

Rainer felt as if somebody had yanked him out of his sleep. His limbs were heavy and his vision blurred. While he was rising his sight improved just a bit and he could hear a voice calling to him: "Come around, dammit! We don't have forever."

He turned his head slowly into the direction from which the voice had come. He could make up a small black figure withdrawing from him. After a while he could see that said figure had a tail and its overall shape reminded him of that of a cat. And, yes, now he could spot the ears, too. No, too big for a cat. And cats couldn't talk to him, either. Also why would a cat ever talk to him in English? Rainer shook his head, he was still dazed and when he glanced over to the shape again he could make things out a bit more clearly. It was standing at the end of a long room, which was lit in an unnatural white light. The figure was in some kind of door frame and it was shouting something Rainer couldn't hear to somebody out of his sight. He realized only slowly that all sorts of sounds originated from behind that door. Voices and screams he couldn't quite identify. Only when the shape returned to him and his vision became even more clear he could make out further details. The figure seemed to be indeed an animal. He noticed the grey and brown fur that covered the creature's face. It was black around the eyes and the muzzle was white, with a black button-like nose.

"If you want to get out of here alive you better get up already!" shouted the animal. "You can really talk" muttered Rainer rather stunned, but without putting much thought into it he had automatically replied in English. "You are very observant. You want a medal for that?" replied the animal brusquely. In the meantime Rainer's vision had restored so much that he could finally make out what exactly was standing in front of him. It wasn't a cat but looked more like an upright walking raccoon that has turned out too large. He was wearing a red and black leather outfit and held futuristic looking guns in both hands. He appeared to be extremely tense and was constantly turning around. Only now Rainer realized that he was lying in a sleeping chamber. As he climbed out of it slowly he saw that the entire room was filled with chambers like this. All of them were empty. The overgrown raccoon looked slightly dumbfounded at Rainer's sight.

„Before you start asking daft questions, you were kidnapped and no you are not on Earth anymore and you can call me Rocket.“ With those words Rocket turned around and ran back towards the door frame. Slowly and shaky Rainer began moving into Rocket's direction. His limbs were still numb and he only advanced sluggishly and with insecure steps. Beyond the door extended a long grey corridor and several panicking people were running along it, some of them screaming. Some of these people had weird skin colours, horns or other features hinting at them being mutants. Last was a person in a long red leather coat with metal mask and red glowing eyes. He, too, was holding two guns in his hands and was shooting repeatedly down the hallways, before he turned around to follow the fleeing crowd.

Rocket was just about to haste through the door frame and into the corridor, when the doors shut tight with a loud hissing noise. He was only able to stop at the very last moment and just so avoided running into them. "Flark, what the hell is going on here?" he cursed loudly. While swearing in a language that Rainer didn't know the raccoon began typing into a panel next to the door, which he could barely reach. Nothing happened except of the panel emitting some beeping noises. Annoyed the raccoon started to look around the room, which presented nothing but this closed door as well as another one – also closed. Above both of them something was written in strange looking glowing red symbols that Rainer couldn't decipher. There was a small vision panel embedded in the door, but it was too high even for Rainer to look through and check what was going on on the other side of it. Rocket didn't waste any time and ran to the other door immediately, where he also started typing into its panel. He could barely reach this

one, too. It opened sluggishly with a loud hiss and revealed the sight of an oblong room. In it were long benches, one on each side, while at the end of it was something that reminded Rainer of a computer or a cockpit. The room was still comparably dark, but illuminated eventually by waking lights. Several metal conducts were running along the high roof.

„Inside the emergency pod! Then we'll leave the space ship this way“. With those words Rocket ran towards the cockpit of the end of the room and even before Rainer could even properly enter he had already climbed the console. He seemed to be rather used to that sort of thing. Nimble fingers were putting in commands and the monitor awoke, showing strange symbols. A few seconds later the pod doors closed and detached from the spaceship with a loud rumble. Rocket started to type a few entries on a little device around his wrist. „Quill, the slavers have cut us off. We managed to withdraw with an escape pod. It would sure be good if you could pick us up.“ The reply took a while. It was a male voice answering. „We have got quite some company here... Doesn't look like they have noticed your take off. If we turn to get back to you now they will notice you. You'd be pretty much in a goldfish bowl for them then. Land on the next planet and drift to the first city you can find. We'll come back to pick you guys up once we have returned those guys back to Earth. The slavers will pursue us for another while; this should give you enough time to land.“ Rocket snorted angrily. „Nothing of that would have happened if we had stayed together. 'Let's split up. It's faster that way' Your plans are shit, Peter.“ A few moments later another voice answered – deep and wooden – like the sound of breaking trees. „I am Groot.“ „I know I can count on you, old buddy, but don't take too much time.“ He ended the conversation With a click on the device around his wrist.

Rocket climbed down the console and sat down on the bench to the opposite of Rainer. They were examining each other for a short while. Rainer still tried to comprehend what really had happened. How had he ended up here and what should he think of Rocket. He still wasn't clear about why this raccoon could talk. He noticed how Rocket looked at him. Probably Rainer was the shortest human Rocket had ever encountered. With his 135cm he was still way taller than Rocket, but not nearly as tall as to be expected from a grown up man. Rainer assumed that Rocket was about 90cm in height.

„My Name is Rainer, Rainer Schmitt. Thank you for saving me, raccoon.“ He had barely finished the sentence when Rocket enraged jumped off the bench. „Call me like that again, you hairless ape, and you can be certain that I'll blast a hole in your skull!“ Rocket drew one of his pistols and held it under Rainer's nose to underline his words. „Ok, ok, you are no... I understand, Rocket.“ was all he replied frightened. Grumbling Rocket returned on top of the console and started feeding it some input. „I didn't mean to insult you. How is your species called?“ Rocket ignored Rainer's question and after he had made a few entries he returned to the bench. „The planet is sparsely populated. Atmosphere and gravitation should be no problem. Warm and dry. Amazing... looks like I am stuck with you on a damn desert planet.“ For a while they were surrounded by uncomfortable silence. It took some time before Rainer felt brave enough again to say something. „Why did the aliens try to kidnap us anyway?“ he finally asked. „Earth may be a damn primitive planet, but it's origin to many self-proclaimed super heroes and mutants with incredibly powers. Galactus, Thanos – those are names that make empires in the entire galaxy shiver. Yet your super heroes took them on. That doesn't necessarily leave an entirely good impression. Many people out there are already afraid of you and there are plenty who are curious about your DNA, especially that of the mutants. They probably hope to create their own soldiers that are as powerful as Cyclops, Storm or the other X-Men. For some reason Starlord is rather attached to Earth and an informant noted him about the slavers trying to kidnap some of you, to sell you to the highest bidder. So he saw it as his duty that the Guardians of the Galaxy took care of that matter. Usually I wouldn't care about your fate, but I don't like the idea of you

ending in a test laboratory.” Answered Rocket. “But I am not a mutant. Why did they kidnap me?” marvelled Rainer. „You’re not?” Rocket looked puzzled for a moment. „I guess they just grabbed everyone who isn’t conform to the norms. Considering how many stasis chamber still were empty they were either in a hurry or they were interrupter.” “So you Guardians are some kind of hero team?”

This question seemed to amuse Rocket. “Listen, Rainer, to save the galaxy usually isn’t very heroic and the pay is rotten. Do you think anybody forks out a credit for your rescue?” “Well, I don’t have much money, but then again I don’t think you’d have much use for Euro anyway.” “Euro? What’s that supposed to be? I thought your currency was dollars? Ah, forget it. I can’t use either of it. You can’t buy any drinks with something like that in space.” Rocket waved aside the offer with one hand. “Why do you actually speak English?” asked Rainer. „Oh yeah, right, you guys had several languages. Can you even agree on anything at all? Starlord comes from Earth and he taught me. Seeing how often we meet some Earth heroes this prove to come in very handy.”

