My Stars and Yours

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Additional Tags: slowburn, RP to Fic, Not Cuddly Ravagers who are Not Perfect People, How they met and everything that went wrong, plus smut, Violence and Blood, ravager nonsense, these idiots are not great people and thats okay, more to be added as we remember them in future chapters, Started Pre-GOTG2 therefore not canon compliant, at least the backstory isn't, blood stuff!, verging on blood play?, is it bloodplay if no one cums?, Who even knows, Cultural homophobia, Chapter 3 - WE GOT NOOKIE, Fastidious Rimming, Character Death, overtones of petplay the entire way through tbh, cultural sex shaming, Body Horror, Gore
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My Stars and Yours

by RedRarebit, Write_like_an_American

Summary

"And even though I know how very far apart we are / I like to think we're sleeping underneath the same bright star."

How they met, how it happened, and everything in the middle. Contains smut, violence, religious manias, aliens, OCs, meandering thought processes and other fun stuff. Pre-GOTG2 and will not be canon compliant.

Notes

This is copy-pasted over from an RP that we've been working on since... December? In some places it can be a little jolty, since this is still where we were finding our feet, but it smooths out.
And its a long one! Strap in for the long haul!
On the one hand, jail time hadn’t seemed like the greatest of options. While he knew he wasn’t much of a weakling, Kraglin had the vague idea that others in prison wouldn’t see it the same way. Which meant he would have had to defend himself, getting a longer sentence… And serving in the corps meant he could keep travelling, learn some of their weird, impersonal weapons and get some piloting skills under his belt.

And maybe plan an escape route, steal a stuttering old courier that had been put in for repairs and escape his pursuers with an ill-advised and poorly-planned frame-shift jump.

He came out on the other side of it with a rattling and a squealing of upset metal, but in one piece. He sat back, raked his fingers through his hair and laughed into his sleeves. At least, he laughed until the alarms started beeping, and he peered down at the display.

Oh. Right. Most ships didn’t have fuel in them when they were being scrapped for parts.

“Flark.”

The ‘controlled landing’ was more aiming the craft at the nearest planet with an atmosphere he could breathe, and soft enough to not destroy him in one fell swoop. Kraglin then pushed away from the display, and calmly shut himself into a storage cupboard to await death. Death, as it happened, didn’t find him - the scream and splintering of trees was the last thing he heard before the floor dipped violently, his head found the metal frame, and he blacked out.

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It was not every day that a star fell out of the sky. In fact, it was a very rare happenstance. Practically unheard of. If the chief learned of this, he would declare that Yondu had been possessed by demonic forces and attempt an exorcism. Yondu, who liked to imagine he was of a more down-to-earth disposition, concluded that he must have pounded a little too much Teku-root into his drink.

He surveyed the smoking scar that had been scoured into the undergrowth. The canopy lay in tatters, branches blasted to smithereens, trunks shorn off half-way. The earthy underbed of the forest was rarely visible - there was always something growing over it, whether it was moss or ferns or roots thicker across than a hunter’s torso, tethering the towering trees to Anthos’s flesh. The fallen star had wrenched away this covering, churning up the dirt beneath like an oversized plow. Yondu, peering from his perch, raised an eyebrow at the multiple bands of brown that had been revealed: loose sand, darker sediment, rich red clay from under the stream.

For a hallucination, this was damn detailed. Yondu tilted his head at the smoking plume, which straggled diagonally from the tip of the scar that was closest to him. Heck, he’d even got the windspeed right.

And the quiet snuffles of forest life re-emerging from their hidey-holes. And the smell of disturbed swampwater, offset by a tang of burning rubber. At this point in his life, Yondu had no idea what rubber was, so this was definitely impressive. The Teku had really outdone itself.

Yondu should ride the trip out. That was the safest way to deal with Teku hallucinations. You sat tight, you focused on a far point on the horizon, you did your best not to fall over, and you waited for the world to stop spinning like you’d just tumbled from the top branch of the village Za’gah tree and smacked every branch on the way down. You most certainly didn’t swarm down into the vine-hung
grotto of the swamp, where Yolopp lurked behind every algae-smeared rock, following the sizzling trail of a fallen star. Not unless you were suicidal - or perhaps just insane. But Yondu Udonta, star-gazing son of the village chief, had never staked his name on sanity.

He crept along the edge of the bald strip that the star had gouged, crest buzzing at every blip in the biosphere. The plume reared ahead, a bulging grey beacon, and for the first time in his life, Yondu’s fascination with the night sky waned in favor of a new attraction.

His body would be floating face-down in the swamp come morning - if there was a body left at all. That’s what you got for following the Teku dreams.

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Kraglin felt the way the ship had shifted, nose pointing far further downwards then he had aimed it originally - probably something to do with the curve of the planet, something he hadn’t been able to calculate yet. He curled his arms over his head in the small, tight space of the storage compartment, shutting his eyes tight and cursing up a wild storm in the cramped space. It would be just his luck if this was how things ended for him; in the dark, in a narrow hole, too similar to the one he’d escaped.

Then it went dark with a scream of sound, the ship flipping tail over nose and back again. Kraglin wasn’t aware of anything after that, the way it skidded in the mud, pushing up thick waves of discoloured, stinking water around the slick shape of the ship. It settled there, the noise dying away, and Kraglin half-out of the compartment, the door smacked open and his unconscious form being flung out with the force of the impact.

At least the wetness of the landing meant there wasn’t going to be too much of a fire risk. A flood risk though, that was something that he hadn’t considered. It didn’t take too long for Kraglin to lurch up, spluttering and spitting water as he thrashed. Pain flared through one side and he wheezed, clutching at it even as he tried to get himself upright, hauling with his other arm on the back of a chair.

The scenery outside was wildly foreign to him - lush growths and water, mosses and plants and trees. Kraglin stared for a moment, feeling the sticky water swirl around his ankles, feeling weak. If this was where he was going to die, it was beautiful enough that he wouldn’t argue.

Walking felt almost like it was out of the question - there was some sort of searing pain up his right side, under his hip and up his spine. But he dragged himself to the exit hatch, trying for the mechanisms to open it. A whirring and grinding answered him, and Kraglin groaned as he let his head clunk against the metal, shutting his eyes. Probably a twisted arm or crushed section of wires.

“Hello!” Kraglin lifted the arm not cradling his side and started to hammer his fist on the metal, off-beat and with frequent pauses to stop the vibrations travelling down his arm. He spoke Xandarian, or enough of it to pass on most planets, so he figured it would be fine here, if there was anyone at all.

If he hadn’t picked a deserted mudball to die on, after all.

Yondu had his bow off his back, arrow already primed as he approached the wreck. He may be reckless, but he wasn’t stupid. Anthos’ beard had housed the Zatoan tribe for a thousand years, ever since their ancestors climbed the volcano and settled in their Great God’s craggy eye socket. They knew every beast of the air, tree, and water. Most they’d sampled in the communal stewpot. Those that were rarely roasted over the fire - Yolopp and Aku and the like - were more inclined to eating Zatoan rather than the other way around.

But this fallen star was new. And new meant dangerous.
Yondu continued to toy with the idea that this was all explicable through a union of hallucinogenic plantroot and too many sleepless nights, right up until he rapped on the star’s surface. It was nowhere near as shiny as he expected. Kinda dull, actually - especially when splashed with swampwater, from where it’d crashed into the center of a muddy, creeper-draped grove. It had a crab-like shell, cold and smooth as if it was forged from yaka itself. It boomed under his knuckles like the village drum.

Yondu jumped back. He leveled his arrow at the star in the space between two frenzied heartbeats. When it became apparent that the star wasn’t going to pounce on him - rather, it seemed content to settle into the mulchy bog, devoured inch by inch under sucking mud - he allowed himself to relax. He had clambered along a tree trunk to reach it, toppled and twisted by the impact. Its canopy tangled with the star’s six points in a mossy green wig. Bark splinters stung his bare feet. But Yondu was a trained hunter, and curiosity won out over pain.

He lowered his bow. The star was either inanimate, sleeping, or dead. Wildlife returned slowly along the meteor’s path, but they had yet to dare venture this far. Yondu was as good as alone.

He had to take a bit of it back, or the village would never believe him.

Glancing around, he located a suitable rock and darted down to fetch it, crest aiding his balance as he ran along the makeshift wooden bridge. The flint was of a size with his head; he hauled it back along the tree until the branch groaned beneath their combined weight. The black water of the swamp bubbled beneath him like soup in a cauldron. Yondu was so busy selecting a weakspot to start bashing that the first reedy ‘Help!’ passed him by. Not that he could be blamed for this - the ship’s occupant was surrounded by lifeless metal, cushioned from Anthos and the sacred connection that interwove Centaurians’ consciousness with the natural world. And anyway, Yondu wouldn’t understand what ‘Help’ meant. Not so long as it was said in Xandarian.

He swung onto the body of the star, bracing himself between one prong and its neighbor. The star was ridiculously easy to climb, easier than any tree - even the small ones at the edge of the village clearing, which were kept pruned so the children could practice. Yondu swarmed to the star’s top, pinching the highest golden, mud-smeared spike between his knees. Then, wobbling slightly as his toes failed to find purchase on the slick metal surface, he stood. He raised his rock, eyes fixed on the point. And then he smashed it down, hard as he could.

