

G A M O R A  
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S I S T E R S I N A R M S

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M A C K E N Z I L E E

**MARVEL**

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For Dad  
*We Are Groot.*

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# Chapter 1

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**T**hirty-six seconds after Gamora landed on Station Rango-15's only public docking bay, her ship was being stripped for parts. Vagrants wrapped in dusty clothes, their faces covered with sheer scarves being used as makeshift filters to keep the Crowmikite dust from their lungs, leaped from their hiding places and swarmed before the landing gear had had a chance to fully engage, climbing onto the nose of her ship and hacking at the paneling to get to the wires beneath.

Gamora sighed, already regretting taking a job on such a garbage pit of a planet. She hadn't even reached the surface, and they were already trying to rip her to shreds. She unclipped the safety restraints crossing her

chest and kicked the button to release the hatch. As it opened with a low hiss, she stood, pulling her blaster from its holster, and took aim at the closest of the scrapers. She flipped the setting to stun with her thumb, then fired twice. The scrapper flew off the prow of the ship, limbs flailing. The rest scattered at once, shrieking like they had been shot too. Half of them dropped the broken mining tools they had been using to pick apart her ship, leaving Gamora standing amid what looked like the galaxy's most useless rummage sale.

She replaced her blaster in its holster on her hip. At least one lousy stun blast was enough to scare them.

Gamora jumped down from the cockpit, the smell of the station's artificial atmosphere so stale that she pulled her scarf up over her mouth and nose. She had fastened her hair in a loose knot at the back of her head, and she could already feel the oily air starting to coat it. She had bleached the ends white before she left, and she knew they'd be dingy and vomit-colored from the dust here by the time she returned to *Sanctuary II*. She should have learned by now: never wear white to a fight. And everything was a fight.

A harried-looking dock attendant came bustling over from the other side of the landing bay, the bottom half of her face obscured by a green-tubed ventilator. Gamora had a newer model, but she'd been told she

wouldn't need it until she arrived planetside. There was enough artificial atmosphere on the tenement stations to breathe without the need of a ventilator to first filter the Crow from the air. But the medic on *Sanctuary II* who cleared her for this mission had given her such a thorough list of side effects from exposure to Crowmikite that Gamora almost pulled the mask out of her pack preemptively.

The sound of the dock attendant's mechanized breathing was accompanied by the metallic rattling of the mining spurs around her ankles. She kept shifting from foot to foot as she tapped the screen clutched in the crook of one arm. It was cuffed to her wrist to keep it from being stolen. "Greet—" the attendant began, but she was drowned out by the rasping engine of the shuttle that was breaching the milky film of the pumped atmosphere overhead. The sky rippled, and a cloud of black exhaust expelled from the shuttle's underside enveloped the platform. Gamora felt her regret for the bleached ends go even deeper.

The dock attendant watched the shuttle through narrowed eyes as it stuttered downward, its engine finally wheezing itself into silence, then turned back to Gamora. "Greetings, friend," she tried again. Her voice was warbled and electronic through the dying speakers in her mask, and she reached up to fiddle with a dial on

the side. There was a squeal of feedback that made them both wince, then the attendant finished, without any noticeable improvement: “Welcome to Rango-15. It’s one hundred units a night to park your cruiser there.”

“I’m here on business.” Gamora flashed her ID card from the holoscreen on her wrist. Technically, she wasn’t on this particular assignment for her father, and technically it wasn’t an enormous pain to pay the one hundred units, but it was the principle of the thing. No daughter of Thanos was going to pay a docking tax on a tenement station of a strip-mining planet.

The dock attendant hardly glanced at the credentials before looking back to her own screen. “You’re outside the realm of the Black Order here, friend.”

“I’m not your friend.”

The dock attendant glanced up, and this time, Gamora watched as her eyes flicked to the blaster holstered on Gamora’s hip. “You a gunfighter?”

“No.” Not technically a lie. She preferred her swords.

“There’s a fifty-unit fee for gunfights,” the dock attendant said. “Plus funeral costs. But I’ll only charge you forty if you pay now, in anticipation of any firearms-related altercations you’re planning on engaging in while here.”

“I’m not a gunfighter,” Gamora said. “And I can go to another station.”

The dock attendant poked her screen vigorously, trying to get the cracked surface to respond. “Same fee everywhere. You can pay now for the entirety of your stay, or take it day to day, though there’s an additional ten-percent surcharge.”

“And what if I don’t pay?” Gamora asked.

The dock attendant glanced up at her, like she wasn’t sure if Gamora was joking. Then she said flatly, “We boot your ship.”

Behind the dock attendant, the doors of the just-arrived shuttle clanked open, and the scrappers that had fallen on Gamora’s cruiser immediately swarmed the disembarking passengers, begging for favors with their heads bent and their hands clasped before them.