The escape pod started to shake and a reddish glow entered through the vision panel of the pod compartment as it entered the atmosphere. Shortly after that the escape pod jerked again as it initiated the automatic landing manoeuvre. Rocket had jumped off his bench and had walked to the door. Apparently he was looking for a way to reach the vision panel. “Flark, I’d really like to know where we’re landing. I don’t like surprises!” he cursed.

“Wait, I’ll stand next to the door. You can climb on my shoulders then.” Rocket did as he said and Rocket was just about to climb onto him as the pod hit the ground and the engines shut down. It seemed he could make something out from his elevated position. “Somebody observed our landing, a vessel is driving towards us.” Rocket peeked through the window for a while longer. “They definitely got weapons and they don’t look like they are here to give us a friendly welcome either. Guess the slavers put out a bounty on your head already and the local scum would like to cash in.”

Rainer could feel the weight dwindling from his shoulders and when he looked up he could see Rocket hanging on a metal conduct close to the ceiling. The window frame must have proven enough for him to be able to climb up further. In his free hand he was holding one of his pistols and was waving with it at one of the benches. “Sit down and look as innocent as possible! Surely you’re way less worth dead. I’ll take care of the rest.”

Rainer had a queasy feeling. Up on the spaceship things haven’t been that clear to him and he had been fighting the side effect of the cryo-sleep, but now he was painfully aware of what was about to happen. The feeling grew worse with every second and it felt like ages till something happened. He looked up to Rocket once more, who was still hanging above the door, but he signalled not do so. Outside strange noises could be heard and shortly after that the bulkhead of the escape pod opened with a hissing sounds. Scared Rainer looked up to the figures entering the capsule. Both creatures were way over 220cms tall and had a russet, scale-covered skin. Their limbs were long and thin. The long scrawny neck and the beak reminded him a bit of vultures. Both creatures were wearing the same clothes - richly embroidered robes made from cloth – and both were armed with strangely shaped rifles. They shouted something in an odd croaking language and pointed their guns at Rainer. He reacted with slowly raising his arms, hoping they would interpret the gesture correctly.

At first things happened painfully slowly and then they suddenly tumbled. From up above Rocket shot both Aliens in the head and even before their bodies dropped to the ground he let go of the conduct and commented the kills with “Blam! Murdered you” After this he ran out of the little

space craft, firing both his pistols. Battle noise entered the room from the outside and shortly after he had left the pod Rocket came flying back in again and landed roughly on the ground. One of his guns scattered along the floor. Rocket wanted to reach out for it but jumped aside quickly as a purple coloured beam struck the weapon and turned it into a pile of black ashes. Rainer cowered into a corner and tried to observe the events from his position. It was hard to believe, but the raccoon, who wasn't even half as big as his opponents, used his size and his speed to outsmart them. They apparently had trouble targeting something this small. While they were firing off target one shot after the other Rocket had no problem whatsoever to hit the big vulture-like creatures. It didn't take long until the noise subsided.

A moment after that Rocket entered the pod complacently. "Could have gone better. Got to close to the foot of one of those dirt bags and now my beloved blaster is in shambles. But six more dead on my list aren't too shabby." The little device on Rocket's wrist hadn't survived the impact on the floor. Cursing he ripped it off and tossed it to the ground. The loss was quickly overcome when he spotted the huge rifles. His black button eyes sparkled visibly as he armed himself with one of those weapons that was clearly bigger than himself. "Oh yeah!"

Rainer – still in shock due to the recent events – decided to climb out of the capsule and get a general view of things. In close proximity of the escape pod he noticed scorch marks everywhere on the red sand, as well as four more scattered bodies lying around. The vulture-aliens' vessel had several large holes in it. Chance was high that they had destroyed it themselves, trying to hit Rocket. In order to distance himself from the battle activities Rainer started scouting the close surrounding. "Rocket I think we have a problem." Holding the alien rifle in his hands Rocket exited the pod. Neither the size nor the weight of it seemed to be of any hindrance for him. "Yeah, we really do. Those rifles are too much adapted to those idiots' anatomy. I can't reach the trigger and aim at the same time." With those words he dropped the weapon that had just moments before caused him to be excited all over it. With a gesture Rainer pointed at the landscape around them and Rocket followed him with his eyes. "Shit. We have landed in no-man's-land."

The emergency pod had landed on a knoll and the view was the same in every direction. Deep-red sand as far as the eye could see, interrupted by the odd pointy rock formation and withered vegetation. The latter usually consisted out of small puny trees with dark red leaves that weren't larger than the average human. Rocket and Rainer searched the pod for anything useful and found a box with emergency food rations inside a compartment. Rainer had to carry it with both hands. According to Rocket the rations should sustain a group of several people for a few days. It was a good thing they were only two then. Apart from this they also found two bottles with water and one of the aliens had a large knife, which Rainer put into the box with the emergency rations, as they had no other place to put it. This was all they found that could be helpful for them in this situation though. The only clue they had were to go were the tracks of the destroyed alien vessel, so they started to follow them.

It was hard to tell how long they followed the tracks, but they faded in the sand long before they could even spot a settlement or something similar. The march seemed endless and the only thing accompanying them was the red sun, that tainted this world in a rather monochrome coloured light. Despite the sand and the dry air every now and then they stumbled over little puddles, just deep enough to put a foot inside them. All of them were surrounded by meagre trees or weird little plants. At one of those puddles Rocket came to a halt. "I have no clue where this water comes from, but if those water holes continue to pop up on such a regular base we at least won't have to worry about drying up." Rainer put down the case with the rations and sat down. "The plants growing around those puddles are proof that there is a constant supply of water, but the soil around us is extremely dry. Rocks are protruding everywhere from the

ground. I assume that underneath this layer of sand is solid stone that is crossed by subterranean rivers, which again are refilling the puddles through cracks in the ground."

"Our little human has something inside his head after all! This doesn't even sound half bad." This Raccoon was gradually getting on Rainer's nerves. "Say, Rocket, are you always this bad tempered?" "Let me think about it. The day already started shitty, then I was supposed to rescue humans who won't pay me for doing so. As to be expected Quill's plan didn't work out and now I am stuck on a dusty planet, without any booze, nothing to kill and if you'd at least been female than I might have even overlooked the fact that you're a human! After all your size is fitting and we could have considered other means of payment, but no... so yeah, I got no choice but to be bad tempered." Rocket turned back to the puddle again and dipped his little paw into the water to get some of it to his muzzle. He sniffed cautiously at it, before he gave it a try. "Are you sure that water is drinkable? Could be infested with bacteria or parasites for all we know" Rainer interjected sceptically. "Na, smells fine. It's just piss-warm!" Rainer opened the box with the emergency rations. Next to the packages that looked they contained a whole meal he also found several bars. He picked one and asked "Are you sure about that?" "My sense of smell is far superior to that of a human. I would have smelled it if there was something in the water and before you ask, you can eat that bar. It's fine." With those words he started refilling his water bottle again, from which he had already drunk.