Kraglin yelped with what could charitably be called terror as the ship made a noise like a dull gong - it was rickety, sure, but the metal was still thick enough to withstand space travel. He reared back from the door and squinted at the ceiling, the wall, and the floor, in case it was the ground collapsing under the ship. Nothing seemed obvious, and he hurried over to the bridge to peer out of the muck-smeared windows.

He couldn’t see anything. Which meant there was potentially a massive creature trying to open his ship like a hungry man getting into a can of grubworms.

“Hey!” He yelled, indignant, finding a switch and pressing it desperately. For a moment or two, the mining lights in front of the ship flared to life, stuttered and died again. “Get off my flarking ship!”

Hunters did not scream. At least, not unless they were performing a war-dance before storming one of the villages on the rocky plateaus at the base of Anthos’s Face: heathens who sang to no God and believed in nothing but themselves. Then there was screaming aplenty. And roaring, and whistles so loud that every arrow in the vicinity juddered in its harness.

Yondu wondered if adding in a couple of those would make this less embarrassing.

When the star’s eyes opened, he’d had his rock over his head in preparation for another blow. As a
result, jerking in shock (and okay, screaming a little too) meant losing his balance.

Yondu dragged himself out of the mire. He was coated in black mud, stinking and thick. All Centaurians took a swamp-dive at some point in their lives - and unless there was a nearby Yolopp, most crawled out again. Yondu knew not to thrash; knew not to panic. But that was so much easier when you weren’t directly under the nose of a pissed-off star. And oh - now he knew why they shone. Accustomed to the dimness of the under-canopy, lit by phosphorescent algae, the star’s eyes seemed brighter than the twin suns. Yondu, rock long-forgotten, struggled onto land that felt solid, albeit boggy at the edges, and threw up his hands in futile self-defence.

Stupid, stupid! Trying to steal a sliver of a star so he could prove to his father that there was more beyond their planet than a lifeless Void? The chief had always said Yondu was far too confident, and he was right. This time he’d really gone and done it. The star was awake, it was injured, it was angry. And it was looking straight at him.

Kraglin yelled incoherently at the - what the hell was that? Wet, sticky-looking drippy creature that seemed to be flailing its way away from the ship, cowering. Then he felt bad - sort of. This was clearly a small thing, and his ship was big and bright and ugh. The Corps had got to him if he was worrying about the delicate feelings of swamp critters who were trying to deafen him.

Kraglin flicked a switch, using the last of the dying powersource to flick the pad washers, swiping mud and water off the front window. He leaned closer, trying to see out there better as the light faded and died, and waved the arm not clutching his side in what he hoped was greeting.

There was something inside the star. It looked like it was flailing. What could it be? A previous meal, writhing in its death throes? Or perhaps it was a sign from Anthos, telling him to run.

Yondu sized up the distance between the star and him, pushing slowly to his hands and knees. His thigh muscles bunched in preparation to spring. Mud dripped over his face, slithering across his chest tattoos in fat peaty streaks, but Yondu didn’t dare raise a hand to wipe it away. He felt like he was staring down a snake, sure that the second he bolted the star would pounce.

Which was why the dying lights made him frown.

What was the monster playing at? Was this a lure, designed to entice him in? Well, Yondu wasn’t falling for it. Still moving slowly, he notched his arrow - for self-comfort more than anything.

“Don’t you come any closer!” he growled, clicks carrying through the humid midnight air.

“Cmon.” Kraglin could see the other thing had a weapon - that was good, that implied intelligence and maybe something he could work with. He offered what he hoped was a grin, remembered what people had told him about disliking his smiles and stopped that tactic in favour of just waving again. For a moment he eyed the display, and took a sore breath.

One step at a time. He eased himself up onto the control panel, kneeling on the buttons and dials with a wince that came from the pain in his kneecaps and his side. He couldn’t tell if anything was broken, in all honesty, but it hurt to breathe too deeply on that side.

Raising his arm, he knocked on the glass a few times and waited, hopeful. If this being was trying to attack his ship, that implied a non-contacted species which meant this could either go really well, or badly.

Yondu froze at the knock. There were five of them, tapped out in a rhythm not unlike the first beats children learned to click along to at feast-days. No way. It couldn’t be. Was the star actually not
trying to eat him? Was it... trying to communicate?

Yondu’s heart buoyed up his throat in excitement. By Anthos. He was already the first man of the village to find a star, and now he was going to be the first to talk to it.

His mother would counsel wariness, if she were here with her hunt-pack. But it’d been a long time since Yondu hunted in formation - he preferred to stalk the deepswamps alone, free from orders, answering only to himself. Sometimes it got him in trouble - Yondu didn’t have enough fingers and toes to count the times he’d been almost-eaten. Hopefully this wouldn’t add another tally to that list.

He skulked forwards, watching the star’s eyes for a flicker of light. When he found none, his gaze roved upwards, to the odd convex bubble of shiny material on the star’s forehead. It reflected the glimmering algae that filled this bower with gloomy blue iridescence. If Yondu tipped his head, he saw himself - bulging grotesquely, like he was looking into a pool on a curved surface. It looked kinda hilarious, actually. Not bothering to squint through the bubble, into whatever dark skull cavity lay beyond, Yondu remounted his treetrunk and bounded as close as he could, making the ascent over slippery bark look effortless. He gave his reflection a poke.

It hurt. The star was nothing like water, which rippled when young centaurians stuck their faces in it to try and catch their mirror image. If Yondu tried that here, he’d break his nose.

Yondu stretched his sore finger. When he breathed on his reflection, fog swept out and obscured it, expanding rapidly from his nostrils and mouth. Bemused, Yondu leaned away to let it clear. Only when it did, his reflection wasn’t the only thing staring back at him.

A face. One whiter and fuzzier than any Yondu had seen.

There was nothing for it. He screamed and fell back in the swamp.

“Well that’s just rude.” Kraglin groaned as he eased off the panel and into the seat, shutting his eyes and tipping his head back to try and rest. Enough clambering around and hitting things for the time being - he let his hand move up and down his side gingerly, trying to test for any serious damage. No blood, which was reassuring, and he couldn’t feel the sharpness of any broken bones. He eased in a breath, winced, exhaled and winced again.

So nothing conclusive discovered, which wasn’t helpful. At a guess, he’d think he just knocked himself badly and his body was just stubbornly refusing to get over the whole thing, added to the various aches and pains he’d had before he left. Unless he was just really allergic to this planet already and his body was trying to take the quick way out by rotting around him.

He hoped he hadn’t drowned the sticky small creature. Kraglin sat up a little bit and peered through the window, trying to spot it.

This time he would not be defeated.

Yondu spat bogwater. It tasted foul; rotting vegetation and stagnant shallows. But it bolstered his determination. He wasn’t going back in the swamp, no matter what the star threw at him. Bright lights, ghostly faces - his Teku-root theory was looking more believable by the second. But Yondu couldn’t shake the certainty that this was real. Everything was real - from the slurp of mud around the star’s slowly submerging base, to the feel of it itching and drying on his scalp.

Anyway, he had yet to see a single Vash’ryk performing one of Anthos’s dedication-dances, which was the usual indicator of a bad trip.

No, this was real. And that meant Yondu had let himself be bettered - twice! There wouldn’t be a
third time.

Growling, he dragged the mud on his cheeks into two stripes, then added another vertically, from his crest to the bridge of his nose. He squared his shoulders. He settled his arrow shaft in its nook, wet bow creaking as he drew it. And then he let loose, a sharp whistle guiding the *yaka*-head into the glass.

Kraglin let out an entirely brave and bold yelp of fear and concern when he saw the vague shape of the creature priming its. Wooden, looking moon-shape thing with a stick? Was that normal? Kraglin didn’t want to find out if it was weaponised to where it could ruin his day.

His day was then promptly ruined with the glass front of his ship getting a mighty crack running through it, lines spreading from the point of impact out to the framework of that pane. He squawked, getting up and trying to stagger back a bit, not wanting to get hit with anything else.

“Stop hitting holes in my ship!” He yelled, picking up a fallen datapad from the - now deeper - water and lobbing it at the pane in retaliation. That hardly helped, a few chunks of glass falling out, and he gave another little yell of despair. This was going to take forever to fix, if he even had the resources in the hold and nothing had broken in the crash.

Yondu blinked. Either an enterprising bird had returned to this part of the forest, or whatever was inside the star was still very much alive, and was now shouting at him. His arrow, having lost momentum when it struck, couldn’t be whistled back - he was going to have to climb up and retrieve it. He could always fire another. But then if that suffered the same fate, where would he be? Two arrows down, and facing a trek to the lava-fields and a very grumpy village blacksmith.

Yondu hooked his bow over one shoulder. His mud-smeared face was like something from the old stories Aja told him: stories of the days before the villagers had settled, when the forest was rife with territorial battles and every clan had their own pattern of warpaint.

They might not be nomads anymore, but Yondu still had the heart of a warrior. Tree trunk creaking under him, he charged.