“You’ll keep the scavengers off it?” Gamora asked.

“You have my word,” the dock attendant replied. “There’s a three-hundred-unit fee for scavenging in the public docking bay.”

Gamora resisted a pointed look over her shoulder at the ripped-up nose of her ship.

“Fine.” She tapped the holoscreen on her wrist, transferring units. The dock attendant checked her own screen, then nodded, confirming the transfer. She slapped a magnetic barcode on the front of Gamora’s ship, the tarnished plate standing out like an oil stain on the pristine reflective surface. “Welcome to

Torndune,” she said, powering down her holoscreen. “Don’t drink the water.”

As the attendant bustled away, Gamora crossed to the edge of the docking bay and peered down at the surface of the planet below.

*This place was once green*, she thought as she scanned the skeletal remains of what used to be a jungle planet before Crowmikite veins were discovered beneath its forest floors. Now the surface was rust-colored and pocked with trenches. The mines were deep craters amid the peaks of smokestacks and artificial-gravity generators. Lights along the tops of the refineries blinked red, mapping bloody constellations across the terrain. The low chorus of the machinery was audible even over the protective fields that surrounded the tenement station where the miners lived, a rumble she felt in the soles of her feet. Above the surface, hundreds of stations the same as Rango-15 crowded the air, smudgy dots against the dark sky. A miles-long elevator shaft connected each station to the surface of the planet, tethering them above the now poisonous atmosphere of Torndune, so choked with the runoff fumes from the Crowmikite that there was nowhere left where breathing wouldn’t kill you.

Gamora pulled a pair of binocs from her pack and raised them to her eyes for a better look at the surface.

As she scanned the planet, stats rolled out in green type before her eyes, crowding her view of long trains of miners going up and down the scaffolding, hauling canisters full of raw Crowmikite. The stats were temporarily disrupted as one of the enormous pointy-nosed dig rigs broke across it. Gamora shifted her gaze to the end of the trench just below the station, where most of the miners who lived on Rango-15 worked. The surface-depth statistics flickered for a moment, calibrating, then flashed: 3,897 km.

She turned off the lens and tossed the binocs back into her pack.

Only 3,897 kilometers to the center of the planet. Should be easy.

“Howdy, friend,” someone said behind her, and she turned to see another being holding an enormous holoscreen and wearing goggles walking quickly toward her, waving in a way that seemed friendly until they said, “It’s two hundred units to park your ship on the public dock.”

Gamora sighed. At least the cheaper grifter had gotten to her first.

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The station town was dusty and colorless, and the Crow that clung to the miners’ clothes and boots wafted in

muzzy clouds that turned gold when the light struck them. Speeders with missing parts were outside sagging shop fronts, locked between troughs of dingy liquid for the miners to wash with. There were more beings than ships, and the streets were crowded. Miners still in their coveralls, the imprints of goggles and ventilators fading from their skin, were lined up outside ration stands, trading tokens for meals and blankets and new boot laces. A medical bay was swamped with others showing off bloody knees and smashed hands as they begged to be seen. The ones with the decayed joints from Crow exposure lurked at the back of the crowd, their gray flesh worn away to the bone not enough to earn them attention.

Even on this small station, the miners were a diverse array of beings from all over the galaxy. Gamora remembered reading that when the Crowmikite had first been mined, the planet had been flooded with off-worlders who joined the locals in cashing in their life savings in hopes of striking a vein and staking a claim. The lucky few who had found a deposit had been bought out by the Mining Corps: the ones who cooperated were offered stock in the Corps in exchange for their surrender, while the ones who fought had had the treads of their diggers slashed in the night, their food stolen, and the tunnels they labored over collapsed

mysteriously while they slept. When they finally threw up their hands, they were forced into the same indenture as the other miners who worked for the Corps, and sent to these station tenements.

On the scaffolding assembled around a burned-out husk of a building, a group of missionaries from the Universal Church of Truth chanted hymns as they washed the feet of their converts in baptism. One missionary wearing the face paint of a priestess stood on an empty box marked DANGER: EXPLOSIVE, reading from a ragged book of scripture. “And it came to pass, they did find in the land a garden, and they called the garden Cibel, a word meaning the origins of life, and from its soil all things in the galaxy grow.” As she passed the acolytes, Gamora glanced beyond them, down the street at the shoddy dwellings crowded there, assembled from spare parts and mining trash, some no more than foil sheets draped over scaffolding supports. Fires were lit between them for cooking, and the light was amber and liquid against the ruddy sky.

The stations above the planet weren't all like this, dilapidated orbital tenements lousy with beings driven from their homes, with no option but to strip-mine their own planet in order to afford the taxes they were charged to live there. On her way to the Rango network, Gamora had flown past some of the white-walled

city stations that floated higher above the surface, where clean air was pumped in and fresh flowers bloomed in front of gated houses. That was where the Mining Corps executives lived, the ones who had stripped Torndune for its incomparably powerful energy source and now took the station-habitation fees straight out of their miners' paychecks.