The greyish white survival-bar was a completely new experience for Rainer. Its taste and texture made him wonder if it was possible to turn cardboard, Styrofoam and concrete into a bar that used cotton wool as a flavour enhancer. Rocket also took one of them and sat down next to Rainer. "Luckily you were the only one in the room. I doubt those rations would have lasted long for 8 people." he said, while chewing on the concrete bar. "And also luckily we're so small that they should last even longer." replied Rainer. "Any special reason you're so tiny?" asked Rocket. "I had leukaemia as a kid, a rather deadly disease. The treatment is no joke either and there were complications. I nearly died. In the end I survived, but you can see the consequences of it all. I was really young back then so I didn't really understand what was going and during all those hospital stays I felt pretty much like a lab rat." As he spoke the last words he could see that Rocket's tail twitching and for a split second his ears flattened while he continued to eat his bar, seemingly unimpressed. "We should continue to move. I'd rather have as much distance as possible between us and the escape pod, lest they find us after all." With those words Rocket rose again and started moving.

While they fought their way through the endless-appearing desert Rocket started to talk about his adventures with the Guardians of the Galaxy. As far as Rainer's understanding went they were rather a bunch of outlaws who tried to do the right thing. Their leader was a half-human named Peter Quill, who went by the title of Starlord, and whose father was some sort of mighty emperor, with whom he didn't get along very well.

Then there was Drax the Destroyer, who - according to Rocket's description - bore some resemblance to Hulk. His sole life purpose was it to kill Thanos. Next there was Gamora, the killer, assassin and daughter of said Thanos. She also didn't get along well with daddy, which was her reason for joining the Guardians. The strangest member of the Guardians wasn't even the talking Raccoon himself, but a tree man named Groot. If he understood Rocket correctly this alien seemed indeed to be a living tree and him and rocket were best buddies. Finally there was Rocket and he loved to talk about himself. According to his own statements he was master strategist and tactician, an ace pilot, weapons expert and trained in various combat styles. Before their encounter with the vulture aliens Rainer would have laughed about that

statement... He also seemed to know his way around technical things though and was translating for Groot, too.

If what Rocket was telling was really true he had been working together with the Avengers and the X-Men in the past. Rainer never set high value on the super heroes and rarely followed the news about what was saved and which supposedly dead hero walked among the living after all, but he was pretty damn sure that he never before had heard of the Guardians of the Galaxy. He surely would have noticed a talking raccoon

The sun was slowly setting and they began looking for a resting place next to a small tree. Rocket scouted the area but couldn't find anything that would pose an immediate threat to them. Rainer remembered his cigarette lighter and intended to break off a few branches from the tree, but it was so dry that he could effortlessly use it entirely as firewood. Rocket watched him bored, while he was massaging his paws after the long walk. It took a while till the tree was taken to pieces and Rainer's little camp fire was flickering in the night.

"Wow, you made fire. I am not impressed! I guess no one told you that our main dish is self-heating." To demonstrate it he reached into the rations box, took out one of the bigger packages. While he opened it it made a hissing sound and steam rose from it. "Who knows how cold the nights get here and not all of us have the advantage of wearing fur." Rainer followed Rocket's example and grabbed a ration. After opening it a bubbling tough half transparent lilac substance was welcoming him. It smelled strange. "Bad luck" replied Rocket and started shovelling down the food with the spoon that had come with it. Either his taste buds had died long ago or people in space were used to that kind of stuff. "On top of it fire and the smell of smoke should keep away wild animals" added Rainer. "Not on every planet, I can assure you that, but it's worth a try. I, for one thing, will not stand guard tonight." Despite his small size he seemed to have no trouble at all with a meal portion meant for way bigger aliens.

"You told me a lot about you and the Guardians today, but you said nothing about your home world or your family. And I still don't know how your race is called." inquired Rainer, while he tried to consume the biggest crime ever committed in intergalactic cuisine. "I..." started Rocket, but fell silent again and shook his head only to start anew. "I am from Halfworld in the Keystone Quadrant. The entire planet is a gigantic nut house, which is shielded from the rest of the universe by a construct known as the Galician Wall. The inmates were called Loonies and to help them with their therapy animals were brought in from earth. At some point somebody must have had the brilliant idea that it would be a good thing to have the entire staff of Halfworld consist of animals. Since they look cute and sweet the inmates' aggression subsided and they were more willing to accept therapy." His emphasis made clear what exactly Rocket was thinking about terms such as "cute and sweet". "So they started cutting the animals up, re-assembled them, implanted stuff in them and tried all kinds of things and experiments on them. I can barely remember that, but it does return in nightmares occasionally. As far I know they never made another one like me. No, there ain't no family, no species, there's just me."

He sat there, sunken in before the fire, his eyes staring blankly into the flames while he was telling his story. He was very calm doing so even when his voice sounded very sad. Rainer didn't know what to reply to that. He wanted to tell Rocket something to cheer him up, but he couldn't think of anything. The crackling of the fire was the only sound they heard for a while until Rocket got up and tossed the packaging of his meal into the fire. With the words "I hope you don't snore" he lay down in the sand and tried to get comfortable somehow.

Rainer remained sitting in front of the fire for a whole while longer and thought about what Rocket had told him. It changed the image he had of the little go-getter entirely. Somehow he couldn't imagine that Rocket told that story very often and he wasn't quite sure why he had told

it to him of all people. When he finally lay down sleep would not come to him. Too much had happened today and he was afraid something might come to attack him the moment he would close his eyes. He was tossing and turning all night... and it was Rocket who was snoring. In the morning Rainer was woken up by Rocket, who had more trouble fighting the packaging of a survival bar than one of the aliens that had ambushed them yesterday. It had become rather cold over night so he woke up shivering. "About time you got up. The faster we get to move the faster I can get off this shit planet." griped Rocket. Warm water and disgusting ration bars for breakfast, a hero's meal. The only good thing about the food he could see was the fact that the case he was carrying got lighter. "Hey Rocket, you got something in your fur" Rainer pointed at the side on which the raccoon had been sleeping the night. His fur was full of deep red sand there. He rose cursing and started getting rid of the sand. It was raising so many sand particles that Rainer had to think of an old rag that got beaten out of dust for the first time in years.

They continued their journey and passed sand, more sand and even more sand on their way. The march was monotonous. The landscape was not changing at all. Only when they passed a little area on which several little plants were growing did Rainer know that they were not in fact just running in circles. Rocket was telling stories about various adventures again, but there was one thing still on Rainer's mind.

"I know you won't like this question, but if I got that right you were... ah... created from an animal from Earth. Why does it bother you so much when you're called like it?" Rainer didn't even finish the question as Rocket turned around enraged. "Why? Why? Everybody only ever called me a raccoon I called myself raccoon, only I didn't know what it meant and then I get to Earth and see that this stupid animal is known for rummaging through trash. Do I look like I am rummaging through trash? Has a flaking raccoon ever saved the galaxy?" Rocket's outbreak was so intense that Rainer let go of his case to raise his hands in defence. "Calm down, Rocket!" but Rocket went on unabatedly. "Do you know how it is when everybody only ever sees an animal in you? Do you even know how it feels like to be compared to something that is even further away than your relation to monkeys? Everywhere I go nobody takes me serious. Everybody makes fun of my size and the way I look! When I stand in a room with Iron Man everybody looks at him like he is the hero and I am just an adorable little pet! His armour is junk and I fixed it for him more than once. I probably saved the galaxy more often than him and what do I get for it? Nothing! They make fun of me!" Rocket stamped angrily on the ground and kicked some of the close by little plants away. Rainer grabbed his case again and followed him in a safe distance. "When I was younger they were mocking me for my size as well. At least in that matter I can understand you, believe me." said Rainer silently and carefully. Rocket turned his head around and it showed rather an expression of sadness than anger. He slowed down a little. "I guess I am the first person ever who has to look up to you" he said crestfallen. "That's true. You're also the first one to save me. Maybe we should go grab a drink some day." Rainer replied encouraging. The anger vanished from Rocket's face completely. "Yeah, we really should do that. I know something good, much better stuff than your beer." "Our beer? Did you ever drink German beer? Or even better: mulled wine, I don't think you'll find something better than that" protested Rainer.

