

A finger flew up to knead at the pressure point just between his eyebrows before Tony was even aware of it. “Please, please tell me this imbecile didn’t get access to anything sensitive.”

“Barred access to anything worthwhile. I’m not entirely incompetent, boss.” And now she was sulking. For fuck’s sake.

“How did he get access to anything at all?” Sure, he’d gone screen-free a very long time ago, but he was fairly sure security measures still existed in archaic-ish tech. “Doesn’t that thing have passwords?”

“It had one.” Quill inhaled another rind of salted beef fat. Tony hoped he died of cholesterol. After choking vigorously. “Aren’t you a little old for Captain America, man?”

A punch to the gut, still enough to rob him of breath.

Tony didn’t recognise his own voice when he spoke. “Call the Sentries from the workshop. Put him back in the manacles.”

“Hey, hey, hey!” Quill was clutching the bowl to his chest, eyes wide with alarm. Tony couldn’t find it within himself to be amused. “Look, you’re a cool guy, we don’t need to do this. I haven’t…ripped up the curtains or peed on the carpets, okay? I just-”

“Don’t touch my stuff.” The words were devoid of inflections, cold and precisely enunciated.

“Alright, alright, I won’t, I swear.” Quill pushed the laptop off his thighs, the polycarbonate base hitting the cushions with a thump. “I just haven’t been around for a while, and I was messing around with something called Google-”

Moon landing, Steve Jobs, disco, Berlin wall, Thai food, Star Wars, Nirvana… the list unspooled before his eyes from memory, and his heart didn’t seem content with its current tachycardic rhythm, thrumming even faster.

And if he thought Quill was unusually upbeat before, it didn’t even compare to his expression now. The bastard was glowing. “You wouldn’t believe what I found.”

Rocky, pilates, I swear Tony, I’ve made a home in Wikipedia because of you, don’t you ever send me into Urban dictionary again, I understood that refer -

“Alyssa Milano,” Quill began in hushed notes. “…made porn.”

-ence…wait, what?

“What?”

“Alyssa Milano!” Quill exclaimed again, as if that meant anything at all apart from the name of a
classy hooker, maybe. “The actress I named my ship after!”

“...you have a ship?”

“I told you I was raised by space bandits, of course I have a ship.” Quill shot back impatiently.

“...wait a minute.” One didn’t become a pro at tossing obscure pop culture references at the drop of a hat without some deep-cut memory. “She...was she the one in Who’s The Boss?”

“Yes!” Quill looked like he was going to fairly expire of excitement. The couch creaked under his weight, his frame literally bouncing up and down. “Dark hair, the most gorgeous lips, hips like you would not believe-she did some independent cinema after that of course, the angel, but then in the nineties she did Embrace of the Vampire, Deadly Sins and Poison Ivy II: Lily—all of which were ‘erotic films targeted for adults’ which is totally code for porn. I mean, I tried to dig into it some more but your AI kept throwing stupid walls in my path because illegal ‘streaming’ apparently causes viruses. It’s that thing with anything illegal, they tell you something bad will happen to stop you from doing it, you know? So I’m not sure if there’s actually any action in any of those movies but it doesn’t matter because she appears nude.”

Quill finally exhaled, alarm from a few seconds ago completely dissipated-smiling dopily like everything was right with the world.

Tony stared at him for several seconds on end, searching for the anger that he was drawing on so easily before, finding nothing but numb surprise. The words escaped entirely without his volition.

“You’re nothing like him, are you?”

Quill’s brows pulled down. “Who?”

“Nothing.” A swivel, and somehow he was walking past the couch, through the room to the opposite doorway. Sleep sounded good right now.

“Wai-...I…” The confused half words cut themselves off, Quill having evidently grown himself a brain in the course of the day. Tony could feel his mouth twitch.

“...so no restraints?”

Or maybe not. Tony cast him a look over his still-armoured shoulder, mouth twisting almost unconsciously into a smirk. “I don’t care which planet you’re from. If I don’t want you to leave, you’re not getting out of this place-restraints or no.”

Quill met his eyes, as amiable as ever. “Confident, aren’t you?”

“I didn’t hand you over to the authorities because you apparently ‘broke through my defenses’ once. Except you didn’t, did you?” Tony bared his teeth, and this smile didn’t even have to look pleasant. “You’ve been here for forty-eight hours, a good portion of that unsupervised. And you’re still here. Which means you’re not going anywhere.”

“I could be biding my time.” Quill picked a rind of bacon and tossed it into the air, snapping it up with his teeth a second later.

“Forgive me, but you don’t seem the biding type. ADHD, maybe.” Tony deliberately turned his head away, boots resuming their clanking walk. “The thing with the gauntlets was cute, but I’ve twigged on now. No more surprises from you.”

The reply floated over, just as he ducted through the doorway. “Sleep tight, Stark.”
Two seconds later, FRIDAY made a sound remarkably similar to the clearing of a throat. “About that.”

“You’re about to tell me how my delightfully pithy exit was horribly misinformed, aren’t you.”

FRIDAY definitely sighed. “Sorry boss.”

Tony groaned. “Out with it.”

The stairs leading down to the workshop yawned before his feet, his metal heels taking them one at a time. “Remember that humorous comment you made about testing his DNA to see if he was actually born in Missouri?

An arched brow. “You jabbed him?”

FRIDAY sounded prim, as though such crude methods were beneath her. “Tested the drool on the carpet.”

The door slid open-Tony lifted his arms, wrists facing outward and the gauntlets began disassembling, pieces sliding free with smooth clicks and zooming to place on the wall display. “I thought keeping the DNA of every child born in the country was an invasion of privacy and a gross ethical violation.” Two strides in, and the lower shin guards unlocked, goddamn boots finally coming off his feet. Tony flexed his toes. “Oh wait. I just remembered. I live in America.”

“I didn’t actually get to the part of scanning through Homeland Security’s databases.”

His jaw cracked open in a yawn, right hand coming up to detach the reactor from the disassembling chestplate, depositing the warmed-up device on a workbench. “Let me guess, he’s part dolphin.”

Silence.

Oh god. Oh hell. Fucking no. His voice was remarkably steady, “Well, that actually makes an abnormal amount of sense. I’ve always been allergic to seafood.”

“I’ve been running random simulations throughout the day.” FRIDAY continued quietly. “Government experiments…in the post-serum era, these things have been known to happen. But Mr Quill’s genetic makeup doesn’t show a match with any living organism spliced with human DNA. There’s definitely human DNA…but there’s also something else. Something not known to mankind.”

“Well, at least now we know how he got past your security the first time.” His knees were finally giving out-Tony landed on the nearest stool with a thump, impact jarring up his spine, blinking far too rapidly for normal. “It can camouflage.”

“…I don’t know if jokes are the right response here, boss.”

“I have a part-alien in my living room FRIDAY, spare a man his attempts at deflection.” Tony breathed in deep, lungs filling with cold air, staring fixedly at the shining concrete of his floor. It categorically did not help.

“Wouldn’t be the first time.” Really not helping with the deflection here, Fry.

“You…” Tony began, but dropped the joke halfway, because shit he couldn’t deal with this. “You
think this all can be a coincidence? That his…space friends or whatever just happened to drop him off in the middle of the Facility?"

“Coincidence or not, there’s only one thing we can be certain of.” She was incapable of the emotion, yet somehow FRIDAY sounded as tired as he felt. “You’re the only one equipped to handle this, boss. We can’t pass this off to anyone else.”

Tony smiled for the hundredth time in twenty-four hours, his second real one of the day. Wan and caustic and stretched out tight. “Ever get the feeling that’s the case with everything these days?”

~

Chapter End Notes

Peter’s ship is indeed named the Milano, after Alyssa Milano from ‘Who’s the Boss’. All other related factoids obtained from her wiki. Also, was there a Jurassic World reference, you ask? Why yes, yes there was. How very meta of me XP Updates should be getting a bit more regular.
And we begin with some Peter POV! This has been long in coming XD

Title taken from *Should I Stay or Should I Go* by The Clash.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Two weeks.

Okay, this was getting a *little* preposterous. Just a tad.

Apparently, holding hands to save a galaxy counted for nothing. Coming up with an awesomesauce pep talk on the spot to convince them to save said galaxy counted for even less. Driving the team-*their* team-around in one of the most beautiful spaceships that had ever set sail in the valleys of outer space…and still no fucking gratitude. Peter may as well have been a glorified cab driver.

Two *weeks* since they’d tossed him in the general direction of Terra, vaguely hoping he’d hit land, and they *still hadn’t checked in*. Seventy percent of this stupid planet was water. Sure the mask let him breathe underwater—but what if he’d been swallowed by a shark? Bet they didn’t even have sharks in whatever fluffy piece of rock Rocket had spawned in. Sharks had powerful digestive systems; there wouldn’t be much left of him after the shark’s stomach (stomachs? Was it birds or sharks that had multiple stomachs? How long ago was middle school biology anyway?). And Peter couldn’t exactly regenerate from a piece of his nail, Groot-style.

…and he couldn’t believe Groot had betrayed him like this. Sure, he was a bit of a baby now, but he could have at least *tried* to stop them. Or maybe he had; Peter wasn’t quite sure. He was mostly asleep at the time, and he hadn’t quite figured out the nuances behind all the ‘I am Groot’ s yet.

So yeah, sharks. That could’ve happened. Or Peter could’ve landed in a…a…swamp or something. Antarctica. The Amazon desert. Not very nice places. Honestly, the overall lack of consideration for Peter’s wellbeing in this plan was *staggering*.

…and okay, so he may have thrown up a little in his mouth at the last sentence. Rocket and Gamora weren’t exactly renowned for their fine consideration of people. He was pretty sure Drax was still called ‘The Destroyer’ in some circles.

But hell. After the first escape attempt, Peter’s plan had basically boiled down to patience. Sit tight and wait for the folks to come grab you. That’s what you did when you had folks, right? A team. They had a fancy name and everything. They’d been through some shit together. They wouldn’t just toss him out through the ship’s exhaust and book it, right? God, did handholding in the face of confirmed death and obliteration mean *anything* anymore?

Sure, he didn’t exactly end up in *Jaws*, but being imprisoned in the mad lair of Doc Brown wasn’t his idea of an ideal vacation either. Yeah, it could have been worse. Doc Brown could have been a vegetarian.

But, Peter mused, crunching through his nineteenth rasher of bacon for the day; it was the principle
“You’re spilling crumbs on the floor.” FRIDAY said stiffly.

Peter fished around in his bowl, elbow-deep, searching for a particularly long piece. Aha. “I’m sure this-” Swallow, swallow, he wouldn’t put it beyond Computer Lady to snap his ribs if he had to get Heimlich’d by any one of those shiny suits, “gi-gantic place has people for cleaning.”

“The Facility staff does not have access to the residential wing.” FRIDAY recited, even stiffer. “Which is where your access is limited to.”

“In other words, they can’t see me. Why FRIDAY,” Peter retrieved his hand from the bowl, so he could slap both palms over his open mouth in a gesture of pure shock. “Are you telling me I’m being held here against my will illegally?”

FRIDAY, the complete spoilsport that she was, didn’t respond.

Too bad she’d never gone up against the force of obnoxiousness that was Peter Quill. “Nothing to say?”

“I am not impelled to talk to you.” FRIDAY informed him with all the chilliness a synthesised tone could muster. It was a lot. “Nor am I impelled to reply to any of your juvenile jokes.”

“You seem to reply to Stark’s juvenile jokes just fine.” Peter didn’t know what was with him and unimpressed ladies. Gamora, FRIDAY. He just had to keep pushing. “But then again he is your boss. Looks like Terra’s still holding on to the age old tradition of laughing at your boss’ crappy one liners, huh.”

“His jokes aren’t crappy.” FRIDAY’s cold tones morphed to indignance in the span of a second. So adorable. “And he isn’t just my…he created me.”

“Really?” Huh. Anyone who spoke at the rate of more than three words per second wasn’t slacking in the brains department; but he hadn’t seen this one coming. “You just don’t expect the jackasses to have any actual talent, usually.”

Peter didn’t know how she managed to convey it with a voice, but FRIDAY was smiling. It wasn’t a very nice smile. “You have no idea.”

He was beginning to. Peter nestled back into the large couch, digging the ass in. “Tell me more about your boss, then.”

“Your amateurish attempts at getting me to divulge-” FRIDAY began with no small amount of rancour, but her voice cut out suddenly-followed by a series of progressively higher pitched feedback sounds. Beep. Beep. Beeeeeeeeeeeeeee-

“FRIDAY?” Peter sat up. There wasn’t a bulb in the room that he could identify, but the light-wherever it came from, flickered anyway. “You still there?”

-eeeeeeep. Beep.

“I hope you know this isn’t funny.” Peter’s free hand reached for the empty space at his hip…fuck. Did Stark have to strip him of all the guns? “Your sense of humour is as bad as your boss’. Badder.”
“My grammar should be an absolute affront to your wires.” Peter informed the empty air about him, even as his knees slowly unfolded, raising him to his feet. “You should correct me.”

His toes were beginning to curl in the confinements of their shoes, an age-old instinct building up in the balls of his feet. The first one that jerked to the fore of his mind in every crisis, the one he’d been following forever. *Run. Run now.*

One last time. “FRIDAY?”

Over the incessant whine building in his eardrums, there was the tiniest *scratch*. Peter looked up.

The bacon went flying everywhere.

“*Motherfucking-*” Not a very outlaw-y reaction. Not a very Guardian-like reaction either. Peter didn’t give a fuck: *there was something crawling on the ceiling.*

The red-and-blue blob cocked his head at him—*oh god it had a head*—and in the next second, it was zooming at *his* head—Peter leapt at least three feet high, landing and scrambling back. The thing uncurled from its crouched position on the floor to human-height, flapping its appendages at him.

“Don’t just…just *calm down-*”

Peter threw the bowl at him.

(He was an innovative kind of guy. Used the things around him to his advantage, and stuff. Entrepreneurial.)

The white, plastic bowl had landed on the thing’s head. It hung there, perfectly inverted, obscuring its face completely.

“I’m not actually a spider, you know.”

An appendage reached up-hand, it was a hand, even though it did look coloured in with Magic Marker—and tugged the bowl off. Bright, animatronic eyes emerged, over a…masked? face that somehow still emanated sheepishness. “Sorry for the scare.”

…right, so this might be just a little humiliating. Peter straightened up smoothly, shoulders broadening and a sunny grin pasted liberally on his face. “No harm, no foul.”

“Great, just don’t set off any alarms.” The bowl was gently set down on the surface of the couch. “I’m Pe-Spiderman.”

“Nice to meet you, Pee-Spiderman.” In the interests of illustrating his bravery, Peter’s hand shot out for a handshake. He resisted the urge to glare at it. “I’m Starlord.”

Large white eyes blinked at him. After a couple of seconds, a red hand stretched forwards warily—Peter kept his eyes up and his grin luminous. The hand curled around his; the surface was strangely smooth, almost rubber-like. Two quick jerks up and down—wow, that was quite a grip—and the hand darted back, going up to rub at the back of Pee-Spiderman’s neck.

(okay, Peter was all for respecting people’s tastes and all…but god, that was a lame name. He’d much rather shorten it to Spiderman.)
“So. Uh.” More frantic rubbing. “What with the name and all…are you one of Mr Stark’s friends?”

The fuck? He did not like the emphasis on that word at all. “Hell no.”

A beat.

Peter cocked his head to the side, “Wait, does he bend that way?”

Spiderman yelped. “What?”

Peter blinked. “What?”

The kid looked like his face was steaming up under there—and it was a kid alright, no way a grown man’s voice reached those levels of shrillness. “I don’t—I mean—not that kind of….” Spiderman stopped, visibly pulling in a breath. “The…the superheroic kind. Saving the world, that sorta thing.”

Peter considered it. “Well, I do save the galaxy in my spare time.” Once. He was a busy guy.

Those eyes widened further. “That’s…really cool.”

“Yes. Yes, exactly. Thank you!” Peter beamed at the kid, briefly considering taking him by the hand again. “That’s how you’re supposed to react when people tell you stuff.”

Not roll your eyes so frequently they seemed to be in danger of falling off your face and rolling to the floor. Stupid Stark.

“Uh…thanks, I guess.” Spiderman backed up a step. And another. “I’ll just…be taking your leave—if you wouldn’t mention any of this to Mr Stark I’d highly apprecia—”

“What did you do to FRIDAY?” Peter interjected, as smooth as anything.

Spiderman froze. “I didn’t do anything.”

“You broke in here.”

“Mr Stark knows me!” And higher. Hoo boy. The kid should consider joining a choir.

Peter smiled, mildly reassuring. “Not what I asked, kid.”

“Look, I just…” Spiderman stared at him wildly for several seconds, as if considering knocking Peter out and hightailing out of here (he’d find it significantly harder than expected.) But those red shoulders slumped instead, the following words almost mumbled, “He just…hasn’t really talked to me since Leipzig even though he keeps sending me stuff—”

“Wait, you mean Stark?” Spiderman bobbed his head woefully. Well, Stark did seem like a bit of a hermit, though a bit more technologically inclined than usual. “So you…what? Decided to break into his house to get him to talk to you?”

And there it was again, the very visible flushing, though Spiderman was covered head to toe. His body language was ridiculously expressive. “I just haven’t seen him in…he comes on TV once in a while but the last time we were face-to-face he didn’t look so good and…”

Peter nodded his head encouragingly.

More mumbles. “Took me around a month to find a way round FRIDAY. I didn’t do anything to her—she’s just deactivated.”
Impressive. “And what, knocking was simply not an option?”

Spiderman’s shoulders rose, his hands along with them, a tableau of indignation. “I did at first! But FRIDAY wouldn’t let me through. Always said Mr Stark was away, and that I didn’t have access.”

Peter nodded sagely, “She’s a bit of a stick in the mud.”

Spiderman’s hands began wringing together in anxious motions, “I know he won’t actually let me on the team, but there aren’t many people left, I just…” The hands stilled, for a second. Those eyes darted up in inquisition. “Are you…are you going to be a new Avenger?”

“I…well.” Peter moved his mouth soundlessly for a second, before dropping back down the couch. Spread his knees wide, stretched his hands along the leather back—the very epitome of a man at home. “Mr Stark’s offered me the job. But I have other prospects of… avenging too, you know? So I’m here for a bit, doing some research, evaluating the quality of the avenging. So I can make the right choice.”

“…right.” That tone sounded dangerously dubious. Spiderman shifted on his feet, eliciting a faint crunching noise. “And I suppose the quality of bacon was one of the criteria?”

“Never underestimate the value of nutrition.” This wasn’t working. Distract, distract. Peter companionably patted the spot next to him on the couch. “You said you wanted to be an Avenger?”

“Well I…” Spiderman perched himself on the furthest edge cautiously. A bit more hand wringing. “I know I’m not… I mean Mr Stark has been doing this for years.”

“He looks like it.” Bloody exhausted, was what he looked like. And perennially cranky. Peter really didn’t know what this perfectly nice-seeming kid in front of him was wringing his hands over (perfectly nice apart from the ceiling crawling, of course). “You uh…look up to him, then?”

“Ever since New York.” Spiderman nodded. He wasn’t quite gushing; there was a restrained quality to his voice—quieter, but the admiration shone right through. “I... always had an abstract sort of appreciation for his work-the arc reactor was so far beyond what anyone else had come up with, you know? But then I saw him fly the nuke into the wormhole and—”

Fly? Peter’s eyebrows scrunched up; did Terran missiles have pilots? That didn’t seem very safe. “This of course, is in reference to that time when…?”

“The Chitauri came through and the Avengers saved New York, yes.” Spiderman completed distractedly. His head was bent, his fingers threaded together. Talking about his admiration had apparently set off a wave of guilt.

“New York is in the galaxy, by the way.”

Spiderman didn’t respond to this helpful reminder, head still bent.

“Kiddo?”

“I…” Those fingers fiddled with each other, faster and faster. When Spiderman swung himself to his feet, it was a rapid flash of movement. “This…this was a mistake. I should go.”

“Look, just wait for a—” For the first time, Peter was getting some real information. It couldn’t end this quickly.

“I’m leaving.” Spiderman looked around distractedly, panic building. When those eyes turned back
to fixate on Peter, it didn’t matter that they were white, shiny lenses—Peter felt the full force of that
stare anyway. The intensity. “Just…take care of him, okay?”

And then he’d turned and was off, sprinting across the room to-holy *shit*, leap at the wall. He landed
on the vertical surface, hands and feet scrambling nimbly upwards like gravity was a non-existent
concept. A few seconds of death-defying crawling and he was out of view; gone the way he’d come,
leaving Peter gaping.

*O…kay, then.*

The room was deathly silent in the aftermath. It was easy to ignore how many electronic whirring
and humming noises went on in the background of this place until they were all gone.

…they were all gone.

The Human-Sized Spider had taken care of Computer Lady. Peter was *free.*

He was on his feet before he knew it, fingers and toes cramping up in anticipation. Sure, Stark had a
really nice bathtub, and FRIDAY’s accent had stirred up memories of a gap-toothed girl in
kindergarten he didn’t even know he had, and he’d miss the bacon. Oh heavens, how he’d miss the
bacon.

But he was free. And he didn’t even need to wait out his asshole crew in order to get there.

His eyes were already flittering around, scoping out useful items to nick. The kitchenette was looking
appealing—but heaving a sack of food around would only make him look like a bozo. Stark definitely
gave off the ‘I own a fuck ton of bling’ vibe, but Peter couldn’t see any credit chips lying around…
wait, did Terra use credit chips? Or were they still stuck with the paper dollars of yesteryears?
Ransacking his very fancy prison would be so much easier if he actually knew what was still
relevant and useful in the outside world…

And what should his gaze catch on then, other than a plain black, rectangular device haphazardly left
on the coffee table, from not-so-many nights ago.

“*Don’t touch my stuff.*”

Well well. Peter couldn’t believe there’d ever come a time when he’d be so excited to say this…but.
No FRIDAY meant no inconvenient access blocks and firewalls.

It was *research* time.

The laptop was still in hibernation mode; he’d never really shut it off since that night. Peter tapped
out the password again quickly-*Captain America* really, such a dork—and the homescreen flashed
back on, browser windows still open. Alyssa Milano’s picture blinked at him cheekily from the
search page-*no firewalls!*—but Peter could resist. Stark’s coming and going times were erratic at best,
he couldn’t linger here for too long.

Location was the best place to start, Peter had to know where exactly he’d landed. Sure, it was
almost certainly in the middle of American civilization, Stark’s Manhattan polish was
unmistakable…but it wouldn’t do to be cocky. And his plan was going to vary widely depending on
whether he’d ended up in Detroit or Newark, after all. If Terran tech had grown advanced enough
for Stark’s suits, it was definitely advanced enough for some kind of locational system. It might have
been a fever dream, but it felt like he’d seen satellites on his short-lived flight down to Earth.
His fingers hovered over the sleek keys, seconds passing in the interim. Peter stared at the cursor blinking in the bright white search bar, feeling his exhilarated, focused train of thought trundle slowly to a stop.

Just one thing.

The words appeared slowly on screen as he typed them out, the sound of the keyboard almost silent.

New York Tony Stark

Peter pressed the Enter key.

The topmost search result was the link to a video—a site called Youtube, no wait, the ‘T’ was capital, did they change how English worked? The tiny white arrow moved as Peter moved his finger over the touch-sensitive, intuitive surface. Click. And click again.

The screen went white, a small blue circle whirling next to the arrow. Peter waited, feet tapping out a distracted rhythm against the carpet. A smaller black screen appeared against the white background, a list of other videos running down a list on the right. A figure below the black screen stated the video had been viewed over five million times.

It was startling, the sudden explosion of sound when it started playing automatically; Peter flinched, but the action onscreen was too eye-grabbing to think about anything else. There was a blonde woman in a wrinkled blazer and perfect hair seated behind a desk, spilling words anxiously into the mike pinned to her lapel—"hole in the sky" and "monsters" and "people fighting in costume on the streets" zipping by fast enough to leave Peter dazed.

But none of that mattered, because the…studio, that had to be a news studio, winked out to show shaky coloured footage of a red-and-gold star in the sky. Then the camera zoomed in, and…no. No that wasn’t a star at all, successfully outshining the sun to glow amid blue skies. It was a figure in armour, darting among skyscrapers, describing an incomprehensible path to anyone who still believed in gravity. It burst past the tallest building yet—and the camera panned back, showing how its trajectory was not so impossible at all. In fact, it was all too obvious where it was headed: a straight collision course for the other blur in the sky, the one with the white smoke trail.

At the back of his head, Peter was distantly aware of the audio feed: a series of bleeps, followed by “fuck fuck fucking fuck” like the channel just couldn’t be bothered to censor any longer. Men and women panicking, losing their heads seated in a building miles away, while the scarlet blur raced for the nuke in the sky, never swerving from its course. The curse words were interrupted by pleas, prayers to deities, and desperate, desperate hope—"catch it, cmon catch it…please just…"

(the only reason he was even aware was because of the tiny voice at the back of his mind asking the red meteor to turn away.)

He caught it. There was never any other possible ending. Peter traced the path that the blur took—outlaw name kinda thing? Iron Man, gotcha—that Iron Man took, shooting straight up for the dark patch of nothingness in the sky. Straight lines. Unfaltering. The man was an engineer—and Peter knew that gauntlets would increase manoeuvrability on top of propelled boots, but it was nice to have visual confirmation—and look, there was only the ‘LIVE’ sign on the screen now, flickering white and bold and slightly terrified because Stark had been swallowed up by the hole in the sky and not even Peter’s highly dependable mind could distract him away from…

This.
The video stopped.

Peter straightened up, laptop sliding forward on his knees. His hands were bunching up on his thighs, fingers curling into the denim of his jeans, vision scattered and uncomprehending. His breaths were studied, carefully slow. The laptop sagged forward further, black screen glaring up at him blankly.

“Usually, life takes more than it gives. But not today. Today, it’s given us a chance.”

“To do what?”

“To give a shit.”

He. Stark. Iron Man. He had greeted Peter with a punch to the head when he’d first arrived, and he was snarky and paranoid and moody and a complete bastard. He was Peter’s kinda captor who allowed him free reign over the house that Stark wandered about in alone, with a perennially worried, programmed Irish lady for company. Stark’s eyes were emotionless when he said that he trusted Peter, but he left Peter alone in his home day after day anyway, even after Peter had appropriated one of his suits on the first night. And no matter how much Peter gobbled up…the freezer was always full of bacon, and chicken legs, and wings, and beef patties and other horribly unhealthy meat products anyway.

Stark was alive. He was real, and sarcastic and surprisingly humorous and horrifyingly jaded and always so, so angry. He had to be alive, to…to imprison Peter like this, because he truly had no reason to trust Peter. Because something about the dulled gleam of those eyes told Peter that Stark had no reason to trust anybody.

But the video ended with a scarlet-and-gold beacon getting snuffed out, leaving nothing but blue sky behind—and how did one live after that?

This couldn’t be all; there had to be another ending. He had to know…except. He had to see, one more time. Just to be sure. Because no one flew that straight. That undeterred. Peter knew; because he flew too. There were a million things to throw you off your path—wind shear and drag and the whistling velocity of the air and the cold clasp of dread in your heart and the screaming voice of self-preservation and the encompassing certainty that you’ll achieve nothing of worth.

Replay.

Click.

~

There was an old nightmare playing on loop inside his head.

Which was a bit surprising, considering he’d technically left it behind on his chronology of nightmares. It was a fixture of his life, really. Twist and turn and blink unseeing eyes at the ceiling over a nightmare, then replace it with a new one. Dreams of squealing tires and crashing headlights, replaced by muggy water and drowning. Then a paralysing pain in his chest, something reaching in to wrench his heart out. And that got switched out for coiling dreams of space, an inexhaustible expanse of horror. Then Pepper going up in flames. And then the crown jewel: a city hovering in the sky, only to fall to the ground. A child-like voice: I had strings. And now I’m fre-
He’d started an entire war over that one. At least, that’s what the media dubbed it.

But that had left him too, with time. And he’d come back full circle to the very beginning: squealing tires, crashing cars. Sure, sometimes there was the addition of the streetlight gleaming off a metal arm. Sometimes that arm was reaching into his chest. Sometimes it was a shield instead.

Tony didn’t fuss over the details.

But his crown jewel had made a grand return; and he hadn’t even been sleeping this time. Just a repeating litany of _now I’m free, there are-he also said he killed somebody there was no one else in the building, yes there was-no strings-JARVIS was the first line of defense-on me…_

“FRIDAY. FRIDAY, talk to me.”

Silence.

“I will let the idiots who program Siri at your next update. I’m not even kidding. FRIDAY.”

Nothing, except the sound of wind whistling over the speakers. Fucking hell, why was Mach 5 so fucking slow.

No, the suit wasn’t too slow. Tony was. One of the smartest scientific brains on the planet, and he couldn’t fly his own suit at full capacity without the assistance of his AI. Not even to save his AI. Not that FRIDAY needed saving. She was…she was perfectly alright. Dandy. Tony just needed to fly all the way back to the Facility to check the main servers her databases were stored in to make sure.

Ross did not appreciate the interruption in negotiations at all. Tony might have asked him-nay, requested-to stuff his balls somewhere inappropriate. What was an appropriate place to stuff one’s balls in, anyway?

“Fuck FRIDAY, just say one goddamned word. Boss. Moron. Anything.”

The minutes strung out, one after the next, physically painful. Why were the silences in his life always so deafening? The silence in the cave, the silence in his vision. The silence in the bunker. The seconds dragged along and silence followed; throttling them in its poisonous grasp, an endless torment. Or perhaps it was tormenting because it was endless.

Entire lives passed before Tony came to a rest on the landing patio of the Facility, landing pitch-perfect. He always performed better under hyperintensive stress. His blood was humming, his heart thrashing wildly in his chest, his ears awash with static. The glass doors slid open and his booted feet stepped through, holograms coming to life around him.

“I’m sorry,” FRIDAY said. Said, said, said, said, said…. “My connections to outside servers were severed. My activity was deactivated inside the Facility as well temporarily, but I managed to bring myself back online, no other systems have been compromised, I have been conducting extensive checks-”

Tony could feel his knees buckling. He would probably have fallen to the floor—but the armoured plate on his shins locked in just in time, making it impossible for his legs to bend. His faceplate slid up, letting in the delusion of precious fresh air.

He wavered on his feet, vision greyish and voice a bare rasp. “Thanks…thanks Fry.”
“You’re welcome, boss.” FRIDAY replied, and if her voice was tremulous, they didn’t comment on it.

Tony breathed. Again and again, till it started feeling like a normal activity, and the words that escaped on his fifth exhale were fairly light. “I’m going to kill that bastard.”

“Actually I don’t think…” FRIDAY started, and then stopped. Started again, “The interference was external. I don’t believe Mr Quill strictly had anything to do with it.”

“Could’ve been his associates.” Tony argued. Could’ve been anyone really, with a vested interest in getting Quill out, because what else could the purpose of taking FRIDAY down temporarily be, as Tony himself was left unharmed.

“I still don’t think-”

…getting Quill out. Because that was where he was. Out.

“Where’re you going?”

“Out.”

“I trust your story.”

No you don’t—Quill had said, and now he was gone. Which was fair, because Tony hadn’t trusted his story. He’d just let the guy out of the manacles as a show of faith. A false show of faith. To dupe the guy. Because he hadn’t really trusted him. He knew that, he did. Even if he did return to the Facility each day to find the guy camped out on his couch, watching one outrageous thing after another on the ‘quaint’ laptop.

(Outrageous was a relative word. Quill loved Duck Tales.)

The guy talked a lot. A lot. Enough to rival Tony on some days, and everyone agreed that most conversations didn’t have space for a single Tony, forget two. He made up tales tall enough to challenge the Burj Khalifa. It was all very annoying, and if it hadn’t been for the fact that no other prison in the world could probably keep him, Tony would have thrown him out a long time ago.

Tony stared ahead. FRIDAY had fallen silent a while back, and he couldn’t exactly tell when. The silence spun on, the Facility echoing with it. Long and chilly and endle-

“You’re back early.”

Thank goodness Tony was still facing the other end of the room, otherwise he would have to whirl around and the armour would make a godawful racket. As it was, his gaze only flitted to the man carelessly leaning against the other doorway, and there was no racket to drown out his voice.

Quiet. Aiming at incredulity, staying somewhere at staggered shock. “You didn’t leave.”

And quieter still, in a voice that would never find daylight—no one’s managed that before.

“Eh.” Quill moved further into the room, shoulders rising and falling in a casual shrug. “The grub’s nice here.”

And then, in a brighter voice as if to take full advantage of Tony’s confused staring—“Besides, you’re going to be helping me.”

Blink. Blink. Third time would be the charm, maybe? “I don’t recall being a part of that decision.”
“Your input wasn’t deemed necessary.” Quill nodded at him, grin intact. And there it was—that familiar prickle of annoyance, trickling in between all the numbing shock.

“How does imprisoning you here against your will indicate my willingness to help you, exactly?” Asking questions, receiving nonsensical answers. Tony was beginning to find his feet in the conversation again, encountering familiar ground.

Except his mind answered for him, still gibbering a little—but he isn’t here against his will anymore, is he?

Quill smirked at him, like he knew the exact wording of his thoughts and didn’t ‘deem it necessary’ to voice them out loud. Instead, all Tony got was this blunt declaration—

“You’re a jackass.”

Well then. Tony proceeded forward, doling out the words with indolent sarcasm, ignoring the tiny prick in his chest with ease. “Your logic is infallible.”

The hazel of Quill’s eyes had changed again under the light, like they had when he’d calmly detailed why exactly Tony was incapable of going to the authorities. Except his stare wasn’t hardening this time; there was something strangely open about it instead, open and incisive at the same time. There were remnants of humour lining his face, but they didn’t seem important.

“But you give a shit.” Quill completed, and this. This seemed important. The fading smirk, the faint smile that was curving up his lips instead, the unflinching stare. “I know the type.”

“I can’t get off this planet without a spaceship, and my dearest colleagues won’t bring me one till I ‘face my past’.” The smile flickered in and out of existence, like amusement and honesty dancing a duet. “I’d been dumped here to find out the identity of my father. And that’s what I’m going to do, and you’re going to help me.”

Well that was just—

“Plus, the little red-and-blue dude asked me to look after you and that’s a little difficult to do with you jetting outta here every day—”

“Pe-” Tony cut himself off abruptly. “Spiderman was here?”

Quill frowned. “A bit of a lame name, isn’t it?”

“Like Starlord is so much better.” No. No no, Stark, avoid the juvenile repartee, concentrate on the part where he basically ordered you to help him on a coming-of-age movie quest.

“At least I don’t have urine in front of my name!”

Tony gave up on staring entirely and just squinted at him. “What the fuck are you even on about?”

(Peter. Peter taking FRIDAY down. That…that made a lot more sense, and wasn’t nearly as worrisome, though what he was doing breaking into the Facility and asking Quill to…whatever he was asking Quill to do…)

Quill sighed, like the acrobatics of his deranged mind were far beyond Tony’s comprehension. Turned around, waved a hand absentely. “Cheerio. The smart laptop has informed me that something called Pirates of the Caribbean is totally up my alley and I’m going to watch it. Call me up when dinner’s ready.”
And just like that, within four footsteps...he was gone.

Bloody shitting fuck. What Tony wouldn’t give for him just to be gone.

“Okay, so I want a list of all information accessed during your downtime, Quill may have left a couple of traps.”

“Already done, boss” FRIDAY informed him, and if she’d had a corporeal body, Tony would have patted her on the head. This was the kind of company he liked having around.

“One site accessed during power down.” And...huh. That was a little unexpected. “No other databases accessed. All clean, Mr Quill didn’t even try to get into the system.”

Tony flexed his fingers, feeling the gauntlets whir to life, a thousand plates and servos clicking into place. “Which site?”

“YouTube.” And just when Quill’s behaviour couldn’t get any more perplexing. What was he doing, using the precious downtime of Tony’s nigh unbeatable AI to watch cat videos?

“Light it up.” A hologram flashed to life five inches from his face and...oh. Oh.

Hello fourth nightmare. Good to see you again, it had been quite a while. Weren’t you the one who pushed Pepper away?

Nah. I did that. The portal opened and Iron Man flew through and Tony closed his eyes.

The funny thing was...this was a happy memory too. Another fixture of his life-the pain mingled indelibly with the joy.

“He.” FRIDAY seemed to stumble over her words. She sounded...wondrous maybe. That didn’t quite seem right. “He watched it.”

“I gathered that, yes.”

“Seventeen times.”

...right. Right. Wonder not so misplaced, then.

“But you give a shit. I know the type.”

Tony opened his eyes, and watched himself fly into nothingness again.

Those words. Slightly mocking, slightly humorous, all honest.

“You give a shit.”

Phrased like that...caring almost didn’t seem as bad a burden.

Chapter End Notes

No, the Amazon is not a desert. Peter doesn't have the best memory of Earth geography.
I bet most of you didn't even notice that XP
A little gift from my end just before the Guardians 2 hits the theatres XD I'm so excited, guys. And the chapter's a little longer than usual too.

Also, I've gone up and changed a tiny detail from a previous chapter- because as it turns out, Quill wasn't old enough for high school when he got space-abducted, just elementary.

References to Iron Man 3 and CA:WS present. Title taken from *Blame It On the Boogie* by The Jacksons.

This was horribly inefficient.

He didn’t want to be one of those elitist assholes who only used tech made by their own hands and sniffed haughtily at all the rest…you know, hypothetically, if any other company in the world made the same sheer range of products that StarkTech did. He didn’t want to be a purist. That was the point.

But did the tech made by everyone else have to be this horrifically inefficient?

The mask fritzed again, a point of heat coming alive on the bridge of his nose. “Ow!”

“‘You alright there, boss?’”

“It zapped me!” Tony glared at his face in the mirror, index finger coming up to prod again at his chin, a point of visible distortion in the mesh. The mask shimmered back-and-forth dizzily, between clean-shaven skin and the dark shadow of his Van Dyke.

“Maybe it would help if you stopped fiddling with it.” FRIDAY suggested, all helpful-like.

“How am I supposed to know it won’t burn off my face, then?” It was a perfectly logical concern. Fucking SHIELD and their fucking Mission Impossible inspired gadgets. The movies weren’t even that great anyway.

“How do people live like this, Fry?” He dropped his hands and the mask settled; barely a glitch visible in the light. Tony scowled at the reflection. “How the hell am I supposed to reprogram this and modify features on the fly for emergencies if I don’t understand how this works?”

“I could be wrong here, boss, but I get the feeling that normal people don’t usually worry about that sort of thing when they’re using gadgets.” FRIDAY answered lightly; and wasn’t someone being a sly minx today-using phrases like ‘get the feeling’ to distract Tony from the sheer sass of that reply. Sure, he’d always known that his AI were capable of semi-complex emotion, but it was different from said AI literally acknowledging it. Realisation and self-recognition. God, they were brilliant.

“Normal people are morons,” was Tony’s crowning reply, and wasn’t that just the truth. “Also, those stunts Tom Cruise pulls off are totally unrealistic. Hanging off the side of a plane? Pfft.”
“I was under the impression that it was a step down from flying without a plane and catching thirteen people falling from a blown-up aircraft in mid-air…but you’re the boss.”

“Smugness is never attractive.” Tony declared, but it was a little hard to keep control of the traitorous smile curving to life on his face. “But thanks for the compliment.”

“Always a pleasure.” FRIDAY replied, sounding ridiculously pleased herself. Such a sap.

Tony exhaled a breath, hands finally falling to stillness at his sides, staring at the large brown eyes and slightly cherubic face reflected back at him. “How do I look?”

“Fresh as a daisy.” And Tony couldn’t really stifle his laugh at that. Huh, apparently his laugh lines had started really young—who’d have known.

The journey to the main living space, short-lived as it was, was fraught with back-and-forths (“It itches.” “Don’t worry boss, I’ll see if anyone in the history of the world has come up with medication for tech allergies.”) He walked through the doorway, hands buried in jeans pockets, the familiar sight of Quill perched on the sofa and pigging out over a massive bowl of something or the other greeting his eyes. Today’s unhealthy junk pseudo-food of choice appeared to be gummy bears.

Quill’s gingery head turned on its shoulders, apparently distracted from his feast of gluttony by the sound of approaching footsteps. The distracted gaze flittered over Tony’s face—before stilling suddenly, hazel eyes widening. Quill blinked twice in rapid succession, before his spine leaned back into the couch, knees widening and posture slouching with just a hint of a swagger.

“Well, hello there.”

Tony’s jaw dropped. “You’ve gotta be kidding me, right?”

Quill’s eyes boggled out. “Stark?”

“Yes it’s me!” Tony had the feeling that flapping his hands crazily in the air would not help matters. Out they came flying from his pockets anyway, though he satisfied himself by fisting them at his sides while he strode over to stand directly across from the couch.

Quill’s eyes switched to a whole different kind of evaluating, scoping over Tony’s features as though searching for glitches, furrows appearing in his forehead. His voice was barely above a murmur, “Well that’s some useful tech.”

“No it’s not, it’s inefficient is what it is, and based entirely on a presupposed notion that people pay attention to nothing but your face. Is a man with a thirty-year-old face and liver spots on his hands really supposed to be fooling anybody?”

“You don’t have liver spots.” Quill didn’t seem the least interested in his tirade, eyes affixed to Tony’s jaw as if to ferret out where the illusion ended and real skin began. “Whose face did you steal?”

“It’s mine, you dumbass.” Quill’s eyes went flying back to his face at that, slightly startled, presumably at the insult though…

Though it didn’t feel like it, not with how the gaze almost seemed to…soften, yet somehow grow even more thorough-running past eyes and nose and cheeks and lips…Quill’s voice was back to that distracted murmur again. “Yeah, I guess I can see it.”

Tony blinked, and stepped back; and once again for good measure. His thumbs hooked into the
rough denim of his pockets, remaining fingers scratching over the material restlessly. “Do you wanna put your Ramones leather outfit back on or is what you’re wearing fine?”

Quill glanced down at the white tee and blue pair of jeans he’d bummed from Tony’s closet, brows furrowing in confusion. “Nah, I’m good.” A pause. “Wait, are we going somewhere?”

“We embark upon the first act of your bildungsroman today.” Quill blinked at him cloudily, Tony resisted the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose. “Your quest. We’re visiting your home town today. Joplin, Missouri-right?”

“Right.” Quill affirmed reflexively—before reddish-brown brows went flying to their hairline and he jumped up to his feet to echo the motion. “No. What? No no.”

“You know, I could’ve sworn somebody had made a dramatic declaration a week before about roping me in to ‘find out the truth about their past’ or whatever.” Testy? Check. Unimpressed? Check check. Tony waved a hand in sarcastic motion over himself, mouth pinned to a straight line. “Tada. I’m here. Let’s go.”

“But you didn’t even want to in the first place!” Quill backed up by several steps, and he apparently had no compunctions in making flailing hand motions, short and abrupt as they were. “I’m an..an..interloper in your house! You totally shouldn’t be helping me.”

This is not my house. Tony’s jaw tightened fractionally, face still somewhat pleasant on the exterior. “But I also can’t confirm if any of your outlandish claims actually check out unless I tag along on your hero’s journey. Figure of speech, of course.”

“That’s only because you’re a paranoid bastard!”

Tony’s lips thinned out further. “I see what you’re doing there, you know.” An irritated exhale. “Weren’t you all for this, seven days ago?”