He grabbed the arrow, leaping from the branch and swinging around the shaft like it was a trapeze. That was all very well and good - a move he’d used a hundred times, retrieving arrows from where they’d stuck in trees. But whatever the star’s forehead was made of, it wasn’t so sturdy as bark. As soon as Yondu applied his weight to the arrow shaft, the crack it’d put in the glass spread, fractures zigzagging like lightning. It burst, a tinkling explosion of tiny knives. Yondu completed his swing with a messy landing on the star’s far spike. He avoided the worst of them. But the sizzle in his forearm indicated some had struck. Looking down, he saw tiny geometric shards embedded in the flesh. There was no time to marvel at them, or to register the pain.

Yondu swung arrow and bow simultaneously, bringing them together in a well-practiced lock. He looked down the shaft into the eerie white face of the star’s lunch.

“You stay right there,” he snarled.

“What the flark.” Kraglin’s tone was complaining, at the very least. He wobbled where he stood, his arm still clutched protectively around his side as he flinched away from the bright noise of it all. The wet thing had come and gone with a surprising speed, leaving only a hole in its wake - and then a series of very threatening noises, and the very threatening point of the pointy thing levelled at him.

He didn’t deserve this. He said that, quite loudly.
“I don’t flarkin’ deserve this.” Kraglin let himself flop into the seat behind him, the movement making water sloosh around his feet, and groaned as it jostled him. “I didn’t want to land here, I didn’t wanna have to do any of this, I just wanted to find a bar and get really drunk, alright? Do you have bars?”

He was going to guess that was a no, if the loincloth and archery set was anything to go by. He sucked in another painful breath and wondered if he could bump this injury up to terminal if he flung himself out of the ship. His ship was broken, he was in pain, and now a mud man was trying to kill him.

“Shoulda stayed with the Corps.”

There were… sounds, coming out of the crestless man’s mouth. They were like nothing Yondu had ever heard. And the way he was holding himself, arms forming a protective loop across his chest as if they were pinning him together…

“Are you injured?” he asked. Not because he cared. Oh no. The crestless were banished, untouchable, shunned and despised by Anthos. He shouldn’t give two shits what happened to him.

Yet while Zatoan hunters were more than happy to take advantage of wounded beasts who couldn’t run from their bows, this was no meal-in-the-making. This was, unless the Teku had really gone to his head, a person. A crestless one, an ugly one, a hairy one, yes. But a person regardless. Yondu, who had only seen hair on the chins of the older village shamans, studied the pale man’s grizzly beard and the buzzed-short stubble on his scalp where a crest ought to sit, torn between repulsion and interest.

Was all of him so fluffy? Did he feel soft or prickly to the touch? And… and why was he so white? Old Aja told a story passed down from time immemorial, of a hunter caught in a Yolopp’s mouth who’d been sucked so hard his color came out. Yondu’d dismissed it as soon as he was mature enough to understand that if you got within snapping distance of a Yolopp you weren’t making it back to the village, blue or otherwise. But perhaps he’d been too hasty.

Whether or not he had been used as a Yolopp lollipop, the man was profoundly non-threatening. He was tall, even without a crest (Yondu found it hard not to stare at his head, so naked despite its cap of bristly fuzz) but thinner than most saplings. His elbows were sharp as Yondu’s arrow tips.

Yondu lowered his weapon until it threatened the crestless man’s kneecaps rather than his nose. This took a while; there was a lot of nose to menace. He reached out instead, watching the man’s odd white-and-brown eyes, trying to convey that he meant him no harm. “You are Krz qa-sza. Crestless. The hell did you do to deserve that?”

That thing looked - sticky. There were areas of blue under the muck that had dripped off it though, so Kraglin could

at least be assured that this was no manifestation of the bog he’d landed in, here to wreck its vengeance for the crash landing. At least the arrow was lowered a little, less menacing and more of a precaution, as far as he could tell.

The clicks though, didn’t register in his translator. It buzzed helplessly for a moment before silencing itself, and he reached up to tap it wearily. At least, he hoped that it just wasn’t a registered language and not that the implant had broken on impact. He couldn’t see this planet having the surgical resources to fix it, and he didn’t want to have to go to any registered port to get it redone, just to avoid being spotted.
“I can’t,” Hell, what was the advice given in basic? Hand motions. He spread one hand to show that it was unarmred, and slowly reached up, tapping his ear a little and shaking his head. “I can’t understand you. No speaky,” He tapped his throat and shook his head again. “The same wordsy.”

He was going to die here. He knew it.

The man was completely bonkers. There was no doubt about that.

Yondu had met madmen before. There was old Moghi, the ancient villager whose mind had begun to rot from age, and Jippe, the promising young hunter who’d never passed initiation after falling into a nest of Vash’ryk. He’d been driven insane from the pain of their venom. So claimed Yondu’s mother - who’d fished him out the next day. Lunatics were mostly harmless, so long as you didn’t spook them.

Replacing his bow on his back and his arrow in its quiver, Yondu took a step closer to the man sprawled over the strange, seat-like contraption in the dead star’s head. The insides of its cranium were crowded with buttons and levers and throttles. Yondu had never seen so many small shiny things, in so great an abundance. Having deemed the man not-dangerous - just a poor mad Krz-qa-sza from the villages at the mountain’s base - he set to satisfying his curiosity by poking as many as he could.

“None of that is gonna work.” Kraglin said, watching the being poke at things. This close, it was obvious that it wasn’t a child, at least - Kraglin’s sense of scale tended to be way off, given his own stature, but this one seemed to be an adult of its species. Not that he was about to flip up the loincloth and check - not supposed to have contact with non-contacted species, and here one was, poking around his ship.

He sighed and sat forward a little, gingerly letting go of his side to have both hands free in case the swamp thing wanted to attack him again.

“I’m gonna need to fix all this.” He said, more to himself then the guy being a muddy nuisance all over his bridge. “Glass needs replacing, the door needs fixing, gonna need to drain the whole flarkin thing, everything’s gonna have to dry… Gonna need fuel…. You have no idea what I’m talkin about, do you?” Great.

Yondu had no idea what the madman was talking about. So he decided to ignore him, and keep poking things.

If you thought there was only so much amusement one could get from poking unresponsive buttons, you’d be wrong. Yondu was fascinated with the various mechanisms: how some you could compress and have them spring up to meet your finger again, while others remained jammed down until you pressed the release key next to it, at which point it would pop back to its original height. The mud on his fingers was mostly dry, but he still left a motley mosaic of swamp-muck over everything he touched.

He waggled one of the levers, then spotted an interesting button above the madman’s head. The star wasn’t exactly spacious - he had to crawl over the madman’s chair to reach it, planting one hand on that weird fuzzy skull to steady himself. Not soft, he registered, fingers curling through the short-shorn hair. At least, not when you rubbed it in the wrong direction.

He wound up crouched on the thin chairback, toes gripping the plastic. The button - big and red and promising-looking - was protected by a panel made of similar material to the star’s outer bubble, only striped black and yellow. Yondu’d need his arrow to crack it, but there wasn’t enough space to draw the bow… Still, he figured, pulling it from its sheathe. He’d work something out.
“The Ryk are you doing?” Kraglin leaned back again with a flinch when the other thing crawled over him, grumbling to himself. This swamp critter was insane, obviously, and hadn’t seen anything as shiny as his ship before. Kraglin could forgive some curiosity, sure, but he didn’t need a wide view of whatever was under the loincloth. He tried to blow the fabric away a little, tilting his head to squint up at what had caught the other things interest.

“No!” Kraglin couldn’t move quick enough, not without getting that pointy thing in his eye, he guessed. He reached up, trying to bat at the being about to press the emergency eject button. Partly because he wasn’t sure it was still working, and partly because if it was, they were about to be fired out through the escape hatch and into the bog.

Why didn’t the pale man want him to touch the big pretty button? Was he trying to keep it for himself?

What an a-hole.

This star lay beyond the outskirts of the village - ergo, it was free game. Hunters took what they wanted from Anthos’ creation. Yondu was well within his rights to stake his claim on the red thing, once he’d pried it from its casing. He was going to add it to his collection - gemstones chipped from the lava-fields at the mountain’s peak, twisted knots of vine, the occasional pebble with a hole that could be threaded and worn like a necklace. If this ugly creature wanted to stop him, he was going to have to try a helluva lot harder.

He planted a foot, dirty from his bog-trekking expedition and smelly from the run through the forest that had preceded it, square on the crestless man’s face. The front flap of his loincloth hung between them, so Yondu didn’t get distracted by his contorting expression. Tongue poking from between his teeth, Yondu pressed the arrowtip against the hard glass shell and twizzled it between his palms like he was starting a fire.

“You’re going to kill us!” Kraglin squawked as best he could around the foot in his face - the urge to bite was a strong one, but the other being was armed and he was injured. Not his best footing in a fight in the world. He did the next best thing though, and twisted himself a bit to try and topple the thing climbing on him, one arm moving out to try and sign that it was bad.

What was a good danger sign?

He pointed at the button, then drew his finger across his throat. There. That should be reasonably universal. He shook his head as well, and put a suitably scared expression in place.

“Bad,” He said, hoping his tone was grave enough to carry across. “Very bad. Bad button.”

Yondu, having paused in his chiselling to flex his palm, stared at the whey-faced $Krz-qa-sza$, who was miming slitting his own throat. The implication - danger - was obvious enough. He twitched his gaze to the button, the glass over it now sporting a chip, and back to the madman.