Now they had found a new topic to talk about. They were discussing a whole while about various drinks and bars, even when most of the things that Rocket knew sounded strange to Rainer and he wasn't sure if he ever wanted to try any of them. Time passed by and they wandered across the sandy width without really getting anywhere. Rainer's legs started to hurt and he was grateful for every opportunity to make break. Eventually the point was reached where Rocket was fed up with telling stories and so it was Rainer's turn to do so. He didn't quite succeed at it though.

Rocket held his head with both hands. "You're supposed to tell me something so I am not bored. Now you managed it, my brain just fell asleep! Don't you got anything better than that?" "I am sorry. I am just a plain motor mechanic living in a little town in Germany. Nothing much ever happens. I don't have interesting stories to tell like you. Life of plain workers isn't really spectacular."

Rocket walked besides him shaking his head. "Something must have occurred in your life? Hell, even my time working as a postman for Timely Inc. was more exciting than that." Rainer had to laugh at that. "You and a normal life? Like, with going to work every day and a superior who is never ever satisfied?"

"The Guardians of the Galaxy had disbanded back then and I really tried it, living a normal life. Whole six months I have wasted at Timely Inc. to deliver mail. It was horrible and made me totally depressive. I don't know how you stand this? Was really glad that a killer clown tried to snuff me out back then. Finally brought me back into my game. Hey! It's me talking again. It's your turn, Rainer!" He pointed at the man with his little hand. It took a while until he finally could think of something. "I might have a funny one, but I don't know if you'd really like to hear about my bedroom stories?"

Rocket made a disgusted face and stuck out his tongue. "Bahh, it's enough when Quill tries to tell me about his new conquests. On the other hand marching through the desert is rather boring. So go ahead, tell me your story, but spare me the juicy details." Rainer thought about it for a moment. "We were at my home at that time and my boyfriend back then had chained me naked to the bed. We were just about to start as something made a racket in the hallway. We looked at each other confused and thought that maybe a cat had gotten in the house through an open window. My ex was just about to check as suddenly the door flew open and a Police squad stormed in with guns blazing. They were yelling around until they realized that nobody in the room was in any danger and looked at me rather baffled. I couldn't really do anything and the only thing I could think of saying was to ask them if they wanted to join us. The situation was so absurd that even some of the policemen started to laugh." The raccoon next to Rainer started laughing out loudly. "Ok that is really funny! Why did they storm your home in the first place though?" "Somebody had made a prank phone call and back then the police was rather nervous, so they sent out more than just a handful of guys just to make sure." Rocket had to laugh so hard that he had to hold on to Rainer not to fall over. "That was a good one, Rainer, but this reminds me of another good story of my own. You do know the Iron Man, the Tony Stark dude. He tackled along through space with us for a while and of course the first thing he did was hitting on Gamora and I thought he is either incredibly stupid or incredibly brave to try that. Gamora does look hot as hell, but she is a hard-boiled killer. Anyway he actually succeeded to get her into bed, but on the next day she totally brushed him off, like he wasn't really a hit at all. You should have seen his face: Great Tony Stark gets rebuffed by a chick. I could banter him about it forever. It was amazing." Rocket had to wipe away a tear and by now even Rainer was in stitches. "I also don't know what women see in this guy. But you believe me one thing. I did have a lot, probably even more than Tony." Rainer had to laugh even more now. "More women than Tony Stark? How is that possible?" Rocket started to pose next to Rainer, what would have been a more impressive sight if it hadn't been for all the red sand clumping his fur. "Believe me, women dig this tail and a daredevil like me who has seen everything."

It was strange somehow, they had only known each other for a day, but they were already sharing each other's bedroom stories. Rocket had quite a few anecdotes in store, but he also seemed the guy who was prone to exaggeration every now and then. In the end Rainer didn't



really care if everything he told him was the truth. The stories were amusing and that was just what they needed on this journey.

The red sun was shining down on them the whole day. It was warm, but luckily not as hot as one would know it from deserts on Earth. This was about the only comfort they had. The red sand would get stuck everywhere, preferably Rainer's shoes and Rocket's fur. The day seemed to stretch endlessly, maybe it took longer on this planet anyway, but Rainer thought it hard to tell with certainty. Only as the sun was already low in the sky Rocket decided it was time to camp. Rainer's legs and feet were hurting a lot and he was sure that the wandering also took its toll on Rocket. But as much as he complained about everything, he was just as proud as that and would never admit such a weakness. Rainer started a fire again, which didn't give much warmth, but at least conveyed a sense of safety. After that it was time for their main meal. This time around it was chewy yellow slime that almost had something like taste, but only almost. After Rainer finished that he took off his shoes to allow his feet a little rest. Rocket grimaced but at least he didn't comment on it.

"Actually I should break a habit of smoking, but I sure would kill for cigarette right now." sighed Rainer and Rocket nodded in agreement. "Back then I quit smoking especially for Lylla, but I would appreciate a pipe right now." Rainer was confused. Rocket had told him quite a bit about his affairs today, but he couldn't recall him mentioning a Lylla. "That Lylla must have been quite special if you quit smoking just for her." "Oh, that she was, my Lylla." Rocket's face showed a smile that was overshadowed by sadness. "I was still very young back then and Lylla was the love of my life. We wanted to marry when she got old enough." Rocket fell silent and all that was to be heard was the crackling of the fireplace and the scream of an animal in the far distance. "And all my memories are wrong. I can see her so clearly in front of me, can remember everything we did together, but nothing of it ever happened." it suddenly burst out of him. Tears shined in his black eyes and reflected the light of the fire. "Why are all memories of Lylla fake?" asked Rainer carefully, but he got no answer and then there was silence again. Rainer waited for a reaction, but time passed and as he still got no answer he threw the last bit of firewood into the flames. He was just about to lay down as he heard Rocket say "Star Thief" and then was silent once more. Rainer set down next to Rocket. This time he placed himself directly next to him, while he usually took care to keep a certain distance between him and the angry raccoon. "I assume this is a rather big burden for you. Do you want to talk about it?" Rainer didn't really know why he was saying that to Rocket. He actually expected another outbreak and flinched as Rocket turned to him, but to his big surprise he started talking.

"Halfworld was by far not only a lunatic asylum for regular nut jobs. There were quite a few mad criminals, who were there for treatment and some of those had powers like your heroes or mutants. One of them was Star-Thief. He was..." Rocket thought about a proper description for a moment. "He was just a sort of ghost, who was taking control of different bodies. If his host should die he would look for a new one. He could manipulate beings around him and drive them insane. It was of utter importance that he remained locked up safely. Despite all precautions we knew that there was a chance that he would manipulate our minds and bring us to set him free. So they built a cell that could only be opened when the four highest ranking staff members of the asylum were present: Wal Rus, Blackjack, my beloved Lylla and me. I don't know exactly anymore what happened and I asked myself often enough in the past. I guess I was so in love with Lylla that I was afraid of Star-Thief hurting her or that he would play our feelings off against each other to set him free. I honestly don't know anymore what happened back then. To make sure that he never could break free I left Halfworld. But my memories were wiped out and

replaced by fake ones so that I couldn't remember Star-Thief anymore or what really happened on Halfworld, to prevent that I would ever return. Instead my head is full of memories how I saved the planet, healed all patients and fought for Lylla, all fake memories and they feel so flarking real."