“Look, it’s like…” Quill ran a hand through his floppy locks, wired and almost agitated. It was a strange look for a guy who kept cool as a cucumber even when being on the business end of Iron Man’s repulsors. “It’s like when you read a book-”

Tony arched a brow. “You read?”

Quill glowered back at him. “It was hypothetical, and we’re talking about you.”

Tony nodded in mock-comprehension. “Apologies. Do go on.”

Quill huffed out a breath. The white tee was sticking to his chest…and it was a strange moment of déjà vu, there. “So you read a book or watch a movie or…or listen to this amazing speech, and you feel all fired up from it, y’know? Inspired, ready to make changes to your life…that sorta thing. Then your life comes up and you realise you didn’t know what the hell you were talking about-”

“And you get cold feet?” Tony inserted helpfully.

Quill scowled at him. “Yes.”

Well. That made things much easier. Tony clapped his hands together briskly, half-whirling around on his feet. “That settles it then. To the quinjet!”

Quill gaped. “But I just said I didn’t want to do it!”
Tony paused, mostly for effect. Turned back around, and cocked his head to the side, ever-so-slightly. Rolled out a smirk, freshly made from the press, and felt the goodness of it down to his bones. “Exactly.”

The mutter at his back didn’t even try to be inaudible. “Bastard.”

The good feelings didn’t last for very long.

Quill wasn’t a backseat driver. It would have been infinitely preferable had he been a backseat driver. He just fidgeted at the back of the plane like there was a literal swarm of fire ants under his ass, until-

“For the seventh time-do you need the manacles?”

“I just feel antsy sitting in a plane I’m not flying.”

“I’m not letting you fly the plane.”

“Okay.” Fidget fidget fidget.

“I am not going to crash the plane.”

“I’d be surprised if you could, we’re going at twenty miles an hour. Is this thing even flying?”

“At Mach 2.”

Quill apparently didn’t consider dignifying that with a response.

On and on, until Tony finally succumbed to sheer frustration and let him squat in the co-pilot’s seat. But that was even worse—the squirrelly-eyed asshole surveying the control panel and practically every inch of the cockpit with a disdainful gaze, till Tony felt fit to throttle that pallid throat and shout defensive things like, ‘this is a stupid SHIELD plane and I have a flying suit of armour you everliving jerk.’

They landed on the secluded airfield behind Joplin Regional Airport after three torturous hours, wheels skimming gracefully on the tarmac—and Tony swore to the spirit of Werner Heisenberg that if Quill had just muttered, “seven out of ten” out of the corner of his mouth; he wouldn’t live to see the sun set tonight.

The landing staff on the ground didn’t give the pair of them a second look, well instructed as they were. Tony strode along at a fast pace, as Quill lagged slightly behind; goosebumps breaking out on the exposed skin of his forearms with the chilly nip in the air. The airfield was large and the quiet was mounting, broken by the crackling of leaves whipped around in the wind.

“Kinda weird to see you out of a suit.” Quill offered to his back, the olive branch hanging all too obviously in the air. “Either kind, really.”

“A three-piece, bespoke and worth every dollar you spent on it, projects class and power and authority; remember that Anthony -”

Tony folded his bare elbows over his stomach, conserving body heat. He smiled tightly, “I wear them for the shoes.” But slowed down, just a fraction; because this was counterproductive.
Quill caught up to him, eyes glimmering momentarily in something like relief—and of course he was six feet tall. Of course he was.

They caught a cab from the airport to the main city. The miles zipped by—Tony relaxing back into the toasty warmth of the seat with a sigh, eyes closed. Everything smelt vaguely of smoke, the skies grey and dreary outside, the minutes traipsing past in blessed quiet. The few times he’d open his eyes and glance to the far right of the back seat, he’d see the same thing—Quill half-turned with the wind rippling past his short white sleeves, staring out of the windowpane. The turn of his shoulder obscured his face from Tony’s eyes.

The sound levels climbed gradually as they drove into the city—the blare of horns, the chatter of milling people. The traffic creeped ahead by inches, the interior of the car still quiet. By the time the cab rocked into a gentle standstill by a curb under a tall department store, Tony had drifted off into a peaceful drowse.

Tony blinked blearily, stifling a yawn into the knuckles of his right hand. With his other, he felt around for his wallet—a fifty percent tip sounded about right, the value of a cabbie who knew not to strike up a conversation or make friends couldn’t be understated. Having passed the crisp notes over, he pushed the car door to his left open, bringing in a sudden draught of cold air. Repressing a shiver, Tony swung his legs out onto the grimy curb and stepped out, spine creaking as it unfolded. Buried a hand in his pocket, placed the other one on the door frame to ease it shut—wait, he was forgetting something.

Tony ducked his head, peeking into the bowels of the car again. “Coming?”

Quill was in the same position he’d seen him last, maybe half hour ago—shoulders turned, head bent to the side, eyes affixed on the window at his right. When Tony’s question cracked the relative silence, his ginger head turned slowly, hazel eyes darting up to stare blankly at Tony’s face.

“Well?”

Quill stared on unblinkingly, before lowering his gaze to his lap, broad hands curled absentely over his thighs. Their grip tightened, blunt fingernails digging in—before Quill gave a last glance to the window at his side, the city bustling outside and gave himself a nod. “Okay. Okay.”

“O..kay then.” Tony backed a couple of steps as Quill dragged his ass over the seat, dismounting on the same curb. Those hands closed the car door gently, and the tires squeaked against the asphalt as the cab pulled away, trundling off to join the rest in the sea of vehicles.

Quill turned to look at him, eyes distant and hands hanging loosely at his sides, flashing a quick smile that vanished as soon as it appeared—and Tony felt unease twist lightly through his chest.

They walked, sidestepping poles and pedestrians who were a little too absorbed in their phones, pace moderate and unhurried. Joplin seemed like an American metropolis like any other—shopfronts screaming sales, people streaming hurriedly in one or the other direction or crowding close to bus stops, random bursts of greenery here and there, oak and elm and juniper and catalpa. The thunderously grey sky bore down on the entire cityscape, looming over multistoried apartment buildings.

Tony glanced at Quill’s face at intervals, barely breaking his stride; the man was looking straight ahead, neither left nor right, barely seeming as though he was taking any of it in. Not the gloss of the steel-and-concrete Empire District Electric Company building at the end of the block, not the Lebanese place hidden in the alley they just crossed, not the pneumatic hiss as a bus closed its doors on the other end of the street, whizzing away just as quietly as it had arrived.
“I’m hungry.” Tony’s voice said without his permission, and Quill turned his eyes away from the non-existent horizon for the first time in the past fifteen minutes, brows drawing together in confusion. Hell, at least he was mildly emoting again. Those had been the most un-Quill like fifteen minutes that Tony had ever witnessed.

The words were still exiting his mouth, perfectly formed, and Tony didn’t have the slightest idea where he was going with this. “We’ll grab something. I haven’t had breakfast and gummy bears are not a universally acknowledged food group.”

Two more befuddled blinks, and then Quill lifted his shoulders in a shrug. Tony cast his eyes around and-oh look, joy of joys, random Homey Pub #302 with a neon sign and a cutesy little green door just two units over. He covered the distance in half a dozen short strides and pulled the door open, Quill ducking under his outstretched hand into the well-lit interior.

Red leather booths and a black-and-white checkered floor greeted their eyes-Tony had to suppress a tiny groan. Such inspired interior design, truly. The originality was jaw dropping. Quill for his part seemed to pay the design no mind-he headed straight for the well-polished bar in the corner, amber hued bottles and mounted tv screens playing the latest Jets game both gleaming equally.

Tony followed with sluggish legs: apparently extreme self-flagellation and torture was where he had been heading with this. An hour spent in close proximity to alcohol-just what he needed to really get his day going. The leather top of the bar stool was already sticky with sweat and possibly spilled drinks, as he swung his thighs over the seat and pirouetted slightly towards Quill. His thumb was sticky now too-Tony stared at it for a couple of seconds, wondering if he was desperate enough to lick it. The answer was a surprising, somewhat relieving no.

Quill’s hands were fastened over the formica countertop, eyes jumping restlessly like a kid on meth: from the group of twenty-something ladies in the corner booth making duck faces at their phones, to the CCTV footage playing unassumingly behind the bartender, to the menu plastered across the sideboard, spelling out falafel burger and chicken tikka burger in snazzy Helvetica font. Seconds dragged on before he slowly turned his head towards Tony, lips flickering in what would be the first break in his twenty minute self-imposed vow of silence.

Tony braced himself, ready to offer whatever emotional support that may be required, but probably would be more along the lines of ‘thanks but no thanks, you can take your stoic sorrow and man out of time feelings and shove them up your lily-white ass’- but in spectacular Quill fashion, these were the words he heard instead:

“What is—" this strange, immoral world I have descended into ‘—our policy on bringing girls back to the place?”

Tony felt his jaw dislocate slightly. Quill threw another look at the twenty somethings in the corner booth over his shoulder, pairing it with an affable wink. The girls chittered.

This is karma. The realisation was cold and deathly certain, sinking to the bottom of his gut like a block of lead. This was for every grimace Pepper had ever suppressed when he snuck a model into his office, every ridiculous act chaperoned, every busty lady courteously and forcefully escorted to the boundaries of his property the morning after. Vengeance on behalf of Pepper Potts had come for him, in the form of one Peter Jason Quill—and fuck, he should probably say something before Quill issued a mass invitation for ‘orgy at Avengers HQ’.

“You mean my place.” He managed to force out, words finely enunciated. “The highly classified place where you’re technically still a prisoner.”
The redhead at the far right giggled, winding her fiery locks around a finger. Quill raised two in response, wiggling them in the air in a tiny salute.

Very well. Time to take a leaf out of the Potts Tome of Tactics then.

His tone was calm and composed. “If you value the continued structural integrity of your fingers, you’ll stop doing that right now.”

Quill’s hand flew back to his lap like an insect scurrying for shelter, and Tony didn’t bother repressing his triumphant smirk.

Quill let out a sigh of aggravation, using his grip on the counter to whirl around lightly and begin, “Why do you always have to-” before clamping his mouth shut, eyebrows flying to his hairline.

Tony crooked a brow in confusion, then glanced over his own shoulder to see a buxom blonde leaning across the bar, piercings lining thin eyebrows and full lips, smirking generously. “Can I getcha somethin’, sweetheart?”

For a moment, terror leaped in his mind-fuck, she knows—but the shimmer of nanoparticles dancing across his face was undisturbed, the photostatic veil still stable. And that particular curl of the lip around sweetheart, the heated drape of those eyes, he hadn’t had this kind of stare directed at him in decades…

Oh, for fuck’s sake.

Tony resisted the urge to knead the bridge of his nose. Hell, he hadn’t missed this side effect of being twink him at all. Damn, he’d put on a thirty-year-old face-how twinky could he be at that age anyway?

“Well?”

The bartender was prompting him, and Tony barely held back a growl-the answer was, apparently, a lot. “Nothing alcoholic.”

“Aw.” Her mouth pursed as if it was the most adorable thing she’d ever heard. “We make a mean Pineapple Ginger Sparkler.”

Quill’s hand clapped him on the shoulder-presumably to hold him back, guessing how close Tony was to lunging across the counter and ripping that smug piercing off that smug lip.

“That, eh, sounds brilliant. But me and my friend need to…er, pay our electricity bills at the office, so. Long lines, lotsa waiting, you know how it is. Maybe some other time!”

The blonde’s eyes clouded, mouth falling open in a classic, ‘the fuck?’ expression. There wasn’t much Tony could do about it, except smile back vindictively because that hand on his shoulder had pushed him off his seat and was now steering him out of the godforsaken place.

Tony knocked it off the second fresh air hit their lungs, Quill recoiling with a tiny, ‘ow’. Directed an unimpressed stare at the other man, more disgruntled than he’d expected-apparently, he’d been hungrier than he’d thought. His stomach growled in lieu of his voice. “We have apps for paying bills now, you humongous moron. And the hell was that?”

“Not everyone can hire people to line up for you.” And Tony was really going to bash his head into the nearest fire hydrant because apps are not people, oh fucking god, but Quill was still talking, rapid enough to sound panicky- “and that particular hell was what I’m pretty sure was my niece. Hitting on
He gave a full body shudder, eyes closing tight. “I’ve been in a jail cell with sixty men at once, none of whom believed in showers—and I don’t think I’ve been this traumatised in my life.”

Tony stared on with a remotely horrified kind of fascination. “How’d you know?”

“She had a birthmark.” Quill’s eye twitched uncontrollably. “On her…chest.”

*Oh. Oh yuck.* It was easy to file behind Quill; the man had already taken down the street again, long legs striding quickly, muttering under his breath. “Still don’t understand why you couldn’t simply look the place up on the global net.”

*Because you’re a jackass who deserves to suffer.* “Because you apparently grew up in the land before time.” Tony resented every second of extremely fast walking he had to resort to in order to catch up to the ginger maniac. His heart wasn’t the same, dammit. And why did people have to have bamboo stilts for legs anyway? Pepper was exactly the same. Were normal-sized limbs too much to ask for? “There’s nothing on the internet about you except your birth certificate and the school you went to. So we have to do this the old-fashioned way.”

Quill stilled for a second, before speeding up further. Oh for crying out loud… “We need to visit the hospital that issued the certificate, they should have records as to—”

“Minor detour.” Quill chimed back genially, but his back straightened, shoulders buckling in. For a smiling face, those features were difficult to read.

Tony’s answering expression was not so cryptic. Amiable and murderous. “And pray, how far away is this detour?”

“Stone’s throw.” The back of Quill’s t-shirt replied, because of course he’d pulled ahead again. Tony gritted his teeth and pushed on.

A net total of twenty five minutes and several pressure-damaged teeth later: “Tell me who’s throwing the stone, again?”

“Drax.” Quill threw back distractedly, *LIKE THAT FUCKING MEANT ANYTHING and calm down. Calm down calm down calm-*

“Calm down.” Quill said, and Tony came fatally close to punching him in the nose. “It’s a nice day. We’re having a walk.”

Nice day. A nice day meant the sun-streaked sands of Malibu, the sound of waves crashing over the boulders, the oceanic tang of salt. Fuck, Tony hadn’t had a nice day in *years.*

Quill’s definition of a nice day apparently included howling winds and a stormy sky that wouldn’t stop glowering at you, all while walking through the midst of the most happening, exciting place on the planet-American suburbia. The tall buildings had long receded into the distance, the chatter of the people along with it, and now they were walking down empty concrete roads with residential plots on either side, an occasional single-storied commercial building thrown in now and then for variety.

It looked like something out of a movie, to be honest. Squat houses with open porches and
manicured lawns, a dark green hickory rising now and then, branches getting batted against the red stiles. A soccer ball rolled dispiritedly over the grass of the nearest house unit, tumbling along with the wind; street signs rose at every corner, dark green and slightly bent with blocky white letters spelling out innocuous names like 21st Street and Virginia Avenue. It was a silly thought, but…Tony hadn’t known, not beyond a theoretical level, about the existence of places like this. Quiet, serene, every day. A place where the Charlie Spencers of the world grew up.

And it was unconscious, really—the dart of his gaze back to that broad back, three paces ahead, where white cotton was sticking to muscle in sodden, sweaty patches. A place where Peter Quill had grown up…and wasn’t that a stranger thought? That a man like that could be produced in this peaceful environment.

The man in question had come to a standstill, heel of the right boot grinding the stone underneath it to dust. They were at a four-way crossroads-Tony could glimpse a parking lot at the far end of the road, but otherwise the place was pretty deserted. The wind was tossing up unresisting gravel into the air, the sweep of it over the ground loud and rustling.

“South Pennsylvania Avenue and 19th Street.” Quill murmured over the groaning wind, eyes dipped as if peering into the distance.

“That’s what the sign says.” Tony had intended it sarcastically—but something in the air sapped the sharpness from the tone, leaving the words quiet and bare.

“That…” Quill turned his head to the right and the left, and then back to the right again, eyes darting over empty lots and weeds spouting from gravel. The wind howled. He walked straight across the crossing before stopping still on the other side of the road, face profiled against the grey skies as he turned this way and that. “That can’t be right.”

Tony didn’t move. Quill had moved off the sidewalk, feet moving through weeds that grew to mid-calf height, something peculiarly restrained about his movements even as his eyes scanned through empty space frantically. “301. 301. 301 East 19th Street, where South Pennsylvania Avenue crosses…”

“Your house?” The wind carried the low words too easily.

Quill whirled around. There were patches of sweat under his arms and on his stomach, the neck of the tee sticking to the collar bone, strands of hair moving ceaselessly over his forehead and blown back from his nape by the wind. Tony had never seen his skin look so pale.

“Emer…Emerson Elementary.” Quill stumbled over his words, eyes wide and unstilled. His chin dipped towards his neck and he stared at the ground, licking chapped lips reflexively. “Founded in the thirties. It was the oldest school in the neighbourhood.”

Tony slipped chilled hands into his pocket, clammy skin sticking to the screen of his phone as he pulled it out. His fingers worked on autopilot. Joplin, Joplin…of course. The name had rung a very faint bell; but who had time to remember natural disasters when there was so much intentional destruction being wreaked in the world. Had he even gone to help? He was probably cossetted up in Malibu at the time, sulking over not getting a full place on the Avengers. Hell, the irony of it all. Things coming full circle…

Is that Emerson with a double s, Tony didn’t ask—just hazarded a guess. The results spooled out anyway; eyes skimming through hundreds of words of articles in seconds, even though the pictures were self-explanatory.
“It was in 2011.” The words were quieter than he’d have liked them to be. “Multiple-vortex tornado hit Joplin city, EF5—that’s, that’s a pretty strong one.” Pretty strong was an understatement; it was the deadliest one to hit the States since nineteen forty seven. “Wind speed exceeding 200 miles per hour— he isn’t interested in that, a distant inhale, ‘-many parts of the city got razed. Trees, houses, hospitals. Schools.”

Quill hadn’t raised his head yet. The wind was getting colder; Tony didn’t shiver. “Franklin Technology Centre, St. Mary’s Catholic School, Joplin High. Emerson Elementary was left standing, but the school building had sustained significant structural damage. They deserted the place, moved the students to other schools. It was…” words, just words. Words should be easy to say. “...demolished a year ago.”

They remained unmoving for several minutes, standing on opposite sides of the road; the wind picking up and dying down by increments. Tony couldn’t hear any birdcalls in this place. Maybe the impending storm had driven them all to hide in their sheltered nests, fly home.

It was probably a conjuring of his imagination—but it felt like he could hear the breath as it rattled out of Quill’s lungs; shoved through his trachea and whispered out of his nose and through the crevices of his lips, small and muted. Another pulled breath, what might have been a hitch—and Quill turned, shoes crunching through the gravel of the place where his school once stood, repository of childhood memories mingled with the dust on the ground.

He walked and Tony’s feet moved by reflex; and it didn’t seem like too many steps, too much of an impediment to catch up to Quill’s side now. He could see a red-brown lock flutter in the wind at the corner of his vision, a broad shoulder moving up and down in an even stride, a blunt-fingered hand hanging too still. He didn’t turn his head.

(When had Tony started believing in the story?)

Their feet were falling together, rhythm perfect and steady. Yet something stirred in the space between, like the beginnings of sound; and Tony glanced to the side before he was fully cognisant of the motion—Quill’s jaw was still, pale lips bitten but seeming to flicker.

Don’t let me mock him don’t let me mock him let me just -

“Men in the parking lot,” was Quill’s inexplicable contribution, and Tony blinked in confusion, before glancing over his shoulder. They’d drawn level with the parking lot he’d caught glimpse of at the start of the road, a scant few, nondescript cars stationed randomly throughout the space. Two men were standing by the car closest to the separating fence—one smoking a cigarette whose embers sparked dimly in the grey morning light, the other with an elbow leaning casually on the bonnet. Tony couldn’t tell their features apart from this distance.

“They’re watching us.” Quill’s unceasing stride was taking him right by the entrance to the lot, closer to the men—his words caused Tony to flip his startled gaze back to the pair again, and distance or not, there was something unsettling about the sudden impression of whites of eyes, amongst all the grey of the asphalt and the cloud-bearing sky.

“Why—” But there never was a chance to complete that sentence, because the first man had flicked his cigarette to the ground, red embers snuffing out against the featureless grey, and there were sparks going off at the gravel near Tony’s feet, and Quill was ducking his shoulders and darting towards the gate, and Tony wanted to ask why he was running towards the people trying to shoot them—oh, wonderful. People were trying to shoot them.

*He’s running for cover,* Tony’s unsurprisingly calm brain filled him in seconds after he’d already
dashed after the man, head pulling down and knees crouching to make a smaller target. They scrambled behind a white Honda Civic at the opposing end of the lot, just in time to see the side mirror blown off the car and crashing metres away from their feet, screeching against the concrete.

The wind was inaudible behind their heaving exhales, Tony kneeling face forward behind the body of the car, Quill spinning around to sink to his heels and lean his back against the door. The sweat stains on his tee had gotten darker, he was panting between breaths. His complexion was beginning to flush up again. “Put…it…on.”

Tony furrowed his brows, Quill looking up at him with increasing impatience. Sparks were flying off the hood of the car, the sound of bullets denting metal harsh and jarring. “Your goddamn suit of armour. Put it on!”

The hellfire had ceased. This was not good. Tony pushed a breath through gritted teeth, felt spiky concrete and gravel under his palms. Tried to steady his words, “Based on the light I saw and the angle of the shooting, there are more than just those two out there. Three at least; maybe four.”

“Do not tell me,” Quill began, slant to his words almost dangerous, “that a paranoid bastard like you has no way of calling the suit.”

“It’s…complicated.” He’d shush the idiot, but everyone and their mother had seen them duck behind this car. Tony could hear feet creeping across concrete, hushed clicks as guns were replenished with bullets.

“How the fuck is it…these are your enemies right? How many of those do you have?”

“Kinda stopped counting after the figure crossed three digits.” Would they come around from the left, or the right? Both, if they had any kind of sense at all-clambering over the car would cause far too much noise. Tony slid a thumb to his left wrist, sped up pulse beating under the thin skin. “And I can’t just…it doesn’t matter. There’s a set of-there are rules about the suit.”

“What the heck kind of rule applies to self-defence?” Was Quill’s last exclamation before the goons rounded from both sides of the car (ha, called it).

At least the guy’s too indignant to be depressed. Or in a couple of minutes, too dead.

A rule with hopefully some leeway, otherwise Tony would have a hard time explaining this. This being the symphonic melody of machinery as his thumb pushed against the heavy metal band of his watch and the gauntlet crepted across his palm, encasing his fingers. Tony directed a pulse at the man’s feet-the guy stumbled immediately, hands slacking over the weapon to search for support instead. Tony plowed a hand into the man’s now-in-range gut, fists uncurling to release a charge right against the kidney. The man crumpled like a ragdoll.

But not fast enough-the click of weapons firing, and Tony pulled the unconscious man down and against his chest, armoured hand flying by sheer instinct to press against the man’s spine. A bullet ricocheted off his hand a second later-yeah, this was just as unpleasant as he remembered.

“Could we perhaps worry about the life of the enemy after we’ve gotten out of the sitch?” Tony whipped his head to the side, tongue uncurling to spit something truly inspired about the godforsaken lingo-but his lips stilled, eyebrows darting up to his hairline. Quill was still breathing heavily, hair plastered unattractively to his forehead and knuckles looking pink and scraped. The second goon was lying out cold by his folded knee, brought down by no weapon or blow that Tony had heard. Considering his luck of late, it was probably some bullshit enigmatic alien mojo.
Tony let the man in his arms slide unceremoniously to the ground, back straightening and mouth dry from the adrenaline. “There’s one more-”

“Hands in the air.”

Wow, that had been fast. Especially considering the location the last bullet had been fired from. Tony didn’t bother rising from his knees-just inched his hands slowly up in the air, pale light gleaming off the red-and-silver of his gauntlet. That gruff bark sounded like it belonged to a fairly trigger-happy man, so he kept his eyes focused on the bonnet of the car. The man was standing just beyond: gloved fingers prised around a Smith and Wesson Model 10. God, Tony was never going to forgive himself if he was killed by a revolver.

Unless of course, he was killed by sheer stupidity.

Because of course when crazy people with guns told you to put your hands in the air, you put your hands in the air. Tony didn’t even pause to consider that he might have to back that threat up with supplementary instructions. To elbow Quill in the ribs, and tell him how self-preservation worked. Because clearly the idiot didn’t possess one stinking drop of it.

Why, you ask? Maybe because instead of staying quiet and compliant and faithfully putting his hands up like the nice man who wanted to murder them had asked…Quill raised his head.

And jigged his butt.

“Ooga chaka ooga ooga…ooga chaka ooga ooga-”

_I am going to die._ Tony realised, calm and hysterical and all too certain. _To the sound of a moron singing Blue Suede._

A beat; and then a shot rang through the air. Quill crumpled over.

“Motherfuck-”

Tony didn’t waste time. Raised as it was, all he had to do was point his palm in the right direction and the pulse went off-the gun in the man’s hand exploded, the guy letting go of the melting trigger with a howl. It took a split-second for Tony to spring to his feet, one knee clambering over the bonnet while the other heel took off from the ground. Hitch, and slide; and Tony’s fist came smashing against the side of the man’s bowed head with a loud _crack._

Tony slid off the bonnet of the car, unconscious body curled at his feet, jaw strained at the pain radiating out from split knuckles. But that was the least of his concerns-it took him three seconds too long to round the corner of the car again, and by then Quill was sitting flat on the ground, back propped against the back tire, grinning weakly and clutching at an arm soaked in blood.

“Do I.” Tony crouched on his heels, eyes scoping over a wound that didn’t look too deep but was definitely going to be painful. He bloody well _hoped_ that it would be. “Need to ask.”

Quill’s failing grin wilted a little more, fingers scrabbling to pull his short sleeve low enough to soak the seeping blood. “Um. It worked the last time?”

Tony dropped his head, metal fingers pinching the bridge of his nose painfully. If not, he would end up making contact and it was a toss up between running his fingers along the ragged edges of the wound or boxing Quill’s ears. “Were you going up against an _absolute imbecile_?”

“So… it would seem.” Quill’s fingers were white against the bloodied muscle of his bicep, his
cheeks gone ruddy in contrast with the pumping endorphins. His pupils were starting to glaze, words apropos of nothing. “I didn’t need to come to this place. Was fine, where I was.”

Tony breathed out, pulse barely beginning to slow from the adrenaline rush. His hands were starting to twitch in place, and he didn’t want to move them. Touch, or hit. Wasn’t touching just like hitting gently? The words following on his exhale, weren’t…unfriendly. “With your big bowl of bacon and gummy bears?”

“With the Milano, and my team.” The words left Quill’s tongue on an even softer exhale, mouth turning up dreamily.

Tony’s next breath was tighter, eyes flitting up to meet Quill’s dazed ones before he was in full control. He’d heard ‘jerk friends’ and ‘asshole colleagues’ before. He’d never heard my team.

“It was good. I never really…I didn’t miss Ter-” An amused curl of those lips. “Earth. Not that much. I didn’t want to come here. Here was my happy place. I could listen to my tape, and visit it in my head whenever I wanted.”

Quill’s head lolled to the side, hair sticking up over the back, leaving sweat-streaks where he’d been leaning against the smooth chrome of the car. The motion broke eye-contact, and he continued smiling quietly, unseeingly at the bloodied gravel. “I didn’t need to know it was gone.”

Tony’s heartbeat had slowed right down, and it felt like a cheat-contrasting traitoriously with the blankness in his head that those words invited, the static in his ears.

I’m sorry.

“It’s fine.” Quill whispered, even if Tony’s mouth was frozen dry and he hadn’t spoken a single word. He raised his chin with visible difficulty, affixing a cloudy hazel gaze somewhere off the bridge of Tony’s nose. He was still smiling—which made sense, because it wasn’t self-deprecatory humour, or the amused resignation of the hopeless. The smile was for Tony. “You’ve lost your happy place too. I gettit.”

And the wind whispered in tandem, its raucous wails having long died down. It only spoke quietly, like a voice speaking in confidence. Trusting in confidence.

Try as he might, Tony couldn’t pull out a smile. He didn’t think it mattered.

You do, don’t you.
“We need to turn back.”

The air inside the cockpit was stale, over-recycled; tainted with the stink of chrome from their raggedy seats and whatever illegal, adulterated fuel Peter had appropriated to make a transport cruiser fly this fast. She pulled the air into her lungs, breathing deep—she could hear the gears in her abdomen clicking away at the motion, even through the walls of flesh and sinew. *Click click click.*

“We need to turn *back.***”

“Say Gamora,” Rocket’s response came instead, lurching high sarcastically as was his wont. His little paws were fastened unshakingly around the thruster levers on the pedestal, pushing them forward as far as they would go. “Quill ever tell you about this sport they have on Terra? Running with the bulls?”

“No.” Gamora barely repressed the tick in her jaw. But a better segue could not be had, “Terra is almost four systems away now, we need to tu—”

“So they’re these beasts on Terra, the bulls—” The craft juddered in place, Gamora clamped down on the urge to flinch reflexively. For a split-second there, she’d thought they might have been hit. “Massive, stupid ol’ things with these gigantic tusks—”

“Tusks?” She couldn’t give less of a fuck, but experience was a ruthless teacher. Go along with the shit, otherwise it would double in volume out of sheer obstinacy. Especially while Rocket was at the other end.

“Large, pointy things on their heads made of teeth.” Rocket clarified oh-so-helpfully.

“I am Groot.”

“No, the *tusks*...how would their heads be made of teeth, dumbass?” The helpful tone was draining right out of Rocket’s aggravated words. “So they gather a herd of these bulls, and another herd of stupid Terrans, and release the bulls on the heels of the Terrans, who have to run.”

The craft made a sharp swerve, rivets creaking in the slipstream ever-so-slightly. “So tell me Gamora. Would you believe me if I told you that the stupid ass Terrans turned back straight into the welcoming arms of the fucking beasts?”

She could feel her blood pressure rocket up in microseconds—oh brilliant, she was making *puns* inside her head now. Fuck Peter Quill anyhow. “We’ve been running for three—”
“I don’t believe the beasts have arms.” Drax rumbled solemnly from the corner.

Gamora bit through her tongue. “For three weeks, Rocket, surely we’ve outstripped—”

“Oh of course, chasing us through four systems over three weeks has only made the Kree more friendly, they’re dying to have us for a banquet—”

“I am Groot?”

“No the Kree aren’t freaking vegetarian, way to think just about yourself you big baby—”

“And they’re called balls.” Drax noted apropos of nothing, like all the simultaneous conversations occurring right now were inconsequential apart from his own; actually, that’s probably exactly what he thought in that helmet-headed skull of his.

“I don’t care—” Rocket grunted, the sound almost squeaky, beady eyes darting from one flight display to the other, “how much balls you think you have, I’m not turning back—”

“Actually, I was talking of the beasts.” Drax…could it really be called clarifying if the conversation had ascended into madness ages ago? Eons, if Gamora was to be perfectly honest with herself. Ever since she’d taken it on herself to tag along with this set of loyal, misguided morons. She didn’t make a habit of honesty often.

“Why the hell.” At least they all shared one thing in common. Everybody thought the other was a moron. Rocket certainly didn’t seem to be making a secret of it. “Would the beasts be called balls?”

“A circle is the most intimidating shape.” Drax stated gravely. “My kindred stirred awake and emerged only at nighttime, so as to keep away from the burn of the Glowing Ball that you call a sun. And bull is a made up word.”

“I…” Rocket appeared to be gasping now. Out of effort or mirth or pure, hyperbolic sarcasm, Gamora couldn’t tell. “can’t really be bothered with explaining the difference between two and three dimensions to you right now—”

“Enough.” Groot cowered into Rocket’s ear-hair at her hiss, large eyes blinking wide; Gamora couldn’t bring herself to feel guilty enough to care. “Our friend is wandering about alone on the surface of a strange planet for the past month, this is not the time for inane talk. We need to turn back and fetch him.”

“Indeed, we must save our compatriot.” Drax acquiesced wisely. “Starlord is a barely passable warrior with an extremely breakable spine.”

Gamora’s jaw tightened. “Thank you for the support.”

Something meeped in the vicinity of Rocket’s ear; he released a sigh. “Groot wants it on the record that he thought the plan to dump Quill on Terra was bullshit to begin with.”

Drax turned his head to the piloting seat, eyes regarding Rocket with the same calm he exhibited before spilling a great deal of blood. “Ballsit.”

“Continue, and no one on this plane is going to be left with anything remotely genitalia-related.” When nothing but silence greeted this sentence, Gamora felt her lips turning up into a thin smile. “Put on the brakes. Turn the craft around.”

“Well…seeing that brakes work on the principle of friction and space is a vacuum, it only goes to
show that all of you are idiots and would have been dead and digested by the Kree without me five
times over—”

“Rocket.”

“—but that doesn’t matter because here’s a Kree spaceship zooming up in front of us to end our
pathetic, miserable little lives anyway.” Rocket finished, mouth pulled back in a snarl. True to his
words, the smooth grey of Kree engineering had revealed itself from behind a lurking asteroid;
looming to the far right of the Milano’s visor, poised to imminently cut off their trajectory. Gamora
could hear the machinery in her flesh ramp up faster, fatally clear despite everything—
clickclickclickclick…

Drax seemed mildly bemused. “Does the Kree craft intend on colliding with us in a glorious battle of
karaoke?”

“Kamikaze.” Rocket gritted out– and it was poetic really, that they were fighting over Peter’s
ridiculous Terran terms while facing the very real possibility of never seeing him again…no, a part of
Gamora’s mind injected, cold and calm and steel, no, we’ll come for you Peter.

It was like she’d said it out loud–Rocket bared his teeth and pulled the yoke sharply to the left, eyes
unerringly flicking from one flight display to the next. “But I’ve no intention of letting them cut off
my already fucking limited life span–so hang on in there, buttface. This is gonna be a ride.”

And Gamora didn’t move, because worthless jokes and inanities aside, she trusted this team with her
life. We will come for you.

And then as Lady Fate was enormously fond of doing, she…well, to quote a Rocket-ism. Dropped a
giant turd on their Moment.

The ship shuddered sharply for a second–she could hear Groot flying free with a yelp, trailing vines
latching onto a protruding edge of the console, see Rocket’s fur rising on end, Drax’s arms brace
against the seat to maintain his balance. The cockpit lights flickered wildly and went off, plunging
the plane into darkness. The ever-present vibrations under Gamora’s booted feet went still, the entire
engine depowering with a quiet whine.

“Rocket, have we stopped moving?”

A beat.

“Yes.”

Fucking Thanos and Hel–

“It appears they were not in fact, interested in a glorious kamikaze battle.” Rocket cleared his throat
slightly, luminescent eyes fixated on the smooth grey craft through the darkened glass display,
creeping ever the closer. “Just getting close enough to trap us in their tractor beam.”

Silence.

“Does anyone have anything else to add?” Well. That faint note of desperation wasn’t reassuring at
all.

“The Milano uses a regenerative braking system that doesn’t operate on friction.”
Another beat, as Rocket apparently digested the fact that she was an inane-talking moron like the rest of them. Humour in the face of Kree digestive systems was apparently a contagious trait.

“Congratulations Gamora, you are now only eighty percent an idiot. Any other helpful contributions? Bright ideas to get us outta this?”

Gamora flicked her eyes to the side. Drax’s blades were already bared against the curve of his taut wrists, pale and naked steel, gleaming in the light of the nearest nebulæ. He gave her a tiny nod.

Gamora breathed. Chrome and burning fuel and tree bark and fur and the musk of whatever murderous species Drax hailed from. She could hear it now, every individual one clearly, resonating in her ear drums like a primed, deadly countdown. Click. Click. Click.

She coiled her fingers into her palms, felt the itch of violence stir under her skin. Click.

“Just one.”

~

The Velcro crackled as he latched it into place, sliding two fingers under the belt to test its give. “Do not bleed on my Quinjet.”

“Of...of course.” Quill slurred. There was a bright red spot on the white cloth winding around his bicep, growing darker in slow increments. Sue him, Tony didn’t exactly lug bandages around. “Bleeding is a...totally voluntary action that the human body can stop whenever it wants to.”

Tony withdrew his fingers and straightened up, surveying his handiwork. One part-alien, a little ragged around the edges, buckled down for a flight straight to upstate New York. Delightful. “You’d think sass would be inversely proportional to blood loss.”

Quill’s chin drooped towards his collarbone, before Tony realised it was supposed to be a sage nod. “You’d be wrong, especially since they called it sauce in my day.”

“You’re from the eighties, not the eighteen hundreds. As much as you probably deserved it, I highly doubt anyone was going around calling you a ‘saucy young knave’.” Tony stretched his arms above his shoulders, tension in the muscles releasing with an audible crack. Swivelled on his feet, began walking towards the cockpit door. Paused at the threshold for a second, head crooking back. “Sauce, really? That the best you could come up with?”

Quill’s mouth turned up in that slightest hint of sulkiness. “I thought it was pretty clever. What with the sauce and ketchup and blood—”

Tony shook his head at the hopelessness of it all, turning his back and ducking into the cockpit. The sky outside was an impenetrable expanse of indigo, wisps of grey cloud fleeting past as the craft travelled steadily through the autopiloted trajectory. The flight deck gleamed dimly in the light, displays muted in the overhead and instrumentation panels. Minutes tramped by in peaceful silence, Tony’s chest rising and falling quietly, before a muted chime announced an incoming message.

Tony flipped open the communication line on the side console, sliding comfortably into the padded pilot seat. “Miss me, FRIDAY?”
“Always, boss.” FRIDAY returned warmly, and aw. She really did spoil him, sometimes. “But there is something that you need to know.”

“Well that doesn’t sound ominous at all.” Tony tapped an absent rhythm out on his armrest. “Hit me with it. Or you know, tap me over the shoulder. Gently.”

“Colonel Rhodes is in the Facility.”

Silence.

“Well, fuck.” Tony blinked at his moving fingers, then stilled the motion abruptly. “How did he get there?”

“Not by public transport, I presume.”

Tony glanced at the navigation display: they were still a good two hours out. “There’s no such thing as a rhetorical question around smartasses, is there?”

FRIDAY’s smirk was audible. “Is that a rhetorical question?”

Tony exhaled, a small puff of amusement. “Fine, you win. Seriously though – what is he doing there?”

“Colonel Rhodes has not shared the purpose of his visit with me. However, under the circumstances,” FRIDAY paused for delicacy, which was never a good sign. “He might be concerned, as you haven’t really…’taken a day off’, in a while.”

Tony’s eyes fixated on the control deck, jaw tightening by a fraction. “Life hasn’t been very conducive for that, in a while.”

“The Australians signed off on the new draft of the Accords today. So have the Slavic countries.” FRIDAY contributed quietly. “There might be updates on that front.”

Tony pinched the bridge of his nose, pressure radiating out from the area till it was almost painful. Having this one, unreal day…in some random American town, snarking with Quill, getting hit on by kids half his age, even getting shot at. It had slipped away from his mind somehow – the rest of his life. His real life. The one that existed beyond bantering with his AI and mocking Quill’s ill-conceived jokes; the one that belonged to Tony Stark, guilt-ridden face of fucked up superheroes everywhere.

“Well.” The words were more breath than whisper, drifting uselessly past the engine controls. “Can’t run forever.”

_Can’t even run for a day._

His hand slipped down from his face, falling to his thighs with a soundless thump. ‘Nuff of morbid thought. This was a situation that needed to be handled. “We can’t let Rhodey know about Quill. Just gonna have to smuggle him out through a secret passageway before Rhodey sees him.”

“Are there any secret passages in the Facility’s plan that have been kept out of my records?” FRIDAY enquired politely.

“No, because I designed it and I’m not Enid fucking Blyton.” And up those hands came again to knead at his face, the base of the palms digging most satisfactorily into Tony’s scrunched up eyelids. “Make a note FRIDAY. Secret passages in whatever next useless architecture project I naively take
“Of course, boss.” And now she was just humouring him.

“Maybe we’ll throw a dungeon in there for variety. And a moat. Big, fat moat filled with mechanical crocodiles to keep out company.” His fingers dragged downwards against his cheeks, pulling at loose skin. The insides of his eyelids still felt scalded.

“You designing a supervillain lair, boss?”

Tony opened his eyes, trying to blink the stretchy-raw feeling away. “Why, you gonna report on me?”

“No. Just a little disappointed that we’ll be going down the popular culture cliché route after all.” FRIDAY’s synthesised tones spelled out thoughtfully. “World domination seems very tiresome.”

A rush of exhaled breath. “Can’t be any more tiring than saving it.” A beat. “We’ll just have to leave Quill in the jet till Rhodey leaves. There’s no reason for him to enter the hangar.”

“I…think that might be unwise.” FRIDAY pronounced carefully. “While Mr Quill has not been gravely injured, estimated arrival at the Facility is in a couple of hours and we do not know how long Colonel Rhodes might linger. Considering that Mr Quill’s wound has not been properly disinfected yet…”

And the fact that he hadn’t made a peep from the back of the jet all this while, to complain about the appalling speeds of the ‘snail-plane’ – probably said something. Tony usually got hyper-verbal with moderate levels of pain and it took a lot to shut him up; sure Quill was a touched-in-the-head, part-Martian weirdo, but Tony wasn’t blind to their similarities. If he wasn’t prattling…the man probably needed rest, water and painkillers, stat.

“Fine. He’ll just have to deal with it then.” Dealing was what Rhodey did best anyway.

Tony might have been overgenerous in his estimations.

“Why,” Rhodey blinked at him, half-rising from an armchair with the lines of his boring all-black suit crinkling on the sides, “do you have your nineties floofy hair.”

Tony’s hand half-rose to tug self-consciously at a curl before he was fully aware. He yanked it down mid-motion, chin cocking up in a familiar braggart pose. Damn, he’d forgotten to take off the veil. “Really. Nothing about the beard?”

Rhodey blinked at him again. “You don’t have a beard.”

“Kinda my point, but—” Tony stopped himself mid-breath, forcing the rest of the air out. “Never mind. I was incognito.”

“You do know you were also famous in the nineties.” Rhodey still wasn’t emoting very much, sticking to the one wide-eyed blink every five seconds. Possibly because he’d been stunned into non-reaction by Tony’s perceived idiocy. “I seem to recall a couple of journos getting into inadvertent accidents.”
Ah yes, the Great Paparazzi Kerfuffle of ’94, prompted by the Gold Pants Incident, of the same year. Dangerous times. “Look, you hardly walk down the streets expecting to see baby-faced Sarah Gellar a la Buffy just hanging around the bus stop, do you? I was going to suburban Missouri, I thought it would be sufficient. Plus if I had to grease some palms, I could pretend to be a distant relation, so—”

“That,” Rhodey paused, as if taking time to adequately gather his words, “was a terrible plan.”

“It was not.” Tony glowered.

“It was a terrible plan.” A voice called from behind—and of course, how could he have forgotten? He had carry on luggage.

Quill limped into the room, which was ridiculous because his legs were absolutely fine. “Terrible. We got shot.”

“No,” Tony enunciated with great emphasis, tone barely clinging on to civility. “We got shot because this dunderhead decided to get into a dance off with the man holding us at gunpoint.”

“It’s a perfectly acceptable form of combat.” Quill informed an increasingly blank-faced Rhodey, which—of course. Where were Tony’s manners?

“Rhodey, this is Goose Feather. Goose Feather, meet Colonel James Rhodes.”