Beyond that beaky nose, his pale eyes looked earnest. He was making his funny noises again. Chesty drones, more like a yapping animal than the clicks and whistles of civilized people. But Yondu got the impression they weren’t entirely meaningless.

He narrowed his eyes. Looked at the $Krz-qa-sza$, whose scared face was smushed under the ball of his foot. Then up to that tantalizing button.

“Buh-uh-ah’d?” he mimicked, nudging the case with the arrow. The bug-eyed expression on the madman’s face told him everything he needed to know. “Bah-ad.” His jaw rolled uncomfortably
around the word. Usually, he’d ignore all advice to if it got between him and his goal, no matter how well-intentioned. But the madman seemed so earnest - as if it wasn’t just himself he was concerned for. Yondu appraised him properly, after slotting the arrow back besides its sisters. He used his foot to turn his face from side to side, still perched on the back of his chair like a runty and mud-covered Aku-bird, and studied the stubble-pitted hollows of the madman’s cheeks, the bob of his gangly throat.

“Yer too skinny,” he muttered in his own tongue. “Ain’t no meat on you. That’s bah-ahhhd. Must be hard, for a Krz-qa-sza living alone… You’re far too tall to hunt properly. Betcha keep banging your fool furry head on things.” Despite their height, Centaurians’ crests were more useful than they were a hindrance. They could be folded to one side if a hunter needed to fit in a tight space, the bones pliant and soft. But this lanky Krz-qa-sza would only find use in the swamps as a *Yolopp’s* toothpick.

Yondu felt a little sorry for him. He couldn’t fathom what life must be like crestless, isolated from Anthos and his people. But hey - if he couldn’t take a chunk of the star to show off in the village, the *Krz-qa-sza* was the next best thing.

“Bad.” Kraglin agreed, glad that the being was backing away from the eject button. He endured his face being moved around with only a wrinkle of his impressive nose, squinting up the leg to the other one. From here he could see unspattered areas, bright blue skin gleaming back at him.

“You're weird.” He said, cheerful in the knowledge that he couldn't be understood. Then he pointed at himself, giving a small nod. “Kraglin. Krag-Lin.” Did these creatures have names? “Do you have others like you? Home?”

The madman was babbling again. Yondu smiled at him fondly. The noise was jarring, tuneless and without any sense of rhythm. Yondu kinda liked it.

“Still no clue what you’re saying,” he said, hopping off the chair. He was used to jumping out of trees, so a short drop like that didn’t register. But the noise did; that same drum-like crash he’d caused when he first knocked on the star’s outer casing. It was followed by a gurgle as the swamp claimed another inch of metal. The star was too big to sink overnight, and the canopy that cushioned it would prevent it from being swallowed completely - not until the wood rotted away, several years from now. But an inch closer to the water meant an inch closer to the *Yolopps.* “Uh. Mighty noisy, this thing. Y’know, the animals ain’t gonna be scared off forever. The sounds’ll start to attract ‘em soon. We better start a fire if you wanna survive the night, *Krz-qa-sza.*”

Technically, *Krz-qa-sza* forfeited their names when they left their villages. Whatever crime the madman had committed (heck, it might not have been a crime at all; he could have been outcast from one of the less forgiving tribes just for the color of his skin and the hair on his head) it denied him any right to protection under Anthos’ laws. But Yondu had only heard of the *Krz-qa-sza* in stories. He’d never met one in person - certainly never one so odd-looking, or dressed in so many unnecessary clothes. He needed something else to call him.

And interspersed with the madman’s grunts, hadn’t one been repeated, accompanied by a self-referential point?

“Krah,” Yondu tried. Then turned to one side to cough. Fuck, how had the *Krz-qa-sza* adapted his throat to make those animal-grunts so naturalistic? Wiping spit and mud from his underlip, he tried again. “Kuh… Kuh-rah-glyn. You stay here for tonight, understand? It’s too dangerous to guide a walking ‘eat-me’ sign like you about after dark, but I’ll lead ya to the village in the morning. Now stay. I need wood for a fire.”

And with that, he flung himself out of the star’s busted carcass and into the trees.
Well shit, it looked like they were leaving the craft. Kraglin wasn't a lizard though, and he doubted he could leap about the trees that effortlessly, even if this planet seemed to have a much weaker gravity than he'd been raised with. He sighed as he watched the narrow space the blue one had flung himself from, with the sort of weariness that comes from trying to babysit children.

“Alright,” He said, more to himself then his suddenly absent new friend. Maybe the question had been understood and he was being taken to someone with a little more sense in his head. Kraglin got up with a grumble and a stretch, tentative and aborted with a flinch.

Peering over the edge, Kraglin wrinkled his nose at the sight of the swirling uck below. He retreated and made quick work of his uniform jacket, tucking it under the dash for safe keeping. This left him in just the navy pants and an undershirt; still not ideal.

He jumped down anyway.

The splosh made Yondu tense - as did the sudden snap of sensation in his crest. It was as if a circuit long-broken had just been completed.

Oh.

As soon as the madman’s feet hit the mud - and sank a good six inches into it, to his vocal disgust - Yondu’s senses were overpowered with certainty. This man, this Krah-glyn... He did not belong. It was as if he’d crawled from the deepest darkest parts of the swamp, where the insects grew to over a foot in length and the light never percolated, even on days when the suns blazed brightly side by side. Even in that scenario though, Yondu’s crest wouldn’t produce so much feedback. Anthos’ body and all things born of him were joined by his celestial energy, the force of life itself. Krah-glyn looked like a Centaurian - a pale, tall, and crestless Centaurian, but a Centaurian nonetheless. However, the likeness was only superficial. Every instinct Yondu owned was raving about how Krah-glyn was impossibly, ineffably different.

Every saturated twig he broke as he flailed about in the swamp, every squelch and suck of the thick black ooze, all reported the same thing.

Krah-glyn was not from around here.

Yondu’s working theory - that Krah-glyn was from the plains-villages, and had been wondering aimlessly through the forest since his banishment only to be eaten by the star before it died - seemed suddenly redundant.

Krah-glyn was not star-food. Krah-glyn was the star itself.

By Anthos. Dad was gonna have a fit.

...But Krah-glyn was also going to get himself eaten if he followed him. Yondu, already halfway into the canopy, mud-smeared blue body invisible against the shifting leaves, spared a moment to sigh. Then he crawled down the tree vertically, fingers and toes locating every tiny crack in the bark with the ease of long-practice. “You stay,” he said, dropping upside-down with his knees locked over a branch. “I’m just going for dry wood. Follow me, and…” Taking a cue from Krah-glyn’s earlier display, he drew one finger sharply across his throat.

Right. Well that made a little more sense. Kraglin dithered a bit, torn between wanting to shake all the mud off his feet and legs - a futile attempt, give the surroundings unless he was able to awaken a previously unknown ability to levitate - and crawling back up into his ship to die. Everything in his body rebelled against the wetness of the mud, it triggering some sort of spirit memory of miners who...
died, choking on it as their tunnels filled and filled.

“I gotta wait here?” he pointed to himself, then the ground - then in retrospect, at a patch of firmer looking ground, drier and easier to stand on. “I'll wait there.”

He mimed walking to the dry area, and then bent the legs of the little man as he spoke; pointing to the ship and shaking his head.

“I gotta sit. Too hurt to climb, so gonna sit over there. On that rock.” He pointed, giving a questioning nod.

The last thing he wanted was this man-shaped Bettel Fish to get mad at him for sitting on a sacred rock.

Yondu nodded, hoping he’d understood and that Krah-glyn planned on waiting rather than flaunting his ridiculously tall and bony body about the forest like raw sausages dangled on a string.

White skin; honestly. The man had zero camouflage.

Ideally, Yondu’d push Krah-glyn back into his star and lash him to his chair, just to make sure that he didn’t go roaming and turn to aku-chow before Yondu could drag him before his father and demand that the old a-hole acknowledge what Yondu had always known. There was life out there, beyond the rain-clouds that fogged their world’s humid skies. And it was time the Zatoan recognized it.

But Krah-glyn was walking funny, arms pinched into his sides. He was breathing hard, not from exertion but from what looked very much like pain.

Injured then, as well as helpless and all-too visible. Yondu would have to deal with that in due course. He knew basic medicine; when you were trapped alone with a miswhistled arrow through your ankle several miles from home, knowing which herbs kept wounds fresh and which made them blacken and spread meant the difference between life and death. For now though, fire was more important. Krah-glyn boasted little edible meat, but hungry forest creatures wouldn’t let that stop them. They’d crack his bones and feast on the marrow. Yondu needed to hurry.

For firewood, he was going to have to climb through the shrub layer, into the tangled undercanopy and above, away from the root-rot and the mould and the clinging damp of the swamp. It wouldn’t take him fifteen minutes to gather dry kindling. After that, so long as they kept it hot and didn’t mind the smoke, they could use damper wood from the forest floor. Yondu just prayed Krah-glyn would still be perched on his rock when he returned.

Left alone in the still, chirping swamp, Kraglin had little choice but to deal with things himself. He managed to get himself over to the island of solid land without too much difficulty, though his boots had surely seen better days by the point he got there. He sat himself on the rock for all of five minutes before he could gather himself a little more, and try to get things sorted.

