

The world-setting (containing Alorani-190-188, Taora Proxima, and other original landmarks within this story's context) are owned by Sylvan Scott. The characters of Rocket (aka "Rocket Raccoon"), the Collector (aka "Taneleer Tivan"), the Guardians of the Galaxy, the Nova Corps, the Kree, Star-Lord (aka "Peter Quill"), the High Evolutionary (aka "Herbert Edgar Wyndham"), and Bug are owned by the Marvel Entertainment Group and used without permission as an act of parody/tribute. This story may not be shared or edited without the express written permission of the author.

Special thanks to Quinn for suggesting the source of Rocket's special technology.

Unique, or, "Ain't No Thing Like Me"

©2017 Sylvan Scott

Years had evaporated, unnoticed. The march of time had passed with barely a whimper. With it, had gone "that feeling". Rocket had almost thought it lost. Perhaps it had been blown away in one of his many near-misses and narrow escapes. Maybe it had gradually shrunk into nothingness and gone the way of his old night terrors. Possibly it had even never been there to begin with: a fancy bourne of those half-awake moments when he wasn't sure of himself.

But it wasn't gone.

It hadn't left.

"That feeling" had merely hidden; ducked out-of-sight in the light of his adventures and friends.

But for it to re-emerge, all it had needed were Tivan's words...

"You're ... not ... unique."

It was galling. In the vastness of space it was easy to feel small. When you stood, at most, one-point-three meters high it was even easier. Ever since the so-called "Collector" had told Rocket he wasn't sufficiently unique, the feelings of smallness had only increased.

It had been after Rocket rescued the rest of the Guardians from Taneleer Tivan's collection. The ancient being had admitted Rocket had only been included to make his set "complete". Without the others, Tivan had called him "nothing".

Nothing.

Rocket gritted his teeth.

He piloted the *Rack 'n' Ruin* through hyperspace, trying not to think of his insignificance. If he wasn't unique, if all his pain and experiences and achievements and sacrifices weren't one-of-a-kind, why did he matter? He defined himself by his exclusive characteristics. He took pride in being singular. He knew that in a place as vast as the galaxy, let alone the universe, he wasn't powerful. He wasn't the strongest or fastest. But at least he could comfort himself with thoughts of his individuality. It made him feel ... big.

Now, the foremost expert on rarity had decreed him "uninteresting".

It shouldn't have mattered, but it did.

It gnawed at him as he let the autopilot ferry him towards his destination.

Eventually, the main viewscreen flashed a message.

Proximity alert: star system, Alorani-190-188.

He was almost there.

He didn't need the ship's monitors. His cyber modifications included I/O-ports and wireless interfaces. As his ship left hyperspace, a blue-green world emerged from the dark.

A communication pinged his systems.

He raised a brow as the ship's computers forged a digital handshake with a local, standardized network. Unencrypted, it was a fairly common protocol. He snorted with derision.

"They're practically invitin' me to steal their stuff," he scoffed.

But that wasn't the problem.

Everything he had researched on The Collector's coordinates had indicated a lack of technology. The planet wasn't even supposed to be inhabited. Nonetheless, he could see satellites in orbit maintaining a planetary network.

Rocket supposed it could have been put there by the Nova Corps. They did that sort of thing. But as he got closer, his scans confirmed most of his early research: there was no sign of any technology.

Frowning, he took the *Rack 'n' Ruin* into orbit. As he had, before, he started sifting through star charts and planetary logs trying to locate an entry for the planet.

It took Rocket a few minutes to find any cross-referenceable records. Even then, they were sparse.

Taora Proxima, the computer read, Class OL-22 Civilization.

Bad news.

The "22" designation was usually only applied to dangerous, isolated places. The "OL" part meant that it was a pre-industrial place with at least one race of savages in residence. Taora was host to a dangerous, primitive society. He frowned. They could conceivably be so primitive that they hadn't even gotten around to inventing fun technology like explosives or guns.

He considered the various things that could go wrong if he landed and got caught.

Every bleeding heart preservationist in Nova Corps space would come trampling all over him if he so much as stepped on the wrong flower. There would be impact statements, writs of religious sanctity, cultural purity documents, trade-zone protections, and all manner of ambassadors writing rules about what could be said, to whom, and in what way.

And that was before any problems caused by the natives, themselves.

"Who knows *what* they're like," Rocket mused. "They probably eat rocks and build houses out of lava 'n acid..."

Tivan hadn't said much about the place but it had been at the heart of his proclamation that Rocket wasn't unique. He just wished he knew why without having to break all sorts of Nova Corps planetary trespass rules, first.