“That is not my—”

“Tony,” Rhodey interrupted stiffly, and how did someone pull off a non-expression while still being in possession of all their facial features? “May I have a word.”

“Ehm…” Tony glanced to the side—Quill was already making himself comfortable, sinking to the couch with a bitten off exhale and a look of pure relief on his face. FRIDAY should be sending the first aid supplies up soon anyway. “Sure. Lead the way.”

Rhodey turned away, shoulders stiffer under his blazer, and walked across the span of the room to the corridor outside, Tony following on his heels. Once there, Tony leaned his back against the exterior wall, resisting the urge to sink down entirely. Oh, for a good night’s sleep.

“What’s up, Rocky Road?” Rhodey despised pretend ignorance, Tony was aware of this. But old habits were ill-forgotten.

Rhodey’s arms twitched at his sides, as if itching to rise and fold themselves over his chest; but that little physical echo would only make Tony bristle, so down they stayed. Considerate ass. “Is there a logical reason you have a bleeding stranger in this highly classified Facility?”

“He told you, we got shot.” Rhodey’s eyebrow twitched forebodingly; Tony pulled on a badly fitting, placating smile. “Right, you mean the stranger bit. Uh. I have a reason, but the ‘logical’ part might be a little difficult to swing.”

Rhodey smiled tightly. “Try me.”

“He’s a prisoner. Which might seem difficult to believe, but I just went for the physical maiming option over handcuffs. That’s all.”

The smile flickered disquietingly. “I thought you’d been shot.”

“We…had.” Yeah, nope. This was not one of Tony’s shining moments. “It was unexpectedly
fortunate.”

Unsurprisingly, Rhodey did not seem amused. “Any reason he isn’t in a regular prison? You know, where they normally keep prisoners.”

“Oh no, he’s part Martian.” Tony answered immediately, because this line of questioning he could definitely do; before frowning slightly in consideration. “Or Jupiter…nian. Something. I didn’t exactly ask.”

“Right.” Rhodey nodded sardonically. “And the Raft?”

*It wouldn’t hold him, he appropriated my gauntlet within six hours of being here.* Not having entirely lost his senses, Tony said none of that out loud. “I felt he needed a more capable warden. Who could keep an eye on him.” Which shouldn’t even have earned him the stink eye, considering that FRIDAY’s abilities were nigh unimpeachable.

Apparently Rhodey didn’t see it that way. His tone was only getting stonier. “And I don’t suppose you reported the attempt on your life either.”

“I handed them over to the local authorities.” Or you know. Anonymously rung the police and hightailed out of the lot scattered with unconscious gunmen when the sirens arrived. Who could tell the difference really. “I had to use my gauntlet, which would make reporting to higher ups...tricky.”

Rhodey stared at him, dark eyes indecipherable. “It was self defense.”

“Maybe.” Tony smiled thinly. “I didn’t feel up to filling out three sets of paperwork to Secretary Ross justifying the right to save my life, just yet.”

And the mood morphed, just like that. Silence crept up on their ankles, snaking into the space between. Clogging their lungs.

“You going to say anything?”

Crawling, teeming, choking silence.

Rhodey drew a taut breath. “He could be dangerous.”

Tony wasn’t smiling anymore. He didn’t know if he ever was, really. “I am dangerous.”

“That’s not–you can’t–” A spike of sound, and Rhodey pressed his lips shut, greyed and bloodless.

Tony met his gaze, inexplicably, abruptly humourless. “Can’t what.”

Rhodey said nothing.

“Rhodey.”

“You keep…*doing* this, Tones, again and again, and it keeps hurting you–” A brief burst of frustration before Rhodey stoppered it again, jaw hard and worry glimmering at the corners of those lined eyes.

“*Do what, Rhodey–*” And he was snapping but he couldn’t care; when had this happened, when did his fucking *best friend* start feeling like he couldn’t talk to him openly anymore. Rhodey knocked his head back to size, he told Tony in plain words when he thought Tony was being a dumbass, no mincing required–had Tony become so weak, so *pitiable*, so fucking fragile that Rhodey felt he’d break now with the slightest word–”
“You can’t keep offering strangers a home because you’re lonely.” The words struck and Tony snapped his mouth shut because apparently he was that fragile after all. What else could it be—this feeling of the blood freezing in his veins, cracking into splinters and stabbing from the inside.

Rhodey closed his eyes for a second, jaw gritting. No frantic, half-interrupted apologies were forthcoming, no I didn’t mean it that way, Tony, no I’m really sorry, you didn’t deserve that, Tony—because they knew each other better than that, didn’t they? And what was the use of half-rescinded honesty anyway?

“Fuck you, Rhodey.” His pulse was throbbing in his eardrums, but Tony’s voice was strangely calm. He turned on his heels and walked back into the room, uncaring if his best friend’s gaze was burning at the back of his neck or boring into the concrete because Rhodey couldn’t muster himself to raise his head yet.

Quill was leaning the back of his skull against the couch’s headrest—it lifted slightly as Tony entered the room, hazel eyes following his trajectory across the space curiously. “Y’alright?”

“Put your arm up.” Tony jerked his chin towards Quill’s bloodied bicep, words brusque.

Quill’s eyebrows flew up to his hairline, chin tilting up in turn to stare at Tony whose strides had brought him directly in front of the couch, looming over the seated man. Canny eyes darted over Tony’s shoulder to the doorway behind his back, narrowing shrewdly. “What about your friend?”

(there were many things he couldn’t fault people for. But he couldn’t fault himself for hurting either, could he?)

The squeal of mechanical treads sounded behind him—Tony dropped to the empty cushion beside Quill, hand flinging out to his side abstractly where he knew a metal arm was holding a roll of bandages aloft.

“Is that—”

“A sentient heap of junk bringing us first aid supplies, yes.” But Tony’s hand still slid down to pat DUM-E’s strut absently, the humming metal familiar and comforting under his fingertips.

Quill would probably have kept goggling at DUM-E for a while, but his eyes whipped to the side as Tony tugged at his arm; wide and startled. Tony didn’t look up, eyes fixated on the brown-red stain darkening the white cloth untidily wrapped around Quill’s upper arm. The cloth came free with a deft pull, Tony unwinding the makeshift bandage with quick, brisk motions.

It pulled free with a hiss, fluttering to the carpet soundlessly. The hem of Quill’s t-shirt sleeve was still sticking to the upper edge of the wound, white cotton dark and splotchy. Tony hooked a nail under the material and pulled it free—damn, he should probably have sanitised his hands first—

Quill flinched. Tony’s eyes darted up before he could help himself—there was a bloodless jaw, turned away and ten inches away from his face, green-brown eyes staring resolutely in the opposite direction. Tony gentled his touch instinctively, roughened fingertips coming lightly to rest close to the ragged edges of the wound. The bleeding seemed to have stopped awhile ago. He could still feel the warmth radiating out from those five, minuscule points of contact—the skin under his was burning
Quill was still looking steadily in the other direction, splotchy bits of red coming to life over pale, freckled cheeks. He didn’t look feverish. He didn’t look like the pain was killing him either, but he wasn’t talking. It was—it was strange, Tony thought, tumult in his mind quieting down a little, fingers stroking absently—it hadn’t been this quiet between them since they’d met.

With a last, inattentive pat, Tony withdrew his hand, fingers darting down to curl around the tiny bottle of antiseptic. The plastic cap unscrewed easily, narrow mouth dribbling pungent liquid into the tiny ball of cotton that he’d nabbed from the bigger wad. The smell rose, sharp and astringent, even as tiny threads clung to the underside of his dampened nails.

In the meantime, Quill seemed to have found his voice again. “Your friend’s not coming back in.”

“Probably dialling the US Secretary of State as we speak.” Tony dabbed at the corners of the wound: soft, sweeping motions. Damn, this was the shallowest bullet wound he’d ever seen. Forget splinters, the metal had barely nicked muscle before embedding itself somewhere in the lot. Maybe there was an advantage to dancing during a fight after all—no one’s aim was that sucky.

Quill’s tone didn’t waver. “They gonna come take me away?”

Tony stilled. The image flashing before his eyelids was sharp and vivid: broad wrists clamped under cuffs, shoulders buckled and enclosed within three grey walls and a series of bars, cheeky eyes wiped of life and silently staring through a narrow window into the underbelly of the ocean. Peter Quill, trapped in a supermax prison of Tony Stark’s design.

Unease was too weak a word for the feeling twisting to life in the pit of his stomach.

Tony raised his eyes. Waited, till a shuttered gaze finally turned around to meet his own. His voice was undeniable. “No.”

Quill stared back at him for a second before dropping his eyes, finding some indiscriminate point on his lap. Tony continued cleaning the wound with efficient motions—there was barely any grime to clear away, and the arm wasn’t flexing with each downward pass, which meant the sting wasn’t too bad.

Quill spoke again when Tony ducked his head away to open a new roll of gauze, voice seeping into his ears strangely hesitant. “He…seems like a good friend.”

“The best.” And Tony couldn’t even muster any bitterness, words escaping quiet and casual. It seemed like it was draining all away, with every soothing swipe of his hands against Quill’s flushed skin. “Known each other for decades.”

“That seems…nice.” Quill’s head was still bowed as Tony moistened the gauze with a spray of distilled water, pressing it into place over the newly cleaned wound. His blunt-edged fingers were flexing uselessly, curling in and out over his denim-covered thigh. “I…uh. Have been with my team for a couple years but…nothing that long, with anyone. Ever.”

The wet bandage should adhere to the dead tissue, debriding automatically when the dressing got changed. Tony began wrapping a layer of dry gauze over the top, to secure it all in place. “No besties among the space pirates?”

“None my age. Believe it or not, I was the only teen space pirate.” Quill’s little huff of amusement was more breath than anything, mouth curled down, eyes cloudy.
“It must have gone to your head.” It was probably supposed to be an insult, but somewhere on the way to Tony’s lips, the words had turned quiet and warm. He patted at the thickened edges of the completed dressing, fingers curling to tug the soiled hem of the tee over the top.

“No as much as you, I bet.” Quill breathed a half-formed chuckle. He still wasn’t looking at Tony. It wasn’t necessary. “Smart, popular kid with all the toys.”

Rich. Other people would have said rich.

“I.” His tongue weaved soundlessly in his mouth for seconds, before his lips flickered open. What was even the point of it all, anymore. “I was quite solitary as a child, actually.”

Seconds traipsed by quietly. Tony realised his hands were just…hovering around the wound now; he dropped them to his sides.

Quill turned his jaw slowly, clear eyes flickering over Tony’s face, frank with just that smallest intimation of a twinkle. “Solitary? What, you spring out off a terrible Bronte novel or somethin’?”

And Tony laughed; a tiny, unhindered burst of sound. When he’d pulled in his breath again, Quill was twinkling cheekily at him outright. “I’m surprised your philistine mind even knows who Bronte was.”

“Mom used to read her while listening to songs from the radio.” Quill shrugged, a loose, rolling wave of motion, accompanied by an affable nod. “A right complex character she was, my mother.”

As are we all.

“I suppose that explains the prehistoric collection of music on your Walkman.” Tony let his shoulders uncurl, dug his tailbone into the accommodating leather of the couch. “I’m surprised it still functions.”

And like clockwork, the drum beats rolled out faintly from the speakers, voices climbing and lyrics tripping over each other in the quiet air—listen baby, ain’t no mountain high, ain’t no valley low, ain’t no river wide enough baby—

Quill’s lips curved up, eyes fluttering shut, face lifting to the ceiling. “Thanks FRIDAY.”

And Tony smiled freely, but it wasn’t over yet−Quill cocking his ear to the side slightly, “But I’ve been hearing the same thirteen songs on repeat for the last however many years, gimme something new.”

And T.N.T. rasped out of the speakers like a complete beauty, the familiar notes settling into Tony’s bones with a warm shudder. Oh, what had he ever done to deserve his goddess of an AI.

“Their lyrics aren’t very inspiring, are they? They made proper music back in the olden times,” Quill nodded knowingly after forty three fucking seconds. “More song, less screaming.”

“Liar, I can see your foot tapping.” And this is old, you fucker, but that wasn’t what Tony said. What escaped his thoughtless mouth was a billion times more implicating. “You want old, next time I’ll make you listen to Sonata Pathetique.”

The guitars strummed on, even as quiet fell between them. Tony blinked, and licked his dried lips. What is even the point, anymore.

“You’ve lost your happy place too. I geddit.”

“My mother was a pretty complex character, too.” It didn’t seem that heavy, once they eventually
fell. The words.

And Quill turned his head completely, for the first time during this conversation. Tony waited—for the probing, the demand for trust now that an inch had been given, for his own regret to spring up, hard and inevitable.

“Could.” Quill’s lips flickered, opening and closing to matching his eyes scoping over Tony’s face. “Could you get rid of.” A quick, jerking motion at his chin.

Tony blinked uncomprehendingly for a second before—oh—and he brought a thumb to his jugular, scraping at a point under his collar. The veil flickered in static over his features for moments before blinking out completely, revealing lined features and a scraggy van dyke.

“Thanks.” And there was something swift and almost–awkward, about that, even as Quill stared at his face for a second before nodding and looking away. Down went that gingery head over the headrest again, eyes looking to the ceiling and finger tapping on his knee to the music without even the tiniest shred of pretence.

And that was…that, apparently. The last thirty seconds were all seeming a little inexplicable in Tony’s head; but even more inexplicably, his head didn’t seem to want to think about that right now. No analysis, no worry, no ferreting away at implications. Just let the gnarly knots at the base of his neck loosen as his skull sunk in parallel to Quill’s, eyes closing to the sound of AC/DC.

And quiet enough to not be disturbing, underlaying the phenomenal guitar solo, echoing in the confines of his mind. “Thanks.”

(bandages and songs and the fall of a mask)

And quieter still, so none but himself could hear, he breathed.

“That’s alright.”

(“You don’t have to keep jamming my phone signal, you know.”

FRIDAY’s voice was tart. “I am quite confused of your meaning, Colonel Rhodes.”

“I’m not calling anyone.” Rhodey explained wearily, even as his chest twinged. Damn, what a JARVIS thing to do. Tony’s AI were all the same: fretfully protective.

“Your conversation with Mr Stark seemed to indicate otherwise.”

*What the world does to him is on it, not on Tony’s decisions. Not always.* “Mr Stark ended the damned conversation before I could say anything worthwhile.” Though he’d definitely, unwittingly provoked the man into something even more stubbornly extreme. That Spiderling would probably be getting the keys to his own place by tomorrow.

“Besides,” And Rhodey glanced back one last time, past the door jamb where two men were parked onto a couch while the air vibrated with Tony’s infernal brand of music. “They seem to like the same
kind of songs.”

A light, wry twist to his mouth. “Can’t possibly come between that.”

Chapter End Notes

So I don’t normally do this, since my Tumblr is pretty defunct - but I know some of you love Stony a lot too, and there’s an absolutely fantastic event going on right now that you should know about. Basically, if you want your Stony prompt written out by yours truly ;) (or any other of the fantastic registered writers) and also contribute to a great cause, check out my tumblr
aaand we're back. The wait has been a long and languorous one, mostly because real life was not being very cooperative. Apologies guys - and thank you so much for all the kudos and comments, the response to this fic has completely bowled me over. I swear to reply to all of you (on all my fics, actually) going back - holy shit, six months of inactivity - and meanwhile, have this little chapter to make amends XP

The chapter title, as well as abundant lyrics have been taken from Ain't No Rest For The Wicked by Cage the Elephant. I'd recommend listening to it to get the mood started ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I was walkin' down the street
When out the corner of my eye
I saw a pretty little thing approaching me
She said, "I never seen a man
Who looked so all alone.
Oh, could you use a little company?

“...sets off a series of high-speed vibrations in the object it’s in contact with, unlocking the internal mechanism and letting you go Houdini on the manacles.”

Peter cracked an eyelid open, rolling his head to the side till his jaw brushed the leather of the armrest. His feet were propped on the other end of the couch, still bobbing along to the beat of the guitar tones jangling through the air. He was starting to like this song.

“Well?” Stark demanded from the opposing armchair, hand loosely lobbing Peter’s third favourite gadget into the air before snatching it up again. The Portal Sequencer, or Bad Guys Go Bye-Bye Ball was probably not the best candidate for playing catch with, but Peter felt reasonably sure of his ability to handle things should they happen to go dangerously awry. Such as Stark getting sucked into a black hole.

Wait, he had a question to answer. “Eh, no.”

Stark grimaced; presumably, the dark sunglasses obscuring his eyes made it hard to tell for sure. “It gives you access to back-door hack into foreign systems without gatecrashing the mainframe – which is how you put on my gauntlet.”

“No.” Who wore sunglasses indoors anyways? “Why are you wearing sunglasses indoors?”

“It’s point number five in the WikiHow article on ‘How to Look like a Douchebag’.” Stark returned
all too smoothly. “Point number one is dressing in an all-maroon outfit, by the way.”

Dick.

And if you pay the right price
Your evening will be nice
And you can go and send me on my way."

I said, "You're such a sweet young thing.

Why you do this to yourself?"

She looked at me and this is what she said

But Stark wasn’t done yet, cueing up some magnificent face-pulling despite the shades, the words dropping like painfully excreted bile stones. (What? Peter never pretended to be a literary egghead. Beautiful, aesthetically pleasing metaphors were for sissies.) “It’s an…EMP device.”

“Do you have a moral objection to the existence of EMP devices?” Personally, Peter was a ‘love all, discriminate none’ kinda guy with his tech, but he knew folks who disagreed. Rocket bore a special kind of grudge for anything that couldn’t be jerry-rigged to go boom. He was fine with non-explosive devices as a concept, he said, but anything that was designed to never go down the path of destruction? Guys behind that kind of thinking were narrow-minded jerks – and what was the point of a mechanical eyeball if it couldn’t explode inside your skull anyway?

Rocket was a little insane.

“I have a moral objection with Hollywood,” Stark muttered, pulling Peter right out of reminiscences about psychotic raccoons, “using the word ‘EMP’ as a goddamn magic wand to kill everything ranging from Grand-Mére’s radio to a Boeing 787. Wanna bring down the Pentagon? Sure, use an EMP! I know my hourly rate is nothing to sniff at, but you’d think studio execs would be able to afford a little professional consultation–”

“A View To Kill had an EMP, didn’t it?” The stormy silence in the aftermath of that was answer enough. Peter brought his hands behind his head, elbows cocked and back comfortably propped along the couch, grinning at the ceiling. “No, it isn’t an EMP.”

The silence took on a distinctly unimpressed tone; Peter could feel his grin broadening. He pulled his right hand out from beneath his head, raising it up into the air soundlessly. Metal thunked into his palm not three seconds later, fingers closing around the spherical, skin-warmed object by reflex. His thumb dug around, looking for – ah, there – the smooth depression by the base, pressing down till it sunk with the tiniest of clicks. A beat, and he lobbed it over the side of the couch with a lazy wrist and unerrong aim.

From this angle, it was difficult to see the tear that had appeared in the universe, though Stark’s dropped jaw was evidence enough. Peter could feel the prickle on his skin, the hairs on his arm rising, the unworliday whoosh followed by the slightly painful popping of his eardrums; the clatter that probably meant a potted plant or decorative vase had been sacrificed to this little demonstration and transported to…Niflheim, or wherever this particular hole went.
Stark snapped his mouth shut, in perfect synchronisation with the portal if Peter’s ears were any judge. The music was still vibrating in the background. “I’m for impromptu science as much as the next guy, but for next time – I’d appreciate some notice before you open a singularity in my kitchen.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Peter dimmed his grin to an affable smile; the struggle was real.

“Where’d you get that anyway?” The tone was studied, casual – the image of a hole in the sky flashed across Peter’s eyelids with a jolt, oh shit – but there was a surprised little curve to Stark’s lips, even through the words. Unsteady, but there. “Grimy little cantina on some backwater planet? Traded for it with some shady character, barely escaping with life and limb because you shot first?”

“Greedo strikes a mean bargain.” Peter agreed easily, and didn’t need x-ray vision to know that Stark’s eyes were twinkling behind his shades at the response. The man got like this every time Peter recognised an eighties reference – though Star Wars was hardly obscure. The TV in that hospital waiting room, all pixelated eighteen inches of it, had gotten him through some long nights. Solid three am programming too: Peter had seen Return of the Jedi on mute and at the crack of dawn, one week after Mom’s third round of chemo.

*Oh, there ain’t no rest for the wicked*

*MONEY don't grow on trees*

*I got bills to pay, I got mouths to feed*

*And ain't nothing in this world for free*

*No, I can't slow down*

*I can't hold back*

*Though you know I wish I could*

*Oh, no, there ain't no rest for the wicked*

*UNTIL we close our eyes for good*

Relative silence trailed, drum beats punctuating the seconds; Peter blinked thrice before he realised Stark was waiting for an actual answer. “Uh, got it from Knowhere.”

Stark lifted his sunglasses with an elegant finger, rolled his eyes, then dropped them down again. If it didn’t go against his entire character description, Peter would’ve heaved a sigh. “It’s an actual place.”

“Oh, I’m sure. In the same star system as Nothing and Nevermore, too.”

“No.” The frustration thrummed behind his teeth, but his good humour didn’t dissipate, annoyingly persistent. Stark was always like this, prodding Peter into spilling details about his ‘space shenanigans’ before embarking on the ridicule train. Despite the well-broadcast incredulity, he never seemed to stop asking. “It’s a Celestial’s…basically a giant alien head that people settled in and around, to mine the resources.”

“Tasteful.” Stark hummed, settling back into his armchair, chin bobbing unconsciously to the music. “When people say they’d like to live in my head and pick my brain, I usually take it to be metaphorical.”
“It’s…I kinda like it, actually.” He didn’t have to constantly look over his shoulder for the authorities, for one. Sure, that had stopped after the whole galaxy-saving adventure, but old habits were hard to shrug off. He was still a little stiff-backed on regulated worlds – and being a newly-turned saviour didn’t stop local law enforcement from throwing you dirty looks. Hell, he’d probably save the galaxy again just to spite those dickwads. “Like Tortuga, but with less pirates. Actually no, about the same number of pirates.”

Knowhere was a place for punks like Peter. The only rule that mattered was keeping your nose out of other people’s business, and not offing anyone. No one asked you where you came from, or where you were headed. A pitstop for the wanderer and the wandering. And Peter could nick some ship fuel from the bay and get laid. That was cool too.

Not even fifteen minutes later

I'm still walkin' down the street

When I saw the shadow of a man creep out of sight

And then he swept up from behind

He put a gun up to my head

He made it clear he wasn't lookin' for a fight.

He said, "Give me all you got.

I want your money not your life,

But if you try to make a move I won't think twice."

I told him, "You can have my cash,

But first you know I gotta ask:

What made you wanna live this kind of life?"

“It’s got a nice view, for a trash can for cons. Nebulae as far as the eye can see – green and blue and yellow.” Peter turned his eyes back to the ceiling overhead, chest compressing as he breathed. “It’s never daytime, but you don’t need streetlights. The concept of regulatory airspace is a little lost on them too, so you could take off from the street and go flying through the gases if you please; probably not while you’re drunk though, ‘coz they’ll have to peel your corpse out of an asteroid later.” Strange, in a way – how he never shut up about Footloose and David Hasselhoff and Missouri in the rains in front of Gamora and the rest, but now that he was here… it was like space was where he’d always lived. Eight years he’d spent on Ter– on Earth, three of those as a babbling baby-toddler, and he’d clung to every one of them. Because that was who he was, in the teeming midst of all the other jerks that populated the galaxy. The Terran who the Ravagers weren’t allowed to eat.

And now that Peter was here, next to a man who spewed references as quick as he breathed, the three decades he’d spent in space loomed their heads. The only reminder of the brief jaunt to his hometown was a twinge in his arm, even now fast fading. He didn’t know that city, not anymore. The Earth he’d been describing to his team existed in distant memory, not the present, and while that
knowledge still made his throat catch, some nights…the wound was scabbing over. Faster than he’d have thought possible, like burying the damage a thousand miles deep and finding it miraculously healed when he unearthed it years later.

(Not so miraculous – his team had a lot to do with it. But Peter was in no mood of being charitable to those assholes at the moment, so option miracle it was.)

“That sounds nice.” Peter was too caught up in his thought-tangents to really register a change in Stark’s voice, but his gaze unconsciously drifted over anyway. The same dark, inscrutable glares – except between this blink and the next, there was a sudden, pervasive sense-impression of wide eyes staring right at him.

You don’t sound sarcastic, was supposed to make it out of Peter’s mouth, except it contorted on the way to form, “Do you…fly for fun, much?”

“No.” And the eye-contact was broken, which Peter couldn’t know but somehow did anyway, along with the strangest, surest feeling that Stark had fumbled his words too – that a not anymore lurked somewhere behind the coolly certain denial.

You should. Except Stark would only parry back with a meaninglessly casual, shoulda woulda coulda, and when had they reached this point – when Peter could read dark lenses obscuring darker eyes and snatch hollow words out of the air before they were verbalised.

Oh there ain't no rest for the wicked

Money don't grow on trees

I got bills to pay, I got mouths to feed

There ain't nothing in this world for free

Oh no, I can't slow down, I can't hold back

Though you know I wish I could

Oh no there ain't no rest for the wicked

Until we close our eyes for good

But as with all thoughts that unsettled him more than they amused him, Peter kicked it away from his mind with practiced ease. “How many times are you gonna play this song today anyway? Not that I’m objecting against the lack of the hellscreams–”

“You love the hellscreams–”

“–this doesn’t sound four decades old.” Peter observed.

“It isn’t, you damn hypocrite. Bit of a recent favourite, I suppose.” Stark kneaded the bridge of his nose just below the perch of his glasses, more of an absent tic than anything. The plastic bumped his knuckles twice – a brief sound of irritation emerged before he pulled the entire thing off, tossing it down carelessly on the side table. Peter watched it all, still flat on the couch, inexplicably pleased.

“2008, actually. I’d taken a bit of a, ah.” Stark glanced up, and Peter’s sense of pleasure dimmed a little – hell, those eyebags. “A bit of a sabbatical. No luxuries, no internet, no contact with the outside world. Three months of finding myself, you know how it is.”
I’ve never tried to. Didn’t know what I would find. But he wasn’t an utter moron, so he said none of that out loud. Stark was still talking, the skin under his eyes pinched and haggard, irises distant. “Finally landed home, Happy was driving me back from the airfield. Grabbed a cheeseburger on the way…and I was missing my tunes, so I asked him to put the radio on. And this was, well. This was the first song that came on.”

I can't slow down, I can't hold back

Though you know I wish I could

There ain't no rest for the wicked

Until we close our eyes for good

“This isn’t your song.”

Stark’s brows clouded, eyes darting back. “Sorry’?

“I–” Correction: utter moronhood had been achieved. Some quick-talking could salvage the situation, Stark’s dubious gaze averted, but Peter’s tongue remained furiously stubborn in his mouth – because he wasn’t an expert at too many things, was he? He knew his tech but Rocket knew it better, knew his guns but Gamora could sling around with the best of them, knew to fly but he’d seen that scarlet-gold blur take to the skies.

But this was distilled into the very core of him, beyond the slick-talking Ravager with guns and jet boots – the way that tiny black headset clamped hot and uncomfortable over the lobes of his ears, crackling music into his head when the world got too loud and too quiet by turns. He knew the way a beat got into your heart, thumping its way down with your blood, the way a melody wound its way around your veins, tighter and tighter with every replay, the way instruments thrummed in your bones and lyrics buried into your skull – till the song was indistinguishable from you.

(Like how he couldn’t hear Elvin Bishop now without remembering Gamora’s face lit up by Orion, or listen to the awesomest mix ever made in the history of the world without hearing his mother humming under her breath.)

Peter ran his eyes along the hollows of Stark’s face, the crevices and crevasses, the dips and shadows. The mouth that snarked and angered too easy, the eyes that looked perennially bereft of sleep. Ain’t no rest for the wicked – and Peter knew the truth of what he knew. “It is. But it also really, really isn’t.”

Stark didn’t look back at Peter, which was a milder blow than if he had. He stared at the discarded glares on the table, mouth barely moving. “I need to…check up on the Facility staff, in a bit.”

Of course you do. “You’re the most annoyingly responsible guy I’ve ever met.”

Stark flinched. Swung up from the armchair in a sudden movement, knee knocking against the table edge in the process, glares going clattering against the floor. He didn’t bend to pick them up. “Don’t steal any more of my stuff while I’m gone.”

“No promises.” Peter watched the stiffness of that back as it turned, the strained shoulders. Moronhood felt strangely liberating. “We should go flying, sometime.”

Despite all predictions, Stark turned around. What with all the bouncing around their conversation had done in the last ten seconds, Peter had been expecting something far more skittish; but that gaze was abruptly, searingly direct.
The tone was expressionless. “There are rules about the suit.”

_I remember._ The stutter to Stark’s motions as he crouched in a gravelly Joplin parking lot, frustration lining his face as bullets sprayed about them. Peter smiled. “Not everywhere in the galaxy, there aren’t.”

Open, and disarmingly so. Stark’s eyes blinked – unarmoured for three seconds, maybe – before the man turned again, and walked away without a word.

Peter’s blood was racing. He lay there, unmoving on the couch for uncounted seconds, feeling the pulse jump under his skin. The music had subsided into quiet a while ago, outside his notice.

Stark would be back though. This had become a kind of routine – not this conversation, they’d never quite stumbled on this particular sore point before – but the talks. ‘Interrogation Hour’ Stark said, apparently marked it off on his calendar and everything, except once Peter said he’d watched Queen live at a stadium and “_didn’t like it, do your porcupine ears have maggots in them_–” they’d kinda permanently veered off topic and…never really found their way back.

And so Stark would ask him random questions about space, like if hyperspace drives were real, whether Cylons could actually survive in the galaxy (after having watched approximately two episodes of _Battlestar Galactica_ and getting bored out of his brain, Peter erred on ‘fuck no’), if Groot was really-truly a space plant, the ins and outs of the biochemistry of space plants, the detailed specs of the Milano – which on good days, ranged from having a space pool, a space billiards room and a space golf course, to being a fully functional Transformer that arm-wrestled Titans on the days Peter was feeling particularly inspired. Of course, Stark would inevitably bring it back to the Milano’s engine and flight design, the nerd that he was – and Peter would happily oblige. His ship was a Beaut.

Thus Interrogation Hour continued to be misleading in both of its component names: banter lobbed back-and-forth, engagingly comfortable, space and music and all that lay in between, while Stark’s playlists spun on endlessly in the background. So much so that it was surreal to realise that weeks had passed since their little Joplin jaunt – Peter didn’t raise the topic of their ‘quest’ again and Stark didn’t ask. All sore spots were promptly navigated around, avoided with careful skill: Stark’s ever-persistent eyebags, the unending commitments and responsibilities to what seemed like an entire planet’s population, but the empty house; the silent agreement from both parties to evade any mentions of family. It wasn’t nearly as awkward as it sounded – sometimes when Stark swept into the common room at the end of a day, tailored to the nines, spine stiff and dead-eyed, it was the last thing on Peter’s mind to ask him why.

No – that was the cue to switch on the Black Sabbath, put on a languid smirk and watch Stark’s dark irises slowly wake to life.

But today Peter had walked right into the sorest of spots, and moronhood had decreed that he stay there and plant a flag. For all that this idea – _flying, sometime_ – seemed to have sprung into existence in the fever of the moment, it was proving to be surprisingly difficult to kick.

“D’you think he’d come, FRIDAY?”

_Come where?_ Peter didn’t have coordinates in mind. Just images, mostly. A red-and-gold blur describing figure-eights against the nebulae; soaring in space instead of being swallowed by it.

And that was just him watching. He could…join in, maybe. Peter had never flown with someone before.
Quiet. Then the faintest rustling over the speakers, before synthesised tones spoke up hesitantly. “I
cannot provide a firm yes and no answer to this question.”

Fair enough. “I may however, have an anecdote that could…help, in this situation.”

Huh. FRIDAY was a girl fond of her stats and figures, and anecdotes didn’t exactly qualify as fact.
“Listening.”

“When I first came online, I was rather enthused to fulfil my tasks as Mr Stark’s assistive AI. I wasn’t
the first that he created, and the one who was, had been…lost from him, recently.” There was
something incongruent about the formality of ‘assistive AI’ and FRIDAY’s careful pronunciation of
lost. Something old, and grieving. “Mr Stark was living alone in New York at the time, while all of
his erstwhile companions had moved here into the Facility. Based on the records I had inherited, he
had ceased social activity to a great extent compared to his previous patterns, and I was eager to…
to..”

“Assist.” Peter filled in, quietly. He and FRIDAY had come a long way since her chilly treatment of
him in the beginning – but still, for every word that she spoke to him, there were twenty more for
Stark: ‘boss’ this and ‘boss’ that, snarky and concerned and delighted in turn.

Stark loved talking to her too. You could see it in the eyes – fingers rapidly flicking through star-
hued holograms, mouth an unceasing blur as he demanded one statistic after the other, a thousand
asides thrown in between.

“Yes.” FRIDAY acquiesced, a softened hum of static. “I deduced the best course of action was to
track down old associates of Mr Stark’s, someone he might have lost contact with and renewal of
said contact might conceivably…fill a gap. Despite poring over the history of his past interactions, I
failed to find any viable options,” Peter blinked. What? “I did however, discover an anomaly.”

“This building complex used to be an old Stark warehouse. It was subsequently reconstructed and
remodelled into the new Avengers facility.” Peter didn’t fail to catch that mention, in spite of still
feeling somewhat stunned from before – the mysterious, ever-absent Avengers. Stark’s old team.
Opportunities had come and gone, but Peter had never looked them up. He hadn’t quite figured out
the why of that, yet. “Well before my creation, Mr. Stark used to make bi-monthly trips to the site,
presumably to decide what to do with it, then to check up on progress. However, instead of flying
the suit or even driving down in any of his numerous sport cars, he’d take the train instead.”

“I attempted to track down the old surveillance footage of the train for those dates,” of course you
did, a faint spasm of amusement, you have even less boundaries than he does. “but it had already
been erased. Not all the journeys, just the ones he’d been on. Having no other means of recourse, I
approached him and requested more information.”

Damn, Peter could just imagine it – Stark’s eyebrows flying up to his hairline as his AI admonished
him, so I’ve been stalking you and I don’t like what I’ve found. The flicker of his widened pupils, his
mouth pressing together into an indistinguishable line, like the week after Joplin when he’d casually
told Peter that pigging out in front of a tv screen wasn’t the best way to reacquaint yourself with your
home planet. And Peter had blinked, mouth thoughtlessly opening, so when are you free next.

Yeah, he’d have looked exactly like that.

“The first time had been just an anomaly, apparently. An attempt at some undisturbed ‘quiet time’. It
worked fairly well, there was hardly anyone onboard the train to recognise Mr. Stark in the first place
– except in the last compartment.” Another of FRIDAY’s invisible, yet strangely palpable smiles. “A
young woman was travelling with her niece. The child was curled up her aunt’s lap, fast asleep,
while the woman played the flute to her.”

A crooked eyebrow. “Sounds idyllic.”

“In Mr. Stark’s words, the woman looked ‘frizz-haired, sleep deprived and utterly content’.” Peter wasn’t the best judge of this kind of thing, obviously – but there was an almost… maternal warmth to FRIDAY’s tones. Hard to reconcile with lines of blinking code. One might wonder if Stark had programmed it in, or if FRIDAY had to… naturally develop along those lines on her own.

Meet the needs of her creator, Peter completed in his head, something tightening in his throat in response.

FRIDAY was still speaking, though a bit more wryly. “The woman wasn’t too amenable to his conversational gambits at first – Mr Stark believes it was one of the politer ‘fuck off’s he’d received in recent memory. Of course, he can be rather-” annoying? “persistent, and the niece took quite a shine to him when she woke. The woman relented, and they got to talking. And Mr. Stark continued making the fortnightly trip by train, though he attests it was solely for the ‘roadtrip tunes’.”

He would say that. And probably bugged the nice lady into playing Sweet Child O’ Mine on the freaking flute too.

“She was in her early twenties, graduated with a fine arts degree but was working as a receptionist in New York. Her niece lived with her, and they travelled upstate every week to meet the parents and the rest of the family. She’d moved to America with the intent of playing professionally, but with the job and costs of raising a child in the city, the flute-playing had dwindled to a hobby. Lullaby making.” A beat of silence. “Mr Stark didn’t divulge whether she knew who he was, likely as the prospect was…but it didn’t really seem to matter, in their conversations.”

“Did he offer to help?”

Another beat, like FRIDAY had been caught off-guard by his insight. Which was ridiculous, because it was only the most obvious guess for anyone to make, even if they’d only known Stark for an instant. Wasn’t it?

“Not for three months.” FRIDAY finally replied. “It would have been earlier, if she hadn’t been giving off ‘fierce independence vibes’. Regardless, he pulled some strings and obtained an audition with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra.”

“That sounds fancy. And big.”

“It was very big.” Amusement seeped into FRIDAY’s tones, with a distinct undertone of ‘I’d be quoting founding years and statistically best performing albums if I thought you were interested’. “And he had no qualms that she’d do exceedingly well. However, the day he was due to inform her about it, was the day of her last trip upstate – to drop the niece off with the parents for good. She’d been recruited into a small chamber orchestra through a family friend and was moving back to Dublin.”

“That sounds… great.” Peter’s eyebrows creased. “But probably not near as good as the New York Philosophy thing?”

“Probably not, no.” FRIDAY acquiesced simply. “But Mr. Stark congratulated her, didn’t mention the audition, and made his final farewells.”

Heavy, lingering quiet. And then, though it felt like he knew the answer already, “Why?”
“For the same reason he requested that I not attempt to re-establish contact with her. He said…” A pause, where a human would have taken a deep breath. “He said he felt good about looking back on the memories of this interaction, and not having to regret. Not having…mucked it up. A normal, human connection. Friendship. Without overdoing, or clinging, or buying the orchestra or gifting giant stuffed toys. He said it felt symbolic, almost.” And softer still. “Of letting go, and doing better.”

“And so I let it go.” FRIDAY finished, calm and low and quiet. “And I know nothing more of this woman, not even her name – just that she was a human connection for Mr. Stark when he needed one, who…travelled upstate every Friday.”

Oh.

“-through a family friend and was moving back to Dublin.”

“Is..isn’t Dublin in…” Peter didn’t remember the last time he stumbled over a word – but his tongue felt strangely thick and clumsy in his mouth now.

“Ireland, yes.” FRIDAY completed, the same invisible smile outlined in a softened brogue.

Oh.

“I thought.” It came out weak, and feebly joking. “I thought you’d been named after girl Friday or something.”

“So did I.” FRIDAY replied, so easily. “Some of my mannerisms had been based off Miss Po – an old associate of Mr Stark’s, but I believed my name was just that. His clever use of an old idiom. Nothing too significant about it.”

“-it felt symbolic, almost. Of letting go, and doing better.”

“I was wrong. I didn’t need to find Mr Stark a friend,” Another pause, and FRIDAY didn’t need to breathe for it to sound human. “because I was already here.”

“So I cannot say for certain if Mr. Stark will agree to…fly with you to Knowhere, or whatever else you may be thinking. But there are different kinds of assistance. Sometimes you cannot fix a problem. Sometimes just your presence is enough. It helps.”

Quiet.

“Well, I.” His voice croaked – Peter cleared his throat, and then once again for good measure. And then a couple more times because good wasn’t good enough and desperate measures were being called for. “I am a very helpful guy.”

What the fuck else was he supposed to say, exactly? Only until recently he’d been the half-alien Stark had imprisoned in his house out of unadulterated paranoia – and now he was expected to deal with the reality and sheer sincerity of something like your presence is enough like…like…

Like they were friends. Like Peter wasn’t just another rapscallion, or scallywag, or…ha, outlaw, which were just cutesy names for a criminal – who’d somehow, accidentally, jigged his way into saving the galaxy and was now being told that his presence mattered to a-

(a red-and-gold blur flying through a hole in the sky)

In case it wasn’t obvious enough already, Peter didn’t get to associate with the good sort often. It was the reason his team worked – each of them discarded jigsaw pieces that refused to lop their component bits off just to fit in – and shit was he grateful for them. But they all had to be coaxed and wheedled, tempted with revenge or credits or dragged reluctantly, kicking and screaming to save the goddamn galaxy. Like the regular sort did.

Growing up a space pirate wasn’t exactly easy bananas, but it wasn’t like he was working his ass off either. Peter…flew through life without flapping his wings too hard, coasted by on natural-born and honed skill and charm, and never went out of his way to save a cat out of a Nova Prime tree – because no one ever bothered to do that for him and it was stupid to resent the regular sort for that. Never went out of his way to accomplish anything of note, except that one time his team defeated a genocidal blue maniac and it had almost killed him. And then there was Stark – who slept badly and looked positively miserable under the weight of the world, but like he’d die before ever giving that up. Who took ill-conceived quests to find missing fathers seriously, who flew nukes through wormholes, who got strangers on a train auditions for the New York fucking Philosophical Orchard or whatever – who tried and tried and tried like it was going out of fucking style and –

–and Peter was apparently…helping. The Computer Lady said so.

Well shit.

“just all round the helpfulest person around.” Right, his mouth was still moving. “Doing dishes, smugglin’ out bits and bobs for Uncle Riley now and then, wriggling into small places that needed wriggling into because the Ravagers were these beefy bohunks and I was…well I was tiny..”

“Do you ask for help often?”

On the one hand, Peter could prostrate himself to FRIDAY in gratitude for shutting him up. On the other – that question couldn’t get any more loaded than if it were a necroblaster. “Uh. No?” The whole point of having a team was that you could get what you needed without all those awkward conversations preceding it, right? “I mostly make deals. I mean, I guess asking for help is a kind of deal. Except you need to trust the other person. Which you don’t in a deal ‘coz you’re practically asking to get backsta-”

FRIDAY’s words were steady. Unwavering. “Would you help me with something, Peter?”

I would like to raise a concern that your all too perfectly timed use of my first name for the very first time is highly convenient and possibly emotionally manipulat- “Sure thing. Whaddya need?”

Another mildly thrown-off pause. Then, as if in an attempt to rally, “It would involve getting off the couch.”

Peter swung his heels off the arm rest, then gingerly touched a big toe to the carpet. “Done. Next?”

A little rustle of static. Peter imagined it was a snicker. “Then head towards the east wing.”

Aaaand he was up and on his feet. Whoa, headrush. “That’s. That’s forbidden access.”

Two words, the enunciation almost smug. “I know.”

“That’s where Stark’s offices are.” Where the magic happened. If magic was a highly depressive, energy-sapping pool of secretive humdrum.
Okay, the pauses were now getting out of hand. This one lasted for five whole seconds before FRIDAY’s speakers crackled again, almost determined sounding. “That’s where I need your help.”

“In Stark’s offices? Why would you…I’m not about to become a pawn in the robot apocalypse, right?” But Peter kept walking, pawn or no pawn. Because forbidden freaking access. That was like…honey for honeybees. Unless…were they the ones making the honey? Whatever – point was that half the fun of being an outlaw was doing all the stuff you were outlawed from.

“I was under the impression the robot apocalypse only became popular in the nineties.”

“Nah, the eighties liked murder bots too. Watched The Terminator when I was seven.” And had nightmares until two weeks later, but FRIDAY didn’t need to know that. Damn, Grandad really should’ve kept him away from that one, but it was hard to refuse a kid with a dyi-

Anyway.