He was not, after all, helpless.

Kraglin shifted a bit until he was able to strip off the now-damp undershirt, his movements careful and measured, ears alert for any noises while the fabric was over his head. Then he twisted, turning to try and see the extent of the damage. He gave a low whistle when he saw them - thick, black-purple lines already appearing to the skin around his spine, wrapping their way around his side and curling jaggedly over his hip. By the look of them, he guessed he had slid out of the compartment and solidly against every chair on the bridge - it had been some small miracle he hadn’t broken a
bone on his way around, like an arm. Or a neck. Still, knowing the damage made it a little easier to bear, even if his ribs and side protested whenever he did anything like breathing.

The darkness of the little clearing made his skin prickle - he could see a little way into the depths, used to the dark, but the shapes were entirely unknown to him. Although they had done a few days training in the ‘wilds’ for the Corps, there had been nothing like this strange emptiness. Out there, there had at least been the roar of engines ever present, company, the knowledge that it wasn’t real and you were going to be heading back to camp to have a few spoonfuls of greasy stew. This was the Wilds, and all that word entailed, something entirely untouched by someone like Kraglin. Never mind the fact that he flew here, the idea of greenery felt so different to him that he hardly knew where to look. Torn between wonder, apprehension and general malaise, Kraglin leaned back against the rock where he’d slid down to sit on the floor, tipping his head back to look up at the trees.

Gorgeous, really. He could appreciate that for now. A few days without a holopad might drive him a little batty, but he could deal with that in due course. For now, he had to catalogue what needed fixing for his ship - and remaining optimistic that anything could be fixed at all. While this place was pretty, he wasn’t sure he wanted to go native and die out here.

A noise past his general circle of awareness made him lift his head, mouth opening a little in a silent snarl - older now than he had been on his own planet, the second row of teeth slid smoothly out behind the first, almost painless save for a tickling prickle along his jaw.

Yondu swung himself up into the boughs, hauling his bodyweight from tree to tree and leaping between the branches with an agility that belied the strength behind every motion. The moisture from the mid-afternoon rains had trickled through the top layers of thick foliage, and the swamp permeated from the bottom up. But between these two spreading layers of moisture there was the mid-forest, where the twigs were dry and brittle and snapped in bundles.

He collected five bushels, stuffing them into his quiver so he had free hands to climb. This was about haste, not care - he was sure Anthos wouldn’t hold the thin branches he snapped by accident against him. As soon as he had enough to feed a small fire, stuffing a few extra handfuls into the waistband of his loincloth in case they let the darn thing blow out during the night, he began his downwards passage.

He hadn’t been so long. Barely ten minutes, in the end. Surely Krah-glyn couldn’t have gotten into too much trouble in that time.

The shape started to resolve itself into something low to the ground, coming up to his thigh at best. It had long, thin limbs and a pointed face, large ears pressed back to try and make itself smaller. Kraglin watched it skitter from edge to the other, getting clearer as it came closer. Skinny, with dark fur that seemed to be dripping more swamp water, and large eyes to catch every scrap of light it could in the underbrush.

And it looked hungry.

Kraglin shifted a bit, drawing his feet up under him until they found purchase on the soggy ground. If the animal thought he was small just because he was sitting down, it was in for a horrible surprise. Sure enough, he saw it creep closer to the edge of his vision, just to the point where he didn’t have to strain to see it in the murky depth. It crouched, tensed, and shifted its weight from side to side. Kraglin found he was doing the same, bringing his shoulders up to protect his neck for the jump.

When the animal pounced, he pushed up. Lower gravity, he reminded himself, one arm swinging up to grapple the surprised beast, who now found its target far higher than expected. It had claws, and Kraglin gave a seething snarl of fury as they raked through his chest. He pulled the animal in tight,
keeping some of the limbs pinned and its struggles minimised, feeling wet, hot fur press and drip against him. It stank, it was going to taste disgusting.

He felt teeth score his shoulder, seeking his neck. Kraglin tightened his grip and ducked his head, teeth flashing out to snap messily at the animal, coming back with fur and skin and chunks, the animals cries turning angry and wounded, little yelps at the end of its growls. He knew he struck true when the flesh yielded easily under his jaw, no bone to stop him. Kraglin drove forward, eyes shut against the sting of swamp water in his eyes, until he felt the subtle ‘pop’ of an artery, pulling back swiftly to avoid drowning on blood.

Yondu had, as the village shamans liked to say, a bad feeling about this. First there was the growl - never a good sign. Then the crunch of bodies through ferns, then the splash, and then, at last, the yips and squeals of a taabshqa living it’s last. Taabshqa were nasty things; skulking pests that hounded the hunters and stole their kills, and occasionally dragged a lagging warrior into the brush, never to be seen again. And Yondu knew from experience that they travelled in pairs. Whatever had taken them down was going to be big, nasty, and dangerous.

He only hoped he’d find Krah-glyn alive. He didn’t have any great expectations. The forest was harsh on the inexperienced, and Krah-glyn, with his otherworldly biosignature, was the very epitome of the word. It would be a shame. A live star was better proof than a dead one.

Arrow already notched, he hastened down the tree, jumping lightly from branch to branch. He surveyed the clearing. There was one taabshqa: throat torn out, haemorrhaging dark blue blood into brackish water. The poor lighting made its body difficult to spot - by morning, it would’ve sunk so deep that it’d be indistinguishable from the bog.

One taabshqa down, one to go. But where was Krah-glyn?

Chewing sounds from below. The rock where he’d left Krah-glyn was obscured from Yondu’s sight, the branches between them weighed low with verdant leaves. Whatever had bitten out the taabshqa’s jugular, it was still there. As for what that meant for Krah-glyn... Grimly, eyes skating the slimy reeds for any sign of the second taabshqa, Yondu swung onto a lower branch, arrow trained on where he’d left his star-man to the swamp’s mercy.

He was ready. He had seen the death of friends and family many times over. Few Centaurians survived to adulthood, and fewer still their first hunt. Krah-glyn’s innards would be no more nauseating than those of any other species, regardless of whether they were pink or blue.

Which was why when he saw his star-man with blood and mud coating his face like bitumen, Yondu’s first thought was that Krah-glyn was past saving. But then he moved. His head swung around, eyes shockingly white amid the splattered blue-brown. And Yondu saw that the blueness concentrated around his mouth, staining his lips brighter than if he’d been eating berries. Raw flesh stuck between his teeth. Yondu’s heart, pumping steadily in preparation for the adrenaline rush of being accosted by an angry, mateless taabshqa, revved into a higher gear.

This was no junior woodsman who required constant protection. This was a predator. Out of his element, maybe, but a predator regardless.

Kraglin had coughed when he threw the jackal-like body to the swamps, figuring it could feed some other poor, hapless creature - that was how ecosystems worked, right? The gashes in his skin burned, the swamp water and mud doing them no favours. If he wasn’t going to get eaten, there was going to be some foul infection setting in that would take him out within a solar rotation. Just what he needed - he had all his vaccinations, sure, but this didn’t seem somewhere that would be on the list of covered planets.
The second furry body barreling into him was a surprise that shocked a few curses out of him. He felt teeth scoring his shoulder, deepening the wounds from before and he half-roared, fingers digging in hard to the animal's body and trying to pull, one hand hitting at him. It was harder to get an aim like this, and his teeth caught ears and the side of the animal's muzzle before he caught under the jaw. He dug his teeth in, shut his eyes and jerked his head back, feeling bone resist before he pushed the animal hard, one knee coming up to help with the leverage. The hollow, squealing noise when the animal was flung away and the jaw stayed in his bite was more satisfying than he wanted to admit, but he spat it away. The odd, bony animal staggered around, backwards before its legs buckled, chest heaving.

Kraglin heard movement behind him and turned, teeth bared in case it was another— but no. Just the swamp person with his bow out and oh, god, Kraglin felt the bottom of his stomach drop out. He'd probably just eaten a family pet.

That answered his question about where the second *taabshaqa* had gone. Yondu made sense of the tableau before him— one *taabshaqa* dead, the other disabled and as-good-as, either from infection, starvation, or the star-man himself if he decided he was hungry. Krah-glyn certainly looked like he could do with putting both *taabshaqa* away. But there was better meat to be found in the forest: juicier, less bitter, less tight to the bones. Yondu would hunt it for him. Yondu would hunt all of it for him. But maybe he'd let Krah-glyn kill it - if only so he could see his blood-smeared face again.

He drew his bow. Krah-glyn flinched, which was odd— but of course, Yondu was pointing it directly at him. Didn't they have whistle-guided arrows, among the stars? There was no way to ask. He fired, and spun the arrow back on itself to cut off the jawless *taabshaqa*'s keens with a single piercing note. Then and only then, once Anthos had been appeased, did he allow himself to approach Krah-glyn.

There was something curious stirring inside him; something Yondu had felt before but never put a name to. He recalled the nights when he used to run with his mother's warband, sleeping piled on a branch with fellow huntsmen, sharing quiet forbidden touches in the dark... But thoughts like those were dangerous. Especially when they involved a lanky star-walker - a male, at that. Yondu could only imagine what the chief would do, were he to discover what filled his son's head as he wrestled *aku* alongside the fiercest men and women in his village. Or apparently, when he watched a hairy star-man spit out the *taabshaqa*'s jawbone, splintered ends bearing the imprint of multiple rows of teeth.