His train of thought stopped. His searches finally had yielded something.

Data on the dominant lifeform filled the *Rack 'n' Ruin's* main screen.

He felt "that feeling" intensify.

Quill would've used the word that Rocket had learned to hate. But there was no avoiding its accuracy since that's what his eyes, the orbital network, and his ship's sensors confirmed.

The dominant lifeforms were bipedal, honest-to-Nova raccoons.

A whole world of them.

The Collector had been right.

He wasn't unique.

Smelly buggers, he caught a whiff of their scent even from half a click away. But that was the trade-off: he was downwind and above them on some cliffs so they wouldn't be able to catch him in the act of spying. Not that they'd report him. They wouldn't even have the means to let the Nova Corps know that Rocket was trespassing. But he would prefer violating the law more carefully.

Looking through his binoculars, there was no denying it: they looked just like him. About half his height and not as handsome, of course, but if he didn't know better he would have thought he'd found his ancestral home.

Then again, he didn't know better.

He had no idea where he was from. The only guess anyone had was Halfworld. But, after a short visit there, it had been clear he didn't belong.

The natives weren't of paramount interest, though. There was something wrong about this whole world. His sensors had detected some advanced technology eventually ... but the readings had been distorted and designated as "within the percentage of error". But when he'd tracked the signal to its source he found something that was definitely not within any margin of error.

It was a bone-white spire.

Shiny enough to reflect the midday sun, it gleamed as bright as any Kree or Nova skyscraper. It was about a kilometer on a side, sunk deep into the ground, and jutted up nearly three kilometers to the

clouds. The only imperfections appeared to be at the base: indents that resembled recessed doorways. Located in a broad valley, the spire was concealed by even taller mountains.

Around it, the native Taoran raccoons had built a trio of tiny villages.

Frowning, Rocket put his binoculars away and considered the various ways he could sneak closer to get a look at the spire. His jet packs could get him over the heads of the natives but he'd still have to come to the ground to investigate those potential entrances. Unless he waited for nightfall, his jets would attract all sorts of attention.

That was something he would rather avoid.

His ear twitched. From his left came a soft whirring noise. It had appeared abruptly and was getting louder.

Spinning about, he aimed his gun at a small, levitating robot.

"Greetings," it said. "Please do not approach the indigenous lifeforms. They are part of a preserve under the curation of Herbert Edgar Wyndham: the Lord-High Evolutionary."

Rocket snorted. "The who of the what, now?" He did his best to sound disinterested but kept his gun trained on the polished, white probe.

"Herbert Edgar Wyndham, formerly of Terra," the machine clarified. "This world is under the protection of the High Evolutionary. He will broach no interference with the development of either it or its people."

The robot didn't possess any obvious weapons but Rocket knew enough about underestimating seemingly small and harmless things.

"Yeah, well, I'm just about to leave anyway," he lied. "Just had to check in on my, uh, relatives."

This seemed to get the robot's attention. It abruptly projected a blue-white scanning beam over Rocket. It made him tingle, head-to-tail, and ended with a chirruping noise.

"What th'—?"

"Your DNA is, indeed, related," it summarized. "But you are not in the experiment's database. Please wait while I contact the Lord High Evolutionary for instructions."

The little robot exploded; Rocket re-holstered his now-smoking pistol.

"Yeah," he said. "You do that."

So, this planet was under the protection of some Terran.

Quill's mother had been Terran. Rocket visited the planet on a few occasions. They were lousy with spikes of uneven technology and had tons of individualized, bio-mutations. It was a rough-and-tumble sort of place but, nonetheless, possessed too many rules for Rocket's liking. That the person who had built this preserve was from Terra didn't surprise him.

Several loud, sonic booms interrupted his thinking.

Above him—cutting through the topmost layer of thin, wispy clouds—a phalanx of black, nightrunner ships descended at a low angle to the horizon. They arced slow-and-shallow before approaching the valley. Although he had put his binoculars away, Rocket could still see swarms of tiny, white dots rising from the spire's base to intercept the ships. He didn't need magnification to know what they were. Clearly, this "High Evolutionary" had entire fleets of those little robots protecting his "preserve". Judging by the distant bursts of light as the incoming ships cut through them, the nightrunners were prepared for the defenses.

Rocket crouched behind a boulder, paying attention.

The little, white droids were quickly dispatched.

The nine ships then separated into groups of three and landed around the valley: one group at each village. Rocket's stomach felt queasy. He didn't want to, but he peered through his binoculars, again. He watched the new arrivals disembark from their black ships.