Rocket interrupted his tale, probably to brace himself. He sniffed a bit and obviously avoided eye contact. "That was my big moment. My flarking selfless heroic deed that I committed to save the galaxy and nobody gives a damn. But all this wasn't enough to stop Star-Thief. Even though I had no recollection of Halfworld anymore he managed to start a chain reaction of events that brought me back to the planet, without me knowing what was expecting me there. Star-Thief had gained control over many areas of the asylum, even though his spirit was still trapped inside his cell. Because of this Blackjack had to restore parts of my memory again, so that I knew who I was and what I had to do to get everything under control again. But Star-Thief managed to infiltrate my mind and pretended a perfect world for me. Without Groot I would have fallen for it. In the end we could recapture Star-Thief again, but my brain has been messed around with so much that my past is like a giant pile of broken glass. I can only remember fragments and of those more are fake than real." Rocket let his head sink and held his face with his hands. He started to cry. "I did all of this to save Lylla. I have sacrificed my true memories for her and when I came back to Halfworld I found out she loved me once, but in the time I went away she had fallen for Blackjack and had married that piece of shit."

Now Rocket had collapsed completely. Rainer carefully placed his arm around him for comfort. For a brief moment Rocket got tense, but he still allowed it to happen. He leaned his head against Rainer's chest while he cried ceaselessly. Rainer felt incredibly sorry for Rocket. Behind the facade of the teeth bearing raccoon was indeed a guy good at heart. Rainer stroked Rocket's fur to calm him down. They sat there like this for a while in front of the dying fire, until Rocket peeled away from the embrace and laid down in the sand to sleep. Rainer also reclined and could hear him crying for a whole while.

It was cold, as every morning, when Rainer awoke and he was shivering when Rocket ripped him roughly out of his sleep. He jumped on him and as a good-morning-welcome squeezed his pistol into Rainer's nose. His claws dug deep into the humans flesh. "Flark! Rainer, wake up! Listen to me and listen well: If you ever even tell a word to somebody about what happened yesterday or what I told you or did I will kill you and I will do it in a matter that will be most painful for you. I will even come to your damned Earth for that if it need be! Did I make myself clear?" "Yeah, you did. But why should I do that? You saved my life. I owe you." replied Rainer and tried to sound as calm as possible. Rocket jumped off the man again and stomped away. "You're damn right about that."

He touched his neck with his fingers and spotted a little bit of blood on them. He sat up for now and watched Rocket, as he trudged through the desert without turning back even once. He asked himself how long it would take for him to return, as the box with the supplies was still standing here. Without Rocket though he wouldn't be able to leave this planet, even if he did reach a town. So he grabbed the supplies and followed him in a rather big distance. He asked himself what had made Rocket more angry: The fact that he now knew his story and that of Halfworld or that he had seen him cry.

Up until now Rocket's outbreaks had passed as swiftly as they had come. Not so with this one. At least one or two hours passed with Rainer following him in a large distance and Rocket didn't pay him a single glance. At one of the countless puddles, next to a small puny tree Rocket stopped and looked around, as if he had sensed something. Rainer took the chance to catch up to him.

He stopped directly next to the tree and put down the case with the rations. "Hey, because of yesterday..." he started, but Rocket whirled around and Rainer realized just in time, that the raccoon held his gun in his hand. He fired a shot and it passed him so closely that he could feel the heat. That would have probably been the moment to pee your pants in fear, but Rainer was way too scared even for that. He just stood there like petrified and then heard how the tree behind him fell to the ground with a strange scream. Only as Rocket stood next to him, looking down on the tree, he noticed, that it hadn't been him who had been shot at. He turned around and only now realised that the tree had been some kind of monster. Now he could clearly make out teeth and the branches with their leaves appeared more like arms with hands on them now, which still tried grabbing Rainer, despite the creature dying. Rocket looked at the thing with a certain kind of fascination. "I had a weird smell in the nose since a while that I couldn't quite assign to anything. Only when you stopped next to the tree I realized where it was coming from or what it was. Looks like some kind of predator, simply waiting on those water holes until a careless animal comes close. Shit, that thing really did look like a regular tree until it decided that a human makes a for a good snack. "

The rage that had still emitted from Rocket a few moments ago was gone now. Rainer got a hold of himself again. "Thanks Rocket, without you I would really be in a fix here." "Hand over the water bottle" was Rocket's only reaction to that, what almost counted as a good humour for him. They continued their journey and Rainer asked "Is your buddy Groot a creature like this weird tree monster earlier?" "No, that thing only looked like a tree. Groot is a true tree being, a Flora Colossus, to be precise." replied Rocket. "You said you have to translate for him most of the time, because nobody understands him, but how can he say different things when all he actually says is 'I am Groot'?" "Do you want a detailed reply or will the 'I am a dumb human' version suffice?" Rainer grimaced, but slowly he was getting used to Rocket's way. "Just give me the 'I am a dumb human and have no idea about nothing' reply." "Ok, it's not important what Groot says, but how he says it. Depending on the emphasis of 'I am Groot' the sentence gets a totally different meaning. Strictly spoken it is a very complex language and so this one sentence can mean really a lot. Due to this peculiarity Groot appears stupid to many people, when in fact he belongs to the most intelligent creatures I have ever met."

After the event in the morning was forgotten Rocket started to tell lively stories again. About himself and Groot and how together they had saved the galaxy and everything had started with Badoon-soldiers spilling Rocket's drink. They continued following their non-existent path, only accompanied by the warm sun and omnipresent sand.

After they had spent a while in silence again Rainer said "Hey, Rocket, I want to really apologize to you." "What for? That you're human? I can just about tolerate that." replied Rocket to conceal his surprise. "No, seriously. I really want to apologize to you. I mean, you try to save me and all I do is... well, I didn't mean to, but I really insulted you back there in the escape pod and then I made you re-live all those painful memories from your past again... and I am truly sorry for that!"

Rocket looked up to Rainer and placed a hand on his arm. "I know I can be rather short tempered at times. Maybe I overdid it and somehow it did feel good to talk about the past." He let go of Rainer's arm again and pointed at him. "I might have overreacted, but if you ever tell anybody about it I will still kill you." He scratched himself behind his ear sheepishly after he had said that. "Rainer, for a human you're actually quite alright." According to his embarrassment kind words weren't exactly his strong side. Still it made feel Rainer good. Rocket preferred to change the subject though and started talking about various bar brawls he had been involved in. Rainer still couldn't make out when exactly Rocket was exaggerating. Most of his stories sounded

really far-fetched, but then again so did their current journey. The fact that the raccoon was frequently mixed up in bar brawls though didn't surprise Rainer at all.

The scenery slowly started to change; the ground became more rocky and they could spot a little mountain. Since that one was a welcome change to their usual monotonous sight they decided to climb it and get an overview from its top. In Rocket's company and that sparse surrounding Rainer's short growth hadn't been a problem. During the climb it suddenly turned into a disadvantage. Rocket was by far smaller than him, but his artificially changed body and his long time training caused him to effortlessly outdistance Rainer while climbing. That way he had to help him several times, so that he could still proceed, along with the supply box. It was already shaming enough to rely on help with something that was no trouble at all for normal humans, but to accept that kind of help from somebody who was way smaller than you was far worse. Rocket grumbled frequently, but did hold back comparatively.