The blood was thick on Krah-glyn’s cheeks and chest, coating his fuzz like warpaint. Yondu could smell it from paces away, heady against the background odors of mildew and creeping rot. Screw the *teku*-root, he thought, stalking forwards to examine Krah-glyn for injuries. This right here was all the high that Yondu would ever need.

Kraglin did his best not to yelp when the arrow was loosed, but the sudden squeal from the angry dog was enough to let him know what had happened. Letting the poor thing bleed out or rot to death would have been cruel, he could appreciate that; besides, he hadn't wanted to go over and get another mouthful of stinking fur and bitter blood. He spat absently, hoping there was some clearer water elsewhere, or that at the very least, this animal wasn't toxic to bite on. The rush dying off, he could feel the scratches and bites now, and he put a hand up to cover the worst-feeling of them.

“Hey, woah,” Kraglin took a wobbling step back when the other one approached, but couldn’t move fast enough to escape. He didn’t seem to be trying to hurt him - just checking the wounds? He
relaxed a little, hissing when he felt the wounds pull when he rolled his shoulders. He could feel the ache in his jaw that meant the second row was slowly retracting, and he had to open and shut his mouth a few times to get the feeling to pass.

“So, you think I’ll make it, doc?”

Yondu grunted in answer to Krah-glyn’s blather, skating over puffy bitemarks and older bruising. Krah-glyn had removed his outer layer at some point - it lay crumpled a little way off. Yondu supposed it was easier to clothe your top half when you didn’t boast a foot-high crest. Crouching, he poked the long - very, very long - fabric sleeves that covered Krah-glyn’s legs. He couldn’t check him over properly if he couldn’t see all of him. Ideally, he’d strip him down and treat him to a thorough inspection - and if another part of Yondu’s mind jigged at that thought, it was just coincidence.

But the pants hadn’t been sliced in the scuffle. That meant that the flesh beneath was intact. And, when Yondu gave them a cheeky tug just in case, they didn’t budge - held up by the odd contraption around Krah-glyn’s waist. Yondu comforted himself with squeezing Krah-glyn’s bony ankles through his boots, assuring that they weren’t twisted or broken. The star-man seemed unsteady on his feet, and Yondu had seen enough hunters die from infected leg-wounds to know that all injuries were equally dangerous when you were far from the clean mineral springs that bubbled out of the mountain’s peak. Krah-glyn should be able to walk, at least. Climbing was out, given the claw marks on his shoulders. But, standing to check them - and hissing a little, impressed that his star-man had fought so fiercely while wounded - Yondu knew at a glance that they wouldn’t cause serious damage, so long as he washed them tomorrow.

...Assuming, of course, that star-people had comparable immune systems. But Yondu didn’t like to consider that a predator like this one could pass from something so ignoble as a fever. He’d take him to the springs in the morning, and gather enough bark and leaves to make a poultice along the way. After that, survival was up to Krah-glyn.

“I guess that’s a yes.” Kraglin nodded when the other stood, sighing a bit. He hauled himself to his feet as well, shoving his hands into his pockets with a weary look around. He stung horribly, he knew that much, but he didn’t want to risk rinsing things off in this water. He’d just have to wait - there had to be somewhere else this swamp person lived, somewhere a bit cleaner.

“So what’s the plan here, blue man?” He asked, giving him a once over. Hell, he didn’t even know his name. He paused, then pointed at himself. “Kraglin. You?” He pointed at his new buddy, hoping the question translated over.

Why was he telling him his name again? “Krah-glyn,” Yondu repeated, just to show he could. He almost managed to say it without coughing. Then it clicked that perhaps the star-man wanted to know what to call him in return. Meeting new people who weren’t vying for your hunting grounds (and who thus needed to be shortened by a head) was rare. Yondu had known everyone in the village since they were chirping in the pouch, or they’d known him for the same. There simply wasn’t any need for introductions.

But this was different. Yondu was an ambassador not just for his village, but for his entire race - for all of Anthos’s creation. He drew himself up. It didn’t bring him much closer to Krah-glyn’s eye level, but it was the effort that counted.

“I am Yondu,” he said proudly. His name was a syllable of sound followed by a short nasal click and a longer, throatier one, like the sound frogs made in the Season. “Son of the Zatoan, clan Udonta, next-in-line to be chief. Now, get back in the ship so I can build a fire at the entrance. It’s too dangerous to travel at night.” It occurred to him that that might be too many words for Krah-glyn to
identify his name among them, so he banged his chest, saying it again and again. “Yondu. Yondu.”

….Now to see if the star-man could pronounce it.

If that was the name, that was a ton of a mouthful and Kraglin was going to have to shorten it immensely. Kraglin looked totally bemused by the little song the man seemed to be proudly singing him. The last two sounds though, seemed to be emphasized - that must be it, right?

“You’re gonna need to give me a moment with that one, right?” Kraglin took a deep breath and tried with the first sound, then the rest, stringing them together in something he could work with. “Yondu? Is that right?” The other being had tried so hard with his own name, he was putting in his own effort as well. “Yon-du?”

It took a moment for it to register that the noise Krah-glyn made was supposed to be his name, not a sneeze. Then Yondu laughed so hard his guts ached.

Poor Krah-glyn. He was trying so hard. His big nose had scrunched up, and his mouth was tight and white and pursed, and his big fluffy brows looked so heavy they were in danger of crushing the eyes beneath. But Yondu’d heard pouchlings chirp with more clarity. The force of Kraglin’s clicks sounded like he was calling a horse-mount.

“Yondu,” Yondu said again, once he could stand upright without wheezing. “Yondu and Krah-glyn, Krah-glyn and Yondu.” His pointer finger accompanied the words, swinging between their muddy bare chests. “Now come help with the fire, Krah-glyn, or I leave ya here to be yolopp-chow.”

Kraglin grinned sheepishly when Yondu seemed to find his attempts funny - okay, sure it hadn’t been absolutely perfect but he hadn’t thought it was that bad. At least he hadn’t seemed to say anything offensive, which had been the case on Alberon, so that was fine. Yondu seemed to be saying something else, but he had no idea what it was, so he just chuckled a little.

“Whatever you say, Yon-du.” He teased a little, giving the other man a little grin. “Whats the plan? You’re gonna have to point.”

Seeing the smile split the gore and muck on Krah-glyn’s face would be pleasant, if they were lit by more than glowing algae. Yondu wondered how he could convey what he needed from his newfound assistant. Then snapping his fingers he dug into his quiver, depositing a bundle of dry twigs and a flatter, plank-like piece of wood in Krah-glyn’s hand.

“You start the fire, I’ll fetch bigger logs for when it’s hot,” he said, illustrating with a point at Kraglin, a point at the twigs, a point to himself, and a mime of walking - two fingers marching along Krah-glyn’s outstretched arm. The cuts on his torso weren’t especially deep, but it would still be better if Krah-glyn stressed them as little as possible. Yondu wasn’t cruel enough to make him lug logs in his condition - at least, not unless he really annoyed him. And well, fire-making was one of the first things Centaurian children learned. It was what separated them from beasts. A star-man from a race so advanced that they could fly through the sky like aku - or crash-land in Yondu’s swamp, for that matter - shouldn’t have any trouble.

“Thanks.” Kraglin looked at the bundles in his hand with a bemused, but almost fond expression. Was this a gift? Kraglin was reminded with a small bolt of nervousness, of one Corps mate who had happily accepted a gift of something on a planet they were training on - only to discover he was now the bride of the butcher on that land. He looked between Yondu and the twigs with some alarm before he noticed more things were being signed to him.

He paid attention to the mimes that were happening, piecing things together. The sticks were for him,
Yondu was going to - walk closer to him? No, just walk, his arm was just a useful pathway. He frowned for a brief moment, looking at the sticks again. Probably not a wedding present.

Oh, right.

“Fire?” Kraglin put his hand behind the sticks using his fingers to signal flames. Just to be sure - he didn’t need anything being done wrong where he was here, alone and wounded. “I can. Probably do that.” He nodded.

Yondu’s crest wasn’t designed for empathy with higher life-forms. He took Krah-glyn’s acceptance of the twigs at face value, clapping him cheerfully on the shoulder. “Great. Try not to get almost-eaten this time. Or…” His gaze skated to the dead taabshqa, their fur slick with slime and pondweed. “At least catch us something tastier.”

There were logs aplenty, scattered all along the scorched tunnel that had been hollowed out by Krah-glyn’s falling star. Some were still smoking. Yondu bounded to the far side of the clearing, hopping between the less-squelchy patches of earth and swinging from vines and creepers where the mud was too deep to traverse. A part of him wanted to keep Krah-glyn under surveillance so he could shoot the next varmint that tried to eat him. Krah-glyn would see him in his prime, as a hunter-warrior of the Zatoan. Then he’d discover if those odd little shooting sparks in his belly, the ones that had popped and fizzed when he first saw Kraglin’s gore-daubed face, went both ways.