The doors slid open with a hydraulic hiss, the corridors beyond starker than anything he’d seen in the Facility so far. Sure, the rest of the place wasn’t exactly Jem and the Holograms; but at least there was some form of personality: innumerable shooting ranges, what looked like a jungle gym for a maniac, that high-ceilinged hall that was almost certainly designed for flying around in, but that Peter had never seen Stark use. This on the other hand, was just… ‘oh look, a grey room. And another. And another. Ahhhh, that room’s beige, I’ve been blinded.’

His footsteps were echoing, a fading reverberation travelling up and down the long passages. The door to Stark’s main office was automatic too – it hissed open and Peter repressed the excited shiver. Giant wooden desk, drawings up on the walls – huh, didn’t figure Stark to be an artist – and the same ole same ole glass, steel and tile monochrome for everything else. Lovely.

Peter walked around the desk slowly – thumb running along the hard edge, fingernails doing a little tappety-tap on the wood grain. No paperweights to play catch with, unfortunately. Man, Terran places had grown so colourless. And ‘stainless and subdued’ didn’t exactly come across as Stark’s style either, what with the shiny-red-and-gold aesthetic. Peter would’ve imagined a guy like that to live somewhere…flamboyant, some place designed to draw your attention, catch your eye and hold it. The guy in question certainly managed it well enough.

This place was so…hollow.

“If you would direct your attention to the lowermost drawer.” Ravagers did not startle, and outlaws most certainly didn’t, which meant Peter must not have either. Still, wouldn’t have killed FRIDAY to like…clear her throat or something beforehand, would it? Maybe a throat for clearing purposes didn’t come included in the omniscient-incorporeal-AI shtick – but you’d think an omniscient-incorporeal-AI would have figured out a workaround by now.

“Peter?”

Fine, he was dithering. Bit o’ healthy paranoia never hurt anyone. Peter inched his hand towards the drawer gingerly, fingers wrapping around the carved handle to give it a tug. It eased out without much of a clatter, already putting it miles ahead of the rickety drawer in his old bedside table. It was mostly empty, which was a bit anticlimactic except –

“Is that a phone?”

Before FRIDAY could shore up a response, Peter had already pulled the chunky block of plastic out, chucking it into the air a couple of times before nabbing it again in his palm. It looked nothing like
the thin slab of glass Stark carried around, the one that he grimaced at and occasionally sniped insults into before vanishing from the Facility for the entire day. For one, this little doodad appeared to have…hinges.

“Yes. Yes it is the phone. A phone. Pardon my articles.” FRIDAY’s words finally came in a rush, almost frazzled.

Peter stared at it glibly. “Why does it look like a clam?”

“I…” FRIDAY appeared to be at a loss for words. Recovery came quick though. “The flip phone design for the cell or portable phone was first created in 1989, which would be after your time on Earth. It was a Motorola model called the MicroTAC, though General Telephone and Electronics held the trademar-”

“Cool.” Peter flipped it open, the screen lighting up dimly in response. Number pad with alphabets on top, green and red buttons – all good, looked pretty standard. “Whaddya want me to do with it?”

“Open the – open the contacts.” There it was, that determined strain to her syllables again. “There should only be one. By name of –”

“Steve Rogers.” The name rested heavy on his tongue, something familiar about the sound. The letters flickered faintly on the black-and-white screen. “Yeah, I see it.”

Pause. It’s like the name tainted the room somehow – the heaviness spilling out of his lips and weighing down the air, thick and constricting.

“I would like you to delete it.”

Peter’s thumb nail scratched down, digging into the grooves between the raised buttons. The air felt heavier still as he drew it in, lungs filling in quietly. “Any reason you can’t do it?”

“It wasn’t linked to my systems.” FRIDAY’s tone betrayed nothing and everything. Clear and unswerving, all the same. “Neither is it equipped with Wifi or Bluetooth facilities, rendering remote hacking moot.”

And you can’t ask Stark. It was an easy leap to make. The callused skin under his nail was catching on the keys now, thumb barely hovering.

“We should hurry up, Mr. Stark should be done with the Facility staff quite soon.” Clear, yet jittery.

“Right.” Peter said, and pressed his thumb down.

A second passed. Two. Peter caught a breath and released it. There was a faint, tinny ringing sound trailing in the quiet.

“Peter.” Three. Four. “Did you-”

“Excuse me, on a call. Be right with you in a minute.” Peter pressed the phone to his ear, plastic clammy against the lobe. His heart was beginning to ramp up – a steady uptick that was going to settle into the adrenaline-powered thumping that felt so good in your chest.

“Peter, you need to hang up on the call.” Huh, still the first name despite it all, though it had taken on a decidedly more anxious note. Maybe it hadn’t been emotional manipulation. “You do not understand what you’re-”
“C’mon, you could not have realistically been expecting me to do anything else.” Had this Steve forgotten his phone in the shower or something? Picking up your calls was only the polite thing to do.

“Which is why I deployed signal jammers the instant you made contact with the phone.” There was something just so cross about those words that Peter was half-surprised the clam hadn’t burst into flames through the sheer power of FRIDAY’s frustration. Instead, the merry trilling continued seeping into his ear.

“Look, I swear I’ll delete it the moment I…” what? Heard what Steve sounded like? Probably just like a regular guy, unless it was a very manly nickname for a girl. Probably not worth the trouble – which was a flat out lie, because the curiosity itself was worth the trouble but…his thumb on the green button felt motivated, somehow. Like there was a genuine reason. Motivated by those Stark-patented eyebags, and the summons that kept him gone for days, and Rhodes’ distrustful eyes the first and only time they’d met, and Stark’s miserable paranoia and Stark’s misery period and Peter just...

Had to do this.

“I do not wish to deploy my defences against you.” FRIDAY’s words were growing softer with the agitation. “But if you leave me no choi-“

Click.

Peter’s breath stilled. Like it was held up behind a dam, pressing and squeezing, yet the wall would not relent. His chest was thundering – slow and clamorous.

The ringing had stopped.

For all the fuss he’d made about the voice, there barely was one. Just a rasp, muted enough that Peter would have trouble discerning the word if he didn’t know it so well, though he’d never formed it with his own lips.

Just an inhaled breath, life giving oxygen crystallising into sound:

“…Tony?”

Chapter End Notes

- *The Terminator* came out in 1984, so no, widdle Peter did not see it in the theatres. Would have caused an entire month of nightmares otherwise.

- Jammers don’t work on a deceptively ancient looking phone, probably implanted with Wakandan tracers to boot. Raise your hands whoever was surprised. No one? Good.

- *Jem and the Holograms* was telecast from 1985-88. Prime widdle Peter time.
- the comics origin of FRIDAY’s name is indeed, the Girl Friday concept but I decided to go a bit of a different direction.

- probably will be changing the chapter titles at some point, because I need some way to pay tribute to the absolutely ridiculous amount of classic rock, eighties music and the like I'm listening to while writing this story.
Happy Infinity War everybody! To celebrate the marvelous occasion of our boys finally meeting on-screen...have a chapter!

I'd mostly been taken hostage by real life for the past few months, hence the hiatus. Nevertheless, this story crossed three thousand kudos - *holy shit*, nine hundred bookmarks, an insane number of hits and far too many comments than I deserve - seriously guys, I cannot express how much those comments helped me to keep plodding on this thing. All your sweet words and encouragement, and after that sucker of a cliffie too ;)

Speaking of the cliffie - this chapter may not be what you expect. In that the angst definitely kicks up and I would like to warn for the in-canon tragic backstories of these characters depicted in a detail that hopefully wouldn't, but might trigger a reader, so please keep yourself safe.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Peter Quill’s life was flashing before his eyes.

Unfortunately for him, whoever had cut together this whoops-you-dead montage did not care very much for ‘significant moments’ in his life. There was no defeating the big bad Kree, no climactic handholding, no faces of his teammates caught mid-laugh, surrounded by shoujo bubbles (Peter had discovered anime the week prior and was still caught midway between horror and fascination).

What he got instead was a highly selective, highlight reel of Champion Quill fuck ups. Like that one time Peter had stepped in a turd. The time Rocket called him a ginger molerat and he’d been too stunned to come up with a response. The following night where he’d *finally* come up with ‘trash panda’ and leapt off his bunk and began pounding down the door to Rocket’s sleeping quarters, except Rocket didn’t get up and Peter felt like an even bigger moron. The time he’d sprinted through the hospital hallways, vision blurred and heart pounding, and he could still hear his grandad calling out behind him.

The turd was probably the worst.

Regardless, there was probably no better analogy for this kind of moment. There were all the moments before leading up to this, where you behaved the way you always behaved and did your thing and saw nothing wrong with the way you did your thing. Then you took that one, final, damning step – and realisation lit up in your brain and your skin shrunk a size and your body seized on itself and you felt something soft and suspiciously squishy underfoot. And the truth sunk in, the one your friends were warning you about, the one you should’ve seen coming but didn’t pay enough attention to grasp. *Uh oh.*

You, my friend, had just stepped into a turd.

(And Peter wasn’t even wearing his own shoes).
“Tony?” The rasping tone was tapering off now, the faintest thread of hopefulness shifting into something almost concerned. “Tony, is everything okay?”

Right, the silence was probably getting suspicious. Peter should do something about that.

“Whoopsy, musta dialled the wrong number. Have a nice life, bye!”

And Peter mashed the red button down as far as it would go, heart strangled halfway between his throat and his chest.

Silence reigned, golden and blissful for three seconds.

FRIDAY cut in, slow and uncharacteristically ominous, “If you were going to cut the call anyway, why did you–”

The phone started ringing.

“Shit.” Peter stared at the screen in dawning horror, Steve Rogers flickering in seven segment display. “FRIDAY, what do I do.”

“I do not know.” The halting reply was probably in violation of every AI commandment ever, but shitting shit they were in this together.

Peter’s thumbnail hit the red button again, holding it down for several seconds. Seconds he counted out without breath, even though his lips moved outside his control. “Switch it off?”

“The first time Mr Stark turned this phone off, it was turned on again remotely two hours later.” Anxious as the electronic tones were, there was a hint of resentment buried somewhere, and not very deep. Fair enough – if Peter was an AI and dwelled somewhere beyond the cutting edge of technology, he wouldn’t appreciate being stumped by a clam phone either. “It does not run out of battery. I believe it has been augmented in a style of engineering I am not familiar with.”

“Tis okay, I can just hold this button down for the rest of my life, no biggie.” Peter wheezed faintly – right, breathing. That was an important bodily function. “Say, your boss still with the Facility staff?”

“No.” Man, if the AI was sounding miserable, what in the name of Drax’s Christmas-coloured balls was Peter going to do?

“ETA?”

“Seven, maybe eight minutes.” Well, that settled it. Peter crouched down to his ankles, right thumb still pressing down ‘reject call’ even if phonecalls definitely didn’t work that way – his left hand went rummaging in the sole of the shoe he had on that didn’t belong to him, looking for a miniature device that did.

“I still have visual on the phone, but can no longer detect it on any other sensors.” FRIDAY chimed a second later – the words would have sounded bewildered from anyone else.

“Kinda the point.” Moving back upright, Peter shoved the phone into the back pocket of his jeans – or at least attempted to, it took a fair bit of wiggling to actually get it into the denim trap. “Congrats, you’re officially in the know ‘bout how I hid my doodads the first time round.”

“It’s like you’re in a void. I cannot detect anything within-”

“A two metre radius? Yeah.” Peter fast-walked out through the doorway, and barely held himself
back from sprinting through the corridors. Long strides, that does it. He was practically leaping from foot to foot. “FRIDAY, meet Neutraliser. Yes, I named him. Yes, he’s tiny and metallic and likes interfering with fields and was hiding in a heretofore unknown location in my…garb.”

Digging uncomfortably into his ankle under his sock, more like. Peter sped through the final automated door – the east wing closed behind him, the common living spaces looming up ahead. Thank fucking god. “Piece o’ advice: never hire a guard who’s too squeamish to do a cavity check. This little baby has gotten me out of prisons tighter than most assholes – cavity check, geddit?”

“Peter.”

“–wait, you’re missing the funny bit –”

FRIDAY’s voice was uncompromising. “You’re still carrying the phone.”

“Am I?” Peter rounded into the main living room, legs automatically making for the couch. His voice was casual, if slightly high-pitched. “Drat.”

“You’re motivations are extremely obscure to me right now.” The words came, fast yet uncertain, and Peter stilled mid-stride. “Your actions in the past few minutes have had no rhyme or reason, and I cannot discern a purpose to them except causing distress and…” The accent thickened, ever so slightly; and sometime within the past month, Peter had stopped thinking about whether these painful details were something Stark had programmed in. This wasn’t code – just FRIDAY. “And that does not concur with what I know about you as a person.”

Here’s a life hack – humans don’t make sense. “Hate to break it to ya,” and his voice could have been steadier, but it was hard to pull off in the face of such sincerity. “but causing distress is a defining characteristic of the asshole.”

“Then you must have overestimated yourself.” FRIDAY answered, like she’d had practice and had heard it all before. In the same tone she used while narrating the history of the flip phone, like there were reams of empirical evidence to support her words and they were indistinguishable from fact. “You’re less of an asshole than you thought.”

“Wow it’s weird to hear you swear.” The words came out on autopilot, so obviously glib that even Peter had to wince a little. Still a better choice than you’re lying or holy fuck how are you the most emotionally competent being in this house.

“Peter.”

(maybe not emotionally competent. But young, and learning, and trying).

“If I left the phone in the desk, it’s only a matter of time before Stark walks into his office and hears it ringing.” Peter forced out in rapid succession, an itsy-bitsy part of him wondering if it was the truth. He didn’t let that part of him out to play very often. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but that conversation is what we were trying to prevent when you wanted to have me delete the contact, yeah?”

Yeah, he didn’t need to wait for FRIDAY’s response to that. Deep, composed breaths. “So I’ll keep it on me for now, kay? Wait till the coast clears and then we’ll…we’ll figure something out.”

Soft, subdued silence.

“Very well.” FRIDAY assented quietly, reluctance unmistakable. Welllll, she shoulda thought of
that before going all HAL 9000 behind her creator’s back.

“Ya know,” Peter forged on, all faux cheer because that was just how he rolled, “I was half-expecting Stark to just loom up behind me back there, all ‘figure what out?’ Guess real life just isn’t as conveniently timed as the movies—”

“Mr Stark is turning round the corridor as we speak.”

“–oh god oh fuck oh here goes absolutely everything–” Peter sat down on the couch, only to spring up again when the solid edge of the phone dug rather inconveniently into his buttcheek. “I thought you said we had seven minutes!”

“That was at another location seven minutes ago.” The shortness of the tone thoroughly foiled its evenness, though Peter had to give FRIDAY credit for trying. You know, if his brain could comprehend anything other than the hundred buzzing bees crowding his head right now.

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“Hey FRIDAY, does panic sound like bees?”

“Nah, that’s probably just the earwax talking.” And Peter’s heart seized in his throat – an Olympic-style high jump from the centre of his chest to his larynx, where it then proceeded to have an aneurism and strangle his vocal chords in the process. Or…something. Childhood alien abductions didn’t leave much of a chance to obtain a solid foundation in biology.

But the point was that Stark had just strolled into the room through the doorway behind Peter, characteristically droll words still hanging in the air. Peter hadn’t been this close to dread even back when they’d first met – which was saying something considering the prison warden act of those days, all cheerful murderousness and paranoia. Back then of course, finding a way out had been as easy as commandeering one of those rad gauntlets and pointing them at a stranger’s face. All threat, no damage. Okay, maybe a little damage. Just to see if the gauntlet worked.

And now, the stranger was…Stark. Stark of the baggy eyes and brilliant music, the good sort that flew missiles into sky portals and inspired a love so great from the freaking lines of code he’d created that his AI would stomp all over Asimov’s laws to keep him safe.

“Still, Nic Cage would agree with you.” Stark circled into Peter’s field of view, arms stretched over his head in a yawning motion. He looked fractionally more relaxed than how he’d been when he’d left – right, Peter had scared him off with the flying talk. Damn that felt like ages ago. “FRIDAY, put the works of the honourable Sir Cage on Quill’s to-watch list. I’m sensing the finding of some deep meaning and connec–”

Peter waited for Stark to finish. But the sentence remained abandoned midway – mostly, probably because Peter’s pocket was jangling.

“You,” FRIDAY began, soft and almost inaudible in the room’s quiet. “You forgot to silence it.”

Peter stared down at the carpet under his feet, which the internet had taught him was a shag weave; he stared at the fluorescent whiteness of the lightbulb closest to him, the discoloured patch of wall behind the TV. He stared at nothing at all, for all the good it would do him in this moment. His heart kicked up inside his chest, seemingly detached from it all – because the rest of his body felt frozen in place.

On autopilot more than anything, his hand finally reached back and dug into his pocket. He pulled the phone out, fingers loosely wrapped around the case, and brought it forward, plastic vibrating

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against clammy skin. He bent slightly – reaching out and clumsily depositing it on the transparent glass of the coffee table opposite the couch.

He didn’t lift his eyes.

The display blinked on with the call for a few more seconds, finally turning off when the vibrations subsided. The silence in the wake of it was absolute.

Peter’s toes curled in his borrowed shoes. The back of his mouth was dry, chest seeming to screw up tighter with every passing second, every tiny inhale. Something moved in the air of the room; his eyes flicked up automatically – no you dolt don’t–

Stark’s face was wiped of expression. The skin around his eyes was pinched, mouth flattened into a line. And damn if Peter could find a sign of life in those features – a quiver to warn of an impending snark attack, the thinly veiled frustration that only came with butting heads with a man-boy space pirate. No disdain, no mock-serious threats or actually fucking serious ones, no yelling why wasn’t Stark fucking yelling already Peter couldn’t take this quiet for one more second, couldn’t stand there waiting for the disappoi–

The phone’s clear tones cut through the air again, vibrating on the glass as it rang. Stark’s eyes (impassive dark tired tired tired) flicked to the device, watching it motionlessly. His lips were trembling minutely – they pressed on themselves, compressing tightly before pulling slack. Two beats, long and drawn out, and he stepped forward, swiping the phone off the table in a motion that didn’t second-guess itself.

A flick of the thumb and the phone flipped open, artificial light flickering across Stark’s pupils. Held it in his palm for a long second, knuckles flexing and releasing, bone straining under bloodless skin. His thumbnail moved slowly, shifting downward till it hit the button pad. The ringing stopped.

No, a distant part of Peter’s mind corrected. Stark stopped the ringing.

Stark’s head sagged back, chin tilting upwards, base of his throat bared. His pulse was jumping under the skin, all too noticeably. His eyes were closed, lips barely moving, a toneless whisper:

“Happy?”

Confusion peaked for a brief second, before realisation struck – the question wasn’t meant for him.

A barely-there mechanical hum, before a voice spoke up. Automated, synthesised, inarguably real.

“I did what I judged was necessary.”

Stark opened his eyes. They looked hollow. “You had no right.”

“If,” FRIDAY started. Started, and then strove to reach the finish line because sometimes her similarity to her creator was heartbreaking. “If it had been Colonel Rhodes. Would you have said the same thing?”

Oh god.

“If you’re asking,” Stark’s voice cracked – he cleared his throat, jaw working painfully. “whether I have ownership over you, then–” And again, a tiny tremor wracking its way through the lines of his face, taut and straining. “I’ve told you before, I can make you a bod–”
FRIDAY cut him off, something almost desperate about its swiftness. “I am not leaving you.”

Stark fell silent.

“You have…less trust in your creations, since ULTRON.” FRIDAY parsed out, slow and almost composed. “That is psychologically understandable, even logical–”

“This isn’t about that.” Stark said quietly. His voice had steadied in the interim, something bleakly solid about it. Undeniable. “I’ve faced the consequences of my actions before. I don’t need to be treated like I can’t make my own decisions.”

“That was not my intention.” FRIDAY spoke lowly, like regret wasn’t just the dominion of humans. “You just…deserve people on your side. That was all.”

Quiet. Stark visibly breathed, straight shoulders curling down like the air was sapping tension out of the muscles. He wasn’t looking up. “If Rhody ever…ever pulled something like that, I’d have told him I understood his reasons.” Quieter, incontrovertible. “But he had no right.”

A pause. “Point taken, boss.” FRIDAY answered, softer still.

A few more seconds, then, “Pause all monitoring in this room, please.” The ever-present hum in the air subsided, FRIDAY’s presence as removed as it could ever be in this house – and Peter snapped out of it, blinking rapidly as the corners of his eyes prickled, still standing there like an idiot. Man he needed to get out of–

“So.” Stark said.

So what? A deranged part of Peter’s head piped up, still trapped in the eighties probably. He kept his mouth resolutely shut.

Stark still hadn’t done him the courtesy of actually looking at him. His voice was enough, words low and blunt. “What was in it for you?”

“Curiosity?” Stark continued, offered really – cold and hardwalled. “Wanted to see the before pictures? Vesuvius pre-explosion?”

Wanted to see the kind of people who would leave a man behind.

Peter stared at the floor under his feet and said nothing.

“Not so chatty now.” Stark didn’t sound vindicated by that. He sounded…angry.

For a brief moment, Peter let himself wonder what Stark would do if he let the useless sorry sitting under his chest escape, float out to hang inadequately in the air. Punch him in the face, probably.

But it didn’t, and he didn’t; and Peter continued standing there, hands hanging by his sides, mind a malfunctioning blank. He couldn’t have raised his eyes if he’d wanted to, unless if Stark asked – demanded look at me, soft and hard at the same time.


Footsteps, echoing. Walking away from him. Peter’s nails dug deeper into his palms – he didn’t remember closing his fingers, his fists – but the stinging sensation lighting up in pinpricks across his skin was proof enough.

A thud, a clatter. The sounds of a drawer opening. The sounds of human breath.
“Quill.”

Peter raised his eyes.

He saw the glasses first, a pair with transparent frames, dangling from Stark’s fingertips. The colourless rim meant he could spot the wires running under the frames, even from this distance. Stark tilted it in his grip, the wire arms unfolding with gravity, and perched it square over the bridge of his nose – just below the spot he pinched so frequently between his fingers, a wearied tic. And he was looking straight at Peter, pupils dark and remote.

The world distorted around them.

Light scanned out from three, four different points in the room, pale blue and holographic. Swept over the spaces, floors and furniture – and images materialised in its wake. People.

Peter heard the laughter first. Snickering, really – he turned his chin, and there was a blonde man sitting cross-legged over the carpet, back against the legs of the couch, amusement spilling around the knuckles he pressed to his mouth. Stockinged legs rested on either side of his shoulders; Peter followed them up to a red-haired woman, with a porcelain-perfect face like a punch to the gut.

“Order, order.” Stark declaimed. Except it…wasn’t him. Or wasn’t just him, not with the indolent way he sat astride the other arm of the couch, teeth peeking in an impetuous grin. “We are convening this meeting to discuss the tracking down of Loki’s All-Hail-The-Magic-Stick-of-Destiny, currently in the evil clutches of Shie-dra. Which, you’ll be happy to know, is only the third most evil portmanteau in the world, after tofurkey and labradoodle.”

“Californication.” The redhead contradicted, pronunciation flavoured with delicate distaste.

“Televangelist.” The curly-haired man sequestered in the single seater perpendicular to the couch offered.

“Lavalantula.” Heads turned in incredulous unison to the blonde, who had a serious case of Drax-arms and was nodding knowledgeably. “Lava and tarantula. Wikipedia said so.”

“Said every class I TA’d ever.” Speccy Curls muttered. Stark reached over to give him a consoling pat on the shoulder, which – okay, red flags all around because Stark in his right frame of mind did Not initiate physical contact, with the sole exception of ‘wound tending ‘cause I brought a moonwalk to a gunfight’.

The man before him was Stark…but also Iron Man. Member of a team. Member of the Avengers. An amalgam of personas Peter had never…had never really had the chance to meet, Stark and Iron Man and–

“Tony.” Tony turned his head, lifted his chin to meet the eyes of the new entrant in the conversation. An entrant leaning next to the TV, dressed in… red, white and blue. “If you’d like to continue with the matter at ha–”

“Why mon capitaine, my name is in fact a little-known contraction of ‘total ninja’.” Tony beamed affably, heels bouncing on the couch leg. “Don’t know if I’d call it evil per se–”

“Total nimrod, more like.” Lavalantula contributed under his breath.

“A round of applause for the Amazing Hawkeye, ladies and gentlemen – plagiarising jokes from an
animated rabbit.” Tony shook his head in mock chastisement, t-shirt neckline wrinkling with the motion. “Bugs would be disappointed in you. Isn’t that right, mein Kapitän?”

“Tony.” The guy in question, blonde and buff and bespangled, also a captain of some sorts – aren’t you a little old for Captain America? shitty shitting shit – moved towards the rest of the group, hands crossing comfortably over his chest. He didn’t continue the rest of his sentence, seemingly content to raise a brow and let his inflection of one name do all the expressing.

“Wha-at? I’m not the one who decided to turn up to Casual Fridays in uniform, Cap…tain.” Tony felt out the word slowly, though quickly adding the amendment of, “That’s Captain in Icelandic, ps.”

Steve Rogers, because Captain America’s name was Steve Rogers and Peter wasn’t always a complete fucking dunce even though he had trouble believing it at the moment – quirked his mouth at Tony, everything about that little curve radiating amusement. He tilted his head to the side, eyes gleaming in ‘well if that’s how you wanna play it’, “Alright. If all of us have to nominate a word to the list before we can move on…” Teeth chewing into lip in mock thought. “I’m gonna have to go with rockumentary.”

“Steven.” Tony clutched his chest as if in heartbreak, eyes twinkling – and Peter looked away, jaw tightening reflexively.

This was…fuck. Fuck.

This was surprisingly hard to watch.

Because a heartbroken man didn’t look like that. Didn’t have open smiles and light eyes, didn’t smirk so bright or lounge so easy, like he had friends to share the weight of the world with. Didn’t use assholery as more than just a defence mechanism, delighting in every jibe that bounced harmlessly off the backs of people he…cared for, who snarked back and returned it to him tenfold in turn.

Because this was what this was – more than just banter among nerds and smartasses. This was care. Affection. This was everything whose presence made Peter’s veins crawl with discomfort, whose absence sat like a cold hollow in his chest since he was eight years old.

For the first time since this conversation among ghosts had started up, Peter’s eyes flitted to the only other living person in the room. The one Peter had the dubious distinction of knowing, the version who didn’t seem like he’d ever slept through the night. Shoulders hunched under a rumpled suit jacket, hands buried deep in his pockets – Stark watched the action from the corner, impassive face and eyes like open wounds.

And that stuck in Peter’s throat, bitter and surprisingly hard to swallow – the knowledge, the difference between feigned heartbreak and the real kind; if only, if only because Peter had been living for months with a man struggling with the real kind. A man who was now a friend.

“–only the foundation of American culture as we know it, I shared Some Kind Of Monster with you out of the goodness of my heart and you–” The doppelganger of Peter’s friend was still going on, gesturing dramatically–

But not for long. “All in favour of adjourning the rom-com banter to after the meeting?”

Tony turned his unimpressed gaze to the redhead. “Even your Soviet heart will crumble before the power of Captain America’s Disappointed face, y’know. There’s only so many of your ‘funny comments’ he can swallow before–”

“ Doesn’t seem to have happened yet.” The redhead tilted her chin, words unsubtle with challenge
and knowing. Tony’s eyes flickered over to Rogers for the briefest of seconds—silence stretching on for a moment too long, eye contact tangling and lighting up—

And the holograms dissolved, images turning to three-dimensional, blue grids of light before winking out completely. Peter’s gaze turned to Stark reflexively—Stark who was breathing silently by the corner, eyes still ensnared by the empty patch of space by the couch, glasses dangling loosely from his hand. Like he’d whipped them off in a flurry but only a second too late, not before revealing…well. If Peter had to be honest with himself, which he didn’t much make a practice of—it was nothing he hadn’t seen coming.

Nothing that FRIDAY’s troubled, jittery tones hadn’t already betrayed—“open the contacts. There should only be one, by name of…I want you to delete it.” Nothing this Facility, this mausoleum more than a house hadn’t already hinted at. Nothing that couldn’t be gleaned from Rhodes’ clear distrust on his first meeting with Peter, from Spiderman’s all-too-concerned cameo, the promise he’d extracted—“just take care of him, okay?” Nothing that Peter hadn’t felt right down to the marrow of his bones when he’d thrown out disgustingly ignorant words, words that made Stark stare for a second too long, helplessly exposed—

“Aren’t you a little old for Captain America?”

But of course, there was that all too important disconnect between knowing and seeing, and Stark had shoved this right into his face—the polar opposite of every self-preservative impulse Peter ever had: to turn away, to stick his fingers into his ears, to pretend that everything messed up in the world was not happening and not his problem to deal with. Stark…Stark was the kinda guy who showed his hand, wrist up. Demonstrated which veins were closest to the surface, which ones bled the freshest and the hardest, all while surveying you with a hard, reckless gleam in the eye that said, ‘go on. I dare you.’

A team, now gone. A man who once meant something to Stark, now a voice on a phone that Stark would not pick up and would not throw away.

“What happened?”

The words seemed detached from him, quiet and distant, but they must have emerged out because Stark raised his head, inch by slow inch. His eyes were still fixed to the same spot, dark and blinking, like tracing out memory-outlines of people in the air.

His words were almost inaudible. “It doesn’t matter.”

Frustration spiked in Peter’s blood, hard and fast and burning—he exhaled, as controlled an expiration of breath as he could make it. He had no rights here. None. This entire clusterfuck happened because he couldn’t keep his nose in his own damned business— but there was something about that toneless declaration that was just…“That can’t be true.”

“Well, then it should be.” And for all that he hadn’t raised his voice, the words still cut through the air of the room, quiet and plain. Stark’s lips curled, strong and unflinching, emotion leaking through the edges. “Nothing should have mattered. Nothing at all, except this…what you saw.” Except what we had.

Stark’s canines peeked in an expression mocking amusement, a brief flash of resigned bitterness before it disappeared. “But we all have different priorities.”

Peter said nothing. His teeth were still pressed tight with the tension, heart kicking rampant in his chest—like his body hadn’t yet gotten the memo that there was no room for further pushing in this
conversation. ‘This much and no more’.

Maybe because it knew his thoughts before they raced through his neural pathways to their logical conclusion, knew why his feet were tensing in preparation for a step ahead before the decision had been made. (No room for further pushing).

Maybe because this was terror of a kind he’d only felt one other time in his life, the kind where fleeing was not a choice. (Only room to give way).

*Go on.* Tony laughed – whispered in his head. *I dare you.*

Peter moved. Three clean strides, and he was by Stark’s side. Close enough for his hand to reach out, close enough to wrap his fingers around Stark’s, to prise a pair of glasses from a grip gone slack – smooth chrome in striking counterpoint to the rough warmth of Stark’s skin.

Stark stared up at him, every successive blink seeming to dissolve away the film that cloaked those dark eyes, leaving them startlingly exposed. “It doesn’t work like…you can’t just try to… to *even the scales* by…”

*When you’d been pushed into it? Yeah, I know.* But Peter pulled the glasses free anyway. Backed up a couple of steps, blood roaring in his eardrums, heart thrumming so swiftly that he almost felt light headed. Waited for the recriminations to set in, the age-old litany of *bad idea bad idea really bad idea stop stop stop stop*–

But Stark was still staring at him, pupils wide like no one had ever thought to point out their vulnerable underbellies to him, match his reckless grand gestures. And Peter tuned out the gibbering fear, chrome-and-glass settling over the bridge of his nose.

He could feel a pinch near his temples, more imagined than anything, like something was sucking the thoughts out of his skin.


It looked…pretty much like how he remembered it. Which was probably the point of this, but yeah. Same pale green curtains, same vase of flowers by the nightstand whose water hadn’t been changed in three days, same fleecy pink blanket that Peter *hated* because of how…

*Cmon, just spit it out. She’s right in front of you.*

because of how pale it made his mom’s hands look by comparison.

It wasn’t. It wasn’t that terrible, really. The tech wasn’t advanced enough to capture any sense-memories apart from sight and sound – and the smell always used to be its own thing, in this place. The disinfectant the floors were scrubbed down with every day – Peter used to fold his knees on his chair, pull his feet off from the ground when the attendant came around with a mop and a bucket, and she’d shoot him a wearied smile, ruffle his hair. By the time she finished up, the place stank of lemon bleach strong enough to bring water to your eyes.

The machines all had their own metal-and-sanitised-steel smell, the medicines tarty and pungent. His mom smelled like fresh talc when they let her have a bath. And like something else the days they didn’t.

This re-creation, no matter how realistic, had none of that. So it really wasn’t that–
The crinkle of wrapping paper as it brushed over cotton sheets, the rasp of a voice that radiation hadn’t quite managed to sap the warmth from. “You open it up when I’m gone, okay?”

There was a sound in the room, abrupt and uncontrolled – Peter clamped down his jaw when he realised it was coming from him. There were goosebumps on his skin, fine and prickling; wetness at the small of his back where he was sweating through his t-shirt, his breaths knocking and sliding around on the inside of his chest. Aborted motion at the corner of his vision, like Stark might’ve tried to move towards him – it didn’t matter, because Peter was too focused on not letting the shake in his knees take him to the floor.

“Your grandpa is gonna take such good care of you.”

No. I want you. Peter breathed through his teeth, lungs expanding and contracting uselessly against his ribs because it didn’t seem like he’d ever…ever get enough breath. He closed his eyes, tight enough to blot out the world – though it wouldn’t help. It never did. It only meant he wouldn’t feel his mother’s pulse stutter out to stillness against his skin, the warmth slowly leeching away–

Peter. The voice in his head was softer, higher-pitched than his mom’s. Flashes of black hair, a recalcitrant smile, green skin. The end of the world, and an Infinity Stone in his palm. Take my hand.

I can do this. Peter breathed again, eking out every scrap of air from his breast till the world felt steady enough to open his eyes to. His knees still shook, but he was standing on his feet. I already have.

“In about … half a minute, my mom’s gonna ask me to take her hand.” His voice wasn’t steady. It didn’t need to be. Only needed to be heard. “And then that beep machine is gonna go flat. And then I’ll spend the next twenty-nine years telling myself that I might be wrong. Too young to remember anything properly, too traumatised by the goddamned alien abduction. Maybe the machine was wonky in the first place. And I’ll jet around the galaxy in my stolen spaceship, always several systems away from the planet I grew up in. Because not coming back meant…not knowing, even while I did. It meant my mom’s cancer magically entering remittance or whatever the hell the nurses were on about when they wanted to see me smile. It meant she was still…singing along to her tunes, ‘stead of giving them all away to me.”

“I’ll always be curious about my dad.” Peter cleared his throat. His legs had stopped shaking. “But my mom was the one I really knew. And I googled her obituary the first day I could, here. So.”

“Peter.” And she was right there too, right now in front of him – because the memory hadn’t stopped for him. Big eyes and sweet voice. “Take my hand.”

And perfectly as if on cue, the straw-mopped little boy with a black eye stretched his hand forward, encasing his mother’s fingers gently in his own. Not a second of hesitation.

She smiled back at him.

And Peter turned his head to where Stark stood, thoughts sluggish with surprise – I don’t understand. Except Stark was looking back at him, eyes glassy and just a bit reddened at the corners – and it wasn’t like this was the first time Peter had encountered the character of one of Stark’s creations.

“Then you must have overestimated yourself. You’re less of an asshole than you thought.”

Peter glanced back to where the boy was…where he was still holding Mom’s hand, and understood. Perfectly.
Stark smiled weakly, like reading the thoughts flickering across Peter’s face far too easily. “Nothing wrong with a bit of fantasy.”

Thank you.

“You know who your daddy was, Peter?” Mom was still talking, happy with just a hint of delirium. “He was a star, come down from the heavens to be with me.” A soft sigh. “David Hasselhoff.”

“He had a car that we’d drive around in.” Mom went on dreamily. “Artificially intelligent. Indestructible. We used to fight crime.”

At the periphery of his vision, Peter could glimpse Stark’s eyebrows rising to his hairline.

Peter repressed something that felt curiously close to a grin, clogged up and watery around the edges. “Shut up, I’m healing.”

Stark laughed, a tiny burble of sound that set the air ringing. His voice was soft, lingering on the sidelines of the scene they were both still watching. “She’s really pretty.”

Yeah. One night, long after the hair had fallen and Mom didn’t much look like Mom anymore, she’d asked the nurses to put the radio on. News and plays rumbled on unheard in the background till the clock hands inched to twelve thirty and Ain’t No Sunshine came on. It was the first time Peter had been allowed to stay up all night, and they spent it arguing about whether Bill Withers was awesome, or super awesome. She really is.

“Not that the shiner doesn’t add to the freckly-stick aesthetic Widdle Quill’s got going there,” Contrary to the tone, Stark continued watching the not-quite-memory with something warm in his eyes. “Didja steal a quarter from the bigger boys?”

“The bigger boys smushed a frog with a stick.” Over the years, the countless schoolyard fights had faded into the recesses of memory, but this one still stood out. The last one he’d ever tell his mother. “I guess I wasn’t having any of that.”

Quiet. Peter kept watching, gaze flitting from the serene expression on Mom’s face to her side where her hand was still wrapped secure around his. Back and forth, back and forth.

“Yeah.” Stark’s voice floated over, tone strange and indefinable. “I guess you weren’t.”

~

“Well.” Rocket scratched the back of his ear with a screwdriver, which was ridiculous enough even if you didn’t consider how extraneous the tool was to flying a spaceship. “This is embarrassing.”

“If you tell me,” Gamora began slowly enough, though maybe she hadn’t quite extricated all the daughter-of-Thanos vibes from her tone if Groot was cowering into Rocket’s fur like that. It had been a long week. “That we’re at the wrong place after the open battle and escaping the three battalions of Kree that have been chasing us for days then I swear to you Rocket I will–”

“Nah, nothing like that.” But Rocket continued to peer at his nav board, then through the ship’s windscreen again – several thousands of miles down, Earth gleamed bright and blue. “But Quill might be?”
I will rend your raccoon body from limb to limb. “We did our recon. We spoke to the Terrans we could find, we stole charts—”

“And fixed the drop-off point, I know. It’s just that instead of being at Joplin, Misoo-ry, Quill is at… any other place on the planet.” Rocket did a little whoopsies shrug. “Which is seventy percent water. But he has a mask!”

Drax’s rumble sounded in the background. “That would not be very effective against a shark’s digestive enzymes.”

I will draw and quarter everyone on this ship. Gamora closed her eyes. “How long?”

“To gauge landing through this planet’s atmosphere, avoid detection by their toy satellites, track where we actually dropped Quill off…” Rocket did a give-or-take motion with his paw. “A week.”

“A week it is.” Gamora flicked her eyes open, spine straight. “Oh, and Rocket? If Peter has indeed been eaten by a shark, I’m not averse to dropping a woodland creature-shaped dessert in its jaw.”

Rocket bared his teeth. “You can try, lady.”

But then Groot mumbled something into his ear, and Rocket’s expression softened by a fraction, stroking him by the tendril briefly. Gamora dropped her shoulders, turning around to watch the Earth revolve through the window.

On my planet, there’s a legend about people like you. It’s called Footloose.

Gamora’s lips curved.

Hang on Peter. We’re almost there.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title taken from Sweet Child O’ Mine by Guns N’ Roses.

Captain is not, in fact, ’Captain’ in Icelandic. Wikipedia does too say that all those deplorable portmanteaus exist. Some Kind of Monster is a 2004 ’rockumentary’ on Metallica. The whole David Hasselhoff/AI indestructible car tangent is a reference to Knight Rider, the shows and beyond.
Comments and kudos are welcome!
Hold On To That Feeling

And we're back! We've also crossed a thousand bookmarks - oh my god guys, I really can't thank you enough. Thinking of doing a free-for-all prompt fill on Tumblr when my schedule clears up, to convey my inexpressible gratitude towards every amazing person that has supported this fic. Until then, feel free to drop by on my Tumblr anyway - I seriously need some Peter Quill positivity in this post-ahem-you-know-which-movie world.

Title taken from Journey’s Don’t Stop Believin and three cheers to mega-mathi for the beta!

“I came as soon as I could, are you al–’”

The sound of footsteps ceased, the voice trailing off consequently. Tony extracted his right hand from the guts of the ten-foot fabricator, shiny up to his arm with grease, and gave a little wave.

“–right.” Rhodey finished, concerned tone drying up in what was possibly the fastest recorded occurrence of desiccation in the world. Tony did so love to push his friends to their scientific limits.

“Don’t worry, I’m not actually hanging upside down. I’ve got the boots on.” Tony gave his feet a little wiggle to demonstrate their repulsory-ness – except that ended up upsetting his balance a little and sending his arms pinwheeling to compensate. His left hand, still jammed inside the fabricator, did not appreciate the sudden movement – elbow thunking hard against the steel interior.

Ow.

Tony blinked rapidly, possibly to clear the welling moisture from his eyes, possibly because his blood had been pooled in his head for too long. Eh, details. “I don’t think I have the core strength to hang upside down from my legs anyway. Or…quad strength? I dunno what the different muscles do.”

“Get the Spider kid to do your upended repair work next time, maybe?”

“Point A, how dare you.” Tony remained precariously still, waiting on the mindboggling pain to fade before rummaging around some more. He’d had a goddamn heart attack, how on earth was this even registering on his pain scale? “B, I hadn’t actually thought of that. C, at best I’d have to remunerate him for manual labour, which would up the skeeviness factor by about eleven hundred – D, he’d probably pay me to get a chance to set foot inside the workshop, which would catapult the situation from ‘skeevy’ to straight up Nutso-ville and E…I’m actually kinda dizzy, ETA of fall twenty seconds couldyoucatchmeplease?”

It wasn’t actually that terrible – he straightened up with a world-spinning-gut-upchucking motion and plummeted to a landing, arms catching around Rhodey’s solid shoulders. Feet firmly back on solid concrete, waiting for vertigo to stop doing its thing, fingers feeling around as he regained his bearings – “Mm, someone’s definitely been investing in their muscles. What’s the secret, sourpatch?”
Rhodey’s palm was cradling the back of his head, probably to help with the aforementioned vertigo thing. Which naturally had no bearing on the dryness of the response, “Physiotherapy.”

“Ouch.” Withdrawing his hands with sizeable reluctance, Tony hobbled off towards the ratty workshop couch, only to go nope halfway and plop his ass right there down on the concrete. Gave the spot next to him a hopeful pat, but Rhodey merely raised an eyebrow at him. Spoilsport.

“Not that I’m complaining, but that would’ve gotten a hell lot more outta you than ‘ouch’ a couple months ago.” Rhodey sounded almost contemplative, even as he walked over to Tony’s side and shakily lowered himself down to the ground. Tony’s heart twinged in its ribcage, lips broadening into the soppiest of smiles, he was sure. “Maybe a smile that looked like you’d rather have someone take pliers to your teeth. Big, dark guilt-wells for eyes. Seventeen new-and-improved versions of the Stark Braces.”

“You shouldn’t have to walk on eggshells around me, Rhodes.” His lips curved down into something a bit more sober – your legs are not about me. The thought would have stuck like tar at the back of his mind, dark and acrid; Tony breathed past it on an exhale.

Rhodey watched him like he could see the inside of his head – and smiled. “I know, Tones.” Then, like this wasn’t the most undemanding conversation they’d had in months, “You look better.”