From their newly reached position they could finally expect the area around them. Desert, now and then sprinkled with rocks, was spreading into every direction. Only in one point they could make out something that looked like a little hill. That hill was to be their goal for the next day. The climb up had taken them longer than anticipated and the sun was already setting. Up here there was no tree in sight and so they had to get by without a fire. It was uncomfortable, the ground hard and as the night approached Rainer started to freeze. He was unable to sleep. Until now he had only been cold in the morning, but here the wind was blowing over them unhindered and in full strength. Rocket, covered in his fur, didn't seem to be bothered at all. He lay on the ground snoring. He was awoken by two little screaming animals that were fighting somewhere close by. Cursing he grabbed his gun and fired two shots into the dark. Rainer couldn't tell if they had hit, but after that there was silence. With a quick jerk Rocket jumped up and walked over to Rainer. "What's wrong" he asked, as brisk as ever. "I think I mentioned before that I have no fur and this isn't exactly a luxury hotel" replied Rainer with a quivering voice. "I forget sometimes that temperatures like these are a problem." With those words Rocket lay down on Rainer to warm him and protect him against the wind. "Thank you" muttered Rainer. "I can't risk you getting ill. If you can't carry the supply box I will have to do so. For one I don't fancy that and on top of it, it would mean I have no free hand for shooting."

This time Rainer woke up before Rocket, who was lying snoring and with an open mouth on top of him. Somehow he was enjoying the raccoon's presence and decided to let him sleep for a bit more. The only thing bothering him a bit was the little puddle of drool spreading on his chest. Besides the 'sleeping-with-his-mouth-open' part Rocket actually had something quiet cute about him and so Rainer had to resist the urge to pet him. Trying something like this could probably end up rather unhealthy. With a strange smacking sound Rocket finally woke up and looked confused at Rainer for a while, until he finally remembered why he was lying on top of him. As he rose he was sniffing at his fur. "Bha, I smell like a damn human. I need a bath badly." "Well, at least you don't have any slobber stains on you." countered Rainer, pointing on his sweater. Rocket waved it aside "That will be dry by noon."

After their breakfast they went on. First down the mountain and then towards the little hill that Rocket had spotted. On the sandy ground it took them several hours to get there. From a closer distance they could make out something protruding evenly in the scenery. It seemed unnatural and as they got closer to it they saw that it was a ruin. No matter what it had once been, now all that was left were the foundation walls and several metal bars rising up from the ground. They couldn't find anything of use here, but it was the first sign that there might be cities on this planet. Rainer imagined this place to have been a ranch, once. Only with vulture aliens as farmers who had alien cattle. Sadly there was still no road they could follow and as they wanted

to continue they ended up in front of a hole in the ground that was filled with water. It was much bigger than the puddles they had seen so far and its perfectly round shape was proof that it was made artificially. It was unclear whether it was once a watering place or a mine shaft. For the time being they only refilled their water bottles, but then Rainer undressed and took a bath in it. "Ah, just what I needed. I think I will never get out of here again, much too pleasant." he said pleased as he let himself drift in the warm water. Rocket remained in front of the hole and looked around. All he said was "Just see to it that you're done soon and we can finally continue." This confused Rainer. "It was you this morning who complained about the smell in his fur, wasn't it? You were the one asking for a bath." "Your stench is almost gone." Rocket put his arms around himself and scanned the surrounding nervously. "Have you even looked at your fur recently? Looks like you have half the desert in there." Only then Rainer noticed that Rocket was scared. The signs were clear: he had put his arms around himself, his ears were flattened and he was slightly hunched, constantly looking around as if he expected something to happen any moment. Rocket ignored Rainer's remark. "If you're worried it might ruin your reputation, I will tell no one about it." "No, that's not it" replied Rocket silently. Reluctantly he started taking off his clothes. Apparently he had decided to take a bath after all. Rainer gasped as he saw the huge area on Rocket's back that was bare of any fur. The pink skin was a harsh contrast to the rest of the body. The tissue appeared scarred and several metal pieces of different size were embedded in it. They looked like plugs. He remembered the evening that Rocket had told him about his artificial creation and only now he became aware of what it must have meant for him. Slowly Rocket turned towards Rainer and stood in front of the hole hesitating. Rocket had told him a lot about his life, but now he showed him a completely new side. The scared animal that he had once been, before they had turned him into a teeth-bearing fighting machine. The frightened animal was still there and all the aggressive behaviour was only there to sidetrack from the fact that he was so vulnerable. And without his clothes it was there for everybody to see. "Well, in with you. When we get to the next city your fur got to shine to impress the ladies." Rainer decided it was best not to mention Rocket's past again and the raccoon did climb slowly into the water. Now where his maltreated body vanished in the water he slowly became himself again. "Oh, then I can impress in other ways, but you're right, the bath does feel good." They spent quite a while in the hole and while Rainer tried to wash his clothes in it, too, they killed time by talking about trivialities.

When his skin started to turn all wrinkly they finally put an end to the bath. "We still have to wait a bit. The clothes are still soaked." He held up his dripping shirt for demonstration purpose. "My fur is wet, too, but we're in the desert. It'll dry soon and there's no ass around to see us anyway." said Rocket, who took his clothes under his arm and was about to run along. The fact that Rainer had treated him normally when he had showed himself so vulnerable had resulted that Rocket had lost all fear in front of him. While the human put on his shoes and placed the remaining clothes on the supply crate to dry Rocket was mustering him openly. "I really don't know what women see in humans like Peter Quill and Tony Stark. You ain't exactly impressive looking." he commented. Yepp, he was back to normal. That was what you got for being considerate, thought Rainer, who in return, started to muster Rocket. His belly was also covered in scars, proof of various surgeries. He only wanted to peek between Rocket's legs for a brief moment, but he caught himself staring there way too long. His body punished him promptly for his curiosity. Quickly he grabbed the crate with his clothes on it and covered his interest for Rocket that way. Rocket didn't notice any of it, as he was busy observing the area. As always he was indicating a direction and Rainer trotted along somewhat embarrassed and noticed repeatedly that he was staring at his front man's ass too long. "Maybe that Quill and Stark just got the charm that is needed. It's not always boiling down to the body." Rainer attempted to revive their earlier

conversation to distract himself a bit. "Well, in the movies I saw it was definitely the bodies being crucial." replied Rocket. At first Rainer thought he had heard him wrong. "Movies? Where did you get those from? You watch porn movies with humans in them? And I thought you didn't like them too much?" Rocket flinched and turned around, scratching his head awkwardly, while he was looking for a good answer. "Well, I copied a handful of Quill's movies the other day. That Earth stuff is totally his thing and they were among the entire collection. Damn it, what am I supposed to do? I need some fun, too, and when you're the only one of your kind you sadly don't have much of a choice." Rocket was incredibly cute when he was embarrassed. Rocket remained slightly uneasy about the fact that he was watching pornos with humans in them, so he changed the topic again and talked about this and that. Their spirits rose again and Rainer was glad when his clothes were finally dry enough to put them on. Rocket was turning his head pretty much by now. The remainder of the day passed without any further incidents and so they wandered on tirelessly, in hope to reach a city before sunset.