This whole rutting planet was rotten.

On the main square, Gamora picked an elevated saloon at random, taking the stairs leading to its door two at a time. She needed somewhere to review her instructions, and, more pressingly, a drink—she had pulled out her vent before leaving the docking bay, but so few of the miners she saw were wearing them that she had kept it looped around her neck for fear of standing out too much. Her green skin would garner less attention on this planet than a failure to conform. The automatic doors opened with a wheeze and she started forward, but a being at the door threw out a thick arm, stopping her. “Check your weapons,” she barked. There was a badge pinned to the front of her mining coveralls that read simply OBEY ME. Gamora reluctantly unloaded her holsters, the two collapsible swords from her pack, her Taser, a bandolier of blister bombs, and four flash grenades into the bin the woman extended to her.

The bouncer nodded down at her boots. “And the knives.”

“I don’t have any knives,” Gamora replied.

The woman raised an eyebrow. Her expression was less a resting bitch face and more a very active one. “Knives,” she repeated. “You think I don’t know Starforce-issue toe blades when I see ’em? Empty ’em out or get lost.” Her thick hand drifted to the stun baton strapped to her chest.

Gamora kicked a heel against the ground. The Kree Corps knife sprang from its hiding place in the toe of her boot, and she caught it, then handed it blade-first to the bouncer.

The bouncer tossed it in the bin with the rest of Gamora’s arsenal. “And the other?”

“There is no other.” Gamora kicked her heel against the ground, and the empty socket clicked. The woman narrowed her eyes, and Gamora wondered how likely the bouncer was to demand she hand over her boots and proceed barefooted into the bar rather than take a chance she was lying. “Are we finished here?” Gamora snapped before the bouncer had a chance to do a full pat-down. The bouncer grunted, then ripped a red tag from the front of the bin before pushing it backward onto a conveyer belt that whisked it out of sight. “Collect them at the window when you leave,” she said,

handing Gamora the tag. “And don’t drink the water, off-worlder.”

Gamora glowered at her. Perhaps blending in wasn’t worth the effort.

The saloon was crowded with the miners just off their shifts on the surface. Zardoc tables lined the windows, each engulfed by a crowd laying down wagers on the checkered board. A rowdy group by the bar watched bagger races broadcasted from somewhere in the central system on a grainy holoscreen. Gamora ordered a drink, something dingy and thick that smelled fermented, and took a booth in the back. The seat cushions were cracked, and they expelled a puff of foul-smelling Crow dust into the air around her when she sat.

She flipped open the instructions on her wrist screen, careful to keep her back to the room and the tech out of sight. No need to get branded as a rich foreigner worth pinning down in an alley and robbing just because she had a mediocre holoscreen that she couldn’t have pawned for gas money in the capital.

The message was brief, but she pulled it up again, like some new line of text might have appeared since she’d last read it. There were the coordinates of Torndune, a link to a data file on the mining history and environmental hazards of the former jungle world, then two lines:

RETRIEVE THE HEART OF THE PLANET.

DELIVER TO THE FOLLOWING COORDINATES:

She poked at the string of coordinates again, and just like before, the location didn't come up on any of her charts.

What an interesting job this was going to be. An unknown employer had sent her after an unknown object to be delivered to an unknown location. When she'd forwarded the message to Thanos, hoping he would tell her to refuse, that she was needed elsewhere, she had gotten only *Go* in return. So now the orders were more or less her father's. And before all else, she was his soldier.

Gamora pulled her leg up onto the bench next to her and rested her elbow on it, flicking to another screen to see if her father had tried to contact her while she had been flying. She didn't bother to check if she had anything from Nebula. All she would get was the last message she had sent her sister—*I'm sorry. Please talk to me.*—with a stamp indicating it had been read and deleted months earlier. Her fingers strayed to the empty space in her boot where the Kree Corps knife she had left Nebula would have been.

*Eyes up.* She balled her fingers into a fist and pressed it against the toe of her boot. *Focus.*

This wasn't Nebula's assignment. This was hers.

"Hello there, sweetheart," someone purred over her shoulder, and she turned. A woman with bright red hair, her lips and cheeks painted the same color, was leaning on her elbows over the back of the booth, putting Gamora right at eye level with her not-insubstantial cleavage. "Looking for a friend?"

"No thanks," Gamora replied, dragging her eyes away and turning back to her holoscreen.

"It's hard being new in a station with no friends." The woman sank onto the bench beside her, and Gamora could smell the excess perfume she wore to try and cover how long-overdue she was for a bath. Her false eyelashes were starting to peel off on the ends. She had no eyebrows, but had painted them on with a purple cosmetic that looked like it was scalding the skin beneath it. "You a mining exec?" she purred.