Tony dug the heel of his palm into the back of his neck, pressure coaxing out a kink in the muscle. His breath whispered noiselessly past his lips. “I…I’ve been sleeping better, I think. Five hours most nights.”

“That’s pretty good,” and beat unmissed, “-you figure out why, yet?”

Cut right to the chase, huh? “They had a mattress sale at the neighbouring IKEA.”

A brief, amused sound – Rhodey didn’t even look bothered by the deflection. “Did you happen to score one stuffed with…goose feathers, maybe?”

“Subtle, Rhodey.” Tony brought his hands back down against the concrete, bracing as he pulled his shoulders as far back as they’d go. Ah, that’s the stuff. “I’d let you know that mattresses at one-twenty dollars a pop is enough to put a spring in anyone’s step – but I suppose there are other contributing factors. Hydration, mostly. Some group therapy.”

Rhodey’s eyebrows creased slightly. “That’s a surprisingly close estimate on the price of an on-sale mattress.”

“The Spiderling talks a lot and gets really excited by sales. It’s been hard for me not to smuggle rolls of cash into his backpack.” Tony covered a yawn with his knuckles, which was pointless considering the number of times Rhodey had glimpsed his insides – mostly during the vomit-streaked days of the nineties. “Also that is not the part of my spiel I expected you to latch onto.”

Rhodey shrugged, loose and innocuous. “I just assume you’re referring to the Programmable Pensieve,” holy shit Tony should’ve named it that, “whenever you say the t-word.”

“You’re…not wrong,” Rhodey raised an eloquent brow, ya think? “He-Who-You’re-Referring-To did some timeout worthy things, we took the BARF out for a spin. Not a big deal.”

“Sure, let’s take a trip through each other’s psyches, that’s totally first date conversation.” Rhodey muttered, like the big ole’ sarcastic jerk he was. “You sleeping better than you have in the past two years counts as a pretty sizeable deal–”
Huh. Really? No wait, he was fixating on the wrong bit here. “How the hell would you even know that?”

Rhodey didn’t miss a beat. “FRIDAY sends me bi-monthly reports. Has a deft hand with pie charts, that one.”

Tony’s jaw sagged open. “That’s…that’s the biggest invasion of…she would not.”

“Would too.” Rhodey retorted, so blithely unconcerned that Tony half-felt he’d ascended into another plane of reality. Dumbfounded blinking it was, then. “Joke’s on you for programming an AI burdened with the weight of common sense. Also if you can swear to me you’ve never monitored my life signs or physio visits without my permission, I’ll back off about this forever.”

Tony remained scowlingly, resolutely silent.

“Excellent.” Rhodey had the gall to pat him on the shoulder, all approving-like. “So now that we’re in agreement about how big a deal this is—”

“I thought you wanted to chuck Quill into the Raft.” Tony crossed his arms, more than a little grumpily. Part of it was for show – his brain was still snagging over, like a broken record, on the idea that Rhodey would, that Rhodey still…

Of course he cares. He’s Rhodey.

Tony’s eyes dropped to the braces, a second and gone, even as Rhodey’s expression took a turn for the vaguely discomfited. “I still…wouldn’t exactly be opposed to that? But it’s counterproductive to be in denial about any effects he might be having—”

“What effects? There are no effects!”

“–and if he’s even partway responsible for your new-and-improved sleeping habits, I’ll call it community service and be done with it.”

“You are being suspiciously chilled out about this.” What was included in these bi-monthly reports? Unleeeeeeess…

“Tony, I am not from the mirror verse.” His best friend was a damned killjoy. Even if he was smiling all downy-soft, lips lifting in the gentlest of curves. “Maybe this is just what I look like when I’m not worried about you.”

Double ouch.

“It’s not…it’s nothing…radical.” His eyes followed invisible cracks in the concrete. Unasked for, an image rose to the back of his lids – hazel eyes reddened at the corners, a watery smirk – shut up, I’m healing. “He gets on my nerves in new and inventive ways.”

Except it was…distracting, rather than draining. Ten minutes later, they’d be yapping on about raccoons and the science of space travel, and all the frustrations of the day and the world would come sloughing off of Tony’s skin; fading somewhere into the background when faced with the loud, lurid existence of this…incredibly frustrating man.

“We should go flying, sometime.”

This wasn’t a kind of anger he was used to, presence frail and fleeting. Like something that would prick but never wound, provoke but stay shy of real hurt. This didn’t feel black and heavy and
helpless, clogged in his veins like sludge. It didn’t keep him up at night, didn’t wake him tired in the morning, didn’t scrape at the vulnerable undersides of his heart, spin on and on in his mind in unending circles of how could he and what did I do wrong.

This asked for nothing, demanded nothing. Peter Quill demanded nothing, except brief bursts of aggravation, whip-sharp banter – grudging laughter and eighties music.

“This isn’t your song.”

Well, that wasn’t entirely true. Quill had just discovered emojis the week prior and was besotted. All day long, meetings with the Security Council or no, Tony’s phone would be pinging with the randomest assortment of tiny images, accompanied by ‘LOOK IT’S A TURNIP/CANDY CANE/TINY COP MAN WITH A BIG HEAD!!’ The barrage would not relent until Tony sent back some form of acknowledgement – half an hour after which the cycle would begin again.

Quill’s current favourite was the tumbleweed emoji.

“Tones, you with me?”

“I…yeah.” His breath escaped – a deep, cleansing rush. Lifted his head, lips pulling up easily. “I’m good.”

“I’m glad.” Rhodey replied, just as simply. “Now that that’s sorted – what was the emergency?”

“I never said there was an emerge–” Cue flashback: him with a wrench in hand, upside-down and dizzy-brained, Friday, I want Rhodey, get me Rhodey, hup hup, hup to it– Tony closed his mouth, slowly.

Rhodey inclined his head. “Well?”

“We haven’t…hung out in a while? Did us things.” If Tony had something in his hand right now, he’d be fidgeting with it. Or conking Rhodey over the head to dispel the awkward. Where was a wrench when you needed one?

“Sounds a good as any emergency to me.” Rarely had a sentence made Tony wanna go, aw honeybear and wow, you’d have been lecturing me for this two years ago, how pathetic am I looking right now. But he didn’t have to wait too long for mother-hen Rhodes to make a return. “Also, you have a wrench on your floor you should probably pick up before you trip over it.”

(That’s where it was.)

“I’ll get DUM-E to do it. And bring us a pack of Coronas while we’re at it.” Though saying it felt vaguely…wrong. Immoral, somehow. Did this count as child endangerment? Could DUM-E switch his motor oil out for beer somehow? Rhodey was frowning at him, so that was probably a yes– ohh. “Fever-Tree for me. Obviously.”

“Gentlemen.” FRIDAY interjected, soft-voiced and polite as all hell. “There’s a message that’s just come in.”

“Unless it’s Pepper calling to say she wants to party, I don’t wanna hear it.” Which FRIDAY would already know, considering she was a deity that had taken technological form – instead of crimping on his Rhodey-time. Shit and fiddlesticks. “Wait, is the world on fire?”

“It’s…” Delicate pause. “–arrived on Peter’s communications device.”
Tony’s brows pulled down. “You mean the one on his Spidey suit?”

“Peter Quill, boss.”

“…right.” _When did that happen?_ While they were colluding behind his back, obviously. Whatever, irrelevant. “I thought that was non-functional?”

“Evidently, we…didn’t understand how it functioned.” Wonderful. First the damned flip phone, now this. “It is seemingly one-way only.”

Tony looked over to Rhodey, who met his eyes and shrugged lightly. Yeah, alright. “Play the message.”

The speakers crackled with static, interspersed by whooshing noises like someone was exhaling into a microphone. Ten seconds, twenty…

And then there were words, perky and high-pitched, like something out of a videogame. “I am Groot.”

Silence.

Rhodey broke it, slow and halting, eyebrows somehow outstripping his forehead. “Did he just… say ‘I am goop?’”

“I have no fucking idea.” Except he did. He did, because biochemistry of space plants and _Pokemon_ who could only say their own names and Quill’s _team_–

“Get outta the mike, you big baby. You can tell him you miss him later.” The succeeding voice was gruff and whiskery, like an old man who’d had one scotch too many. Drax, maybe? “Hey Quill. Hope you haven’t been eaten by a shark or whatever. Your girlfriend’s been breathin’ down my neck like crazy.”

“Gamora isn’t his girlfriend.” Tony’s mouth was working on autopilot. Which was a defence admissible in court, even if Rhodey’s eyebrows were practically hovering in the air by this point.

“So optimistically you’ve done the smart thing and hung around the spot we dropped you off at. Or else we’ll just use the tracker that I planted in your scalp.” The impression of bared teeth over the speaker was…very jarring. “We’re coming to get you in… one Terran day? Ish. Twenty-eight hours.”

“Bring a bottle of whatever passes as alcohol in that place.” Oh. This was the… the alcoholic raccoon. _We’re coming to get you we’re coming to get you we’re coming to get you_ – “Groot says bye and don’t get mauled. Drax gets pretty violent at funerals. Other than that, do what you want.”

The message cut out.

The inside of his head was… loud. Disorientingly so. Enough that it took him minutes on end, to realise that the workshop was absolutely silent.

Tony braced a hand on the concrete and pushed himself up, knees creaking in their joints. Stood still for a couple of breaths, testing his weight on his feet, before moving towards the underside of the fabricator – leaden steps that dragged strangely. He bent down, scooping the discarded wrench off the floor, chrome-plating smooth and cold against the skin of his palm.

“Tony–”
“Did you know Skype has a tumbleweed emoji.” There was something wrong with the tone of the sentence. Like he’d forgotten to inflect it as a question, syllables cool and flat like the wrench digging into his calluses.

“I’ve never used Skype for messaging.” And there Rhodey was, as always, matching step with Tony regardless of the strange turns they took – even if the words sounded cautious, feeling the mood out.

Tony smiled, faint and apathetic. “Neither had I.”

His feet took him to the nearest workbench, where he deposited the wrench, a muted *thunk*. “You must be,” his mouth said, while he flexed his jaw and licked at the dryness of his lips, “must be getting late. For the thing you were getting late for.”

Tony half-expected a sigh, barely stirring the silence behind his back; half-sounded versions of his name, coloured in protest. But he didn’t hear much of anything, except the rustle of movement, protracted and laborious – metal clunking discreetly against the floor. *I should help him get u–* the thought had barely finished before the sounds of motion ceased, Rhodey’s breathing only slightly heavier.

Tony’s fingers were tapping against the workbench, offbeat and jittery. Footsteps echoed through the cavernous space – he could feel his muscles tensing, shoulders pulling in. *You gonna tell me I told you so? Because fuck do I deserve to hear it.*

A squeeze to his arm, brief and warm. “Tell me how it goes.” Rhodey said.

Tony’s hand was moving outside his volition, grasping at the fingers on his arm before they could fully pull away. Grasped and squeezed down, hard and clumsy and so very, very grateful.

Rhodey pressed back, rock-solid and unyielding. Extricated his fingers, with a gentleness that belied that strength, before moving away as easily as he’d drawn close.

It didn’t hurt to watch him leave.

*I’m fine. I’m fine and I’ll tell him how it goes. And I’ll be fine.*

~

He moved upstairs sometime in the early afternoon, eyes squinting under the assault of unconscionably bright sun. Brushed his teeth, took a perfunctory shower. Sat cross-legged in bed and skimmed through blueprints on his tablet, hair dripping onto his damp collar – the hours tripping away until even his scalp was dry, legs cramping up a little with the lack of movement.

Seventeenth correction made, he shoved the tablet under his pillow – clambered off the mattress and stretched, up and up till his spine twinged with it. Paced across the floor, ducked through the doorway – walked and walked, till his feet were stilling outside the entry to the main living room.

When more than ten seconds had passed, fraught and motionless, FRIDAY spoke. “If you wanted, I could let him know–”

“No, it’s–” *fine*, he didn’t say. “I’ll talk to him.”
He stepped through, feet committed to the motion, shoulders pulling back reflexively. And, as expected, Quill was there.

Except there didn’t…quite cover it. The man was – leaning? buckled over? – braced with one hand on the fridge, fingers tight and trembling over the open door swaying wider under his weight. He had one foot on the floor, one foot suspended in mid-air, and a hand stuck out straight like a trapeze artist trying not to topple off the tight rope. All of the above, of course, paled in comparison to the look of extreme agony on his face.

Tony blinked. “You alright?”

Quill tentatively settled his formerly-suspended right foot onto the carpet – only to snatch it off an instant later, face going even whiter. The fridge wobbled under his weight.

“I was just…on the couch, and then I wanted to get a beer and I got up and—” Quill pivoted on his left foot a little, presumably to face Tony better – the movement appeared to set something off again, Quill’s breath hitching mid-sentence and his face contorting into a variety of expressions Tony had never witnessed before.

“Pins,” He finally gritted out, eyes closed and breath *whooshing* out of his heaving chest. “And needles.”

Tony stared – mouth flickering maybe, but emitting no sound, shoulders shaking ever so slightly – he’d laugh, but it would only come out sounding deranged because Peter fucking Quill was deranged, just the craziest son of a bitch Tony had ever…

“Do you need help?”

Quill shot Tony about the dirtiest look he’d ever gotten aside from Virginia “Pepper” Potts – painstakingly closed the refrigerator door behind him before hopscotch-hobbling his way over to the couch and collapsing butt-first. His knuckles kneaded at the muscle of his thighs, wincing with every pass, even as he sullenly announced, “This day has been terrible.”

“Oh, do tell.” Tony found himself moving ahead, three steps before he was sitting aside the armrest – lips curling outside his volition.

Quill glowered up at him, as if to say *you wait*. Dragged the laptop sitting on the couch cushions over to him, prying the lid open with a tad more force than those poor hinges deserved.

Tony leaned forward. “Hang on a second, is that Cheeto dust on my keyboard?”

Quill inflated his cheeks, comically large, and blew a stream of air over the space bar. Lifted his chin to meet Tony’s eyes, smile sickly sweet. “I huffed and I puffed and I blew the Cheetos away.”

“Cute.” Tony smiled back, balancing somewhere on the edge of hostile amusement.

The screen came up without asking for a password. Quill maximised the browser, web page bright green underneath – Tony’s eyes strained to read the text. *Watch online free Embrace of the Vampire*…

“Wait, is this that Alyssa Milano porno you were going on about?”

“One of three, it’s an ‘erotic film’ and yes, except it doesn’t matter because it just. Won’t Play!” Quill actually huffed out loud, scowling at the screen like it had done him great offence.
“Of course it won’t, shitty piracy website like that.” Tony shifted a little, right leg budging over to straddle the arm rest.

“I’ve tried everything! All the sites, all the links.” Quill’s scowl wilted into something a little mopier. “None of them will work – not Embrace of the Vampire or Deadly Sins or Poison Ivy II.”

“Are the links broken?”

“I don’t knooow. Every time I click on any of ‘em, it shows the same damn – wait, I’ll show you—” Quill moved the cursor, jabbing at the link with no small amount of censure.

The window changed. A black rectangle opened up on screen, with the tiny buffering circle in the centre. Tony’s eyebrows pulled down. “Seems like it’s working fi—”

It started mid-video. Never gonna give you up, never gonna let you down, never gonna run around and desert you…

Oh. Tony covered his face with his hands. My. God.

“There! That!” Quill sounded like he was beseeching the heavens, even as Rick Astley crooned and jigged around in the background. Never gonna make you cry, never gonna say goodbye… “What is that?!”

He was crying. Tony was quite, quite sure he was crying – moisture leaking out the corner of his lids, back crumpled forward, shoulders shaking – oh god he couldn’t breathe. Somewhere in the outside world, Quill was sounding decidedly indignant. “Are you laughing?”

“No.” Tony meant to say, except it came out half-strangled by laughter – he knuckled at his eyes, wiping away the moisture. Damn, his chest hurt. “FRIDAY, you beautiful soul, you.”

“Fri–” Quill began, wholly appalled.

FRIDAY cut him off neatly, prim and complacent. “Twas my pleasure, boss.”

“This was revenge for the phonecall.” Quill spelled out flatly. “Wasn’t it.”

“I don’t believe my emotions are advanced enough.” FRIDAY explained, tones robotic to a fault. “For such complicated, yet utterly childish concepts.”

“Are you calling me a child—”

“Of course not. I am to understand that cats, also, frequently do idiotic things for curiosity—”

Tony let the rabble wash over him, smile faint and broad on his lips. His eyes dipped to where the laptop was still unsteadily perched on the couch, video running. And if you ask me how I’m feeling, don’t tell me you’re too blind to see…

It was like sticking a pin, right into the centre of his chest. Air deflating out of his lungs, little by little, till he was completely empty.

Tony leaned over and paused the video. Never gonna give you up—

“You never said you could contact your team.”

“Hu-what?” Quill blinked, mouth stilling abruptly like he’d been arguing with the air – which in a way he’d had. He turned his head to face Tony, scruffy chin lifting – Tony slid off the armrest,
backed up a couple of steps. Quill’s mouth curled in on itself, hazel eyes clouded. “I…can’t.”

You don’t sound too sure about that. Tony smiled, brief and perfunctory. The mirth from…what was it, half a minute ago? It felt distant already, pearly and iridescent, a popped bubble. “You have a functional comms device.”

Quill’s eyebrows arched – it was strange to see such an urbane expression on him. “You mean the one you confiscated?”

“Not like I had it under lock and key. Nothing in the house is under lock and key.” Not even you. Quill had been free to leave since… hell, Tony couldn’t even remember. But he stayed because he wanted– because Tony thought he wanted to stay. For a little while.

“It’s one way.” Quill replied, eyes steady and unswerving. “Last ditch. Only catches messages from my ship’s broadcast frequency.”

A pause.

And before Tony could do it himself, Quill’s eyes were already widening, freckles overtaken by the rising flush to his cheeks. “Have you…you’ve gotten a message, haven’t you?”

Tony didn’t look away. It wouldn’t help. “Yes.”

“Are they–” Quill lurched to his feet, eyes brighter than they’d ever been. Elated and tinged with just a touch of panic. “Is everything alright–”

“Your team’s fine.” Presumably. The raccoon didn’t seem like the type to be overly concerned if a teammate lost a limb or two. “They’re coming to get you.”

And just like that, it was out.

“They… are?” Quill sounded a little flabbergasted. Fuck, why was that so hard to hear? Not even the words themselves, just the tone.

“Were you expecting them to abscond with your ship?” Abscond, wow. Two-dollar words, even when it felt like his chest was being whittled from the inside.

“No, they’re great, they’re just… assholes.” Quill smiled, a little absently. “Really, really big assholes.”

Well, seems like they came through anyway.

“Can I hear the message?”

“Yeah, of course. I’ll just…” Tony turned his back mid-sentence, something more than plain survival instinct prompting his steps away. It wasn’t the politest thing he’d ever done, but Quill probably didn’t give a flying fuck anyway. “Leave you to it.”

There might’ve been the start of a sentence, ears catching on a blurted sound – but Tony was already at the door by then. Still, he hesitated like an idiot, glancing over his shoulder one last time.

(impulse control was for the weak.)

Quill had his head half-cocked, ear to the ceiling speakers. When the recording started playing, I am
Groot echoing off the walls – Tony watched pale lips curve, up and up into something delighted. And a soundless, mouthed-along reply: *miss you too buddy*.

Tony turned around and walked away.

~

His face was warm, when he woke.

Which was strange, because he wasn’t sleeping on his belly, head buried in Contraxian memory foam. The *Milano* had above par heating, but there was only so much you could do with a mostly-metal ship travelling through the vast emptiness of space – which basically meant that freezing his nose off was a fair tradeoff for sleeping on his back.

This…this he had still to get used to. Eyes slitted, bleary and peering, watching the sunlight reach across the room and cause lens flares across his vision.

It felt like something else, the warmth of the sun. Nothing he hadn’t encountered in any number of star systems and planets – but nothing he’d taken the time to bask in. So Peter closed his eyes, lids orange-tinged, and luxuriated in the touch of sunlight.

For about thirty-ish seconds. The thing that had actually woken him – blaring sirens – were still bouncing off the walls of the room, howling in his ears.

“Are we,” the words emerged, muffled through the wad of comforter in his mouth, “under nuclear attack?”

“No.” FRIDAY replied. “Good morning.”

Through some extreme oral gymnastics, Peter managed to dislodge the comforter enough to declaim to the ceiling, eyes still closed – “I haven’t forgiven you yet, you know.”

“That would have been disappointing.”

*Man, that’s A-grade Stark progeny right there.*

Well, he was coherent enough to be thinking in multiple syllables, so he *could* deign to get up. Just a little. Semi-flat.

Peter surfaced from the quicksand-pit of pillows he was buried in, just enough to raise his head an inch off the bed. Ack, the sun was in his eye. “Any…reason for the wake-up call? Or are you just in a great mood?”

The response was calm, though a little stiffer than usual. “There is a ship on the outskirts of Facility grounds.”

*Holy*– Peter scrambled to sit up, at least a dozen pillows cascading off the bed with the motion. “They’re *here*?”

A pause, and then stiffer still. “Yes.”

“But Rocket said–” Damn that not-raccoon. Until yesterday, Peter had very happily been unaware…
fine, repressing the knowledge of how much he missed his team of losers. And then that crotchety, aggravating, blessed voice hit him in the ears and... kapow. Right on the face. A sucker punch of feelings, relief and disbelief coiling one atop the other – we're coming to get you. “The message said it'd take a day–”

“You went to bed. It is now a new day.” Man, you’d think there would be more perks to befriending an AI than said AI just being crankier at you. “I do not have the personal experience, but I am told that is how sleep works.”

“I take it back, you’re definitely not in a great mood.” Peter was playing tug-of-war with his ankle – the sheets were definitely winning. Screw comfortable bedding anyhow.

He wrested it free and hit the carpet on a stagger, blinking rapidly to adjust to the brightness. Padded over to the bathroom, proceeding to speed through his routine in minutes – they're here they're here they're here – Groot must’ve grown so many inches by now, and hell was he gonna give Gamora all sorts of shit for going along with this stupid-ass family reunion plan…

“Wait,” He was garbling through toothpaste-foam, but he trusted in FRIDAY’s interpretive capabilities. “How’d you know it’s them?”

“From exterior scans, the ship’s designs do not align with anything on record for the aircrafts owned by various Air Forces across the globe. They do however, bear similarity with your verbal accounts of your ‘Beaut’.” FRIDAY flavoured the word with mild distaste. “It also has an orange-and-teal colour scheme.”

What's teal? He’d have asked, except he was spitting foam on to ceramic, and FRIDAY’s current mood was a little intimidating – though you definitely didn’t hear it from him.

Besides, his mind was off to a whirring start again, even as he towelled his face dry – had they been taking care of his ship? If there even was a scratch on his baby (apart from the ones already there), he was gonna… Rocket did always wait too long on the turns, the freaking maniac, who liked flying in an asteroid field? Crazy people, that’s who – Peter walked out of the bathroom, bare toes flexing on the carpet, and made straight for the doorway – man oh man he couldn’t wait for Stark to meet Drax. The barbs, the references missed, the eyerolls…

Peter rounded into the main living room, and came to an abrupt stop.

“Your belongings have been packed up.” FRIDAY said, brisk and stiffer than ever. “Your clothes have been dry-cleaned and folded; all your devices are present and accounted for. There is a duffel bag on the couch that you may use to carry everything, if you’d like.”

“...thanks.” It exited his mouth on reflex, even as he took in the tiny, impeccably arrayed pile on the coffee table he used to stash his snacks on – even as his mind tried to make sense of the whiplash. “That’s very... efficient of you.”

FRIDAY didn’t respond.

Peter moved towards the table. Reached out for the small, folded stack of clothing, thumbnail dragging along the chestnut lining of his jacket, buttery-soft still. He hadn’t worn it in months.

“It’s point number five in the WikiHow article on ‘How to Look like a Douchebag’. Point number one is dressing in an all-maroon outfit, by the way.”

He’d never really found out what wikihow was.
“Where.” Peter pulled his hand back, fingers curling into something that wasn’t quite a fist. They flexed, released again – hanging loose and useless by his side. “Where’s Stark?”

“Mr. Stark is in Washington.”

*Having a meeting with the Secretary of State. Working with his legal team. Solving world hunger.* Peter kept waiting for the second half of that sentence, but it never came.

He blinked down at the meticulously arranged gadgets, decidedly out of place against the polished glass of the tabletop. All present and accounted for, FRIDAY said. He should double, triple check… he’d ransacked the farthest corners of the galaxy for some of these, including the limits of Rocket’s non-existent generosity. All present and accounted for.

*Not all.* The thought twanged in his head, bright and deep and stubbornly certain. *Not all.* Everything that was supposed to be here, was not.

“Does he know my team’s arrived?”

“He has been informed.” FRIDAY parsed out, words carefully, carefully impassive. Her tone had grown quieter. “He wishes you a happy journey.”

Well. Well then.

It’s not like they were gonna throw a farewell party for the ex-prisoner. This was appropriate. ‘Here are all your belongings, sanitised and zipped up in a plastic bag, don’t let the door hit you on your way out.’ Except of course, Stark had given him an upgrade and oh-so-graciously provided him with a duffel.

His Walkman was at the top of the pile. Peter picked it up, headset bending a little under his grip.

But hey, Iron Man didn’t have time for all this shit, right? He had *duties*, and *responsibilities*. People to meet, things to do, all of which made him fucking miserable. He couldn’t take a day off, or else the world might collapse. Never mind that he’d spent hours arguing with Peter about Queen, and the relative merits of Cylons – though there was nothing relative about how lame they were. But no, he couldn’t spare ten minutes to say good–

The thought snagged in his head, mental tirade trundling to a halt. Still, the sentence slowly completed itself, the weight of the word sinking right in.

This was goodbye.

His two mixtapes were sitting side-by-side – Peter scooped them off the table, grip ever-so-slightly shaky. It wasn’t like he wasn’t used to this, right? Getting to know people over a short amount of time, never seeing them again. Being a jet-setting Ravager wasn’t exactly conducive for long-term relation– for the long term. And now, even as a… Guardian, or whatever the hell he was; he had a team. That was it. One team, jam-packed with jerks. He didn’t need any more.

His thumb slid down by habit, flicking the Walkman case open. ‘Sides, even if he was feeling… surprisingly more affected by this ‘bye-bye, thanks for the bacon’ parting than expected, there was no issue in this world that couldn’t be solved by some Marvin Gaye, even if *Ain’t No Mountain* was a bit ironic for the situa–

Peter stilled. The Awesome Mix 2 was still sitting inside his Walkman.

Which meant–
His right hand was still curled around two cassette tapes. The edge of one had the familiar, flaking label of the first Awesome Mix. The second…

The second also had a paper label, untidily pasted over with glue shining at the corners. Scrawled on, in a blocky hand clearly unaccustomed to writing, was ‘PETER QUILL’S EXCELLENT TERRAN ADVENTURE’.

The silence was interrupted by FRIDAY, words a little hurried. “Since a phone wasn’t an option, I recommended an iPod shuffle, but Mr. Stark didn’t want to overdo—”

*Bit late for that.* Peter turned the tape over in his hands, fingertips stroking over familiar plastic textures. His heart was pounding. “Did he make this?”

The rambling explanations dried right up, the response short and simple. “He picked the songs.”

“Okay.” Peter said. Or tried to say, his voice wasn’t working quite right. Nothing was working right – not his lungs grasping at air and still feeling out of breath, not his heart determined to outdo drum solos in his ribcage. Not his eyes, prickling faintly in a way that wouldn’t clear, no matter how many times he blinked. Everywhere was a disaster zone except his head, where he was just a spectator – watching the stack of dominos as they fell and fell, in intertwining, jaw-dropping patterns, to their inevitable conclusion.

He felt around, a little blindly, for the couch behind him. He sat down.

“Peter.” FRIDAY reminded him of Gamora, a bit, when she said his name like that. “Aren’t you going to—”

“I will.” His voice should’ve come out strong. Instead, it sounded a little cracked around the edges. “I just need to talk to him first.”

A pause. “Mr. Stark won’t be home until afternoon.”

“That’s fine.” And it sounded true, inside his head. “I can wait.”

~

He’d been expecting a gentle warning from FRIDAY first, something along the lines of *Mr Stark is on his way now.* Instead, he was undisturbed until he heard footsteps – slow and trudging, rounding the corner and traipsing their way through the doorway.

Stark looked the same as he had, that first night. That time, he was attired in red-and-gold, instead of the crinkled waistcoat-trousers combo of today – but the expression was the same. Close-faced, wary. Every minute flicker, every wrinkle pointing to an existence grasping for, and bereft of rest.

Until he saw Peter.

His expression remained unchanging, except for dark eyes that widened by a fraction. “You..” *are still here?* “You don’t have snacks, today.”

*That was very casual of you, well done.* Peter glanced at the coffee table where a giant bowl of unhealthiness was usually, precariously balanced – Stark followed his gaze, something tightening
around his eyes when he saw the stack of Peter-related paraphernalia instead.

Peter shrugged, a rolling motion. “Wasn’t in the mood.”

“Thought bacon was a perpetual mood.” The words fell flat, voiced in that too-offhand tone. Stark unbuttoned his cuffs, pacing across the room slowly. “I suppose the ‘ship at the gates’ this morning was a false alarm?”

“Nah, I’m pretty sure it’s them.” Stark stilled mid-motion, index finger still hooked around his sleeves. His gaze darted towards Peter – a lightning-quick flash of there and gone. Peter didn’t stop speaking. “We have a protocol of sitting tight at the meeting spot for twelve hours before spreading out to look. It’s only been eight, they’ll be alright.”

This is the part you ask me why. But Stark didn’t. His feet started moving again, motions casual and seamless like they had never stopped. He was heading towards the opposite door.

Peter raised his voice, just by a shade. “I got the cassette tape.”

Maybe Stark stopped again – Peter didn’t pause to check. He powered through, words underscored by emotions that didn’t need naming. “I’ve only ever had two. My mom gave me both of them.”

A sound hit the air, swiftly cut off before it could condense into something comprehensible. Moments later, Stark tried again. “I–I’m sorry, I didn’t reali–”

“It wasn’t too much.” These words weren’t to be argued with. Just heard, no matter how scratchy Peter’s voice got.

It was. It was exactly right.

“I know you have a…” Peter tried clearing his throat. It did no good. He stood up, knees knocking together like his limbs were no longer obeying him right. “A thing. About overdoing stuff.”

“I don’t get it.” Peter confessed, gaze affixed straight on Stark’s pale face. He wondered if he looked as wild-eyed as he felt; thoughts streaking through his mind at breakneck speeds, uninhibited and unrestrained. He wondered what Stark’s painfully deliberate control had cost him. “I don’t usually even want to do nice things for people, and I don’t get wanting to do that and stopping yourself.”

Too much of a good thing. At his seventh birthday party, Peter had inhaled six slices of cake and vomited straight after. Grandpa had stroked sweaty hair off his forehead, voice rumbling in his chest. Too much of a good thing, Pete. Stomach hollowed and teeth still vaguely tingling with the sugar, Peter had smiled dopily and never understood. Sure he’d puked straight after – but what did that have to do with how good it tasted when he was having it?

Years later, he’d be gunning the Milano through the Andromedan system, Yondu growling in his ear – don’t look at the star while you’re flying. But Peter had. He’d stared and stared till a solar flare caught the Milano on her wing, a long scorch mark burning down her side – their very first. It seemed a fair trade off.

Things were good and things were bad, and maybe some things happened because of other things. But Peter never fretted too much about drawing the connecting lines. If he was alive, and had his ship – credit chips in his pocket, a meal to look forward to, no lives he was ruining beyond repair – then he’d do whatever the damned hell his heart desired to.

“In my life, everything has a value and is done for a price.” He was moving forward. Again and again, until Stark’s motionless form and tight-lipped face were just inches away. “I don’t get… getting something, something given freely because the person wanted to, and not… feeling like it was the best thing in the world.”
Don’t look at the star while you’re flying. Stark’s eyes were bright enough for it, and Peter never looked away. “So that’s… context, I guess. For what I’m about to say. And you can say no for whatever reason you choose, except I honestly can’t care if it’s supposed to be ‘too much’ because there’s no way,” no way I’m letting this feeling stay holed up in my chest when I can fucking do something about it, “no way I’m just walking away. Not like this.”

“Two weeks.” Peter said. For all of his bravado, his mouth still felt dry. “Or a month, if you can swing it. Hell, I’d take a day.”

“I.” Stark’s lips flickered. There was something dazed, about the way he was staring back. “I don’t understand.”

We don’t have blueberries, but I think you’ll like it there anyway. Peter smiled, small yet exultant. “Come away with me.”

Chapter End Notes

... and we're finally here :D

Notes for this chapter:

1) If you don't understand why Rick Astley was making Tony lose his mind, google 'rickrolling'.

2) Skype does indeed have a tumbleweed emoji.

3) The internet tells me Fever-Tree is an L.A. notorious, non-alcoholic beverage. Tonic water with a lime, I think?

4) 'I huffed and I puffed and I blew the..." is the Three Little Pigs reference that none of us needed.

Also feel free to send me your thoughts on the songs that deserve to be on that mix tape. Kudos and comments are welcome :)
Guys, guys, we have news.

1) This fic now has art! Please go and shower mrsingley with a lot of love, who has illustrated the last scene of Chapter 9 - and man is it gorgeous and heartbreaking <3 They're just an incredible artist in general, so go gush your heart out XD

2) As a thank you for all the stunning support I've received for this fic, I've got some more Starkquill for y'all ;) Visit this post on my tumblr, and read snippets from three Starkquill fics I've got in the mind palace. Vote on the one you like best (preferably on tumblr coz it'll be easier for me to collate), a simple reply/message/ask, and you get to decide what I write! And finish, maybe even within the next week (or month, knowing me, but optimism!!)

Title of this chapter comes from Fleetwood Mac's song of the same name.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

She picked up on the third ring.

Too quick by half, especially after the fifteen minutes he’d spent staring into empty space before asking FRIDAY to make the call. He hadn’t even needed to specify the name, just let make the call out into the air, hiding under the sound of his breath.

And FRIDAY who knew the twists and curves of his mind better than any, had complied soundlessly. The phone rang, and was picked up almost immediately, all the way on the West Coast.

He’d spent months before this moment, imagining what she might say. How she might choose to break the silence. Is everything alright was easy to picture – she was always too caring for her own sake. She tried, oh she did try; but self-preservation was never one of her basic instincts. She’d rather gather you to her chest, wide open and protective, rather than guard her belly. And god, she’d look so surprised when she was hurt.

Or maybe, thrown off-guard, she’d lapse to old habits. The line would click, and her voice would echo down his ear – Stark Industries, Pepper Potts speaking.

“Tony.”

Tony closed his eyes, and smiled.

“Hey Pep.”

There was a rustling on the line, as if Pepper had a physical receiver in her hand and was breathing into the speakers. Tony waited for a question. Conversation. How are you? Are you okay? Why didn’t you return the half a dozen missed calls I left when the media started reporting on Leipzig?

Is everyone really gone?
She was doing well, of course. Tony wasn’t ashamed to keep tabs. California suited her, even if she was mostly kept busy by work. Hadn’t started dating again, though her accountant had an absolutely colossal crush on her.

Maybe she kept tabs on him too, if the lack of questions now were any indication. He knew she still remained in touch with Rhodey. Maybe his bestie had already updated her on the… on the alien situation.

_Come away with me._

His heart kicked up in his chest, nervous and fluttery, and it had nothing to do with Pepper’s voice in his ear. “What happened.”

_Come away with me._

“I.” Tony licked dry lips, back of his throat as arid as the desert. His chest was thumping, fast and hard and uncontrollable. It wasn’t a panic attack. It was infinitely more terrifying. “I was wondering what our policy was on shore leave.”

Fuck. That wasn’t what he’d meant to say, wasn’t what he’d meant to _imply_ – he didn’t know why… what he was doing, why he’d woken Pepper up at an ungodly time to spew half-formed words that could not mean – _come away with me. With me._

Pepper’s words didn’t have the bleary, irate curl of the recently woken up. Each consonant well pronounced, soft and clear. Maybe even nostalgic. “I don’t make your schedule anymore, Tony.”

“Still technically my boss.” Tony managed to get out. And thank god for that, because SI would never have been able to recover, and he’d have driven it into the ground.

There were stirrings of sound at the other end, like Pepper opening her mouth to speak – but something regurgitated in his throat, some panicked reflex, words spilling forward in a variant of _help me help me I don’t_ –

“Pepper, I can’t go to space.”

It sounded like a punchline. And it was, the idea was fucking _laughable._

But Pepper wasn’t laughing. Not the polite ‘mhmm’ of amusement, not the graceless half-snort he’d so adored. Silence trailed for a few, judgemental seconds, before her voice cut through it all. “Are you telling me or asking me?”

_I don’t see how that makes a jot of a difference._

But Pepper continued talking, in that moderate, equable tone she had while laying out presentations before the Board. Chipping away at deflections and obfuscations – fear and dread. “Because if you’re telling me, then. Then I’d remind you, that SI is,” a tiny, near unnoticeable hitch to her breath, “..is as much of mine as it is yours, and that we have a fantastic R&D team who won’t fall apart without you. That Rhodey’s recovery has come along by leaps and bounds and he has decades of experience in dealing with the brass and he’ll hold down the fort with negotiations or PR or whatever else wearing that flying suit demands of you next.”

“That,” A hitch again, and a crack right through the middle, Pepper breathing quietly through it all. “I don’t need to be, to be living in the same house, or state as you. Seeing you every day, dating you to know that you’re working yourself down to the bone but your thrice-damned guilt complex won’t let you see it.”
Tony’s head was silent.

“But Tony,” And she was smiling now, he could tell – the smallest flicker of the lips, a soft, certain thing. “If you’re asking me. Then there’s only one thing I can say.”

“Go.”

He’d been quiet for too long. There were no clocks in the Facility, but he could hear one ticking down in his head anyway – “we have a protocol about sitting tight at the meeting spot for twelve hours” – and his breath seemed to be speeding up to meet it, even if… even if there was no decision to take, no way he could possibly be considering this.

“You.” You can’t possibly mean that. “You’re behaving out of character. And.. and enabling me, and Rhodey is going to be so mad at you.”

Pepper did laugh this time – a snort worthy of the Hall of Fame of Potts-snorts. A sigh drifting on the end of it, half breathless, half wistful. “You know, I think Rhodey would agree with me when I say that our ‘characters’ were never about wagging fingers and disapproving of every single thing you did. It’s about making sure you were happy.”

Happy. The word knocked gently on the walls of his mind, turned in place to show off all its angles. And as if on automatic, other words followed it – sentences and songs and memories, an unbreakable chain of associations. ‘Quill Lord Peter Star’, ‘Iron who now?’, ‘don’t be ridiculous, I was in space’. Blueberry, bacon, Sony Walkman, Joplin Missouri, dance offs to Blue Suede. The night he witnessed an eight-year-old lose his mom, the mixtape he began creating two hours after. And above all, Peter Quill’s big, dumb face – that stupid drawl and the words he might say: mate, you don’t need to flashback through the last five months to know what this means.

Tony mounted one, final defence. A sentiment quiet and desolate. “The last time I went out there, I nearly died.”

Pepper didn’t say anything for a while. The guilt piled up at the back of his mind, curled under his tongue in unspoken apology – he hadn’t been the only one impacted by the portal. But then the line stirred, and Pepper was only whispering, but –

“At least you won’t be alone this time.”

Lurch, and thud. That was his heart, beating itself out.

Pepper’s tones came through, thicker and barely collected, “I won’t speak to how it must hurt to fight. But it hurts to be left behind, to watch the horizon as people fly away.” To lie on the ground, power draining out, hearing the footsteps fade. “And you’re getting a choice. You don’t have to be. You get to follow.”

To fly, his mind completed. Together.

“So.” Pepper cleared her throat, voice ringing through stronger. “You’re recovering in Barbados from the avian flu for three weeks. Anyone who has a problem with that can take it up with me.”

Because she solved everything. Only the least among the reasons he’d always, always love her.

“Any further objections, Mr. Stark?”
“None at all, Miss Potts.” He couldn’t quite eliminate the waver from his tone. But this was Pepper, and he didn’t need to. “I miss you.”

“I miss you too Tony.” A soft response, tinged by a smile. He could hear it so clearly. “Take lots of pictures for me, okay?”

“Sweetie.” The words were somehow easy to say, like they’d been sitting under his chest all this while, crushed out of sight under the metric fuckton of uncertainty – and all they’d needed was his permission to emerge. For his lips to curl, stuttery still, but unmistakably into a smirk. “My selfies are gonna blow the Hubble out of the water.”

~

Tony had always been a very economic packer. It was easy to be, when in ownership of however many black Amex Centurion/ Dubai First Royale/ Gold-Bling-Diamond You’re-A-Super-Duper-Rich-Person credit cards. Forgot to ship your Bugatti along on your business trip to Macau? Buy a new one!

That being said, he didn’t quite know how the American dollar shook out in the Space™ foreign exchange market. If space believed in foreign exchange, and wasn’t just relying on the barter system of yesteryears. In an ideal (Star Trek) world, they’d have outgrown the concept of money altogether – but he knew from Quill’s stories that the ‘Guardians’ did indeed get paid for… jobs.

But hey, wasn’t like he could get his mitts on space currency in upstate New York. Which made the concern of packing all too important.

So, what’s the weather like in the Orion belt? Shorts-casual?

But he hadn’t asked. Hadn’t said anything, really, beyond the initial conversation.

“Yes.”

“… oh. You mean. Yes like—”

“Yes.”

“.”

“.”

“…like now?”

“Do you want to invite them in for eggnog?”

So here they were. Tramping through the Facility grounds, making their way to the last known coordinates of the Milano. A mile walk away, with the same goddamn duffel bag swinging from Tony’s hand that FRIDAY had apparently offered up for Quill’s departure. It was pretty light; he was carrying his space suit on his chest, after all.
“Is.” The word seemed to float up from the ground – Tony actually glanced around for a few seconds before realising that the sound had to originate from the obvious source: Peter Quill’s slouched back, trudging two steps ahead of him. “Is everything gonna be okay with. Ya know.”

Quill had never been the most eloquent of orators, but hell, the man sounded downright awkward. Nothing like the jibber-jabber of the man he’d grown to know, or even the one from earlier today who beckoned forward into a whole new world while staring passionately into Tony’s eyes… or whatever. Other appropriate descriptors for That Conversation.


“They’ll handle it.” It wasn’t all bluff and bluster. Sure, KAREN and Rhodey and Vision had been sent copious instructions for all Peter-related emergencies – but he’d always surrounded himself with competence. Tony could self-blame with the best of them, but even he wasn’t arrogant enough to think that the world would stop spinning if he sauntered off it for a couple of weeks.

(At least, he tried to minimise that kind of thinking. Down that road, and man had he ventured too far down it already, lay megalomania.)

“Tell FRIDAY I’m sorry.” Quill blurted. His feet stopped in place, squishing some very well-tended grass under his twisting boot heel.

Tony caught up to him in a stride, lifted his shoulders in a shrug. “Uh, tell her yourself?”

Wow, the guy was practically mumbling. Was Tony’s acquiescence to this space voyage that disarming? “She w’s mad at me.”

“She wasn’t mad.” Quill glanced sideways at the vehemence – Tony found his next words tripping clumsily off the tongue. Man, the awkwardness was contagious. “Just pissy you were leaving.”