The invaders were mostly Terran-like but about half of them had a dark blue, not-quite-Kree skin color with a blistered, checkered hide. He didn't recognize the specific species but it didn't matter. They were huge—three meters tall, at least—and carried themselves with the confidence that no race of little, calf-high, fur-bearin' critters could match. The other half of the invaders resembled Quill. The blue blister invaders and their Not-Quill companions surrounded the native settlements.

The Taorans were already scattering and trying to fight back. Weapons drawn, the invaders approached the fleeing raccoons.

Rocket knew what the nightrunner crews were doing. He'd hung around enough Ravagers to

recognize a raid. Only these scum weren't after valuable technology; not in the traditional sense. They were after the planet's "soft" assets.

He turned away.

It wasn't his problem.

This sort of thing happened all the time.

The advanced preyed upon the primitive. It happened daily on a thousand different worlds.

And, really, if anyone asked around, Rocket wasn't a hero; he wasn't even a "raccoon". He was ... whatever it was that he was. He was himself. That was it. And, according to some self-styled "important people", he wasn't even all that unique.

From the distance, the natives' cries reached his ears.

Slowly, he closed his eyes.

"Damn it."

He turned and dashed back to the *Rack 'n' Ruin*.

Night fell quickly in the vast valley, moreso in the shadow of its towering, inscrutable spire. As near as Rocket could tell, it was there to monitor the "experiment" and adjust the planet's biosphere. It did nothing, however, to actually protect the natives. So, whether he was a Terran, a self-styled godling, or a being who thought its power made it better than everyone else in the galaxy, this High-Grand-Poobah seemed nothing more than an absentee landlord. To Rocket's way of thinking, if he actually cared about his Taoran raccoons he'd have outfitted his drones with better defenses than a polite "no trespassers" warning.

He watched as the lumbering slavers finished tying up their captives. Many of the bipedal raccoons were wounded and seething with visible rage. Still, they were powerless against the technologically superior giants. The raiders were bigger, stronger, tougher, and better equipped.

Typical bullies.

Rocket perched on the twisted roots of a tree, taking advantage of its shadowy camouflage. His whiskers bristled as he wrinkled his muzzle in anger and disgust. His ears swivelled towards the nearby village. There wasn't much to be heard. The invaders only barked the occasional, sharp command while the residents reigned in their emotions behind the occasional snarl and glare.

He had been watching the raiders' patrols and actions for the last hour and was getting tired of it. The sun hadn't quite set, but it was getting close.

Behind him came the snap of a twig.

"Hey; look what we got here!"

The voice was a relief.

One of the invaders—a Quill-shaped slaver—had come up a slope that led down to the village's edge, below. Rocket turned to face him and raised his paws.

"Keep walkin', sunshine. Ain't no reason you gotta die, today."

The man laughed and raised his gun. "This one talks," he shouted over his shoulder.

His companion—one of the big, blue, blistery thugs—lumbered a few meters behind, trying to catch up. "Whatta ya mean, 'talks'? They don't 'talk'."

"This one does," the Not-Quill said. He turned back to face Rocket, narrowing his eyes. "How do you talk, runt?"

"Why don't you come closer and find out?"

"He's wearin' clothes, too," Not-Quill shouted to his companion.

The blue blister got closer. "They don't wear clothes, either." He sounded annoyed.

"Where'd you get clothes?" Not-Quill demanded. He raised his rifle.

"Your mother," Rocket spat. "After all, she felt kinda guilty for rippin' 'em offa me th' night, before."

That did it.

Not-Quill snarled and sprinted directly at Rocket, rifle-barrel raised.

Rocket stood his ground and didn't flinch. Not-Quill swung his gun's stock like a club. It passed right through Rocket's form without meeting any resistance. The absence of any mass where Rocket should be, threw the man off-balance. He stumbled forward a few steps. There was a flash, a popping sound, and—as quick as the attack had come—there was ... nothing.

The blue blister came to a stop and immediately raised his gun.

Rocket stood where he had been, unharmed.

"What th' hell? You disintegrated him!"

"Disintegrated?" Rocket's voice came from two places at once. The Rocket where Not-Quill had vanished spoke and, additionally, his voice appeared to come from behind a low ridge of stones, five meters to the blue blister's right. The visible Rocket shimmered and flickered out. "Nah, but if I had, it still woulda been too good for him." A new Rocket climbed up on top of the boulders. He casually tossed a holographic projector up and down in his open palm.

"Where is he?" the blue blister demanded.

"The microverse," Rocket answered. "I think I miscalculated the power-level. I honestly didn't want to foist him on my ol' buddy, Bug, but the technology was just too good to pass up on you oversized assholes." He shrugged. "Guess I'll have to adjust the settings, next time."