A larger part wanted to practice saying Krah-glyn’s name. If ‘Yondu’ sounded so ridiculous coming out of his mouth, the same probably applied in return. Yondu was never one to care much about what people thought of him, but… Well, this was his star-man. He wanted to get this right.

“Krah-glyn,” he muttered under his breath, assured he was out of earshot. He stooped to extract a severed branch from a patch of cracked earth, the mud having dried from the heat of the star’s blazing entry. His throat hurt, but it wasn’t severe enough to make him reconsider. No, by the time Yondu returned with his load, he was going to be saying Krah-glyn’s name like he’d been doing it all his life. “Krah-glyn, Kuh-rah-glyn. Krag-lyn. Kraglin.”

Kraglin watched him lope off again before he looked down to the bundle in his arms. Right. He’d been through basic just like any other bold, upstanding and disciplined member of the Nova Corps. Except, of course, his enlistment had involved a judge and a court order, so he had been treated to Basic Lite, which was the bare minimum to make sure you didn’t get yourself killed, but if you did it wasn’t too much of a loss and would be put down as being stupid or not obeying orders. Kraglin had gone into it with no real illusions about coming out the other end of his service with all his limbs or his pulse intact, which had been part of the motivation behind his escape.

As ill planned as his escape had been, he reasoned as he plopped himself down on a reasonably dry patch of ground away from the water’s edge, at least if he died here it was under his own free will. There was a lot to be said for that sort of freedom.

Right. Sticks. He’d read this pamphlet. He vaguely recalled he and his troop asked various, utterly innocent, questions about correct hand motions, how to rub, how long to rub, what happens if you rub too hard, rubbing too fast and at that point there was something in his memory about being kicked out of the class with the strict instructions to come back when they got a handle on themselves. Which had been the wrong choice of words entirely.

These sticks looked good, in his inexpert opinion. Very good, fine sticks. Probably had leaves at one point. He snapped one, just out of curiosity, and yup - dry all the way through. Great. He fussed with the pile a little bit, reminded himself that Yondu was coming back and that if he was going to be making a total idiot of himself, he should probably get that over with before he returned.
So. Stick, dip, leaves - rub. He recalled it would probably take a little bit of time, so wasn’t too worried when nothing seemed to happen right away. He had this. Probably. And if not, then at least he had demonstrated that he knew the idea of it and was trying his damned best.

He sped up, frowning down at it and doing his best to ignore the little spikes in his shoulders at the more involved motions. This was fine. He could do this. Maybe the ground was too wet? Wasn’t he meant to blow on it? He hunkered down a little more and puffed on it hopefully, trying his best to spot the smoke in the gloom.

To be fair on the star-man, a piece of dry wood and some tinder didn’t go all that far towards creating fire. But Yondu was used to walking the swamps with initiated hunters, who never left their huts without a bow, several arrows, and preferably a knife or three as well - invaluable when it came to firestarting. But he’d kinda assumed the guy would find some rocks to clash over the twigs Yondu had so kindly sourced for him. Or… or something. This - Kraglin’s back hunched as he tried futilely to get enough friction to make the thin sticks catch alight - was hilarious.

Yondu let him know this, as loudly as he could without bringing a herd of Vash’ryk down on them. He was still sniggering as he dropped the logs on the dryish patch Kraglin had claimed, poking the star-man’s cloth-clad thigh with his toe. “Why in Anthos’ name are ya doing that? Idjit. Look. Here -”

Kneeling, he prised Kraglin’s hands from the sticks, cradling them between his own. He was surprised to find the star-man hadn’t given himself blisters. Kraglin was more robust than he looked. From a distance, you only noticed the gaunt form and the gawky, graceless limbs. But up close…

Yondu could smell taaabshqa blood again. He forced his breathing to slow, even as the contact between him and Kraglin made his skin tingle, and turned Kraglin’s hand over to give him something else to concentrate on. Kraglin’s palms were encrusted with callouses. He didn’t have to worry about rubbing them raw, but this would still be easier with a bow. Yondu, effortless as any future chief, took over.

“Hold this here…” He laid the flatter plank between them horizontally, squatting opposite Kraglin. After a moment’s thought he scooped up the trailing ends of his loincloth and tucked them into his waistband - not that they weren’t already filthy, but the more mud you caked onto the fabric, the harder it was to scrub off. Then he snapped a longer, sturdier stick from his own collection and stood it atop the base, so it pronged up perpendicular. Once he’d determined which part of the bottom stick was flattest, he used an arrowhead to scrape a divot into which the top one could be inserted. Then tutted at the dry hole. “Uh. Needs something slippery. Lubricant. Once they turn together a bit smoother, like this…” He demonstrated, twizzling the long stick around in its hole. “Then I can just saw at it with the bow, and - whoof!” He threw up his hands, sticks clattering apart. “Fire!”

Kraglin tried not to grumble as Yondu came back and started laughing, though the tops of his ears flushed bright red. He’d been doing his best, hadn’t he? And now the blue one was babbling at him and laughing and ugh, he tried. He didn’t fight it when Yondu decided to grab his hands, letting him turn them over and over with a soft hum of curiosity. It had been obvious enough from the weaponry and the ease of movement around the swamp that Yondu was a hunter, and finding him (giant gash in the planet notwithstanding) must have taken some skills as a tracker. So it was no surprise his hands were rough, and Kraglin had the vague suspicion that he wasn’t as young as he’d previously thought.

He hummed a little as he listened to the chirping, just tilting his head a bit to try and catch the rhythm of whatever it was Yondu was saying. Instructions, probably, not just calling him an idiot. This was backed up when Yondu started to make mimes with the sticks, clearly explaining it. Might have been
easier if he had understood what was being said.

“I did that.” He said, his tone bemused and teasing, miming rubbing his hands together even as he laughed at himself a bit. “What bit did I miss?”

This language barrier thing was going to be a major issue, he could see it coming. Which - wasn’t all he could see. Kraglin yelped when he let himself focus beyond the sticks and Yondus hands to the not-a-lot he was now wearing.

“Oh wow,” He laughed a little, looking up to the sky, one hand held out a little to shield his view. “Okay, sure buddy, I don’t need that bit to start a fire.”

“I’ll grab some leaves, pound ‘em up, put the gunge in here to make it twizzle easier…”

Yondu tipped his head to one side when he realized his impromptu lesson was being ignored. Kraglin wasn’t even looking at him. Instead, he was gazing up at the broken canopy. Was he thinking of home, wherever that was? Well, boo-hoo. So what if he was lost and lonely; Yondu was talking; he expected Kraglin to listen.

But before he could start flicking mud at him in retaliation, Yondu noticed the placement of Kraglin’s hand. The very precise placement. Almost as if he was trying to cover…

Oh.

Was his star-man shy?

Zatoan didn’t have much of a concept of prudeness, except when it came to the strict laws surrounding their Mating Season. But it was still generally accepted that certain parts of the body were not for public viewing - except under special circumstances, like when a fellow hunter dropped a scorpion down the back of your loincloth for a prank. But Yondu supposed social mores might be different for a man who swaddled the entirety of his legs and his feet in fabric. (And what ridiculous contraptions those foot-covers were. Flat soled-and stiff - how was Kraglin supposed to climb?)

Grin splitting wider by the second, Yondu hoisted his loincloth higher still. He bundled the grubby red fabric around and around the waistband, tucking the back flap up and to one side. Then, after a languid stretch just because he could, he stood, turned around, and sauntered to the nearest tree.

He had to jump to reach the lowest branches, and several times to collect enough leaves to crush. But it was worth it, for the expression on Kraglin’s face.

Kraglin had been in what could charitably be called Space Army - it wasn’t that he was a stranger to seeing all manners of weirdly coloured flesh on display. He had learned more about off-world genitals then he’d previously thought he’d ever needed to know - and thank you, Private Domoran, for that educational seminar on specialised testicles, though he hadn’t been sure he needed the hip-thrusting to be part of the lecture. But he hadn’t exactly expected a blue man to be waggling himself around like that, so yes, it had surprised him.

That didn’t mean he couldn’t tell when he was being made fun of. And yes, he could also tell it was pretty funny. He snorted with laughter when he watched Yondu leaping about, legs and everything akimbo in his efforts to reach something that Kraglin suspected he could very easily climb to get.

“Yeah, alright,” He called, his tone amused if tired. “I get it. You’re proud of your blue bits, I’m real happy for you. Put em away or everyone will want a bite of em.” Honestly, having them flapping about like that just seemed like it was inviting disaster, at least to a man who grew up around various forms of crushing machinery. Kraglin leaned forward to pick up the sticks again, poking them about
with a small grin in place, shaking his head a bit.

Honestly, some planets.

Yondu returned with a swagger, leaves held triumphantly aloft. Had he been able to understand what Kraglin was saying, he’d have told him that back in the days when a ritualistic Za’gah sacrifice was carried out for every minor infraction, the dicks of great warriors were quite the delicacy.

He plopped down besides the sorry beginnings of their fire. The leaves went into his mouth one after the other, crushed between his molars before being spat onto the indented log. He was a little disappointed that Kraglin hadn’t been more shocked - the village elders were much more fun to tease. Sometimes when you dropped out of a tree starkers in front of them, they actually screamed and fell over. Yondu had yet to give old Aja a heart attack - but it was only a matter of time.