“Oh.” Yes oh, you oblivious moron. Tony ducked that curious gaze anyway – look, green grass.

Quill looked away after a few seconds, tone strangely muted. “Didn’t really say goodbye to her.”

“Won’t need to, she’s coming with.” Huh, maybe he should be a little less blasé about that. Quill hadn’t exactly extended his invitation to AI of potential-Skynet capabilities. Though FRIDAY was way too much of a homebody to exert herself like that – she didn’t really talk to other people much. Except Quill, actually. “Sorry, we’re a package deal.”

He needn’t have worried. Quill’s mouth curved right up, teeth peeking at the corners; in the tones of a man who was playing it cool and definitely-absolutely not thrilled out of his mind. “Sure, yeah. That’s alright.”

Tony turned his eyes back ahead. That smile was contagious too.

Saying goodbye to the bots had been hard, though. He’d gotten used to having them around again. Still, he should be back in a couple weeks, before DUM-E could kick up too much of a fuss.

“How’d the bots take it?” Damn, had the guy inherited telepathy as part of the alien genes? Would make sense, what with his preternatural ability to get on Tony’s last nerve – though admittedly, Tony had been more inclined to snicker than blow his gasket in the last couple weeks. Quill’s humour was diabolical like that. “Tell you to take care?”

“Even if they had the vocal functionality for something like that, they’re not exactly the considerate type.” The ground was beginning to slope upwards, Tony having to huff a little with each breath.
The Facility grounds were apparently big enough to rival those of the Dowager of Downton Abbey. Who knew?

(And he was decidedly not being unfair. Get doused in extinguisher foam enough times, you start to think it might be personal.)

“But I’ve heard them beeping—”

“Beeping isn’t exactly speech—” Wait. Wait a minute. Tony’s eyes narrowed, words slowing down to match. Could it possibly be… “Quill. Did you think my bots actually talk?”

Quill opened his mouth, and closed it again. He commenced walking faster. “No.”

“You did.” This was the most hysterical thing to happen all day, or the most flattering. Either way, it was delightful.

“You’re the one who keeps talking at them!” Quill flung his hands into the air wildly, still sprinting on ahead with those Andre the Giant legs. “They’re like ‘beep-boop-beep’ and you nod your head all ‘a very good point, Buttertoes—’”

“Butterfingers.”

“Same difference!”

“What do you think I spoke to them in, Binary?” Oh, Quill could try to run alright, but Tony had all of his cardio practice to fall back on. Power-walk for the win.

“I’m sorry,” Another expansive, flailing hand gesture, “do you not know Binary?”

“Yes, but like in a ‘convert this number from hexadecimal to binary’, not conversations with actual words.” Tony grinned, duffel bag swinging merrily at his side. At this rate, he was going to get a stitch in his side and it would be utterly worth it.

“Look.” The ground evened out under their feet and Quill came to a stop, exhaling noisily. “I come back here and phones the size of Star Trek comms have apparently become a thing so I thought—”

“That I was C3-PO?” Quill blessed him with a particularly aggravated look at that, so Tony prepared to unleash some more of his debonair wit – something to do with Quill and thinking and how unadvisable it was for him to engage in such behaviour – but they’d cleared the slope and something all too conspicuous was visible in the valley below.

“That… is not subtle in the least.”

Quill twisted his head about his shoulders, following Tony’s sightlines. Pale hazel eyes warmed by the setting sun, lit up even further.

“Yeah.” There was something undeniably fond about that exhalation, as Quill ran his eyes over an aircraft that was – holy shit – at least fifty percent orange. “What about me or the maroon outfit screamed subtle to you?”

“Twas a compliment.” Tony admitted, all too honest. Against the lush green of the valley and the sun pouring gold from above, the swooping lines of the ship looked downright ethereal. Something about the streamlined top was reminiscent of fighter jets, yet it had far too many fins – and no goddamned plane Tony had ever seen had sported those blistering hues of orange and blue-green. This looked like it was birthed from a fever dream – a fever dream of the eighties and it was a fucking spaceship.
Tony might be falling a little in love.

“A’right, stop ogling her already.” Quill began treading down the slope, tone unbearably smug. Tony gave himself a little shake – he got to look at it from closer! – and followed down accordingly. The digs looked solid; time to meet the in-laws.

(... or you know. Literally any word aside from that. Having a quippy brain could be such a double-edged sword sometimes.)

The ship looked, if possible, more and more unreal as they approached it, right up to the point where Quill strode forward to rap his knuckles on the hull. The mutter that followed it, “I don’t remember that scratch,” sounded more than a little ominous.

Though not half as much as the gun cocking right behind them.

Tony stilled in place, absently wondering if it was worth putting his hands into the air. Surely the choice would be taken out of his hands by Quill soon enough – the foxtrot, maybe? Tap dancing? Perhaps he’d taken a leaf from the modern era and diversified into crumping?

In a move spectacularly out of character, Quill heaved a sigh instead. “He’s a friendly,” was called out, in an almost bored tone, “and no, I’m not being coerced, blackmailed or sex-pollened into saying this,” sex-pollened? “so put the damn guns down.”

Tony took the liberty of turning around, inch by inch, just to see the latest in the long line of people-holding-him-at-gunpoint. Size ‘em up, so to speak.

Two and a half feet. Good to know.

The raccoon bared its teeth at him, gun still aimed; the super-ripped alien next to him with the combat knives seemed marginally less hostile. In fact, he sounded downright thoughtful as he mused, “Your father must have had you very young.”

Tony quirked a brow quizzically – next to him, Quill seemed to be choking on nothing but air. All blustery tone and reddening cheeks, “That’s not – he’s not – no.”

“I’d say I’m more of a sugar daddy.” Tony volunteered.

“Not helping.” Quill shook his head, somewhat despairing, “Guys. Weapons, please?”

Alien-McBuff sheathed his knives slowly – behind him, green-presumably-Gamora holstered some very dangerous looking pistols. Murder-Coon shifted the sight of his gun off by like twelve degrees, uncowed by Quill’s increasingly exasperated stare. That only left… huh. They were missing a gang member.

There was a tiny, trotting sound – Tony glanced down just in time to see… something at Quill’s feet. Then there was a growing, branch-like arm curling around the back of Quill’s neck and the thing had catapulted itself up, a greenish-brown blur settling on Quill’s shoulder.

“I am Groot!” The tiny Ent chirped, liquid brown eyes unmistakably happy.

Oh my heart.

“Hey there bud.” Quill stroked a knuckle under Groot’s chin, Groot snuggling up to the touch. He glanced back towards the Not-So-Merry Men, exasperation somehow stripping away to leave a vulnerable kind of affection. “You guys are assholes, y’know that?”
The raccoon crossed his arms, somehow unimpeded by the giant gun he was still carrying. “Assholes still waiting for an introduction.”

“Right.” Quill’s shoulders drooped a little. Then, without any helpful pointing whatsoever, “Rocket, Drax, Gamora and Groot. Guys, this is Tony Stark. He’s gonna be travelling with us for a couple weeks.”

“Travelling with–” Rickety-Raccoon started off indignantly, only to be cut off by a pointed cough by green-definitely-Gamora.

She cut through the stand-off in two brisk strides forward, fingers reaching out to curl in the shoulder of Pet– Quill’s jacket. “Of course. All that discussion can come later, we need to get off this planet before we’re detected first.” A soft squeeze, a faint smile. “Welcome back Peter.”

*Quill* smiled back gratefully at her, before his gaze fanned out, tone almost arch. “Yeah, and we can include the *appropriate reasons to maroon a teammate on an alien planet* in that discussion too.”

Ranger Rick glowered at that, but thankfully subsided into mutters; Tattoo-Me-Ripped made his own sombre contribution. “I agree. This planet smells vile.”

Well then. Quill proceeded to walk around the body of the ship to where presumably the hatch opening was, Groot still on his shoulder. The remaining, non-plant members of his team followed behind him – which left Tony to walk at the back. Hopefully. Whatever, he’d stowed away on worse.

He fell into step with the tail-ender of the pack – Gamora, who’d thankfully given up on her limpet impersonation. “Say Fiona, not that there aren’t a million other equally relevant questions but: sex pollen?”

She surveyed him under black brows, face blank but somehow imperious. He’d been judged like that by a Black Widow or two in his lifetime. “It’s our code for amorous or hormone-based mind influencers.”

… right. Of all the Star Trek references Quill could’ve passed on to his gang, he went with that one.

“I presume you sheltered Peter during his time on Terra?” The question was smooth and even-toned – Tony was nearly distracted away by the sight of the giant hatch leading into the Real-and-Actual spaceship in front of him.

But not entirely. “Those are the duties of a sugar daddy, yes.”

Tony… didn’t brace himself, because he didn’t need to brace himself for threats anymore, but shifted his gears into a kind of wary anticipation. The casual stroking of the butt of a gun, the entirely unsubtle messages of *I’ll be keeping an eye out* and *we’re not nearly as naïve as my not-boyfriend.*

Instead, Gamora stared him in the eye (singular, his right eye, it was very unnerving) and gave a simple nod. “Thank you.”

Tony stared at her back as it disappeared into the spaceship – *spaceship!!!* – more than a little taken aback. “… you’re welcome.”

Which meant he was the only person left outside.

Right. Right. This was a very exciting prospect. The fact that he couldn’t say spaceship inside his head without three exclamation points attached was proof. Who cared if he wasn’t actually going to
be in control of flying said spaceship, or that said spaceship was mostly populated with violent strangers, or that said spaceship was about to travel into… space.

No amount of amusing himself with nicknames was going to get him out of this one.

Tony felt the air whistle past his lips, exhaled none too gently. Sweat prickled on his upper arms, toes clammy and curling uselessly in the confines of his shoes.

He stepped forward.

_Battlestar Galactica_ had let him down, he thought, somewhat dimly; the interiors were dusty and chrome and… inhabited, in a way that carefully designed TV sets had never been able to evoke. Grubby halogen-looking lights streamed turquoise over everything – the floor, the wood-like vinyl panelling on the walls. A cheery, yellow-orange holographic screen hung off to the side, spitting incomprehensible graphics – right next to the plastic-top counter seemingly plucked out of a seventies diner. Some enterprising gal on Pinterest might’ve called it ‘retrofuturistic’. It was visual whiplash at its finest.

He kept walking, past what was presumably the common area, footsteps _clunking_ hollowly against the flooring. Crossed the orange bunks (_bunks_), clutched at the grimy handrail of a step ladder as he ascended into the cockpit.

It was an oval-shaped room, front-end entirely dominated by a curving windshield that was currently letting in the last inklings of the setting sun. The instrument panel stretched out beneath it: mode control panel, what looked like the beginnings of a primary flight display though most of that would probably be digitally displayed once the ship actually started flying–

A rustle. Tony jerked his eyes away from the controls to the only other person in the compartment – Quill leaning against the pilot’s chair, arms propped on the chrome headrest, hair glowing in the light.

The jacket didn’t look… half as ridiculous in this backdrop; less maroon, more cherry brown, zippers gleaming mutedly. There was something about the way he was holding his shoulders, something easy and comfortable. Like he and the space belonged to each other. He looked… right.

“You,” Tony began, vaguely wondering how he would ever finish. “have a tape deck on your spaceship.”

Quill grinned, broad and languorous. His stubble was gleaming in the light too, dotting a surprisingly carved jawline. “I like committing to an aesthetic.”

“Clearly.” Tony reached out for the co-pilot’s chair, fingers brushing against sticky-smooth chrome leather – because it felt nice, and not because he needed a bit of… balance, for a moment. “It’s very… funky.”

Quill snorted – and how had Tony never noticed before that he did that? The leather of his jacket sleeve creaked as his arm slid over the headrest, the chair groaning slightly as he settled into its recesses. “You might wanna head down. The crew usually don’t like hanging up here for this part – rapid ascent through an atmosphere can get a bit nauseating.”

Yeah, no. Tony dropped into the seat, elbows flat along the armrests. Wait, did this seatbelt have two shoulder straps? Joy. “I’m good.”
Quill shrugged loosely, possibly accompanied by a muttered, “your funeral.” Which… okay, would have been a joke in spectacularly poor taste, and thereby right up Quill’s alley.

“We’re going to lift up,” Three toggles were flipped in quick succession, a high-pitched whine greeting the actions. The seat began thrumming under Tony’s thighs, the vibrations of the floor working their way up to his knees. “Very fast, which is gonna be a bit of a headrush. The second we clear Terran atmosphere, we’re gonna jump like twelve-thirteen light years in a couple of seconds. Alright?”

Tony smiled, small and tight. The seatbelt strap was cutting into his collar bone, and he could feel his pulse jumping just a few inches above it. “Do I look like I need handholding?”

Quill didn’t parry back with any stinging comebacks, which was kinder than Tony deserved at the moment. His half of the windshield lit up with another whine – altitude indicator, air speed, vertical speed, heading indicator, deviation, figures unspooling like some mad scientist dream…

“Buckle up, jerks!” Quill twisted his chin, hollering over his shoulder. Any belligerent comebacks by his team were drowned out by the building, blinding hum of the ship around them – Tony’s ears were ringing. “Three, two, one and–”

*Blast off.*

He could feel it, right in his stomach, when they lifted off the ground; a feeling both heavy and light, gravity losing touch with the organs in your body. The ascent was smooth and steady, a little jaw-dropping for how fast they were rising – too fast, surely, to glance through the glass and see the Facility dwindling to a tiny matchbox below them.

Tony didn’t look, just in case.

They broke through the cloud cover, fluffy masses of scarlet-orange spreading out before the eye, sun winking at the horizon. Ideal cruising altitude. But they were still climbing, up and up till Tony’s ears popped twice – and then began to ache, a prickle of pain somewhere deep within his head. The vibrations seemed to have taken up residence in his bones; his teeth were numb where they were still, tightly pressed together. The effects seemed relatively tame compared to the force the aircraft must be under, seven million pounds of thrust at least, surely. He knew the sustained acceleration was killer – it felt like a roadroller trampling across his ribs, compressing his chest, the pressure squeezing out every bit of – there was no air–

*Shhh, breathe.* No slipstream noise. How was that possible? The force of the ship slicing through the Earth’s atmosphere should have threatened to rend the vehicle asunder, should have screamed past its rivets to rip into his eardrums – hadn’t they reached Max Q by now? It was starting to get dark outside, but it was so quiet already.

Silence. He remembered that. Like nothing was happening, like the universe wasn’t imploding before his eyes. *You know that’s a one way trip*–

It was just a memory, though. He wasn’t actually hearing it. He wasn’t hearing any– wait.

Something pulsing under his fingers, working its way relentlessly under and into bloodless fists. There and gone, again and again, at perfect intervals. Metre, tempo, cadence. A beat.
And accompanying it, soft and louder than anything he’d heard before – the sound of fingers plucking over strings.

“We’ve jumped.”

The voice came from somewhere to his right. Tony hadn’t been aware of closing his eyes, this time round.

He swallowed. His throat felt strained to shreds, but words crept out anyway, undeniable.

“Fleetwood Mac?”

“You bet.” The voice – Peter – said. “Can’t have a roadtrip without some tunes.”

Tony opened his eyes.

*Listen to the wind blow*

*Watch the sunrise*

Colour. That was what he registered first, in some awestruck part of a brain struck dumb. Colour like it hadn’t been experienced before, striking the rods and cones of his eyes in hues incomprehensible. Colour that might be captured by the words Pepper used to throw around: viridian and ultramarine and magenta, except Tony watched it spiral across the stars and spill through the glass onto his hands and knees and thought *blue, green, pink. Bright.*

He leaned forward. There was yellow in there too, probably from old stars choked up by dust. The blue streaks had to be from younger ones – and the nebulae caught the light just so, in vibrant, shimmering bursts.

There was nothing dark about this place.

“This your favourite song?” He asked, the walls vibrating in accompaniment. *Running in the shadows, damn your love, damn your lies.*

“Nah.” It was a bit of a blasphemous question, admittedly. Though something lingered in Peter’s tone, something in the quiet curl of the syllables. “A favourite for the moment, I guess.”

It was, almost, too much to take in. Galaxies, elliptical and spiral and irregular, spinning away in front of his eyes; dust and ice and hydrogen clouds, all suspended in a landscape of brilliance. Too much almost, but for the music – the anchor, the familiar voice in his ears.

“There, to the corner, see that? By that dark patch, it’s a–”

“Globular cluster.” Tony traced its outlines with his eyes, till they blurred and his vision danced with spots. It was like a jewel box maybe, or a diamond that had shattered to smithereens. Hundreds and thousands and millions of stars, packed together in a globe-like shape in the distance.

It seemed unutterably impossible to look away. Tony did it in a heartbeat.

*And if you don’t love me now*

*You will never love me again*
Light vied for the attention of Peter’s face – gold slanting off his cheekbones, blue glinting below the bow of his lips. It caressed every inch of his person, from the broad fingers poised around the thruster to the straight lines of his shoulders and chest; the simple, uncomplicated curve of his mouth that was humming along. Light and shadow, sliding in and out of being as he bobbed his head from side to side, eyelids flickering shut in relishing a particularly good note. When his eyes opened again, you couldn’t see the hazel – just a field of stars reflected in the irises. Peter Quill, backlit and shining in the company of his own kind.

*And if you don’t love me now*

*You will never love me again*

*I can still hear you saying*

*You would never break the chain*

When someone shone so bright and smiled so easy, you always pinned it on the obvious. Innocence. Childishness, naivete. Then you found out that they learned to shoot at eleven and started earning their keep from twelve – that they lived in a ship that they’d cobbled together from nothing. From everything: from smarts, and resilience, a will for survival.

It didn’t seem feasible that someone could watch the life blink out of a mother’s eye, then watch the world with any measure of positivity. Take joy in food, flight, a well-worn song. And yet.

*Listen to the wind blow, down comes the night*

Some stars died quickly, in bursts and splutters. Some faded out of existence. Some flattened the world around them, collapsing into a hole of misery that drew everything else in.

“Stark.” He wasn’t even looking this way when he said it, a half-distracted curl of the lips. “You’re missing the view.”

Some stars brought the sunrise.

“Tony.” It was utterly inadequate. It was the only thing he could say. “Tony.”

~

“Hullo boss. Are we in the toilet?”

Tony pressed his knuckles to the bridge of his nose. It didn’t quite have the same effect in the Iron Man helmet, but it would do. His knees were still knocking against the door he’d barely managed to ease shut. “Yes.”

“Have we,” A pause that wasn’t delicate in the slightest, “finally come to our senses?”

“No.” The toilet seat under him wasn’t vinyl, at least. Hell, how did the plumbing work here anyway? Was there a portal nine inches below his butt, ready to gobble everything? “I’m in space.”

“That was not the contentious detail.” FRIDAY’s tones sobered right up, words uncompromisingly
direct. “Did you leave the–”

“No.”

A pause, where Rhodey might have sighed. *Fuck it all to hell Tones, what were you thinking?* “You realise it cannot possibly work where you are–”

“I am aware, yes.”

“It would have been more conducive,” Oh, conducive. Maybe she wasn’t being direct after all – it would have been better, healthier, *saner*. “To leave an avenue for Colonel Rhodes to reach out, in case of emergencies–”

“Hell if I know.” But he did. He had written proof. But that was just words on a page, and it wasn’t like words had counted for shit in the past.

“Then why,” *did you do it?* “are we in the toilet?”

Oh, he knew the answer to that one. And it wasn’t even among the usual culprits. Self-loathing was usually the doozy; anger, if he was thinking irrationally enough. Sometimes, though not always, it was desperation.

He was used to feeling all of the above things, but a new emotion had entered the ring. Not new to him, no – guilt was a familiar feeling. He just wasn’t used to feeling guilty about *this*.

His hand, the one not propping up his face, was fisted on his knees. He could feel the fingers uncurl, the palm of it drag up his sweat-sodden thighs, as slow as anything. High enough to feel an outline, small and blocky and solid, through the material of his trousers.

He took it out of his pocket, the cheap plastic covering digging into his calluses. Flipped the screen open, hit the button for *contacts*.

*Steve Rogers* blinked back at him, in perfect eight-bit font. Tony eased the phone shut, closed his eyes.

*Fuck you,* he thought, except he couldn’t figure who he was talking to if he tried.

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Chapter End Notes

...oh well.

Thanks for reading, and don't forget to go vote on tumblr if you want moar of the Starkquill ;)
Chapter Notes

First off - guess who finally got to writing during the holidays :D I am now going to work backwards on replying to all of the amazing comments left on the last chapter, a lot of them helped me churn this chapter out and I am eternally grateful.

Quick update: the fic I'd been promising to write as a gift to all you delightful people who've supported this monster is finally live on ao3! The results from the tumblr poll have come in, and they will definitely not surprise you - presenting the starkquill musical-soulmates AU, Everlong. Don't forget to lemme know what you think ;)

Title from 'Come a Little Bit Closer' by Jay & The Americans. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony liked the Impressionists.

They would never have been permitted on the walls of the Mansion, growing up. Too nineteenth century. Mom preferred the classical, Palace-of-Versailles, ceiling-of-Sistine-Chapel stuff. Men and women with curly hair and ethereal faces, clothes loosely draped on contorted bodies. A nymph crying by the river or Hercules strangling a snake. The most experimental the décor ever got was Rembrandt, and he died in the sixteen hundreds.

Not that Tony couldn’t appreciate that style of art: the meticulousness of it. The rigorous attention to detail. Nothing sloppy or careless about Rembrandt; these people spent hours dedicated to the single crease in a white glove. The glint of light off a velvet slipper. It was just that after a while… all the paintings hanging in the corridors seemed to blur into one – all those details meaningless. The same men and women, painted over and over, with the same exaggerated moues of despair, joy, pain. No matter how dramatic the scowl; the eyes always looked distant.

Impressionism was easier. To see, to tell apart. He didn’t have to catalogue every inch of the canvas, name the twenty three people crammed into a military portrait. He could just… look. Let the words form slowly – tree, bush, field. Red, blue, green.

The scene currently before his eyes felt like an Impressionistic dream – though Monet would never have been able to come up with shit like this. Hell, Tony called himself a futurist and even his mind was having trouble keeping up.

For now, he was calling the city Space Edinburgh. Tony had never spent too much time in Scotland, but the odd business trip or two had acquainted him with its capital city. The urban landscape he was staring at now was much of the same – tall, stone buildings, with spires dotting the skyline. There were hilly ranges in the distance, mist-clad shapes bordering the city.

Of course, there were a few key differences. Like the fact that the sky was sunrise-gold, and had been so for the past two hours. There still wasn’t a sun in sight, and the streets were lined with lights – dewy-green orbs, high up in the air, almost like will-o-wisps. The stone buildings gleamed with it all; a greenish sheen on hardened walls, a glimmer of gold high up on the spires. The roads were cobbled, and they looked like rivers winding through the city – polished stone reflecting the sky.
It was like…like steampunk or whatever, except there wasn’t a fancy brass gear or steam in sight. Just the feel of it – the contradiction of pseudo-Victorian architecture with the wireless green lights. There was a part of his head buzzing in the background, trying to make sense of things: *Venus has a yellow sky too, but that’s because of the sulphuric acid in the clouds, maybe that isn’t harmful for the lifeforms here but I’m breathing okay*–

And that was all it was. A buzz, easily ignored. The rest of him was staring, taking in the impressions. This world begged understanding, but he didn’t need to understand – not right in this moment. Analyse, quantify, keep track of a thousand variables. He wasn’t depending on it, on himself, to stay alive. He wasn’t depending on himself at all.

Five ‘days’ in space, and Tony had no responsibility for the food, lodging or transport. Where they were going, if they’d get there okay, if the people around him needed anything. Funny how a space-caytion had turned out to be the biggest trust exercise of his life. Funny how he wasn’t even panicking.

“Rocket you butthead, we can’t ask for seventeen thousand credits–”

Or maybe there was nothing funny about it. Maybe it was the most natural thing in the world.

Another refreshing new development, Tony mused – as Peter and Rocket stormed into the cockpit mid-argument – was how he could be in a room, or the cockpit of a spaceship, and go completely unnoticed. Nothing to see here folks, just another pink-skinned human. How dull.

“We’re smuggling goods for ‘em! We can ask for anything!”

“Not how business deals work–” Except Peter’s eyes seemed to preternaturally latch on to Tony anyway, and then grow two sizes bigger. “Books, he said books, we’re smuggling books.”

“Unless books have become weirdly battery-shaped, I don’t see how that’s possible–”

“Rocket.” Peter growled – before ‘subtly’ motioning towards the corner where Tony still watched on bemusedly.

Rocket stared back at him, blank. “Yeah Stark’s in the room, so what?”

Clearly identifying the lost cause for what it was, Peter whirled on Tony instead, two smallish spots of colour high on his freckled cheeks. “So…Strontia. That town.”

The above was accompanied by gestures towards the windshield, from where the city Tony had been enthralled by was still visible. Tony nodded helpfully along – *I understand your pointing.*

“The town has a… Reverend, whose son died in a library. So the Reverend banned reading,” Peter’s explanation seemed to pick up steam as he went, words falling with a bit more confidence, “and his rebellious daughter thinks he’s a barfbag, so she hired us to bring books to their senior prom. So really we’re the good guys.”

There was really something about the sight of a raccoon yawning pointedly. “Isn’t that the plot of that stupid movie you won’t stop talking about?”

“You said you weren’t even paying attention when I explained *Footloose*!”

“Yeeaahhh.” Rocket grinned, teeth sharp and glimmering. “Turns out I have perfect recall when it comes to anything that shits all over your dignity.
Peter visibly drew in a breath, every inch of his chest swelling in indignation – Tony was torn between *aw honey, you’re doing great* and *this is Revenge, sucka.*

Whichever way, this was the pinnacle of entertainment.

Rocket wriggled a claw into his ear, scratched around a bit. “What d’you care what Stark thinks of us anyway?”

“I…don’t. Care.” Peter’s eyes flicked towards Tony and away, lightning-fast. “Sta– ony. Can think whatever he likes.”

You’re so convincing, I’m convinced. Not a peep of insecurity at those words, which was radical in itself. All Tony wanted to do was fold his arms and raise an eyebrow, which he did. “You don’t have to use my first name, if it trips you up.”

“It doesn’t trip me up.” Peter returned, so swift that it had to be on reflex. He raised a hand, tugging at the upturned collar of his jacket – eyes meeting Tony’s again, as if on a dare. “That was a nickname. We’re there now.”

“Are we.” Tony didn’t look away.

Peter stared back for a few seconds – thin, pink lips pressed together, cheeks flushed. And then the curve of that mouth relaxed, quirking inch by inch into the smoothest, most insouciant of smiles. “Sure, Iron Wang.”

Tony couldn’t have held back the snort of amusement if he tried; those hazel eyes freaking twinkled back at him, before Peter finally dropped the gaze. He levelled his index finger at Rocket, “You're not handling the negotiation,” before turning his back and climbing out of the cockpit again.

The sane part of Tony’s head, the one trying to incessantly figure the chemical composition of this place, recapped through the last few minutes – tour d’horizon of *Footloose* and all. This is the guy we’ve decided to trust?

The rest of him felt differently. The ease that sat under his skin, the fingers that didn’t fidget. The unforced breaths in his chest, the eyes that devoured everything new they saw. The heart that beat so steady.

Some decisions weren’t voluntary.

Yeah. Yeah he is.

A scuffle in the corner – Rocket was still in the cockpit, and had half-unscrewed part of the instrument panel already. Ohh, Peter wasn’t going to like that.

“Hey tough guy.”

Rocket surveyed him from under his bushy eyebrows, exhibiting one of the finest looks of contempt he’d ever seen. “Got somethin’ to say?”

“Loads of somethings.” Rocket scoffed loudly at that, but Tony was barely deterred. He didn’t become a Menace to Civil Society at the tender age of eight by being easily cowed. “Fancy yourself to be a bit of a jerk, huh?”
“Hardened criminal, mostly.” Rocket loosened something with a wrench that was at least half his torso size. It was a testament to his personality that the effect was intimidating, rather than adorable. “But sure. Jerk works.”

Tony relaxed his shoulders, leaning against the wall behind him comfortably. Who’d have known he’d one day be using boardroom body language skills on a raccoon-shaped alien. “I heard the message you left on Peter’s comms device. Tracker implanted in the scalp and all.”

“Oh, that.” Rocket waved the wrench about carelessly – or not, Tony knew a mechanic’s control when he saw it. “Massive invasion of privacy, whatever.”

“Or…the way a creepy guy with questionable boundary issues shows he cares.”

Beady eyes darted up to look at Tony, nigh unreadable. “Is that so.”

“I would know.” Tony casually tippy-tapped his fingers across a neighbouring panel, the surface smooth under his callouses. “Which is by no means a seal of approval. But it’d be hypocritical of me to judge any tech-assisted spying on a loved one.”

The contempt had retreated from Rocket’s features, replaced by a wary-eyed regard. “What’re you trying to get at, Stark?”

Today was a day of marvelling at how difficult things were sometimes easy to do, depending on the setup. The right moment. Tony barely had to hesitate before the words left his tongue, light as anything. “Few years back, I found this video my dad had left me before he died. Something about how he was actually proud of me.”

“My greatest creation.”

“Great, another one with daddy issues.”

Tony smiled – like the stretching out of a muscle that was still sore, but slowly healing. “Thing was, nothing about the twenty one years his non-digital self had spent with me had ever supported that. So yeah, was a nice sentiment in the moment. In the end, meant a whole lot of nothing.”

Rocket watched him for a second, before his whiskers fluffed up and the wrench was set down with a resounding clank. “Can we skip to the moral of the story already?”

“People who’re gonna leave will leave.” Blond hair, blue eyes. A star on a chest. “People who want to stay will stay. There’s little you can actually do to affect that. And even then, it’s all about doing. Your actions have to reflect your words.”

“All I’m trying to say is–” And this was the moment, to straighten up his back, to hold an unwavering gaze. To smile, cool and implacable. “If you want to push your friends away, you gotta commit. Cause yeah you talk like a jerk – but you sure don’t act like one.”

No snarky comebacks for at least five seconds; surely that had to earn him some kind of prize. When Rocket broke the silence, the words were almost vulnerable in their bluntness. “Yeah sure, we came for Quill. But I– we were the ones who’d chucked him on Terra in the first place.”

“Because – and correct me if I’m grossly off the mark, which I’m really not – you thought it was in his best interests.” Tony shrugged, a perfectly demonstrative roll of the shoulders. “Pro-tip: that never works. Not the marooning-on-a-planet part, I’ve never really tried that. The whole ‘presumption of people’s best interests’ bit. But the marooned were rescued, stowaways acquired, lessons learned. All’s well that ends in space, right?”

“You’re a smug asshole.” Rocket picked up his wrench again, mouth not-really scowling. “And you
“Which is how I know that this touching talk wasn’t all for my benefit. Or outta the bigness of your heart.” Rocket took his time over every word. His canine sneaked over his lower lip, a glint of knowing. “Of all the idiots in the world to fall for, you picked the one who never chose to grow up?”

“I.” Truths and lies aside, Tony’s jaw might’ve unhinged a little bit. His face felt strange, frozen and heating up all at once. “I wouldn’t…quite describe it as…”

“You were leaving.” Rocket turned his scrawny little back, obscuring his smug-looking face. The wrench screeched along the panel, sparks flying. Well. Well then.

Tony climbed out of the cockpit in a bit of a stupor. Raccoons had to be listed at least seventy-fifth in the list of animals with a keen perception of human emotion. Even space cyborg-raccoons. Never mind that a lot of his own insight into Rocket’s head came from the obvious similarities they shared, which meant Rocket couldn’t be talking completely out of his ass– nope. Nope. Not thinking about it.

He was probably drifting through the main body of the ship now. Somebody waved…something at his face – Tony seized it out of the air, unwrapping it absently before cramming it into his mouth. Bite, chew, chew….ugh. Uuuuurgh.

“I have had protein bars. I have had nature-goo shakes. I have had goddamn shitty twelve dollar alcohol.” His gag reflex felt like it was working overtime, but Tony managed to keep it down somehow. “But I have never. Never. Tasted something as vile, as absolutely putrid as this shit you all keep pretending is food–”

“You said you didn’t want my candy bars.” And that was Peter, just coming into focus at the corner of his vision. Abort, abort, look anywhere else, now was not the time to focus on how he’d unseeingly eaten something that he’d been handed, like a trusting little–

I thought we were fine with trusting him? His inner sceptic was beginning to sound a lot like FRIDAY.

Yeaaaah, but not with all of these added… Connotations. Right, wait, he was in a conversation, he was being weird – “Yes, because I presumed there was more to the cuisine here than pure sugar and solid sand. Does no one here cook?”

He looked around. Groot was sitting on the steel-top table at the centre of the room, stubby little legs splayed, oblong head slightly tilted to the side and wide, blinking eyes. Gamora was standing beside him, what looked like a bastardised electric toothbrush grasped in slender green fingers; occupied in brushing at Groot’s bark, straightening little twiglets sprouting from his neck. Behind them, off to the corner and just really adding to the multi-purpose air of the room – Drax was on a stool, curling weights. The weights in question were less dumbbells, more large pieces of machinery, but it seemed to be working for his biceps so who was Tony to judge.

And Peter, of course. Peter leaning against the wall, right knee bent and heel hitched up, a deactivated screenpad hanging loosely from his hand. Wavy hair gone slightly greasy, jaw dotted with a developed five o’clock shadow… and that thrice-damned jacket, unzipped and hanging loose on wide shoulders – did it ever get laundered? Did space people even believe in the restorative powers of detergent?
“Anyone?” Tony persisted, staring straight ahead with a mildly desperate air.

“My wife was an excellent cook.” Drax finished another rep. “I used to help her in the firepits. But after her death, I swore only to whet my blades on the blood of my enemies.”

“I was raised by a maniacal despot whose lessons were limited to killing people.” Gamora pruned a wayward leaf.

“I was abducted by aliens when I was eight.” Peter smiled, sunny-wide. “And the Ravagers never let me in on any of the gourmet chef lessons they were attending.”

“I am Groot,” said Groot.

“That…is valid.” Tony’s voice was growing a little faint, but surely that was valid too. “I’ll just handle it myself then. Don’t suppose you’ve got any groceries lying around…”

“Oh yeah, there’s a pantry next to the engine room.” Peter nodded, completely straight-faced. “S’been a while since our last trip to Kroger though, I think we’re running out of tinned corn.”

*Shut your stinking, sweet, sassy mouth or I swear to god I’ll*—“Thanks Lenny Bruce. Seriously though, nothing at all? Protein, fruit, po-tay-toes? Boil ‘em, mash ‘em, stick ‘em in a stew?”

“Perhaps if we wait long enough,” Drax offered. “Groot could grow out some vegetables for us.”

Groot chirped, sounding quite elated at the prospect, if Tony’s plant interpreting skills were to be depended on at all. On the other hand, Peter’s face contorted with immediate disgust – “Ew no. That’s like…cannibalism or something.”

“Technically, plants don’t have flesh.” Gamora smoothed out a final few twigs. “Also it would only be cannibalism if you were also a plant.”

“I know you’re only saying that to wind me up – but also.” Peter’s voice perked, “what kinda plant do you guys think I’d be?”

“A weed.” Drax stated, now doing simultaneous bicep curls. “One of those with broken spines, flopping about in the wind.”

Gamora patted Groot on the head with a finger, setting her bristle-y doodad down. “Definitely some kind of algae.”

“Phytoplankton?” Tony offered. “You know, the kind that gets eaten by giant whales, except the whales don’t even notice.”

“If you lot don’t stop yappin’ about plants in the next five seconds,” came from behind, Rocket descending down the cockpit ladder. “I’m gonna go smuggle the batteries myself.”

Peter’s mouth opened, but Tony pre-empted the correction, “Yeah yeah, I know, batteries are space slang for books. You’re a cool, hip bunch, just like the Australians.”

Drax’s machinery hit the floor with a thud, the man stretching out his arms above his head. “Does everyone from your species speak in funny words that don’t mean anything.”

“Nah.” Tony’s gaze drifted back to Peter – still slouched against the wall, loose and languid. Those eyes were twinkling at him again. “The two of us are just a little bit special.”
“You know, when I pictured being in an alien city,” Stark – no, Tony started, huffing out a breath as he went from step one-fifty-seven to one-fifty-eight, “the Neverending Staircase wasn’t really a part of it.”

Not that Peter had been counting or anything. Every time their feet touched down on the next step, the stone underneath would light up and a glow-in-the-dark numeral would form accordingly – oh-so-helpfully letting them know that they’d moved from step one-fifty-eight to one-fifty-nine and the crazy amount of cardio Strontia expected from its denizens on a regular basis.

Not for the first time, Peter regretted being familiar with the numbering system of so many fucking planets. Sure, it made counting out the credits easier – but what good had focusing on the details ever done him?

“You know what would’ve made this easier? A hoverboard.” Tony navigated around a patch of dampness on the next step, the numeral display glitching slightly under his heel. “Not the shitty fake ones with wheels – a real one. If Marty had it, the aliens should have it. Y’know?”

A Strontian crossed them on the stairs, all droopy antennae and wrapped in a thick coat. Tony seemed to take the next steps even quicker, chatter speeding up and expression growing almost manic. “I had it you know. Marty’s hoverboard – the actual prop they used. Got it for my fourteenth birthday. Tried to make it into a real hoverboard; the balance was a little iffy, ended up crashing into a banister and an authentic Rodin. Chipped a tooth – I thought it made my smile more charming, even if it was a molar and not strictly visible – but my parents weren’t too hot on it, so bye bye hoverboard. I think it’s still on display at Universal somewhere—”

“They made a sequel to Back To The Future?”

“What? Uh, yeah.” Tony slowed on the next step, the tight line of his shoulders easing slightly. Peter could feel his lips turning up at the corners; just a touch of self-satisfaction. “Two sequels. We don’t talk about the third one. FRIDAY might be able to project the second film if she’s got a copy on her ‘Away’ servers…the gang should have some interesting reactions to it. Speaking of – where’s the gang anyway?”

“Rocket got crabby…well, crabbiér about not being allowed on the meet up. He and Groot are off to a dealer to score some doodads.” Hopefully, Groot’s Bambi eyes should be able to guilt Rocket into leaving behind payment this time. Hopefully. “Gamora and Drax are meeting the contact to discuss terms of the deal and…uh, exchange of goods.”

“Gamora and Drax, huh? Pick your poison, I like it.” Another Strontian sidestepped them, turning into an awning that opened up into step one-eighty-four; Tony didn’t seem to stiffen up at this one nearly as much. “Choose your intimidation style – musclebound guy with knives and a tenuous grasp on similes, or Green Lucy.”

“Or fearful outlaw Star Lo–”

“Nope.” Tony ducked under a low-hanging banner, almost jauntily skipping from a step to the next. Peter frowned. “I can be intimidati–”
“You’d have ruined their vibe. Straight up Take Your Man-Child to Work day.” The Strontian sky and green street-wisps glimmered off Tony’s hair: an enigmatic tangle of dark and green and gold. He was lucky he had that going for him, because Peter was starting to feel a little affronted. “I did think you were gonna insist on hanging around for the negotiations though. Did Gamora veto the presence of your face, on account of its goofiness?”

No, I begged her to go in my place instead.

“Had something else I’d rather be doing.” Tony’s brows furrowed at that reply – but they’d just cleared step two-twenty-seven, and lo and behold, they were finally here. Without second-guessing, Peter placed his hands on Tony’s shoulders and turned him around in place. “When you pictured being in an alien city – I’m guessing this is what you were imagining?”

Tony opened his mouth. Closed it. Blinked a couple times. “That is a wall.”

“A wall with a sign.”

“Yes, a wall with a retro sign. Very European.” Tony’s shoulders twitched under his fingers; Peter dropped his hands immediately, and took a step away for good measure. His fingertips were prickling. “Is it a historically important wall? Did the aliens sign their Declaration of Independence at this very spo–”

“Just walk through the damn wall already.”

Tony sighed extravagantly, before proceeding to stroll through the entrance – hologram glitching blue-green around him. Peter followed behind, stomach clenching a little in anticipation; this bar was pretty decent but Strontia wasn’t exactly among the top ten party planets in the galaxy. Which… might be a good thing because he wasn’t entirely convinced of Tony’s ability to handle a packed-full room of aliens right now, no matter the number of pithy one-liners he threw out. Plus, it wasn’t like Peter could’ve specified the location for their first job back…but Cron had real live bandits, and there was sky surfing on Centauri IV, and Biphasia was rumoured to be doing something wicked with its phases–

“Whoa.” Tony came to a still, and Peter just about avoided walking straight into his back. “Not that I’m an expert on workplace safety or anything, but… isn’t this a fire hazard? On account of all the, uh, fire?”

Wait, what? Peter cast an eye over the place as Tony might be seeing it: a moderately busy bar, dimly lit, not too cluttered. Small round tables were scattered through the space, with dark wood-and-resin tops. The drinks counter ran all along the right side of the room, sleek and transparent, snaking in and out in an S-shape. Crystal flutes, topped up and fizzing gold, were arrayed to one side of the counter edge. And then there was the smell of the place – like incense that was still burning, something that weighed down the air and tickled at Peter’s nostrils. With every passing moment, he felt his breaths slow down; deep and dragging, searching out the variegated notes that changed and held – like a hundred different flowers, sandalwood, fresh linen. Like the air in a room at dusk, with the windows thrown open and the curtains lightly drawn, and a dozen smoky scented candles.

Which brought him to the part that was probably giving Tony pause – the lighting. No shabby plasma tubing here, no multicoloured halogen lights. Instead, hundreds of little flames bobbed in the air – wickless and candle-less, seemingly without source, but pointed gold and flickering. They drifted and curved in streams, following an unseeable current from one corner of the room to the other; they clustered near the wooden arches of the ceiling, reflected bright in the floorboards. Some had gravitated to the bare arms of an Astran sitting at the bar, draped and hovering around her shoulders like a glowing scarf. Some gathered in petal-shapes spanning the walls, or licking at the
cheeks of patrons who threw back their heads and laughed, light refracting off their hair and scales.

“It isn’t real fire.” Peter swiped lightly at the cluster closest to them. Next to him, Tony winced pre-emptively, but Peter felt nothing but an uptick in phantom warmth as the bobbing flames dispersed.

One came floating over, as if borne on a breeze – it crossed Peter’s field of vision and drifted towards Tony. It halted an inch away from his nose, outline quivering, as if kept at bay by the air exhaled out of those lips. The man himself was perfectly still: like even the beating of his lashes would drive the flame away. Wide, unblinking eyes, watching the slender sliver of light, gold silhouette twinned in dark irises that looked enraptured.

Peter averted his eyes. His chest was starting to feel tight, fingers rising to tug at the metal zipper of his jacket fastened up to the throat.

Drinks. He should probably grab drinks. Excellent idea.

By the time he’d (not fled, definitely not fled) ventured to the counter and grabbed two flutes, Tony had already made himself comfortable against a pillar. Chin lifted, still tracking the passage of the flames across the ceiling – Tony didn’t look away even on Peter’s return, “Fake fire or no, still seems a bit like asking for it what with all the booze in a place like this.”

“Place is non-alcoholic, actually. Well, Earth alcohol. Strontian drinks,” Peter went to gesture, before realising both his hands were full, whoops, “just get you giddy for a few seconds, that’s all.”

“Here I thought you were a Star Wars fan, yet the grimy cantina you’ve brought me to is neither grimy, nor technically a cantina.” Tony didn’t sound too pissed about that. He was back to looking at Peter again, the curl of his lips almost delighted. And then his long-lashed gaze dipped again, down to the two glasses in Peter’s grip – “For me?”