The sun was hanging low in the sky again and they realized they wouldn't reach something this day either. "Living in Germany isn't that bad actually. All the super heroes are drawn to the USA. Not sure what exactly all of them want there, but if something happens it's usually there..." Rocket interrupted him with a gesture, looking intently at the horizon. "Do you see that dust cloud? Something is coming." It took a moment before Rainer could see it as well. Both looked into the direction of the growing cloud. "If I can see it correctly the vehicle is fully manned and they have guns on them, too. Maybe we better take cover." "I can't even make out the car" said Rainer, while they ran towards some shrubs, consisting only of a few dry branches and green berries, to hide behind. It was only a very makeshift hideout, but it was the best the desert was offering them right now. "They seem to belong to the same group of scum bags who were waiting at the escape pod. They're wearing the same kind of clothes. Looks like they didn't give up their search for you yet." They both lay down flat on the ground and Rainer tried hiding the box with their provisions. "Maybe they're just looking for their buddies whom you have shot." was his reaction. Their camouflage was more than poor and he held his breath as the vehicle approached them. Only as it had passed them he dared exhaling again. "I had the element of surprise on my side. I could have snuffed them out, but I don't know if you would have made it." It almost appeared as if Rocket would have been happy about another chance to fire all over the place. They only crawled out of their hiding place as the car had vanished behind some dunes. "Rocket, I think you have something on your back" said Rainer, as he realized that what was supposed to be berries covered the raccoon's entire head and back. "What the flark is this shit? Burrs!" cursed Rocket and tried to pull them out of his fur.

They were rather stubborn and after a few attempts Rocket just went on, continuously cussing. Among the endless stream of swear words Rainer got something like they should move on for a while longer before they took care of the burrs. It was astonishing how many different swear words he knew. He also switched languages frequently.

Around evening they discovered a small pit and Rainer started only a little fire, just enough to see the burrs a bit better. He was keeping a distance to Rocket, who was in a foul mood. Some burrs had gotten stuck on his hair and clothes also and he removed them silently. Rocket's fight against them seemed hopeless though, so he gathered some courage and asked: "Hey, should I help?" Rocket glared at him, but realized that Rainer was right. "Be careful with my fur though" he grumbled.

Rainer sat next to him and started to carefully pull out the plants with his fingers and threw them into the fire afterwards. Since his eyes weren't as good as Rockets he always had to sift

through a fur a bit to find those little beasts. One after the other vanished out of Rocket's fur and wandered into the flames. When Rainer couldn't find any more of them he continued to touch the soft fur on Rocket's tail for a while, pretending to search for more burrs. He pondered whether or not to tell Rocket about what he felt, but he was pretty sure the raccoon didn't care much about other men. Besides you never knew how he would react. He froze in his movement when he noticed that Rocket was staring at him. "How long to you intend to stroke my tail until you finally tell me you wanna have sex with me." Rainer was flabbergasted about Rocket's directness. "I... I... how do you know?" stuttered Rainer and felt his face blushing. "Do you honestly think I didn't notice how you were looking at me? Your boner was also hard to miss. I'm just waiting for you to open your trap and say something." Rainer felt incredibly embarrassed and replied "I thought you only care about women." -"The selection of women right now is rather poor and I really need to let off some steam. You owe me anyway so we can skip all the sweet talk and you just undress. "

Somehow Rainer had expected this to be a bit more romantic and a bit less embarrassing for him, but the conversation did lead to the desired result. It was a long and hard night and when Rainer woke up the next day when the sun was already high up in the sky. His back (and more) was hurting and he was surprised how much endurance and strength that guy had. Rocket was already awake and was sitting naked next to Rainer. He was eating a survival bar and looked down at him. As much fear he had yesterday about his scarred back being visible, as remarkable was it to see him having no timidity in front of Rainer anymore. He probably trusted the human more than he would ever admit. "Man, what a long night. If you ever wanna do something like that again would you please mind those claws?" "And there I thought you could take more than that. Now you disappoint me." Rainer touched his sore back. "it wouldn't be as bad if we weren't in a desert. An infection because of dirt getting in there would really be the last thing I could use right now." Rocket tossed aside the wrapper of the bar carelessly and walked towards Rainer grinning. "About time you woke up. I still have some things in store for you." During the first days Rocket had always been rather in a hurry to get on. But now that he had found a new toy he sure took his time. And though he'd never admit it, he did mind his claws. Strictly spoken he could even be tender.

What had started as a horror trip for Rainer turned into a rather pleasant journey, if you took aside the constant walking, the permanent sun, the sand, the dust and the horrible food. It was hard to guess whether Rocket really cared about Rainer or if he was just a pleasant pastime for him, but they wandered on for three more days without any further incidents worth mentioning. During that time they made many additional breaks and Rainer often wondered what exactly they had done to Rocket in those labs, considering how long and how often he was collecting his debts.

At one of the many puddles Rocket was just about to refill their water bottles. He talked about all sorts of nasty little toys that existed out there in the galaxy and which of them he'd like to test out on Rainer. "I'm sorry, Rocket, but I think that will come to nothing. Looks like our journey is over." With a finger he pointed to a spot on the horizon that he had made out on a small hill next to the puddle. Rocket dropped the bottle immediately and hurried to him to get an overview himself. "About time we found a damn city." The town was still quite far away, but they could clearly make out the silhouettes of the houses. Rainer didn't want to end this journey without a souvenir. He returned to the supply box and got the heavy knife from it. Originally he had thought that it might be of use for them, but at least it would be a nice memento for him now. When the thought crossed his mind that something like this could actually be worth money he

stuffed as many survival bars into his pockets as possible. Rocket looked at him questioningly and walked off towards the town, shaking his head.

The town wasn't much more than a small settlement somewhere in the middle of nowhere, but it would suffice. The strangely shaped houses only had one or two storeys and yet they were far bigger than houses on Earth. In front of the first house they passed a bored looking giant dog-like creature with blue, hairless skin and over proportionally big jaws, that were rather intimidating. It was chewing on a bone until it sensed Rocket and Rainer. Millions of years of evolution showed themselves instantly. The dog jumped up and easily towered above Rainer. With a dark bellowing bark it wanted to jump them both. Rocket's fur stood on edge and he was showing his teeth growling. He flattened his ears and waited for the dog to make its move, while his gun was already drawn. Luckily for the dog it was restrained by a thick leash and so they just made a big curve around it. While they did so Rocket didn't leave it out of his sight for a moment. After the owner, one of those vulture-like creatures, had looked out of its house more of those aliens were showing up, trying to find out what this racket was all about. Rainer felt strange as they were all looking at them passing by. He could hear them talking to each other chattering, some were calling in screeching noises and more of them went on the streets, staring at the newcomers. It felt like running the gauntlet. Compared to the aliens Rainer was small and Rocket even tiny and every single one of them wanted to see them. Some of them held devices in their claws that looked like cameras or mobile phones. Whatever equivalent to Facebook and Twitter they had here, they would surely be posted there. Even when Rocket was ignoring the aliens around them his hand was never far from his gun. Rainer followed him to something that could be a bar.

When they reached the building that had symbols blinking over its door a semi-circle of onlookers had formed around them. The doors had motion detectors and opened with a silent sound as they approached. Its interior was similar to a human bar. The green and white pattern formed a nice contrast to the ever red width they had passed. There were only a few guests present at that time and most of the chairs were empty. Rainer was used to everything being too big for him, but here he felt even smaller. With the vultures being considerably taller than humans the furniture of the bar were so also. Rocket walked confidently towards a few empty stools directly next to the counter and Rainer followed him nervously. At first the other guests didn't pay any attention to them, but after more and more onlookers entered the bar as well and sat down in the rear part of it, they did notice them. Their looks were literally piercing his back and he could hear them chattering about them. Effortlessly Rocket climbed up a stool at the counter and stood up on it, so that he could see the bar keeper. Rainer wasn't quite as elegant in his attempt. The innkeeper looked rather curiously at his new guest and squawked something at them. Rocket tried to answer him in another language and when he noticed that the bird didn't understand, he tried another. At least Rainer assumed that those were different languages, basing on the different sets of noises Rocket was making in the second run. The second attempt was a success. The innkeeper replied and they both talked to each other, making a lot of use of their hands, as the vulture didn't speak the language very well. It didn't take very long until Rocket fidgeted around his clothes and drew a plastic card out of barely visible pocket. The innkeeper took it with his claw like fingers. In them the card looked tiny. He took several square shaped coins out of his cash register and gave them Rocket in return. As Rocket held up two fingers the innkeeper kept a few of the coins for himself again and pointed at a room next door. Rocket jumped from the stool. "I'll notify the Guardians to pick us up. If somebody touches my drink stab 'em with your knife."