"Not exactly," Gamora replied.

"An investor? Or a bounty hunter?" She clapped her hands together, giddy at the thought. Her jewelry rattled.

"Something like that."

"But not from around here," the woman said. A statement, not a question.

"No," Gamora said. "Not from here."

“Did someone tell you about the water already?” the woman asked.

“What about it?”

“Don’t drink it.”

Gamora snorted. “That came up.”

The woman reached out and stroked a finger along Gamora’s chin. She had painted her hands, but the skin along her knuckles was starting to rot away, red sores from the Crow too raw to be covered up entirely. “Well, if you don’t fancy sleeping alone tonight, you come find me, you hear?” She spoke with the drawl Gamora had already noticed in all of the beings she’d spoken to since she arrived, a tendency to eschew grammar and consonants in favor of convenience.

Gamora started to respond, but was interrupted by a hollow *boom* from far below, down on the surface of the planet. Her glass rattled on the table. The holoscreen over the bar died, and everyone watching it shouted. Gamora leaped to her feet on instinct, reaching for a blaster before she remembered she had left them with the cretin at the door.

“Relax, sister,” the woman cooed, readjusting the front of her dress. The waist looked like it was pulled in so tight it must have been shifting her organs. “It’s just the Backbone.”

Most beings in the saloon had ignored the blast, but a few had gone over to the grimy wall of windows for a look. Gamora vaulted over the back of the booth and followed. Beyond the edge of the floating station, thick black smoke was billowing in an undulating column from the surface, flecked with strands of white lightning, like threads pulled through a tapestry.

Gamora felt the woman at her shoulder, pressing her body against Gamora's for a better view. She felt the woman's fingers curl around her bicep. "Wow, you're fit. You must be a soldier."

The crowd around the windows was already trickling back to their drinks and games. Gamora watched the smoke begin to dissipate, leaving the trench edge scorched black.

"What was that?" she asked.

The woman shrugged. "Someone digging where they wasn't meant to and hit a Crow vein, most likely. It ain't exactly a stable element."

"And what's the trench called?" Gamora poked at the smudged glass.

"The Devil's Backbone," the woman replied. "One of the biggest Crow deposits they've found. Still chasing the seam down into the earth, so I hear."

"Who do you hear from?" Gamora turned, found

the woman much closer to her than expected, and stepped backward, only to find herself now pressed against the window.

But the woman didn't seem concerned. Or dangerous enough that the proximity was an issue. She was picking dust from under her nail with the corner of her front tooth. "All sorts of places, when you're in my line of work. Three nights past I saw a girl who broke down crying about how it was her that told the Mining Corps the picket lines were fixing to rise up again."

"Are there strikes?" Gamora asked.

"There's always somethin'." The woman had brought Gamora's drink from the table, and took a sip. It left a gray film on her upper lip. "They want higher wages and better stations and lower taxes. They want the company to provide them vents. Hell, some want the whole damn Mining Corps shut down so they can terraform the planet. Like the Corps would give up a claim to the biggest Crow deposit in the outer rim just 'cause some locals blow up a few dig rigs."

"How many of them are there?" Gamora asked.

The woman shrugged. "Maybe lots. Some of 'em strike in the stations or picket down world, until Corps security scatters them. Don't take much. Ain't worth the trouble, if you ask me. They won't get nothing

with signs. 'Specially since most of them can't read."

"And they're armed?" she asked. "They go after the equipment?"

"Some of 'em. A crew blowed up one of the rigs a few weeks back. The drills that make the tunnels," she clarified as she picked out something floating on the surface of the drink, then flicked it at the wall. "The driver turned on their drill and BAM!" She slapped her hand against her arm. The drink sloshed. "They said it were a protest. But the Corps is gonna hang the ones they caught in Buckskin Gulch on the solstice, so I heard, and we all still mining, so it ain't much of a protest. Hope the artificial grav is better than last time—it weren't strong enough to snap the necks. We had to pull their feet so they wouldn't dangle for days. Think you'll be around on the solstice? I'll let you take me, so long as you don't wear the jacket." She ran a hand along Gamora's bicep. "Pretty things is meant to be seen. And you best start using that ventilator." The woman nodded at the one around Gamora's neck. "You'll be spitting Crow dust from here back to *Sanctuary II* without it." The mention of her father's ship made Gamora jump, and the woman laughed. "We ain't so remote that we don't get Xandarian bulletins out here. The signal might take a few weeks, but it shows up eventually. And you ain't real hard to spot, daughter of Thanos.

Especially with that pretty green skin of yours.” She winked. “Now. Want to buy me a drink?”

“You tell me where the rebel prisoners are kept,” Gamora replied, “and I’ll buy you the whole bar.”