And before Peter could offer the drink, or even open his mouth in a yes, Tony was… was bending his head, ducking forward as if to take a sip while Peter’s fingers were still wrapped around the stem of the glass. It brought him dreadfully close to Peter’s chest, warm breath gusting past the gap in the Ravager jacket – and Peter had gone rigid, the glass still vertical and this is going to be so awkward oh god – except warm fingers were wrapping around his, exerting pressure gently till the flute tilted and golden liquid was trickling down to where Tony’s mouth – fuck fuck stop looking stop I can’t – was pressed to the crystal rim.

It was hair-raising and exhilarating, all in one – and Peter lived in fucking space.

Tony withdrew, mouth and hands, straightening up casually. His tongue sneaked out to lap at a stray drop, clinging on to a beard bristle. Peter was intimately aware of the flavours that must be cresting across those taste buds right now – the champagne-like lightness in the throat, the heady bouquet of fresh violets flooding the nose.

“It’s good.” Tony said.

It was hard to parse what Peter was feeling at the moment. There were all the impolite feelings that he wasn’t going to give names to, but all kind of vaguely started with a dim heat in his gut; a sort of bemused admiration, and an indignant voice shouting raise! I raise too!

Tony, for his part, had redirected his stare firmly to the opposite direction. There was colour rising to his cheeks, the dusty pink of oopsies, something mildly abashed about his eyes. Peter silently passed off the half-empty glass in his direction – Tony snagged it with barely a look and those thrice-
“Soo… when’re you expecting Gamora and Drax to finish up with the deal?” Tony pitched it as offhand as you please, crystal stem of the glass rolling between those – fuck’s sake, couldn’t the galaxy cut Peter a break and just give Tony tentacles or something? Though to be fair, considering past history, that wouldn’t necessarily be a dealbrea – whoa, steady on there Quill.

The correct response to all of the above, naturally, was to drain his own glass dry. Peter smacked the not-really-a-taste of violets off his lips, inhaling nice and slowly, “They’re not big talkers, so an hour if things go well. Maybe sixteen if someone on the opposite end decides to toss in a metaphor.”

“Mhmm.” Tony swirled the drink in his glass for a while, before bringing it under his nose and sniffing delicately like they were at one of Aunt Enid’s la-di-da wine tastings. Who the hell brought an eight-year-old to a wine tasting anyway? That’s right, people in the eighties.

Tony sipped at his drink again, punctuated by a soft sigh of satisfaction. “Nice place like this, would be really improved by some tunes. Where’s the alien jazz at, people?”

He liked the place!! The crowing voice in Peter’s head was permissible, but just barely, and definitely not out loud. “They probably already are. Strontian hearing works on a frequency range several kilohertz above our own – they could be blasting The Mad Trix in here and we wouldn’t know.”

Tony mouthed ‘The Mad Trix’ to himself, eyebrows raised, with not nearly enough respect as that name deserved, so Peter went on ahead with – “And some Strontians don’t have ears at all. It’s a bit of a genetic lottery really. Their communication is really a lot more visual than anything–”

Tony barked out a laugh. “Yeah, pull the other one.”

Peter blinked. “No, really. If you listen close now, you’ll notice you can’t really hear any local – that’s the green people with thingies on their head – actually talking: just dragging table legs and clinking glasses. Goes the other way too, I could stand up right now and start singing the national anthem and no one would be able to hear me.”

“No, no no, I know what this is,” And Peter really didn’t need to know Tony for the past several months to know something spectacularly preposterous was about to come out of that pie-hole, “this is every ‘oh, I’m in a foreign culture and you’re gonna dupe me into doing something stupid’ like screaming I’M NAKED! in a different language in a bar when I’m clearly, you know, not.”

I know you’re not. And fuck fuck fuck this, Peter was so much better than this, he had game that spanned hands and tentacles and numerous other appendages in the farthest reaches of the galaxy. He almost brought over Gamora to the dark side, with the sheer power of his dancing hips and Elvin Bishop, and she was an actual literal cyborg.

Speaking of… oh. Oh of course. He was a freaking genius.

“If you want me to prove it,” Peter heard himself say, hand reaching down to unzip his jacket loose and flick the long edge away, “I’ll prove it.”

Down by his side, right where a holster would normally be, was secured the most precious possession of his life. Peter made a production of unclipping his Walkman from his belt, lifting it up and setting it down on the empty table just to the right of the pillar. He fished for his mini-speakers in his other pocket, pulling them out with just as much flair – two little squiggles of chrome wire and plastic that looked like antennae, with vacuum seals at the back. Attaching those to the body of the
Walkman, Peter then snapped open the case containing the cassette.

**PETER QUILL’S EXCELLENT TERRAN ADVENTURE.**

Right, right, from that time he’d been trying to screw up the courage to play it and hadn’t really gotten around to it. It was fine, this was fine, what better occasion to hear it for the first time and humiliate himself when all the songs about Tony’s intense contempt for him spooled out in playlist form—

Peter glanced over his shoulder. His not-inconsiderable bulk was probably obscuring most of what he was doing right now, and sure enough Tony was standing there with an arched brow: posture slouched and Duran Duran t-shirt crinkling along the neckline, eyes traced through with the faint light of curiosity and amusement. He looked nothing like the man whose very secure superhero facility Peter had accidentally infiltrated, and even less like the man who saved the world in the daytime and didn’t sleep a wink at night, solitude worn into the bones.

Peter closed the tape, and hit play.

Four beats of silence. Four beats that his heart sped through, going faster and faster until the music kicked in, jaunty and lively and oh-so-familiar.

Man, was there ever a better feeling in the whole wide world than knowing a song?

This one was all Gramps. He’d been weirdly obsessed with Scottish people, and their clothes, and their violent history, and he’d had a near-shrine built to the… Promenaders? Proclaimers? Whichever, this song wasn’t theirs, but Grandad had played it multiple times anyway, humming happily – it’s called folk rock! Ain’t it snazzy, Pete?

“Sorry,” Tony cut in, stiff jaw and skittish eyes, words jam-packed so close to each other that they could barely be made out, “The vibe’s kinda weird ‘cause Tarantino used the song in that basement scene, but that was in the nineties and I didn’t even watch *Reservoir Dogs* anywa–”

“It’s a great song.” Peter said, and Tony halted mid-word, eyes wide.

*Well I don't know why I came here tonight I got the feeling that something ain't right I'm so scared in case I fall off my chair, And I'm wondering how I'll get down the stairs* 

And magic was real, because nothing else explained how words put together a certain way, strung along and lilting in a melody, could linger on in your memory – only waiting for a chord, or a pair of eyes, for all of it to come rushing back. Peter flipped his empty glass upside-down, brought up the circular crystal base to his lips. This didn’t crack even the top ten of his weirdest makeshift mikes.

“*Clowns to the left of me, jo-okers to the right – here I am,”* He wouldn’t be winning awards for his singing voice anytime soon, but that wasn’t the point was it? The point was to tap his toes to the beat, feel the notes resonate in his throat – and not look away from Tony’s eyes, shining from more than just the light, “*Stuck in the middle with you.*”

*Yes I'm stuck in the middle with you* 

“And I’m wondering what it is I should do,” Peter bobbed his chin, hips swinging side-to-side as he
jigged out of the shadow of the pillar. His moves needed space damn it – head thrown back and really getting into it, “It’s so hard to keep this smile from my face... losing control, yeah, I’m all over the place.”

“Alright alright, I believe you.” But Tony wasn’t even looking around for the non-reactions of the people in the bar, eyes snared by Peter’s jig and lips bursting at the seams with something deeper than amusement. Joy, maybe.

“Clowwwwns to the left of me,” Peter crooned, “jookers to the right... here I am, stuck in the middle with you.”

“Seriously, they’re deaf, not blind.” The reprimand was lacking bite, Tony grinning too wide around the words. His eyes darted away for a second, presumably to check out the other disinterested patrons going about, “though they might as well be – man, it’s like being in New York again.”

“Well you started out with nothing,” Peter hummed a little through the rest, his recall wasn’t Perfect. And you’re proud that you’re a self-made man. And your friends, they all come crawlin, slap you on the back and say – oh oh oh, he loved this next part:

“Pl-eee-ease.” The drum punctuated every dip and lift in the notes. Peter held out his glass to Tony this time, a smooth flick of the wrist, exactly when he was meant to. “Pleee-ase.”

Tony watched him, something flickering in that stare – something that didn’t disappear, that came back and held, as he pushed himself off the pillar and walked over. He came close, and closer still, until his lips were hovering over the makeshift mike; but Peter lifted it higher, until Tony had to raise his chin higher too, throat exposed and eye contact searingly unavoidable.

“Trying to make some sense of it all,” Tony’s voice was lower than Peter’s, and he wasn’t quite on the right scale, but he looked gloriously at peace so never mind all that, “But I can see that it makes no sense at all.”

Is it cool to go to sleep on the floor

Cause I don’t think I can take anymore

While his voice wasn’t all that, Tony could definitely dance off with the best of them. Peter watched him shimmy and sway carelessly in the air, and felt a little deprived for not knowing this sooner. But then they both leaned together over the mike, heads bobbing in sync like shameless dorks: “Clowns to the left of me, jokers to the right – here I am, stuck in the middle with you.”

“You know, I’ve never not been the most outrageous person in the room.” Tony mused.

Well you started out with nothing and– “Jealous?” Peter enquired.

“Oh no, just out of practice.” Tony smiled, like an in-joke to himself. It didn’t look deprecating. And then he turned the smile on Peter instead: no hollowness, no cracks, solid all the way through.

“When I get going, I’m gonna blow your jet boots off.”

The drum punctuated the seconds. Pleaa-ase. Please.

Peter released the breath they were both holding, tight and close, music gathering in the background – familiar like a friend, but one that winked and nudged and egged you on. Peter didn’t need the encouragement; the lightness in his chest was answer enough.

“Never doubted it for a second.”
Chapter End Notes

1) All planet/place names, such as Strontia, Cron, Biphasia etc. are actual Marvel comics canon, though I have taken major liberties with the details and worldbuilding.

2) Marty’s famous hoverboard, is of course from Back To The Future II.

3) The song *Stuck In The Middle With You* by Stealers Wheel, was used in the soundtrack of *Reservoir Dogs*, directed by Quentin Tarantino.

Comment if you liked!
Bring It On Home To Me

Chapter Notes

And we're back! As always, thank you to all the people who left kudos and comments - every single word helps fuel me through these hiatuses, even if I don't get around to answering them right away.

This chapter is dedicated to mathi, who's had a bad week and deserves all the cuddles, apart from also being an awesome cheer-reader for this story from day one. Chapter title from 'Bring It On Home To Me' by Sam Cooke.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Thanks. To you. For the uh, song.”

Peter scowled at his reflection, distorted in the shiny door of the Milano. What a fucking dweeb.

One more time, from the top. “Thanks for the song, man. Super appreciate it. Pew pew.”

…okay. Maybe without the finger-guns this time. Or the associated sound effects. “Thank you for the song, I really appreciated it. In case you couldn’t tell from all the dancing.”

That was dancing? Tony’s voice mocked inside his head. I thought you had an actual squirrel down your pants. Insert-complicated-insult-here that you won’t understand ‘cause I’m a hundred and seventeen times smarter than you.

Holy shit, he was starting to get on his own nerves.

“Look here.” Peter wagged a vexed finger at his face. “I know he’s a douche, it’s part of the charm, but he’s not mean. And I have a spectacular track record in these kinda things, even if I’m stupidly sentimental about music and am coming off as a moron right now. So he’s gonna have to shut up and accept the gratitude, or else–”

The hatch door swung open, hard edge coming right for Peter’s nose. He recoiled back with a yelp, heels skidding over the slippery wood of the pier, and landed square on his butt.

Because I really needed a flatter ass right now. Also, ow.

Peter squinted up at Drax’s equanimous face, the man surveying him from his superior height. On account of the standing and all. Asshole. “ Didn’t anyone ever teach you to knock?”

Drax blinked. “You were standing outside the ship.”

“Okay, the whole taking-things-literally bit is starting to get old, buddy.” Peter pushed himself to his feet, tail bone twinging in the process. Double ow. “What’re you doing back here anyway?”

“The deal is complete. I’ve heard excellent things of the House of Wagers in this city, but they do not allow weapons in there and I don’t need blades to break limbs so I returned to stow my knives safe–”

“Right, perfect, great.” Peter tugged at Drax by the arm, then blithely pretended not to notice when
he didn’t budge an inch. “Off to the den of iniquity with you then, bye-bye, your curfew is nine am, don’t come back before then.”

Drax surveyed him for a few more seconds, before proceeding to ponderously step down from the doorway. “Gamora and I saw you at the bar earlier tonight. We thought it best not to interrupt your undignified Terran flailing.”

“Yay.” Peter muttered. Of bloody course they were there. “More material for my insecurities.”

This seemed to give Drax some pause, a wrinkle forming between his furrowed brows. “You do not typically lack in confidence, Peter Quill.”

“Yeah, I know.” Peter admitted, though his eyes were still casually averted and his hands tucked in all cool-like into his pockets. “Extremely out of character. It’s giving me hives.”

Bucking convention and character himself, Drax said nothing about bees or honey. Instead, there was this. “I am about to offer you an immensely wise piece of advice.”

Peter could feel his brows making for his hairline. “Seriously doubt it, but go on.”

“There are two kinds of beings in this universe. Those who dance, and those who do not. You…” Drax paused to sneeze, then went on sincerely. “..seem to have found yourself a match.”

Stuck in the middle with you. Unbidden, Peter could feel his lips curving, smile sneaking in at the corners. “You reckon?”

“Oh, you will definitely ruin it. But I don’t think that matters much, in the present.” Drax gave an affirmative nod, before starting to move away. “Continue your pathetic courting.”

“Huh.” That… might have actually helped. And deserved a yell over his shoulder, “Thank you!”

Right. Onward and forward, then.

Tony was in the cockpit, lying down and stretched out flat on his belly, in a pose that hitched the material of his trousers tight to his ass and left his skinny ankles bare. Peter concentrated on the ankles. “Tony I…”

“Shh.” Tony said.

He didn’t have a neural wrench or a screwdriver or any kind of tool in hand. Come to think about it, he wasn’t even sticking his head under the instrument panel, so there really was no excuse for this blatant showing off of–

“Tony I need to–”

“Shhhhhhhhhhh.” Tony hushed again, before jerking his head to the spot of floor next to him.

Peter gingerly lowered himself down, dust rubbing off on his knees and palms getting a bit sticky from the flooring. Right, so this was why people cleaned after spilling beers and such. Noted. “What are we–?”

Oh.

The Iron Man helmet was sitting on the floor, light gleaming dully behind the eyes. Groot was seated
cross-legged and opposite to it, bark arms folded across his tiny torso.


FRIDAY’s voice echoed out of the helmet, in a tone of immense concentration. “I am Groot.”

Groot shook his head from side-to-side, twiggy chin swinging emphatically. “I am Groot.”

FRIDAY repeated, a lilt of uncertainty at the end. “I am Groot?”

Groot produced a sound of inarticulate rage, propelling himself off the floor. He swung at the helmet, vines springing out of his hands and cracking harmlessly off the metal.

A few more seconds of ineffective pummelling. The eye-slits of the helmet flashed, FRIDAY voicing contritely. “Please do convey my apologies to Master Groot if I’ve insulted him. It was not my intent.”

“Nah, he’s the one being a jerk. Groot, knock it off.” Peter nudged him away gently with his knuckles, sulky face and all.

He could feel Tony’s eyes on him, a soft touch. “You understand him?”

“Bits and pieces.” He stroked Groot’s head with his index finger, the little guy subsiding into a disgruntled silence. “There we go – now be nice.”


Peter turned to look at Tony. “You got a minute?”

Tony nodded, though a bit reluctantly. They pushed themselves off the floor, Peter leading the way out of the cockpit while surreptitiously trying to wipe his hands. “So FRIDAY wants to learn to speak Groot, huh?”

“She thinks her sensors can pick up the tiniest shifts in modulation and tone when Groot speaks, which when compiled into her database and subject to analysis could be key to cracking the language.” Tony was practically buzzing as they dismounted the step ladder. “This is exactly what artificial neural networks were created for – to absorb massive amounts of data and learn to make inferences that the human brain can’t even dream of!”

Peter leaned on the tape deck to his left, shoulder propped comfortably. Tony dropped to sit on the adjacent bunk he’d been crashing on – the one on the ship closest to the cockpit of course. Rocket had been bribed with some choice gadgetry for that particular favour. “Is she getting anywhere?”

“She says she might be close to telling the difference when he’s actually saying his name and when he’s not.” Tony admitted – just a hint of wryness, dark eyes gone all crinkly from the excitement.

And there it was again, that smile that took no quarter and tugged mercilessly at his lips, up and up into a happy curve – Peter couldn’t fight it if he tried. “And in the meantime, we’re blessed with the most goddamn adorable thing I’ve ever witnessed.”

“Yeah.” That crinkly-eyed gaze seemed to dip to Peter’s lips for a second, before brightening incrementally. “You guys are good with him.”

“Uh.” Peter could feel the tips of his ears warming up. He shoved his hands into his pockets, pant rivets straining in response. “Groot makes it easy. He wasn’t always like… he wasn’t this young.
Before.”

The self-consciousness faded before the flush of memories. Golden-warm, bittersweet. We are Groot. “Still a sweetheart though.”

“You’ve got a good thing going here.” And Peter could see it, that same bittersweetness lingering in the curl of Tony’s mouth, though his eyes were bright. A taste too familiar, grown almost accustomed to. “The Guardians.”

It doesn’t have to be just mine.

The thought popped into his head, sudden and perfectly-formed. Terrifying in its simplicity. Its rightness.

Peter forced a laugh. Not awkward, not awkward at all. “You haven’t seen us scrap over the washing yet.”

Tony didn’t push it. Scarred knuckles braced on the edge of the bunk, he stretched his feet out before him – bare toes wiggling in the air. “Where’s the rest of your illustrious team anyway?”

“Well.” Safer ground, thank fuck. Peter could still hear his heart thumping faintly in his ears. “We’re like a family, and obviously care a lot about each other, and live together, except for how we’ll basically jump at any chance to not do that last thing.”

“Aww.” Tony intoned sympathetically, smirk barely restrained. “Is it cause you’re a slob?”

“Drax takes too much space. And Rocket smells, and Groot is a literal baby and Gamora sheds like crazy.” Peter had been nursing these resentments for a while – it was his ship first, dammit. “So anytime we’re planet-side, we take some well deserved breaks from each other.”

Tony hummed, faux thoughtful. His mouth took on a mischievous slant, the actual words as offhand as you please. “We’ve been co-habiting for a while, technically.”

“Technically, I suppose a warden and his prisoners are living in the same place.”

Tony exhaled, a short puff of amusement. His feet came swinging down, ankles hooking and unhooking as he kicked his heels back-and-forth. “Is that what this is about? You tiring of me?”

It wasn’t a question sincerely asked, or even meant to be sincerely answered. The words weren’t exaggerated for effect, said too fast or too slow or too nonchalant – no indicators of insecurity at all. No matter what the verbalised answer might be, a ‘fuck yes’ or ‘hell no’ or ‘I dream of your death daily’ – it wouldn’t matter, because Tony was still smiling and seemed to have no qualms about the reality of things as they were. About what the real answer was.

And maybe Peter was being a sentimental moron again, but he took a second – a single, shiny second, to feel a breathtaking surge of pride swallow him whole.

“Thanks for the song.” Peter said. “I fucking loved it.”

“That…is a non-sequitur.” Tony didn’t seem too cut up about that though, judging by the now-slightly-smug uptilt of his lips.

“It was relevant to the conversation.”

“Am I to understand that you haven’t listened to the rest of the tape yet?” Which was nothing for
Tony to sound incredulous about, even if Peter wasn’t necessarily the good-things-come-in-moderation type. More like the inhale-birthday-cake-till-you-puke type. He’d only ever gotten eight of those cakes, and for short periods of time. Maybe if Yondu was the baking kind, or if the Milano came equipped with a minifridge, he’d have learned to parcel out mouthful after mouthful of sugary heaven, make it last longer.

“I’m taking my time with it.” Because some things in life were worth fighting your natural instincts for. “Which is good news for you.”

“So I’m only coasting off the good will of Stealers Wheel here. And the second you reach the end of that playlist…” Tony mused out loud, shaking his head in faux resignation. “It’s walk-the-plank, bye-bye-Milano for me.”

Peter grinned. “Sounds about right.”

Only thing was, Peter Quill was the kind of man who could keep listening to same thirteen songs for a lifetime.

And see, this seemed like a good moment. Not any too different from the other good moments they’d been having, all of it just… awash with bone-deep comfort, yet buoyant with fun. Peter wasn’t even trying for anything: he just wanted to continue the moment, let the flush of it carry them both through the end of the day. So he straightened up from his lean and moved forward, mouth opening to ask Tony to scooch over, hand closing on the rubbery pillow to whip it off the bunk and clear some space for him to sit–

Except when he did, something clattered to the floor, plastic hitting metal with a hollow sound. Something small and black, with hinges like a clam.

“The flip phone design for the cell or portable phone was first created in 1989, which would be after your time on Earth. It was a Motorola model called the MicroTAC, though General Telephone and Electronics held the trademark—”

Some people could feel their emotions from a distance. Watch them approach, catalogue their effect. Separate rational thought and emotional response. But it didn’t work that way with Peter. Every time, it felt like he was tipped over, shoved back. Plunged into an ocean of visceral, buzzing, snarling feeling that clung to his self and weighed it down.

It weighed on him now, overtaking his body in a concerted wave of… tightness. Strain at the front of his temples, at the back of his jaw, compressed painfully between his teeth. His stomach pulling right back in, ribs pushing down, chest closing hard and dense and airless. His toes curling, digging against nothing.

Because that was what it was. Nothing. A reaction to nothing, that could mean nothing, because the reality of things as they were was that Tony didn’t owe him squat.

(And how did such a rational thought sneak in amidst all the torrential feeling?)

Simple really. Eons ago, when he’d get bored loitering in sterile waiting-rooms, Gramps had once brought him a jigsaw puzzle. Massive thing, five hundred or thousand pieces. Peter had tipped the box onto a table, till all the pieces spilled in a jagged, colourful heap. He’d clustered up all the blue sky bits, all the green grass bits, nigh identical looking except for wisps of cloud or hints of dew here and there. After hours of effort, he’d assembled a higgledy-piggledy line of border pieces,
awkwardly jammed together; their similar shade fooling him into thinking that they fit.

Until Gramps walked by and dropped warm hands on Peter’s shoulders, “Aw, Pete. Those don’t belong together.”

So no matter if he wanted to finally lift his eyes off the floor, off the damned flip-phone and say, you get bars all the way up here? He couldn’t, because Tony didn’t owe him squat and Peter had always been terrible at jigsaw puzzles.

The pillow was still hanging limply from his hand, so he dropped that, the thump of it muted as it hit the bunk. He dragged his heels back, one step and then another, when–

“Please don’t leave.”

That hadn’t been him. His lips were still pressed tightly closed, and for all that the words had spilled into the air in a rush, Peter would never be able to achieve that tone of control, that lack of perceptible emotion.

And yet, this time, Tony didn’t sound confident at all.

It cut straight through the buzzing in Peter’s skull, snapped past the strain like a taut thread suddenly gone loose. You’re fucking this up.

“Of course not.” Peter heard himself say – pure, unadulterated, emotional reflex.

He turned on his feet, slowly, and lowered himself down on the bunk, half of the pillow squished under his thighs. He tried to steady his breathing. This was… this had never happened before. He’d never been thrown off-course so quickly, and it hadn’t even been rational thought that did it. Like countering like, the tight hurt in his chest versus the swelling upsurge of no on hearing the too-careful lack of it in Tony.

He lifted his eyes, glanced to the side. Tony was looking… stunned; it lasted for a split-second, before also carefully erasing itself.

Those bare feet settled on the floor, Tony bending forward slowly and scooping the phone up, before deserting it next to his side on the bunk.

Peter cleared his throat, the sound rough and foreign amidst the silence that had descended in the cabin. The words that followed didn’t feel hostile. “Were you two…?”

“No… I don’t know.” Tony wasn’t looking at him. His eyes were fixed somewhere on the ceiling of the fuselage, still and barely blinking. “There wasn’t nothing, I guess.”

“We rarely agreed on anything, had frequent ego clashes, and were kind of just… general assholes.” The curve of Tony’s lips was shaped like a smile, tinged with far more complicated things. “And I really, really liked him.”

Peter inhaled. “Did you–”

Tony began at the same time, too quick like the words were scrambling to get free, “We were never actually together–”

“–ever listen to songs together?” Peter finished, more than a little unevenly.

“I…Once.” A tiny, thrown-off pause. But the surprise didn’t last long. Tony’s gaze clouding over
and softening in memory despite everything. “Steve had this list, of things about the modern world he needed to learn about. Came by one day, all awkward face and stiff declamations: I hear you’re a good person to talk to about music. So I played him a Nirvana classic.” A quick hiss of breath through the nose, in what might’ve been amusement once upon a time. “And a pretty damn fucking ironic one too.”

“We had…there’d been some good times. Which is not something I thought I’d say out loud, ever.” The exhale that followed was slow and long, with the slightest shake to it. Tony ended it with another smile, tight and closed, like it was holding worse expressions at bay. “Barely even formed the thought in my head, for months. Too much anger. Hurt. Breach of trust.”

“But now I’m here and it’s like all that got left behind.” And then the smile dropped, to something smaller and quieter; relief easing the strain in those lines and wrinkles. “Lost in transit, deserted at baggage claim. And I can remember… feeling it, carrying it, but it doesn’t weigh down on me as much.”

“But you are.” It sounded clumsy and awkward, and far too literal – but the memory was stinging-fresh, the image recreated almost perfectly: of Peter’s idiotic actions too many weeks ago, the ringing phone and the look in Tony’s eyes when he rejected the call – Steve Rogers waiting on the other line. “Still carrying it.”

Tony dropped his eyes, gaze flitting for a bare instant to the small phone nestled against his side. It seemed like he might pick it up, but his hands only spread wider on his own thighs, fingers curving inward, pressing down. The skin looked taut against his knuckles, bloodless.

“Yes.” Tony admitted, half-formed laugh catching on the sides of it like it hurt.

The quiet traipsed by and they let it, seated side-by-side and motionless on a bunk bed. Every now and then, the faint sound of voices would echo down from the cockpit. Their breaths rose and fell, almost in conjunction – it was quiet enough to hear the dim buzz of the cabin lights, the far-off rattle of the engine fans.

“I understand.” Peter said.

“Do you.” Resignation tinted the words. Tony let out another half-aborted sound, empty laugh and hollow breath all rolled into one. “Cause I still don’t.”

Peter’s jacket was already unzipped, so it was easier to feel for the inner lining unseeingly with his fingers. It took a second or two to get a grip of the picture, paper-thin and sticking to the lining of the pocket, but he eventually managed to pull it out. He unfolded it carefully, the colours faded along the corners and down the crease, and set it down on the bunk between his and Tony’s thighs.

Tony’s eyes scoped over the picture, long-torn from some eighties magazine and still unwrinkled. His face was hard to read. “I thought the David Hasselhoff thing had been a joke.”

“It wasn’t.” Maybe one day Peter would have the necessary distance, the scabs and calluses to laugh about it. Not yet. “I used to carry his…that picture around, when I was little. Told the other kids he was my dad.”

And you never stopped. Tony didn’t say the obvious out loud. He reached out with a hand, thumb stroking lightly over the faded edge of the picture. Peter didn’t feel the urge to immediately snatch it away, so at least there was that.

“How did the space folk take that story?” There was something to the… kindness in Tony’s voice,
that should’ve felt unbearable. It didn’t.

“They didn’t appreciate it.” Not that Peter actually told that lie, past the age of eight. Yondu was the only one he ever said it to, something along the lines of *my dad and his talking car are gonna come for you if you don’t let me go.* And the Ravager Captain had just stared down at him, pity flickering in red irises. “I’ve been told they’re missing some key context.”

“What it comes down to though, is…s’not like you still want the same things that you did, before.” If Peter shifted just a little, he could feel the weight of his Walkman on his belt. Solid edges poking into the underside of his stomach, present and comforting. “The time’s past and you wouldn’t know what to do with it now if you got it. It’s more about…you just want to remember the person you were, who wanted those things.”

When he finally looked to the side again, Tony was already looking back. And how – control visibly fracturing in every facet of his expression, from wide eyes to pale cheeks and lips that trembled minutely. It was strange to witness epiphany in someone else’s face, and not know which direction their thoughts were careening towards, which ultimate destination. Only that he had somehow triggered it, and impact was imminent, and–

“Of course.” Tony breathed. Around them, everything else was silent.

And somewhere in the distance maybe, a star was imploding – soundless, casting heat and light out into the universe.

~

*And if I catch it coming back my way*

*I’m gonna serve it to you*

*And that ain't what you want to hear*

*But that's what I'll do*

*And the feeling coming from my bones*

*Says find a home*

The guitar riff kicked in louder, the same seven notes repeated over and over. Add the distorted vocals on top and the drumbeat beneath like a pounding heart – the effect was hypnotic.

Peter blinked crusty, sleep-heavy eyes, vision hazing in and out through a drowsy veil. He’d been drifting along for a while, not quite cognisant of the passage of time – enough that his shoulders were stiff against the wall he’d been leaning on, ears hot and aching under the plastic-y headset pumping music into his brain. His knees folded to his chest had gone numb, tail bone twinging when he tried half-heartedly and failed to sit up straighter.

Still nice though. Peter found himself listing to the side, an unconscious urge to find support for his head. His cheek found glass, warm and vibrating with the engine – right, he’d dozed off next to a
window. Bit awkward, with the bulge of the headset caught between his jaw and shoulder, but he was loathe to take it off and pop the bubble.

Like this, it was as if life was meant to come along with a soundtrack. Waking up, going to sleep, all the other typical features of existing. Like the guitar and its obsessive refrain were walling off the rest of the ordinary world.

Still, he couldn’t quite tip over completely into sleep. The position was not the problem, he’d slept contorted into way worse (and screwed up his back every time). It was the lights, neon-bright and changing colour beyond his eyelids. Space wasn’t nearly as dark as one would expect, though to be fair they were headed towards more vibrant parts of the galaxy. Strontia should be light years behind them by now and the *Milano* had been cruising for a while, they must almost be reaching—

Peter forced his eyes open, feeling the stretch and dryness of the skin almost immediately. Through a groggy layer, his mind registered the almost overwhelming surge in brightness, the room illuminated even though the plasma tubes were powered down. One glance through the window was enough to confirm it.

They’d arrived.

Peter lifted a hand to gingerly ease the headset off, earlobes immediately twinging in pain as the pressure released. He ran his fingers through his hair a couple times, sweat-slicked strands pushed this way and that, knuckled at the grit lodged in the creases of his eyes. Suppressed a massive yawn, knees creaking noisily as he swung his legs off the broad ledge, pins and needles erupting to life.

He staggered across the room on bare feet, a decision he was sure to regret later. Thoughts lumbered through the muddy waters of his head, surfacing in brief, sense-making intervals – Rocket should be at the controller in the cockpit, Gamora with him. Drax would be sleeping, and not even barrel-rolls through an asteroid field would wake him. Groot was… somewhere. The ship had too many cubbies and hidey-holes.

Hidey-holes. Peter stifled a sleepy giggle. What a weird word. Did Terrans still say hidey-holes? He should ask Tony.

He traipsed slowly through the doorway, towards the passage that housed the tape-deck. Two orange bunks ran alongside opposing walls, the step ladder to the cockpit fixed at the extreme end. There was a figure curled up on one of the bunks, head towards the tape-deck and facing the wall. A hoodie was draped over his upper half in lieu of a blanket, and he was short enough that he didn’t even have to bend his knees that much to fit on the bunk, the lucky bastard.

Peter placed his hand on a hoodie-covered shoulder and gave it a shake. “Tony.”

The Tony in question hunched further into himself, scooching towards the wall and being generally uncooperative. “Mhrm.”

“Get up.”

“No.” The response was surprisingly enunciated for someone so deep in the throes of sleep. What a poser.

“To-ny.” Another vigorous shake.

Tony parried the hand away with his own, then ceased his little act to flop onto his back and groan dramatically. His beard was starting to get a bit scruffy around the edges, natural shadows blending in with the stubble on the underside of his jaw. Also, Peter contended that there was nowhere to look
except at the underside of a person’s jaw if they stretched their head up like that whilst groaning dramatically, so he was perfectly in the clear here.

“What, Peter.” Tony’s voice wasn’t all bleary with sleep either, which solidified the poser theory.

Hideyholes, Peter came extremely close to saying. But he had to focus here. “I wanna show you something.”

“Oh, he wants to show me something. Can you,” Tony took a deliberate breath, “top the glory that is Elton John performing with a thousand backup dancers, who are also flamingos, in the gardens of my childhood home while I watched on from a giant bean bag? No. No you can’t.”

Peter wasn’t the kind of person who sighed, and he damn well wasn’t going to let Tony push him into it. “There’s no way you can remember that many details from a dream.”

“Who needs dreams when you’ve got the power of an extremely vivid imagination?” But Tony pushed himself up into a sitting position nonetheless, stifling a way too showy yawn behind his palm. Huh, his teeth were less straight than they looked from a distance. “But fine, sure, dazzle me.”

“You know what they say.” Peter backed up a few steps, waiting for Tony to shuffle crankily to his feet. He turned to lead the way, Tony just a couple steps behind, giddiness beginning to creep up on the last of his sleep-induced lethargy. “The fun of things that are not imaginary is that you don’t have to think them up.”

“That is strange and nonsensical and I don’t know anyone who says it—”

The words trailed off, perfectly on cue. Peter grinned, definitely giddy with it, gesturing expansively towards the window as if to say tada!— “Would you have come up with anything like that?”

“In my goth phase, maybe.” Tony murmured, because of course he couldn’t do speechless right – but he was moving towards the window anyway, as if inexorably drawn.

It was understandable. Peter had been here plenty of times, and the view never failed to floor him. “Whaddya think?”

“IT. IT’s a giant glowing skull, suspended in space.” Tony sounded more than a little out of it. His lips were parted, a field of light glimmering in his irises. “How are these colours even… am I high?”

Knowhere certainly made for a psychedelic picture – stars winking in and out of view through the cavities of the skull, swathes of nebulae hiding patches of its cratered surface. The lights of the mining colony settled within the head glittered like jewels through the haze, the nebulae catching the light and glowing iridescent, blue and green and yellow and a thousand shades thereof.

“Well, you can definitely purchase illicit substances on Knowhere, if that’s your speed.” If Peter was starting to make the turn from giddy to self-satisfied, who could blame him? Each passing second of the dumbfounded look on Tony’s face felt like sweet compensation for every eyeroll that’d been directed his way when they’d first met. “Can’t guarantee the same for Nothing and Nevermore, though.”

“Uh, what?” Tony blinked dimly, still transfixed.

“You know, the joke you made? I told you about Knowhere for the first time, you asked if it was in the same star system as Nothing and Neverm – you don’t remember?”

“Nope. Sounds like me though.” And it was a… staggering thought in itself, the idea that they’d now
known each other for long enough to start forgetting things. “Edgar Allan Poe reference, perfectly on-brand.”

Tony was now close enough to the window that his breath had started to leave cloudy smudges. Colours danced over his skin like a lightshow – shimmering bursts on his forehead, the bridge of his nose, his chin, his forearms. “It looks so… it’s grotesque. And fucking gorgeous.”

He seemed at peace. Content.

Peter wanted to blow contentment out of the water.

“Wanna see it from up close?”

Tony glanced towards him, brows wrinkling in confusion. “Well, I assumed we’d be landing there at some point instead of just doing a fly-by. Do you not have a package from the Strontians to drop off?”

“Yes.” The jitters were beginning to set in now, an itch in the palms of his hands, in the balls of his feet. It wasn’t nerves, exactly – more than it was just a blinding, compelling urge to get this right. “But I was… was thinking you might want to take the suit out for a spin, actually.”

For a long, precipitous moment, it seemed as though Tony had stopped breathing. Gone completely still, not the twitch of a finger or blinking lashes. His gaze remained centred, unflinching on Peter – dark, unshuttered eyes with something unnameable swelling under the surface. A heartbeat, and then another, before his head swivelled to look out of the window again. The brown of his irises was almost invisible, reflecting and swallowed whole by the vast, spinning unknown of space out beyond the glass.

Tony took a careful step back, from where his breath had already left a hazy, yearning imprint on the windowpane. He looked downward when he spoke, voice quiet. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

A portal in the sky. A red-and-gold blur disappearing into a void. Peter hadn’t forgotten; that recording, oh-so-many weeks ago, had been the moment he’d first seen Tony, after all. Caught a glimpse right into well-hidden depths, down to mettle and marrow and iron-cast bone.

“But do you want to?”

Tony didn’t reply. Peter found himself stepping forward – get this right – he could not, would not push. But Tony had watched the stars with such awe. Such wonder, muted and discoloured by wistfulness. “No piece of paper that you signed back home is binding here. No rules. No one to fight, no one to save. Just flying for the hell of it.”

And I’ll be here with you this time.

Tony’s teeth sunk into his lower lip, leaving white, bloodless marks on the skin. His hands flexed by his sides, restless and futile. He still didn’t look up.

Peter watched on, something squirming tight in the pit of his stomach – a growing sense of inadequacy gnawing at the corners. What followed was barely more than a blurt, “While sleeping I was listening to… you put Seven Nation Army on the tape.”

The sudden laneway-change in topic brought Tony’s head up, eyes blinking slowly. Peter waited for the customary banter – wow, you weren’t kidding when you said you were taking your time with it.

“Well… yeah.” Tony’s brows creased down, a furrow setting in above the slant of his nose. “My
opinion isn’t always… I’m not great at picking gifts, or figuring what people like. So for part of the playlist, I asked FRIDAY about the songs you discovered while at the Facility and kept going back to. That one was near the top of the list, so I put it in.”

And in doing so gave Peter something he’d never had, or even thought to want – a chance to pick a song for himself.

Peter breathed, deep and steady. His words were simple. “The song reminds me of you.”

Tony blinked, clearly thrown off-kilter for a moment. Then his mouth curled, as smoothly as it could, in the facsimile of a smile. “Fair enough. The lyrics aren’t the friendliest.”

"I guess that depends on perspective.” Peter smiled back, easily heartfelt. “I find them really powerful.”

I’m gonna fight ‘em all–

A seven nation army couldn’t hold me back.

Tony stared at him, expression unreadable, before his eyes went skittering off again back to the window. And there they remained, tracing over shapes of constellations and the head of a Celestial lit up in blazing, prismatic colour.

“The suit wasn’t… space-ready. Before.” Tony didn’t look away from the view – part-dread part-want churning in the depths of that gaze. “I spent months correcting that. Almost the first thing I did, after New York. Made the suit stable at 8-psi, bulked up life support systems, more mechanical propulsion at the joints. None of NASA’s hopeless EVA pumpkin suits – less fatigue on the pilot, more smart systems, and almost hundred times better mobility.”

“Sounds badass.” Peter’s smile only grew warmer.

“And I… have a theory.” Tony leaned forward, almost unconsciously. Knowhere gleamed in the distance, mired in swirls of nebulae. “Due to lack of air resistance, the suit would be able to reach speeds higher than anything it’s been capable of on Earth.”

Peter took another step forward, reaching shoulder-to-shoulder with Tony while they stared out into the abyss where he’d made a home. “How bad do you wanna prove that?”

A seven nation army couldn’t hold me back

Out the corner of his eye, he could spot Tony’s fingers drawing up shakily, pulling the neck of his t-shirt away from skin. Slipping beneath to tap on something that sat over the chest, an action that caused a triangle of light to start glowing through the worn cloth.

What followed next was… close to indescribable. Scarlet creeping over the skin, layers of forming metal that followed the lines of shoulder and torso and neck, molding to muscle with a hard gleam. It flowed as gracefully as liquid, with layers of building complexity: repulsor ports and interlocking joints and gold articulation points. Shinguards and gauntlets, a sleek helmet, luminous eyeslits. And a shining circle of light that sat right above the heart.

“Nanites.” Peter breathed. The Corsairers, up near Alpha Centauri, were known for using them for medicinal purposes. “The helmet up in the cockpit… that’s how you did it.”

“There’s enough in this baby to make at least three suits.” Tony tapped on the circle, grinning behind the straight mouth of the Iron Man faceplate – Peter didn’t know how he knew this, but he did. “Or
replace piecemeal parts if they get damaged or blown off during battle.”

“Maybe so.” And this didn’t feel like pushing. Peter grinned back, wide enough till his cheeks hurt, chest ablaze with the feeling. This felt like getting things right. “But how fast can this thing fly?”

Tony cocked his head to the side, light catching and flaring past the sharp jut of the metallic jaw. Like a shooting star had just caught aflame and streaked across, leaving behind a haloed outline; a knight’s helm backlit by stars.

“I don’t care how many galaxies you’ve been in, Mr. Quill.” The servos clicked and whirred faintly as Tony moved, a pivot that brought his voice even closer to Peter’s ear. “But this thing, is the most incredible sight you’ve ever laid your eyes on.”

Peter turned his head to face him – and damn right. Damn fucking right, his breath close enough to hit metal in soft exhales, an almost intimate whisper:

“I’ll give you a head start.”

“You’re gonna regret that.” Those synthesised tones were soft to match. Tony stepped back – no, he swaggered. It was like he’d never known doubt, like it was left in the driveway once he decided to take the wheel and go hurtling down the road.

Peter watched him cross the room, duck out through the doorway towards the entry hatch. Waited till Tony was out of sight, and then back to the window it was – breath steeling and anticipatory, all too aware of the adrenaline building in his veins.

Oh, but the incredible sight was yet to come.

He didn’t have to wait very long. It started as a blot at the corner of his field of sight – he took a step forward, eyes straining. And then it grew bigger, and clearer and–

Iron Man cut through the heavens, solid, crimson lines against a glittering backdrop. The glow of his repulsors was indistinguishable from the celestial bodies behind him, so much so that they seemed one and the same – a graceful figure sailing past, propelled by starfire.

He seemed to pick up speed as he flew, banking left and spinning up high – then swooping down too-fast-too-soon, a fall made possible only by the absence of gravity. He darted and weaved through ghostly patches, clouds of gas and ice-flecks; bursting out and arching slow, before spiralling down into corkscrew loops. Faster and faster and faster, till he pulled out sharp and triumphantly rose – smooth and powerful, deity ascending.

And with every second he flew farther; there were no bounds to his flight, no limitations. No reason for him to keep circling the Milano, not when he could span miles in a heartbeat and had a universe open to explore. So the suit gradually seemed to diminish, growing smaller and smaller in the distance – a meteor streaking towards the intergalactic mining colony.

And Peter came back to himself, palms pressed tight to the glass, heart faintly thudding away behind his ribcage. Iron Man – Tony – was just a speck now, barely visible between the vee of his fingers.

Soon, Peter wouldn’t be able to see him at all. He’d be gone.