Rainer's hands started to shake because of his nervousness. Until a moment ago he still had



something to refer to. Now he was sitting all alone in a bar in which everything seemed strange. He looked around carefully and realized that many of the vultures were still watching him and obviously talked about him, too. He winced when two glasses were put down next to him with a loud clangour. The innkeeper looked down at him and cawed. Suddenly he realized that this was how Rocket must feel like every day. For him there was no home, no culture he could call his own. Everywhere he went he was a stranger and everybody around him acted accordingly. Now he could also understand Rocket's fable for guns. The vultures seemed so tall and intimidating and the knife conveyed a strange sense of security. Rainer tried to take the glass off of the counter with both hands, but due to his shaking he nearly spilled its content. Some of the spectators laughed at that, what only increased his uneasiness. Inside the glass was a milk like murky liquid. To Rainer's surprise it tasted rather sweet and pleasant and the alcohol was easy to detect. It took several minutes before Rocket returned. To Rainer it had felt like hours and so he calmed down a bit upon his sight. "Peter and the others thought we have been taken captive and started brawling through this planet's underground to free us. It'll take a while till they reach us, maybe two or three more hours. They started something they want to finish now. More time for booze!" In Rocket's small paws the glass appeared gigantic and he took an enormous gulp. With a loud belch he showed his appreciation. Rainer took on his drink more slowly and didn't even get half of it done when Rocket already ordered his second round. Rocket's look wandered between Rainer and the empty glass and back again. He called for the innkeeper once more and gave him several of the coins. "Finish your glass already, I still have plans with you." With those words he pointed at Rainer's glass. "Why? What do you have in mind?" An all too familiar grin showed up on Rocket's face. "We still have time and they have rooms here. Will be the last time." He saw nothing speaking against it, so he emptied his glass and they went up. Three of the vultures seemed rather amused that the two were vanishing in a room so soon. One of them said something in the same language that Rocket had used for the Innkeeper. Rocket whirled around and moved towards the group and according to his facial expression and gestures he was bombarding them with insults. They were only even more amused by this and some of the unflattering gestures they made even Rainer could understand. He grabbed Rocket's shoulder and pulled him towards the stairs. "Leave those idiots be. Better let off steam in the bedroom." It took a moment before Rocket followed him and as a parting gesture he flipped the vultures off. Rainer asked himself, if he knew that gesture from humans or if it had a negative meaning elsewhere as well. Even on his way upstairs Rocket was still cursing.

Rainer couldn't tell if it was the anger or the fact that it was the last time for both of them, but their stay in the room took way longer than expected. Afterwards both of them were worn out and this time Rocket hadn't held back. Rainer felt a sweet pain on his back. Even Rocket appeared very content with it all. This changed the instance they walked down again and the trio from before, who was still sitting in its spot, continued where it had stopped earlier. Rocket was about to launch at them with flattened ears and bared teeth and Rainer had to stand in front of him and hold him back with all of his might. For the other guests it must have been quite amusing to see such a dwarf keep a mite from letting loose on those three. The innkeeper's attempts to keep the group from their teasing was rather half-hearted. He didn't even step away from his counter. For Rainer it was a futile battle. As the tallest of the three vultures rose and walked towards them he knew it was just a matter of seconds before Rocket would break loose and start a bloodbath. None of the attendees was aware of how serious the situation was. While Rainer and Rocket were the centre of attention until a few seconds ago suddenly all eyes turned towards the door as it opened and a giant tree entered the bar. The vultures had already been huge for Rainer but this thing was enormous and towered over everybody present without exception and by far. Legs as thick as tree trunks and a body completely covered in bark let no

room for doubts about who this was. The newcomer looked at Rainer and Rocket and then to the vulture who had just been about to launch at the two. With a wooden "I am Groot." he stomped towards them. Glasses danced on the tables as Groot passed them. The two vultures who had remained sitting saw this as a sign for them to go and they left the bar helter-skelter. Their leader followed as soon as he realized that the tree belonged to the two strangers. Rocket cursed after them for a bit, but calmed down as he ran towards Groot and shouted; "Groot, old mate, it's so good to see you again!" Rainer had expected Rocket to stop in front of Groot, but instead he started climbing him. Groot turned towards Rainer and knelled down in front of him, so he could offer him his giant hand with branches for fingers. His face was gentle and showed a smile. "I am Groot." Rainer tried to take the hand and shake it, but it looked like an infant trying to shake its father's hand. "Hi, I am Rainer Schmitt." All of Groot's movements seemed slow and as he got up again and walked towards the door he turned his head to look at Rocket "I am Groot." "Yeah, buddy, I know. Wait what? Do I have something in my muzzle?" Rocket started to wipe something off his muzzle hastily and Rainer would have loved to just vanish in the floor as he realized what had still been there. "Hey, that's really not what it looks like. The drinks here..." started Rocket hastily and Groot interrupted him with "I am Groot." "Ok, the journey was rather boring, and well, sometimes you got to... well, you know. How about I give you a bottle of the good stuff we got on the last planet and we forget about this." "I am Groot." "Two then. Have we gotten this far? I'll give you two, alright, but don't come running to me when you're in trouble again." Even when the movement of the tree were slow and unhurried Rainer had a hard time to keep up. Luckily the space ship wasn't far away.

After they reached the ship they set a direct route for Earth and held a reunion party. Rainer was introduced to Gamora, Drax and Peter Quill, who - in the course of the party - told them what they had been up to while Rainer and Rocket had been stomping through the desert. Rocket mentioned a few selected details of their own journey, but left out quite a few bits and pieces. At some point everything became too much for Rainer and he was grateful when they showed him to a bed in which he could rest. He couldn't tell how long he had slept, but in any case it had been long. The entire journey and the last time with Rocket had left him completely exhausted. He was awoken by the latter as they had already reached Earth.

Rocket accompanied Rainer to a hatch that was still closed. On their way they only exchanged the most necessary words. They came to a halt in front of the hatch and a weird silence spread between them. Both seemed to wait for the other to say something and finally it was Rainer who broke the silence. "Didn't expect you to be the one who escorts people to the door for goodbye." "Rarely doing it. People usually find their way out on their own." Rocket turned around repeatedly to make sure that they were alone and scratched his head awkwardly as he made a step closer towards Rainer. "I know I have said it a few times before, but I really want to thank you again for everything. For saving me and well, the nice time with you. Thanks again." Rainer took the remaining step forward and hugged Rocket. It was a strange experience for him to hug somebody smaller than him. The embrace was returned. "For a human you aren't even that bad and..." whatever he wanted to say, he didn't say it out loud, but that was alright. Rainer caressed Rocket's head carefully. "Will we ever see each other again?" "I don't think so" replied Rocket inertly and retreated out of the hug. He turned around quickly and wiped around his face. "Finally shove off the ship" he muttered sniffing without turning around. Rainer stood there with tears in his eyes, too. Everything else would only painfully stretch the inevitable and so he left the ship without ever looking back.