"Ain't gonna be a 'next time'," the blue blister shouted.

The three-meter-tall giant fired.

The small ridge of boulders exploded in a ball of flame and scattered debris. Smoke plumed and spread out. The blue blister sneered and stepped forward. The smoke cleared and Rocket gradually came into view, standing in mid-air with a flicker and a smile.

"Man: you guys fall for a hologram, once, and I could forgive ya. But twice?"

The blue blister stiffened and spun around.

He was too late.

From his actual hiding place in the higher branches of the tree, Rocket dropped his second, re-calibrated micronizing grenade. It went off in a spectacular display of green and yellow light. This time, however, its target shrank visibly. It was still quick and, in less than a second, the blue blister was barely knee-high. He managed to fire his gun but, off-balance by his new mass and displaced height, the recoil launched him backwards.

Rocket leaped down and retrieved the weapon. He walked over and loomed over the diminished would-be slaver.

"I warned ya, tiny." The shrinking hadn't fully stopped. The blue blister barely came up to the top of his toes. "Shoulda walked when ya had the chance."

He lifted his paw and stomped. It was a quicker end than the slaver deserved.

Rocket looked up. Chaos had erupted in the nearest village. The gunfire and micronizing grenades hadn't been subtle and the noise had attracted attention. The slavers had divided themselves into reconnaissance groups and begun to fan out.

Rocket made two more quick adjustments, via remote, to the remaining grenades he'd scattered throughout the region. Then, he darted down the slope towards the village's edge, staying out of sight. He drew a small energy rifle.

It had taken all afternoon but he'd modified it with the micronizing tech.

The rifle hummed to life. Its transparent power-canister, running down the top of the barrel, glowed with swirling, black dots within a corona of green energy.

It was time to take the slavers down: literally.

A plume of micronizing energy went up from sixty meters to Rocket's left as the first unlucky band encountered one of his grenades.

Technically, he thought, *they're more like mines. But who cares? They still go "boom"*.

Remote cameras he'd placed by each streamed the visuals.

Rocket's final tweaks to energy output and reduction parameters had worked. Each of the invaders shrank at about ten centimeters per second. Their weapons, clothing, and external non-biomass remained normal-scale. The effected Not-Quills and blue blisters dwindled, tripping over themselves in a panic, reduced past half their normal heights down, down, down until they were barely knee-high. A few—those closer to the center of the energy burst—shrank even faster and smaller.

Rocket chuckled at the sight of them scurrying around like tiny vermin: confused and frightened as they approached insect-size.

Originally, he had merely wanted them to experience life a third the size of their enemy. The unintended consequence of it, though, was that his method of inflicting the experience upon them was amusing, funny, and entertaining.

Rocket made a mental note to save this tactic for future use.

He vaulted over a low, rock wall at the village perimeter. Several guards had remained with the nearest cluster of captives. Three rapid-fire shots later and they were blown-back: flat on their asses, shrinking out of their clothes and barely a quarter-meter tall.

Rocket ran past them.

"No: don't get up."

He kicked dust and gravel over the shrunken invaders.

Raccoons looked at him in shock and surprise. Shouldering his rifle, Rocket drew his hunting knife and quickly cut the restraints from the wrists of the locals.

"Okay: now go kick some ass," he shouted.

Despite how dramatic and inspiring he sounded, the raccoons only exchanged nervous glances.

Rocket looked from one to another before sighing in frustration.

"Right. You don't talk." He looked at the tallest of them—a woman with copious, native-looking jewelry and some face-fur paint—and figured she had to be in charge. "Fight them," he said, slow and loud. "This is your chance! Fight back!"

The woman blinked and cocked her head. "Why are you talking like that?" she asked.

Rocket blinked. "You, uh, you speak? But I thought—"

"We don't talk to *inferior* outsiders," she said, proudly raising her chin. "But you are clearly not with them." She paused and looked closer at the much larger, Rocket. "I don't recognize you. Are you from Bezzelholt?"

Great, he thought, *they have a superiority complex*. Aloud, he said, "Don't know where that is. But I'm giving you the chance to fight back; to end this!"

The raccoon leader nodded. "What are you waiting for?" she asked the others. "You heard him: *attack!*"

"That's more like it." Rocket grinned a full, toothy smile and took aim at another Not-Quill.

The man yelped in surprise as the force of the blast knocked him off his feet. By the time the slaver hit the ground he was a meter tall and still shrinking.

Rocket emulated a Terran fist-pump. "Right between the eyes!"

In a fight, time always sped by. Rocket wished this one could have lasted longer. Not only was it getting increasingly easy but the whole operation was becoming more and more *fun*. He had to actively restrain himself from laughing at some of the slavers' reactions to suddenly being raccoon-sized to a raccoon.