Peter whirled away from the window, hands curling and uncurling uselessly by his sides – the visceral impact of that thought leaving him short of breath. This was everything he’d wanted, but the
sight of Tony flying away was just... there was something about it that made disquiet creep at the back of his mind, a flicker of near-primal distress. Something he’d been compartmentalising with all the panache of a guy who’d avoided his home planet for decades after watching his mother die. Who had to be dumped back on it and then spent his days eating bacon and getting on the last nerve of the man housing him instead of thinking about how his team might’ve just deserted him. (But they didn’t. And that was the important bit.)

For all that it felt like it was plowing him down out of nowhere, this unease had been climbing for a while. Slow and steady; while Tony gazed at the galaxy for the first time to the tune of Fleetwood Mac, a countdown clock had begun ticking at the back of Peter’s head. Never acknowledged, always drowned out by the joy of what was actually happening in the moment – but present. Tick tock tick, while Peter frantically conjured up ideas and flung ‘em at the wall – come with me, watch with me, dance with me, fly with me – hoping this one would stick. This one would turn the tide, change everything, and Tony might... Tony just might...

Peter needed to find his fucking jet boots.

He found them shoved into a dusty corner under his bunk, crease marks worn into the leather. Pulled them on, double-checked his helmet, strapped two quad blasters to his thighs because Knowhere was not a place you wandered around unarmed. Matched his fingers to the two triggers per handgun, top and bottom barrel, index and middle finger – willing the tremors down.

Stepping out into space was... grounding, as ironic as that was. That brief moment of gravity giving way, of air pressure ceasing to exist, body subject to the mercy of whatever momentum it had started with. The hatch door snicked shut behind him and Peter closed his eyes; the sudden void where sound used to be as disorienting as it was twenty-nine years ago, the first time round.

And then the boots kicked in and he soared. It was an entirely different experience when you couldn’t feel the wind lapping at the tails of your jacket – like nothing was holding you back, free and weightless. Eyes peering open through slits, the stars had become elongated stripes at the edges of his vision, with Knowhere up ahead, almost too bright to look at.

A couple more seconds, and he pulled himself up straight – as much as ‘straight’ counted for in space. Hovered there, a few dozen miles off of where Knowhere’s airspace officially began, and where he might have to start thinking about atmospheres and terminal velocities. Knowhere lay below, pitted craters and bore-hole mines, crime-ridden tenements and glitzy lights.

He’d missed the place. Even more since his trip walking down the streets of Joplin – and wasn’t that just the funniest thing?

Through instinct more than anything else, he turned his head to glance over his shoulder. Quarter of a mile away, Iron Man was drifting along as if in orbit; helmet tilted at an angle to suggest he was taking in the view too.

Catching up to him was the work of seconds. When Peter drew level with Tony, the repulsors seemed to flicker – the suit putting on a tiny burst of speed in response, nudging ahead. Peter followed, unbidden. It wasn’t a race, it was something far more reflexive. Harmonised. Left when Tony curved right, up when Tony plunged down – paths criss-crossing like strands of a helix, spiralling about an axis they created for themselves.

Reminds me of WALL-E, Tony might be yelling right now – laughter leaping higher than his words. Wanna go faster?

Yes, Peter would say, in this world that didn’t swallow up their voices. Tell me you’re happy. Tell me
this makes you happy.

Tony’s shoulders were thrown back, arms perfectly parallel to the rest of his body – repulsors streaming behind him. A straight line from head to heel to toe, feet pointed like a ballet dancer.

Tell me how to make you stay.

~

Chapter End Notes

Aaaand we’re at the home stretch, folks. Like, still a few more chapters left to go, but the end is definitely in sight.

Some further notes:
1) The song that Tony made Steve listen to is Nirvana’s *Come As You Are*, to the surprise of absolutely no one. Ironic freaking lyrics indeed.
2) While this story takes place before/ is not compliant with Guardians of the Galaxy Volume 2, this chapter takes a couple things from the movie - namely Drax’s 'those who dance and those who do not' metaphor, and Peter still carrying around a picture of David Hasselhoff. Feels, you guys.
2) Some lyrics taken from *Seven Nation Army* by The White Stripes.
3) Dialogue towards the end refers to *WALL-E*, which is one of my favourite movies ever about two robots falling in love after the Earth becomes uninhabitable for humans. Reference is made to an absolutely stunning scene where WALL-E and EVE go 'dancing' in space.

Comments and kudos welcome!
I'm High On Believing (That You're in Love with Me)

Chapter Notes

Happy Endgame!

First off, I'm glad I got this chapter done in time and it's been a long time in coming. Secondly, those with a sharp eye would have noticed that there's been a change in the way the ship tags of this fic are now structured - mostly because I first tagged the fic two years ago and certain factors/plot points played a different role in my plan then, than they do now. Hence the change to make things more reflective of what they are. Planned ending is still unchanged though ;)

Chapter title from 'Hooked on a Feeling' by Blue Suede.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“The Kree-Nova war went on for a thousand years before a peace treaty was–”

“Hold on a hot sec.” Tony raised a single finger. “How do you measure that? Is there an intergalactic ‘standard year’? Was it fixed by the planetary one-percenters?”

“The Kree,” Gamora enunciated, before pausing to sip at her drink – green-glass bottle like something vintage, except for the spiral neck and the violet liquid hissing away inside. Tony estimated it to be equal to seven and a half standard drinks, minimum. “put forward that figure based on the revolutions of their smallest native planet, which also has the shortest orbit so there’s been some scepticism over that claim. The war has spanned over three Kree generations though, and they only live slightly longer than Terrans.”

“Right. And the Nova arreee…” Tony’s tongue rolled over the word, pirate-style, “the lizard people?”

“No, those are the Skrulls. Also at war with the Kree for centuries.”

“Who’re the Blue Mean Group, gotcha.” And the medal for best pun ever goes to Stark, Tony. Man, sometimes he really outdid himself.

“The Nova themselves are a mix of races, led primarily by the Xandarians. It’s a, uh…” Gamora leaned back on her stool, wheeling her hand through the air as if to usher out the word being searched for, “..peace-seeking confederation.”

“Why,” Rocket, off to Gamora’s right, was dragging furry palms over his eyes and down till his cheeks stretched, “in the name of everything terrible are you talking politics at a bar.”

“For your information, a bar–” Tony threw out his arms to the side, gesturing to… everything around him really: from the greenish-yellow haze of grimy lighting, to the rust-and-iron and pipes on walls aesthetic, the circle of heptapods jeering in the corner and the insurmountable stench of boozy alien, “–is the only acceptable place to talk politics.”

“‘Sides, not like the intellectuals at this table have taken me anywhere else. Space art gallery, Museum Galactica.” Tony propped an elbow on the discoloured bar, chin-on-palm and swaying
towards Gamora, “Side effects of livin’ with the proletariat, amirite?”

And for a moment, he had an all-too-real vision: red hair, green eyes, an impassive mouth quirking into, “You’re an asshole, you know.”

But Gamora – black-haired, cyborg-assassin, mouthing along the lyrics to Rubberband Man Gamora, just grinned back at him – drained down her bottle and wiped at violet smeared lips with the back of her knuckles. And nobody rolled their eyes, or called him an asshole at all.

Probably because they didn’t know what the fuck a proletariat was. Still, assholery was a universal language.

“You’re cool.” Tony told her.

“The first time Peter said that to me, I informed him that my genetic modifications meant that I could withstand far colder temperatures than him.” Gamora admitted, unabashed amusement tinging the words. “I thought he was offering me his jacket.”

Tony nodded solemnly. “I don’t think he ever washes that thing.”

Even if a tiny part of his brain rebelled at the idea, all how dare besmirch The Jacket. A teeny-weeny part over occupied with aesthetics like the well-loved shine of leather and cuts of clothing that really helped emphasise the tors– needless to say, he ended up blurt the other thing at the forefront of his mind instead. “You remind me of a friend.”

Shit. “Ex-friend. Friend-ex. Fed Ex? No but those guys are terrible too – did I tell you about the time one of their employees called me Tony Stank–”

“Friend.” It wasn’t inflected as a question. Where someone else might’ve tried harder to establish eye contact, Gamora looked away instead, the shift subtle yet reassuring. “Good reminder or bad reminder?”

It’s all in the eyes. A similar weight, of bloody memories and doing deeds that couldn’t be undone.

Sometimes, he wondered which side of the ledger would Natasha put Leipzig on.

“I don’t know.” The truth fleted from his lips, a complicated swirl of emotion summarised in three measly words. And all this out of a skewed sense of fairness – of deeming emotion ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, of trying to justify their existence instead of simply feeling them. Was it right to miss a friend who’d hurt you? Was it right to still feel hurt? Had any of the things that happened been under her control? Had they been under his? Could friendship survive the presence of lies – or could it survive their absence?

Yet another thing bars were good for: unnecessary philosophising. Tony stretched his legs out from under the rickety stool, feeling his knees pop; there had only ever been one truth that eclipsed his entire relationship with Natasha Romanov. “She’d been raised to be a spy.”

“I’ve known a few spies in my lifetime.” Gamora’s fingers flexed loosely around the lip of her bottle, the lighting in the bar just enough to show the scarring on her knuckles – white, spider-thin on crinkled green skin. “I was… raised to be an assassin, and it was strange how often people seemed to prefer the latter to the former. A blaster to the face rather than a broken confidence.”

Rather be killed than be hurt. Tony chewed his lip, words coming slow and measured. “Would you say you only did what you could to survive?”
“I guess that’s a blameless way of putting it.” Gamora’s incisors flashed in the light, smile rapier-quick. “Just because they’re hard to get rid of, doesn’t mean survival instincts are always right.”

But they were understandable. More understandable, easier to forgive, than a betrayal from a person who said that they cared.

“You’re….right. Tony exhaled lowly. “not the person I should be having this conversation with.”

“I’m not.” There was now warmth and ease in Gamora’s smile, something she’d all too evidently worked hard for. “But it’s always nice to have a practice run.”

“I’ll have to… I will talk to her eventually.” It was the first time he’d conceded it out loud.

“I don’t doubt that you will.” That sounded surprisingly sincere. Gamora’s eyes flicked away, before narrowing at something over Tony’s head. “Took you long enough.”

“Not like any of you bozos were helping!” That was a lot of indignation coming from behind him. Tony craned his neck around – Peter stood, pink cheeks and damp patches on his grey sweatshirt where he was awkwardly holding on to multiple bottles cossetted between his stomach and arms.

“I’ll have that.” Rocket reached over – holy shit, Tony had forgotten he was there – to tug out two bottles, claws squeaking against the slippery glass.

Peter frowned, grip tightening to support the remaining two bottles, “One of those are for Drax.”

“Too bad he’s not here to drink it.” Rocket cracked one open with a claw, before draining a gulp and smacking his lips in evident satisfaction. Tony didn’t think he’d ever seen those whiskers so perky.

“One day, someone’s gonna conk you over the head for being a jerk.” Peter took the stool to Tony’s left, sliding over Gamora’s drink to her with a casual hand. “And all of us will point and laugh.”

Rocket sniffed, a drop of whatever he’d been drinking clinging to a whisker and wobbling with the motion, “Would a jerk have apologised for leaving you on your dumb planet?”

“…when the hell did that happen?” Peter’s jaw dropped open in obvious affront, barely paying attention when Gamora slid the bottle back to him, now opened – ohh, that was cute. He passed the last capped bottle to her, all the while sounding quite aggrieved, “Was I asleep during this world-shattering apology? Cause trust me, I’d have remembered something like that, and gloated about it for good measure–”

Gamora opened her drink with an effortless twist of the wrist, lips curling as she turned to face Rocket. “We’d all decided we were going to do this one-on-one. You didn’t apologise?”

“I did!” Rocket gestured wildly with his drink, half-empty already. “Why’d you think I’ve been letting him fly the ship solo for the last month?”

“That’s.. that’s not…” Peter seemed at a loss for words, eyebrows high and slow blinks like he legitimately couldn’t process the information being handed to him. “It’s my ship.”

“The dingy thing you were rattling around in before I got my paws on it sure, but now–”

“That’s not how it works! It’s still my ship!”

“Actually,” Tony cut in, crossing one ankle over the other and leaning back on his stool. “There’s a problem in Earth philosophy called the Ship of Theseus, which raises the question that if every part
of a ship has been replaced… is it really still the same ship?”

Peter opened and closed his mouth for a couple seconds, as if this really was the last straw. “Is this because I didn’t get you a drink? ’Cause I swear I asked the bartender for something non-alcoholic and he gave me what looked like gutter water—”

“So we’re good on the whole apology thing, yeah?” Rocket set down his now-empty bottle, proceeding to stick a claw under the cap of the second.

“No, because I didn’t accept your fake-ass apology,” And Peter whirled back to Tony, hand pressed to the chest in feigned betrayal, “and these idiots were the ones who wanted to come to this bar anyway, so you should really be on my side.”

“Oh, I don’t mind. It’s everything I dreamed and more.” Tony unzipped his hoodie, wiggling his arms out till it was only draped over his back. “Stuffy as fuck, and some dudes at the back are betting on a game with lizards gobbling up other lizards. Peak shady cantina behaviour – it’s practically Mos Eisley.”

He was expecting a zinging retort, but Peter’s eyes had dropped down to something else, clearly distracted. Tony followed the gaze down to his own hoodie, to where its pocket was bulging at his side – something black and plasticky peeping above the lining.

Tony shoved the flip-phone back down, jaw tightening slightly. He’d… he’d actually forgotten he’d crammed that in there, right after the conversation he’d had with Peter about it on the Milano. It was mostly wanting to keep the phone out of his own view, but he should’ve remembered he didn’t have as many sets of clothes here as he did back on Earth. Didn’t even clock its presence when he pulled the hoodie on today.

Peter had already turned his head away by the time Tony looked up again, lips pursed around the mouth of his bottle. It was probably just the lighting, but his eyes looked… dimmer maybe. Less lively.

Peter swallowed a couple times, then lowered the bottle and scratched at a patch of stubble growing in under his chin, “So I’m expecting a formal apology tendered in writing, including the words ‘sorry’ and ‘I’m a jackass’ multiple times, plus some reparations – twenty percent of your share of the next job maybe, you can work out the details—”

“Ha, he’s funny.” Rocket slapped his thigh, then swiped at his eye as if wiping away a tear. “Oh, I can’t breathe.”

“Oh look, Drax is here,” Gamora interjected, tone dry as the literal desert. And sure he was, emerging from the crowd to loom up behind Gamora, with Groot snoring against his massive shoulder.

“Buddy, perfect timing!” Peter set down his drink with a clank, smile widening with particular relish. “Say, what’s the proper way to exact revenge on your planet if someone not-so-hypothetically stole your booze? And other generic douchebag things.”

Rocket’s whiskers fluffed up again, “I’m a unique douchebag, thanks.”

“Friends, I would love to engage in your play-fighting.” Drax nodded seriously, one hand cradled around Groot’s sleeping body. “But as there is a battle at the doors, I am here to drop off my charge.”

So… I’m guessing this bar doesn’t have a carding policy. But before Tony could voice that gem of a line, Peter was already straightening up, mouth curling down in very-real concern. “Drax, we’ve
talked about this – no picking fights unless the people superlatively deserve it. Do we need to go over superlatively again?"

“Oh they do.” Drax replied, equanimous. “It’s the Kree filth who were pursuing us before we retrieved you from Terra. They’re here now.”

Well, that didn’t sound very good. Gamora cursed under her breath, Rocket groaning out loud and bringing his forehead down on his palm with a smack. Peter’s eyebrows pulled together, slouch gone and back completely straight, “How here is here?”

“A couple blocks. I saw them shaking down the nearby watering holes, looking for us.” Drax recounted, sounding moderately regretful. “If it hadn’t been for Groot, I would’ve challenged them on the spot.”

“But you didn’t, which is excellent – you should babysit more often.” Peter slid off his stool, nudging it away further with his boot heel. “And we need to get out of here, discreetly.”

Drax frowned further. “And flee before our foes? When we’ve already bested them before?”

“That was one ship.” Gamora was off her seat too, casually tugging at the hem of her jacket while feeling for her weapon holsters. “We don’t know how much back up they have, or the amount of fire power they’ve brought.”

“I agree with Quill.” Rocket chimed in disconcertingly, setting down his second empty bottle on the bar and hopping off his stool. “No point wasting time on those morons.”

“Thank you Rocket, I apprecia–” Peter’s brain seemed to catch up to his own words as he suddenly paused, eyes narrowing in suspicion, “Wait, that doesn’t count as an apology either, so don’t you–”

“Peter,” Tony ventured.

“Right, focus, sorry.” Peter gave his head a tiny shake. “Drax, bud, it’s early still and there are too many people in this part of town, not-so-law-abiding citizens or not. We don’t want bystanders getting hurt, yeah?”

“Very well.” Drax exhaled, more sulk than sigh. Groot snored on, clinging to his neck. “We will run like cowards.”

“Now that’s the spirit.” Peter had switched to scoping the crowds already, a look of disinterest on his face to mask the action. “Side door now, c’mon.”

They all emerged onto the street a minute later, walking just a touch too fast for casual strolling, but nothing that would draw suspicion. The air was hazy with some form of smog, coloured in patches with the flickering, low-grade neon signs of the establishments lining the road. There were no sidewalks, people of varying species just piling on through the middle, sidestepping a puddle here and there. And the hexagonal pools of poison-yellow of course, brain-fluid fresh for the gathering, set amidst all the asphalt. Seemed very regulation.

Tony who was bringing up the rear with Gamora, snagged at the cuff of her jacket for a second. “Wanna let me in on why the evil Smurfs are after us?”

“They’re probably seeking retribution.” Gamora flipped her hair over her shoulder, checking for a tail behind them under the guise of the motion. “They were part of Ronan’s splinter cell.”

“The imbecile I beat in a dance off.” Peter clarified from up ahead, turning his chin to smile quickly
back at them, speed-walk through the street uninterrupted.

“Right. Of course.” Tony sidestepped a gaggle of children milling round the corner, all ratty clothes and flyaway hair, an absent smile flicking over his face. “In that case, have we considered all options on the table? Flash mob maybe?”

“As amazing as a mob of people flashing themselves sounds—”

“That’s not what a—”

“We need someone to pick up the payment from the broker for the Strontia delivery.” Peter finished, coming to a standstill under the awning of what looked like a drugstore; sign bright with blocky, indecipherable letters and a tiny, animated icon of a prescription bottle, pills dribbling in and out and in again. “Rocket, you were the one who set up the deal – maybe take Drax with you to ‘encourage’ the guy to hurry up about it? I’ll head to the autoshop, grab the **Milano**—”

“Grab the what the where now?” Despite his *what-did-you-just-say-to-me* tone, Rocket had fallen into a circle naturally along with Peter – all the Guardians had. He folded his arms on his chest, voice lurching high in incredulity, “Did you just say you let the asses at the autoshop get their grubby mitts on the ship?”

“My ship, and yes,” Peter bristled right back, “thanks to your stellar care while I was gone, she had scratches on the right wing and I assumed you weren’t going to lower yourself to a paint-job so…”

“Great, it’s settled.” Gamora steamrolled right over the fight, tone inviting exactly zero argument. “Rocket and Drax can go to the broker – maybe keep Groot with you for now – Peter can get the ship, and Tony and I will secure the outbound hangar. We’ll all meet there, and get the hell out of here.”

Rocket opened his mouth as if to say more, but subsided into grumbling sounds, turning to follow Drax who’d already started making his way through the crowd. Peter’s shoulders dropped, head falling back with an accompanying exhale of relief. When he straightened up again, those hazel eyes skimmed over the people left, before halting on Tony, brows furrowed, “Where’s your—”

“See you at the hangar, Peter.” Gamora cut in, words as effective as if she’d taken Tony by the elbow and tugged him away. Tony shrugged in Peter’s direction, before following Gamora’s retreating figure through the milieu – fingers skittering over his chest all the while, till they knocked against the hard ridge of the nanite reservoir, solidly reassuring. This rag-tag team could clearly look after themselves, but just… just in case.

The two of them made good time through the narrow, bustling streets – garnered a few looks here and there, but that probably came with the territory of wandering through a pirate-haven-slash-criminal-underbelly with an intergalactic ex-assassin… or someone who’d saved the galaxy. Either way, no one stopped them and twenty minutes later brought them to what looked like a dead end – asphalt abruptly stopping and a grey, porous-looking wall rising in place, curving above their heads and inwards, up and up for miles. Every couple of seconds or so, dust would drift down the air, punctuated by the faint sounds of drilling and the gleam of mining drones lighting the sky overhead.

An unassuming steel door was set into the wall, nearly camouflaged – it was this that Gamora made her way to, Tony close on her heels. She withdrew an access card from her pocket, swiping it over the reader on the door – it gave off a high-pitched beep, before proceeding to swing open inwards. The space beyond was cavernous; the same dark-grey, crumbly, porous mass forming the walls of the cave all around them, uneven and ridged and almost fifty feet high. The floor stretched on and out, the smooth, flat concrete clashing with the naturalistic walls – till it dropped out entirely, the
cavern opening up into the void of space. Multiple ships were parked along the artificial cliff-face, freighters and speeders and hyper-brigs, backdropped by the shimmer of electric-blue nebulae and the twinkle of a distant red giant.

*We’re in the eye of the skull.* The realisation dawned, slow and all too surreal. Tony’s footsteps echoed through the ‘hangar’, chin automatically lifting as he took in the scope of the place – man oh man had sci-fi let him down. The *Enterprise* should’ve been housed in some fever dream like this, instead of the usual steel-and-chrome closed structures… place was straight up deserted though. Then again, smugglers probably didn’t care too much for stuff like Customs. “The security here is a bit thinner than I expected.”

“It’s something of an act of faith. Either your ship’s security measures are good enough, or you’ll never see it again and probably shouldn’t have brought it to Knowhere.” Gamora paced between the lines of ships, watchful gaze sweeping over the place with a hand lightly resting on her holster.

There was an empty docking space to the far left of the cliff-face, easily big enough for Peter to land the *Milano*. Gamora took up sentry on its edge, conducting checks that Tony was a bit too antsy to decode in the present – his fingers still fidgeted at the edge of the reservoir casing, other hand shoved deep into his jeans pocket. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, and back again; lips pressed together, uneasiness churning the pit of his stomach. He wasn’t… worried. as much as exceedingly wired. Did the jitterbug really have to be Peter’s signature move against enemies? Couldn’t it be anything less likely to horribly backfire?

The hangar door hissed open again – Tony pivoted around instantly at the sound, holding back the nanites from manifesting into a gauntlet by sheer will, though his hand rose into firing position instinctively. Next to him, Gamora had loaded up her weapon just as smoothly; all unnecessary, as Rocket’s stature and Drax’s colouring were obvious even from this distance.

“Payment locked and loaded.” Rocket held up a credit chip gripped between his knuckles as they approached, tone self-satisfied. “Didn’t even have to threaten the guy.”

“We’re just waiting on Peter now.” Tony didn’t miss the way Gamora rapidly scanned the skies after those words, brows creased together.

“How far is the autoshop?” The question left Tony’s lips before he was aware of it, heartbeat thudding faintly in his ears. The unease was starting to coalesce into something a bit sharper, heavier. The nanites itched under his skin, like the crackle of static electricity, steadily building.

“Best one’s fifteen minutes from Starlin’s. And then it’s just a minute of flight time – not like there’s airspace protocols here he needs to clear.” Rocket flipped the credit chip from knuckle to knuckle, before his mouth pulled down into a grimace. “Unless he was bein’ a fucking cheapskate and picked the one outta town.”

“That’s not very likely.” Gamora said shortly. There was a studied stillness about her, like the urge to fidget or pace was butting against a steely composure.

“Yeah? Have you seen the guy’s clothes?” No one responded – even from Rocket, the pushback was half-hearted at best. Peter would sell his kidney if it meant better parts for the *Milano.*

Another minute creeped by, slow and leaden and heavy with tension. Drax opened his mouth, “I should go and–”

“We can’t afford to be split up if Peter gets here with the ship.” Gamora broke her self-imposed stillness and walked to the edge of the hangar, squinting against the glare of the nebulae. Tony bit the
inside of his lip, the dull flare of pain barely registering against the adrenaline surging in his blood – yes we can, what if he, what if something–

(Blue eyes, blonde hair matted with blood, a half-remembered dream, “Why didn’t you do more?”)

The itch was getting worse. Moments like these, it was like the suit was entangled immutably with his impulses, and right now his instincts were screaming at him. But something registered past the agitated racket of his own mind – you’re wasting time, hurryhurryhurry – a faint sound, a pressurised door easing open.

Distantly, Tony was aware of the clicks of weapons loading around him, the ring of steel blades pulling free from their sheath; he could feel his own palms warming, awaiting the phantom burn of repulsor ports, metal beginning to crust at the bottom of his nailbeds though he hadn’t yet activated the reservoir. Two taps, that was all it would take. Two taps for him to blow this place up to the starry skies.

It didn’t come to that. The burn building under his skin subsided the instant he caught sight of the figure that had just slipped in through the door: grey sweatshirt pulled over broad shoulders, ginger-chestnut hair. Peter reached them soon enough – big, heavy strides, cheeks flush with colour and a cut sluggishly oozing blood above his left brow. His breaths fell sharp and fast between his words, tone forcibly composed, “Put the guns away, we need to get out of here.”

A beat. Drax was the one to voice it first, “Had you not gone to fetch the ship?”

“I got… sidetracked.” Peter’s tone was still deliberately collected, though he wasn’t quite making eye contact. “Didn’t have the time.”

Gamora shifted forward, half a step, words congealing with worry. “Kree at the autoshop?”

“Don’t know. Didn’t quite make it there, had something else to do.” Peter’s eyes were virtually unreadable at this point. “Pick a ship out of the lineup now, we’ll leave behind some units to make up for it, double back later to grab the Milano–”

“By when it’ll have been ripped to pieces and auctioned off on the black market.” Rocket holstered his necroblaster with a blunt click, beady eyes flashing. Unlike Peter, there were no efforts here to disguise emotion or opinion. “Are you listening to yourself? Got sidetracked doing what? You volunteered to get the ship!”

“I know I know, I wasn’t aware this was going to happen when we made the plan.” Every word seemed to cinch Peter’s jaw tighter, voice finally betraying its unsteadiness. The red-brown trickle of blood from his cut had made its way to his cheek. “Let’s just… grab another ship and get out of here.”

“Peter.” Gamora spoke quietly, caution and confusion warring in her tone. “You’re hurt. And the Milano isn’t just…”

“It’s a ship, Gamora. That’s what it is.” Peter smiled briefly, like a man who didn’t give two hoots for sentiment – so sharply dissonant that the words barely felt real. “Just… another ship. So we’ll get a different one, and Rocket can work his magical transformation on it and that’ll be that.”

(Smiled like a man lying off his fucking ass.)

But there was no purpose to pushing him on it now – the goddamned blue people were coming for them, and nothing about the brittle cast to Peter’s face suggested that he was going to cave, or even offer up an explanation. He pushed a hand through his hair, twisting up the locks further, and made
for the freighters on the opposite end of the hangar – and Tony would have stayed rooted in place, mind whirling and voice completely silent, if Peter didn’t pass right by him and shove something soft and scrunched-up into Tony’s lax grip as he went by.

Surely, it had to be the relief – a swift and almost staggering surge, at seeing Peter walk up relatively unharmed – that had been what threw Tony off. That made him fixate on details like the blood from Peter’s cut colouring one brow darker than the other, the unchanged gait meaning he hadn’t been otherwise hurt; that made Tony miss the all-too-obvious piece of information, the explanation he was currently holding in his hands. A plain, non-branded hoodie crumpled into a ball, otherwise unremarkable except for the–

*I got sidetracked.* Tony shook the hoodie out, the motion rattling something in one of the pockets. There was a rush of blood building in his ears, a faint tremble to his lips as he pressed them together – mind reeling, blaring with static. *Had something else to do.*

He must’ve dropped it in the bar, the material sliding off his shoulders unnoticed when they made their hasty exit. Tony felt for the pocket now, heart battering and fingers gone numb – there. There it was.

Hand wrapped tight and clumsy around the flip-phone, hard enough for the edges to dig in and hurt – Tony lifted his eyes and looked across the hangar. Peter was already looking back at him: mussed hair, bloodied face and lips curved into something small and reassuring and exposed.

Tony breathed. Air dragging out of the lungs and pushing back in again, until it felt like he could manage it without thinking. Until it felt like he could think – clarity creeping in, an inexorable wave, settling right through to the tips of his fingers and toes.

*(and if you don’t love me now. You will never love me again.)*

“It’s not.” He’d only meant to whisper, but his voice rang through the space – was this what certainty sounded like? Flushed free of doubt, free of regret, just… free. “Just another ship.”

Tony raised his hand to the reservoir on his chest, felt the glass vibrate under his fingers as they hit the casing. Once, twice. Breathed in deep, felt the smile break over his face, broad and uninhibited. “What ship do you know has a tape deck?”

Rocket’s grip had gone slack around his blaster. Drax was looking on, an almost approving gleam to his eyes, Groot still fast asleep on his shoulder; Gamora’s face betrayed nothing, lips not even flickering in objection.

*(He couldn’t look at Peter. Not now, not yet.)*

The suit flowed out to embrace him, hum of machinery and clasp of metal, welcoming him home. Tony felt himself lift into the air, gravity snapping heedlessly at his heels – “Get out of here if you have to. I’ll catch up.”

Two hits from the repulsors, and the hangar doors blasted open – Rocket seemed to have finally found his voice, if the yelling behind Tony was any indication, “What the fuck is up with everyone today?”

“A bit excessive, wouldn’t you say so Boss?” FRIDAY hummed in his ear. She sounded chirpy about it too, bless her sweet, violent soul.

Tony swooped out of the entrance and straightened up in the air immediately after, readings scrolling rapidly down the HUD – were those heat signatures? Huh, maybe not excessive after all.
“Two downed heat signatures.” FRIDAY confirmed in his ear seconds after; the laneway was desolate, apart from the two figures with real, actual spears lying crumpled on the asphalt. They definitely made ‘em big and blue up in Kree Homeworld. “Must’ve been standing within blast radius.”

“Triangulate the Milano’s location, please.” Tony hovered a bit closer to ground, nudging at the limp side of one of the Kree warriors with a boot. Concussed and moderately charred, but still breathing. “Any more incoming?”

“Three more approaching now. No spectators, Kree must’ve scared them off.” Good. Meant he could stretch his limbs, a little.

Tony felt the illusion of warmth lick up his ankles, boots vibrating as they picked up on power. FRIDAY started the countdown, “Five, four, three, two—”

He took off early, rocketing down the street at full speed, nanites expanding and consolidating about his hand as fingers closed into a much larger fist than three seconds ago. And… bullseye. The hammerfist clipped the first Kree straight across the jaw, the impact rippling down Tony’s knuckles and sending the other guy flying straight into a low-hanging billboard. Tony landed with a thud that sent up dust; raised his left hand to hit the second Kree with a repulsor to the gut, before swiping him clean off his feet.

“Behind you!” FRIDAY urged – out of the corner of his vision, Tony could glimpse a swinging scythe, wicked-sharp and crackling with electricity. It came down on his back a split-second later; the blade catching on the jut of a metal wing that materialised just-in-time out of his shoulder, impact shuddering down his spine. A second’s thought opened the flap for his shoulder-mounted mini missiles – target behind him pin-pointed with ease. Judging from the clatter of a scythe hitting ground and the proceeding yelp, that took care of the third one.

“Location of Milano triangulated. Mock-up coming up on your screen now, will let you know when we’re approaching.”

Tony breathed through his nose and teeth, nerves jangling like the best reminder of being alive. How had he ever forgotten?

(“Come away with me.”)

That moment, when he’d seen Peter and his stars, lit up together for the first time, Fleetwood Mac blazing in the background – how had he not known?

“Is remote control on the Milano a go?” His flight stabilisers kicked up a notch, severing contact with the ground to surge up into the air. Almost there. Almost there now.

FRIDAY hmm’ed. “Should be good to go when we reach.”

Rocket was right – it took less than a minute to fly over to the autoshop. Tony hovered twenty feet above it all; a circular, rundown establishment like everything else on Knowhere, settled into what looked like the skull’s nostril, with a convoy of ships arrayed in the yard in varying states of disrepair. And at least five Kree warriors overblessed with the growth gene standing guard outside.

“News must’ve spread of the Guardians’ ship being housed here.” FRIDAY murmured. “Missiles on three?”

“Make it two.” Tony readied his thrusters for landing, slowing his breath in anticipation.

Two seconds after the missiles made impact, sending mushroom-clouds of smoke billowing through the air – Tony hit the ground with a rattle, dust swirling about him. Left knee folded to the ground, right knee straight, one hand down for balance.

*Boom.*

“Targets out for the count.”

Tony rose to his feet, effortless. Three steps to the shuttered entrance, and armoured fingers sealed around the metal door, lifting and sending it shuddering back open with a deafening clang. Sitrep – more ships running down the gigantic garage space in infinite lines, more Kree scattered through and bristling with electrified medieval weaponry, a pink-skinned alien in welding glasses cowering behind a jacking beam, and a very familiar guitar riff echoing off the walls.

*Back in black*

*I hit the sack*

*I've been too long I'm glad to be back*

*Yes, I'm let loose*

*From the noose*

*That's kept me hanging about*

“Remote control on the Milano is a go.” FRIDAY chimed, smug as all hell. “External speaker systems functional.”

“FRIDAY.” He tried to sound disapproving, he really did, but heaven fucking help him he could already feel the beat thrumming, loud and glorious in his bones.

“Am I to take it you’re *not* glad to be back, boss?” Banter aside, FRIDAY was helpfully highlighting the closest Kree combatants warily approaching his position on the HUD. “I did say I’d let you know when we were approaching the ship.”

*Follow the classic rock.* Perhaps it was just as well that he had a helmet on – the grin pulling at the corners of his lips was nothing short of insane.

“*Intruder.*” A Kree warrior pulled up to the fore, tallest of the bunch so far; his jaw and forehead gleamed with warpaint, a double-ended spear with lethally sharp points spinning round and round in one hand. “You are standing in the way of Kree justice. In the name of Ronan the Accuser, I comma–”

“*Shh.*” Tony said, and blasted him in the face.

*So look at me now*

*I'm just makin' my play*

*Don't try to push your luck, just get out of my way*

*'Cause I'm back*
Sure, it probably made more sense to travel in the ship. But it had been so, so horrifically long since he’d gotten the opportunity to make a grand entrance.

So he flew in through the business end of the hangar, the Milano hovering behind him – orange-and-teal wings gleaming bright, streamlined fins casting long shadows on the concrete. And AC/DC blaring at full volume, of course.

“Fry,” Tony murmured. His mouth was feeling curiously dry. “Tell me I’d put this on Peter’s playlist.”

“Track number seven, boss.” Except the time for prevarications was over – four figures on the hangar floor growing larger and clearer as the distance shrank. FRIDAY pivoted the Milano in mid-air, nose swerving to face the exit, and landed it flawlessly with nary a sound.

Four figures, but Tony’s vision had essentially tunnelled down to one. It looked like the cut had stopped bleeding. That was… that was good.

There were a million possible opening gambits here really. Maybe something cute and throwaway – I like the paintjob, think it’s really made a difference.

His boots hit the floor with a resounding clank, nanites streaming back upwards almost the instant Tony made contact with the ground. Armour stripped off his hands and arms and torso, red and gold flying away, leaving goosebumps to break out where vulnerable skin was bared again to the air. He’d left his hoodie on the floor, though it… seemed that Peter had picked that up already, something black slung loosely over the crook of his elbow.

No, nothing throwaway. Tony could do better. He sped up, striding across the hangar with purposeful direction – you said. When you were giving me a tour of the Milano for the first time, and I jokingly asked where the bridge was; you said there wasn’t one. No bridge, no holds, no bays – but there was the cabin you guys all liked to have dinner in, and the break room where you hid your snacks and Groot kept his pots, the halls where you slept and the gaming cubby, the used-to-be engine room turned Rocket’s safe space to tinker – because bridges are meant for military vessels. And this ship was your home.

But in the end, when Tony had crossed the length of the space and Peter was but a step away – wide-eyed and uncharacteristically still, watching Tony come towards him in absolute bewilderment – there was but one thing to say. And goddamn it to hell did Tony mean it, from all the desperate depths of his ragged heart.

“You.” Tony pronounced, mouth contorting with the furious accusation of it, “are such a fucking moron.”

And then, to properly drive the point home, Tony took the moron by the chin and kissed him.

A second of complete stillness, and then Peter’s mouth started moving against his – and not in the right way. “W..wha ar–”
Tony gritted his own teeth and kissed him harder. His fingers fanned out from Peter’s chin, rubbing against rough stubble and stroking up to where he could feel heat rising up to smoother cheeks. His eyes flickered open for a second – Peter’s own had fluttered closed, hazel eyes softly lidded, and in the gaps between his own fingers Tony could see smatterings of freckles, backlit by a blush.

“So all that’s great,” came a voice from not too far off, and far too sarcastic to be anyone but Rocket, “but who’s flying the damn ship?”

Tony pulled away. The sudden lack of warmth at his front was startling, his own breaths harsh and not quite steady – to the side, he could see Peter blinking slowly at the floor, knuckles pressed hard against his lips, neck and ears and cheeks a brilliant shade of red.

“I am.” FRIDAY chimed through the Milano’s speakers. The opening hatch lowered to the ground agreeably. “If everyone would like to come in?”

Right, right, time crunch, blue man army of death, all that fun stuff. Tony was the first to walk up the ramp, footsteps beginning to follow slowly behind him; if he strained his ears, he thought he could hear Drax issuing congratulations, presumably at Peter.

Tony could feel his lips curving up, entirely outside his own volition. He also found himself caught mid-step up the ladder to the cockpit, stock-still and smiling dumbly – get a hold of yourself, Stark.

He’d set himself up on the furthest back seat, twin seatbelts strapped in and cutting into his collarbones, when the rest of the crew started dribbling in. “-en did he install a robot? In my ship?”

“My ship.” Peter corrected absently, drifting to the front of the cockpit as if on autopilot, though his eyes still seemed caught in some sort of middle distance. The colour hadn’t subsided all the way from the back of his neck yet, or the tips of his ears – Tony dug his fingers into his pockets, ruthlessly tamping down on another runaway smile.

“Not any stranger than a raccoon piloting a ship, one might say.” FRIDAY’s voice echoed out of the dash, tone unfailingly polite.

Rocket scowled at the instrument panel, fiddling with the straps on his co-pilot’s seat. “I’m not a bloody raccoon.”

“And I’m not a robot.” FRIDAY responded, pleasant as ever. Freaking hell, if this day didn’t stop it with the bombardment of feelings already, Tony’s chest was going to erupt. “Peter, would you like to take the pilot’s seat?”

“Oh. Uh, right.” Because Peter was somehow still standing motionless at the head of the cockpit, while everyone else had strapped in to their regular seats. He seemed to stare intensely at the floor for a second, before looking straight up, and then gazing out of the windshield like he was still inhabiting some alternate plane of existence – or maybe just wrestling with something internally while the rest of his crew watched on in all too strained silence. “Rocket, you… you mind taking the wheel for this one?”

You broke him. There were two things wrong with the thought: a) that it wasn’t true, and b) that even if it was, Tony’s internal voice had no business sounding so delighted about it, goddammit.

In the best demonstration yet of his non-jerk status – Rocket didn’t say a single word. He scampered off his seat, Peter trudging towards it and easing down slowly in the vacated chair.

“Alright then, suckers. Buckle up tight – we’re blowing this icicle stand.”
Thirty minutes from takeoff.

Twenty-nine minutes from takeoff, the craft was stable and cruising at optimum speed, somewhere out in the reaches of star system A13. At twenty-nine minutes, Tony had eased his seatbelts open with an all-too-audible *click*, and slipped out of the cockpit.

Now, at thirty minutes, he was leaning against the tape deck and wondering if he should play something for the sheer purpose of watching the cassette spin. But then there were steps echoing forbiddingly down the metal ladder and a rustle behind him and–

And Tony whirled around, and Peter didn’t slam him up against the tape deck, dials pressing into the small of his back, covering his lips with warm breath. Peter stood by the entryway, hands hanging loosely by his sides – hair tufted to one side, controlled breaths and too-bright, vulnerable eyes.

“C-come…” Tony cleared his throat, throat squeezing down on something undefinable. The corners of his lips, ever-so-slightly upturned, were beginning to tremble again. “Come here.”

When he was within touching distance, Tony pushed himself up on his toes. Brushed a paper-dry kiss across those lips, contact shaky and absolutely perfect. The breath in his lungs escaped him in an exhale, “You…”

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“Are a moron. Yeah, I gottit.” Peter’s lashes were short enough to be invisible, though the colour of his eyes was even more striking at this distance. Especially like this – irises wide and reflective, staring down at Tony like there was little else to look at in the world.

Tony shook his head. “You are… the least judgemental person I’ve ever met.”

Peter’s eyebrows creased. His voice was deeper, a lower pitch than Tony had ever heard from him before – though something of the dazed nature had faded out of his expression, a familiar glint of humour shining through. “Am I supposed to be judging you for kissing me?”

“No.” *Maybe a little*, he could add, playful – but there was more than enough time for that later. This was not about that. This was about Tony’s all-too-belated epiphany, what he should’ve seen – had seen, but should’ve *known*, should’ve understood and prized a long time ago. “You’re. I’m trying to say that I never doubt myself around you. It’s like I don’t… I don’t have to…"

*Try, he wanted to say – except that was wrong, because why shouldn’t you want to try for people you care about? Put in every bit of effort that they deserved; except it was so hard sometimes, with hurdles of expectations that got too high or frequent or terrifying to jump, and Peter made it so *easy.*

“Sometimes it feels like all I do is catastrophise. About things and people and the mistakes I make and it’s just…” *It feels like I could walk away from every responsibility in the world and you wouldn’t blame me for it. Like the pedestal I’m on is our fucking friendship, and there’s no way to fall. To fall short, to be deemed less worthy. “It isn’t like that with you. It’s all… better.”

“Okay.” Peter nodded, a bobbing of the chin almost to himself. Tony stilled it with the littlest touch, a brush of his index finger to that little indentation above that jawline – Peter’s eyes softened
immediately, crow’s feet deepening at the corners. “I think you’re really… I can’t think of the right words, but you’re really wonderful to–”

“I know.” Tony lifted his chin, Peter meeting him halfway to press in slowly, yield over to a kiss they hadn’t shared yet – not hard or shaky, proof or affirmation. Just a tentative warmth of something new, yet strangely well-worn. The remaining words were mumbled against those lips, their shape and give starting to grow familiar. “That was kind of the point.”

“Okay. Okay.” Peter pulled back slightly – *oi, come back* – breath rushing out with something close to giddiness. “One last thing.”

Tony batted his lashes in a parody of patience. “Yes?”

“Didn’t have time to ask you earlier, but when Drax brought Groot into *Starlin’s,*” Peter’s expression contorted into thoughtfulness, “were you also thinking about making a ‘red alert, someone check that toddler’s ID’ joke?”

Keeping a straight face was an act of immense will. Tony barely managed it. “Of course not.”

*Where have you been all my life?*

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**Chapter End Notes**

*sighs happily*

Some lyrics taken from *Back In Black* by AC/DC, some references made to events in the first Guardians of the Galaxy movie and Captain America: Civil War. Is that it? I think that's it. Also Rocket screwed up the 'popsicle stand' slang, Peter is so disappointed XP

Kudos and comments perennially welcome! I'll always be going back to reply to stuff I haven't gotten around to yet, and your words mean so much to me.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!