Also, once he noticed that direct, center-of-mass hits had similar extra-shrinkage results like those who were at ground-zero of a micronization grenade burst, he made sure to be extra accurate with his aim. He moved fast and kept under cover.

Sadly, the fight was over almost before it had begun. By the time the slavers seemed to realize what was happening, Rocket had reduced over half of them to a size small enough where they just didn't matter.

Occasionally, he'd shoot the same one twice and chuckle.

The first raccoon village was liberated within a half hour.

By sunset, they'd freed the other villages.

The landscape was littered with empty piles of clothes, discarded weapons, and miniature, would-be slavers. The micronized invaders were eagerly rounded up by the relatively looming Taoran natives. A few times, Rocket encountered one or two still-defiant invaders. One even desperately tried to prop up his outsized, discarded rifle like a cannon. Rocket shot him with the micronization rifle several times until the Not-Quill was smaller than a grain of sand.

"Stupid-ass slavers," he muttered.

He didn't see the hopping-mad, naked slaver get devoured by a tiny, hungry bird.

Finally, moonrise came. It was full and bright, rising between the western mountains. The raccoons of the three villages gathered. Several hundred of them, they got together in the largest of the three settlements. Their leader raised her hands to the rising moon, visible through a cleft in the distant mountains, and shouted a war-cry of praise.

"Great High Evolutionary! We, your children, thank you for sending your emissary to defend us in our time of need! Our enemies have been laid-low and your great community may now continue!"

The others echoed her final words, "May the Great Community continue!"

"Great High Evolutionary?" Rocket raised one brow. "Are you being serious?"

She turned to him and nodded. "He is our creator; our god."

"Lady, he ain't no god. He's just a high-tech Terran! Look..." Rocket withdrew his comm from a belt pouch and performed a quick search on the Nova Corp public database. After a moment, it projected a hologram along with a wanted poster. It showed a man in high-tech, purple armor. "I don't know if you can read, but this guy's been performing illegal experiments all over the freakin' galaxy. He's not a god; he's a criminal!"

The chieftain's face grew stony. She shook her head. "You may think you know him, but you do not. Your machines and light-sculptures are pretty but that is all they are. They are no more real than an oasis in a desert. And while we thank our Lord High Evolutionary for sending you to us, I must insist you show him respect."

He rolled his eyes. "Listen: nobody sent me but me. All this?" He swept his arms, wide, to indicate the tiny corpses and captives. "This was all just dumb luck."

"What you call 'dumb luck' we call 'divine guidance'," she said, haughtily. "Besides, how do you know our Lord High Evolutionary did not create you, too?"

Rocket frowned. He paused for a long while. The chieftain kept her gaze fixed on him. "Trust me," he finally answered, "you don't want to go there."

"Don't I? You look like us ... smell like us..."

"I said, *back-off!*" he snarled.

The chieftain frowned. Her eyes went to Rocket's hand, resting on the holster of his pistol. Slowly, she nodded.

"As you wish."

She bowed. Following her lead, so did the rest of the native, raccoon-like Taorans.

Rocket withdrew his hand. "Well, then: looks like my work, here, is done."

He turned to leave.

"When you see our Lord High Evolutionary, be sure to convey our thanks," the chieftain said.

Rocket looked over his shoulder. "What makes you think I'm going anywhere near that nut?"

She shrugged, absently, contemplating him for a long moment.

"Because you want answers," she said at last. "You want to understand all of this. And, moreover, you want to understand yourself."

"Lady, you are *seriously* mistaken," he said. "I'm not exactly the introspective type."

"So you say," she replied. "But, in the end, I think you want to know the same things that we all do: why we're all so ... unique."

He paused at that.

For a moment, he considered responding. But, after thinking better of it, just resumed his departure. Seeing movement out of the corner of his eye, he fired one, last blast at an escaping blue blister and diminished it to bug-size. He gave the natives a casual wave.

"Stay real," he shouted.

Rocket tried not to look like he was in a hurry, but it was an act.

He needed to leave this planet.

Quickly.

Too much of him suspected there was more of this place buried in his past than he had originally thought. There were too many similarities to be ignored. Some of the Taorans had even possessed fur markings similar to his own. But despite his feelings, Rocket knew he didn't belong. It didn't matter how much he looked like them: he was still different.

An outsider.

Story of his life.

At least "that feeling" was gone.

He reached the *Rack 'n' Ruin* and climbed aboard.

A satisfied grin crossed his muzzle.

The Collector had been wrong.

The End