Swinging his bow off his back, Yondu snapped his fingers for Kraglin’s attention, pointing imperiously at the sticks. No more star-gazing. Kraglin had to learn, if he wanted to survive. Setting tall stick on flat one, he slotted the end of the former into the latter’s groove. Then, hooking his bowstring around it and applying downwards pressure with one palm on the top, he began to saw in a rapid side-to-side motion that got the stick spinning far faster and smoother than it would do by hand. It was still hard work; Yondu’s shoulders bunched from the repetitive pull. But he was an initiated hunter, trained in the ways of the bow. This was just another use for them, one all Centaurians were expected to master.

There was no rest once the tinder took. The thin string of smoke wound between them, and Yondu scanned for the rest of the small kindling twigs. Realizing he’d given them to Kraglin, he gave him a demanding shove with his foot. “Hurry up! Give ‘em here - if we gotta start over, you’re doing it solo.”

Maybe Kraglin had been distracted. He paid attention to the way Yondu moved the sticks around, making a mental note of the bow - he wasn’t entirely stupid, after all, and he was figuring a way to make his own, smaller version for merely lighting fires. If he’d picked a stocked, working ship instead of the broken-down piece of junk he’d fled on, there might even have been some shock-sticks to use to light fires. That would have made Yondu happy, he was sure of it.

Filing away that idea to work on later - since he had no illusions about a speedy exit from this planet - he let himself watch Yondu. The mud wasn’t exactly becoming, and the dim light did nothing for his colouring. But that fin was incredible; he’d only met a few others who had something vaguely similar, though theirs were bonier, more spikes than this ray of red. He knew what he was doing, and Kraglin wondered how far along his civilisation was. Not to space travelling, that was obvious, but it didn’t look like they had anything in the way of power sources either, if this was Yondus go-to for fire.

That arrow though.. Had his eyes tricked him when he saw it move against the wind?

Kraglin put his chin in his hand as he watched the muscles in Yondus arms and shoulders, absently nibbling the edge of his lip as he drifted a bit to the sound of the others words. They were an interesting language, totally devoid of anything his translator could pick up. It had been silent since the first helpless buzz, which meant it hadn’t even found anything in the deep archives to attach it to, so he was stuck with miming.

At least watching him work wasn’t a bad view. He blinked and jumped a little when he was kicked though, understanding the general demand quickly. He offered the bundles of sticks with a grin and nod, wanting to show he was willing to learn and help.
“Thanks.”

Yondu accepted the bundle and fed it to the embers piece by piece. The hard bit was over. Now they just had to keep the fire fuelled and sheltered. The last one shouldn’t be difficult; Kraglin’s descent had shredded the trees, but there was more than enough cover here at the edge of the clearing, with the star behind them and the trees above.

Once they had a small blaze going, Yondu nudged a few twigs to Kraglin, motioning that he copy him. Teaching was fun. And it gave him an excuse to boss Kraglin around; flicking his knuckles when they came too close to the flames.

“Don’t wanna burn yourself on top of everything,” he said. “I’ll be covering you head to toe in Aja’s poultice at this rate. And ya don’t want that. Trust me, that stuff stinks.”

He stayed where he was; squatting close to the growing, crackling heat, nurturing it until the flames leapt high enough to claim one of his damper logs rather than being snuffed by it. When that was popping nicely, bark peeling from its outside and glowing red-hot within, he finally deemed that it wasn’t going to go out the moment he stopped watching it and let himself flop onto his back besides Kraglin. He folded his crest to one side, spread starfish-style over their rock, and generally took up as much space as possible. The air above the fire was shimmery with heat haze and his eyeballs were itchy from dryness and smoke, but Yondu felt the pleasant thrum of satisfaction that came from a job well done.

“You should get some rest,” he said, patting Kraglin on the nearest thigh. The man was all joint; his knee was liable to stab Yondu if he rolled in the night. “I’ll keep watch. We got a long way to go come first-light.”

“Hmmn?” Kraglin shifted a little to give Yondu some room, realised that was a poor idea and just sighed, settling with his back against it. There was no hope of him being comfortable tonight - with an aching back, cuts on his front and shoulders, there was no position he’d be able to put himself in to be comfortable. The best he’d be able to do was distract himself. Tipping his head back against the rock he shut his eyes for a moment or two, enjoying the warmth and vague company.

When he opened them, he was treated to a view of the sky, given that he’d accidentally shorn away a chunk of the covering. He hummed a little, tracing little lines between the stars before he raised a hand, pointing at one. Trying to get the reference for them from the opposite direction was difficult and prone to minor errors, but he new a good few clusters off by heart.

“Came from there. Well. That direction.” He paused, glancing over to make sure Yondu was paying attention, then tapped his own chest. “Me. From those ones.” He made a little circle around the cluster, fairly certain it was the correct one.

The snapping of the fire was pleasant, bordering soporific. The side of Yondu’s body that was closest to it had already reached that state of baked warmth where he’d either have to roll or cook. It was tempting to fall asleep in Kraglin’s stead, as he seemed more inclined to studying the stars. But Yondu was a star-enthusiast too. Who better to share that with than a star itself: the living incarnation of those tiny speckles of white and gold that burnt in the blackness a thousand thousand miles away?

Yondu sat, scooting along the rock until he was crammed against Kraglin. He looked up the length of his outstretched arm. Kraglin had isolated a small group of stars, not especially bright nor especially high. It wouldn’t be long before the smoke from their fire obscured them completely. But for now, they were visible - tiny chits of light, like the glass fragments that had exploded from the front pane of Kraglin’s pod, several of which were lodged in Yondu’s arm like grit in the grazes you got when you fell out of a tree.
Yondu counted the stars. He discovered, to his surprise, that there were just as many as there had been the night before, when he’d climbed one of the trees at the village edge to make his usual survey before bedtime.

“Which one were you?” he asked.

Kraglin’s star looked big up close, and its lights were certainly bright enough to pierce the night-time gloom. But perhaps Kraglin was still young, as stars went? It would explain why no stars seemed to be missing from the glowing tapestry that Anthos had strung through their sky, even though one sat next to him in the flesh, long and bony and uncomfortable to lean on, but (as Yondu was discovering) pleasantly tickly, with all that extraneous hair.

“Hmn?” Well, the question didn’t translate over. Yondu felt chilly though, and Kraglin did his best not to shiver at the idea of how cold a loincloth must be. Kraglin tilted his head a bit to see Yondu, trying to figure out what had been asked. Maybe his mime hadn’t been clear enough, so he pointed at himself again, then those stars.

Then he curled his hand until only his pinky and thumb were out and moved it in a slow sweep, side to side, and pointed at his ship, then repeated the motion. Himself. Stars, moving motion of his ship.

“I flew from those.”

Yondu’s jaw cracked around a yawn. Could Kraglin please stop moving? His shoulder was a bad enough pillow as-is. But, unless he was squirming about for the sole purpose of pissing Yondu off, he was trying to illustrate something - another concept that their differing languages made nigh impossible to grasp. Yondu squinted at Kraglin’s fingers, long and pointy like those of the village musicians, backlit by the rich amber glow.

Point to sky. Point to Kraglin. Point to ship, and sweep, and back again.

Yondu flopped more of his weight onto Kraglin’s side, grinding his chin on the man’s bony shoulder in an effort to keep him still. “I know you’re a star, idjit. Don’t gotta keep telling me.”

Kraglin sighed a little when Yondu said something, not sure if the message had got through. He flinched harder when Yondu ground himself against open wounds, teeth catching hard in his lip to stop any stupid noises from breaking out. Whatever - he was sure there would be plenty more time to try and talk tomorrow. And maybe more swamp people.

Maybe, he thought, this one just wasn’t educated in more easily translatable languages. Maybe there was hope for discussions yet, or at least somewhere to try and get parts sent here for his ship.

“Alright, alright,” He muttered, gritting his teeth and trying to shut his eyes. “You’re tired, go to sleep. Aint gotta poke and stuff to make your point.”

Yondu smirked when Kraglin stopped moving. Point one to swamp-man.

He stopped leaning on him, surprised that he’d managed to pile so much of his bodyweight onto Kraglin’s side without him budging when a), the man was skinnier than a well-whittled arrow shaft, and b), wounded enough to jerk when Yondu agitated the slices on his back. There wasn’t any way Yondu could apologize for that, not without a shared language. And even if he could, he’d be more likely to blame Kraglin’s discomfort on himself, because if Kraglin hadn’t been jabbering away when Yondu wanted him to sleep, he’d never have hurt him in the first place, would he?

“Rest,” he said again, poking Kraglin gently between his closed eyes. “You’ll need your strength tomorrow.”
Yondu could skin the flanks of the *taabshqa* for their breakfast - there wasn’t much meat and it wouldn’t taste great (leaving it on the fire to smolder for a few hours longer than necessary would actually be an improvement). But it would give them energy for their uphill trek through the jungle, and that was what mattered. He and his star-man could continue their little pantomime-game as they walked. For all his feigned annoyance at Kraglin’s attempts to communicate, Yondu was looking forwards to it.
Yondu watched the flames burn lower and felt his eyelids droop in synchrony three times during the night. For each, he forced himself to bounce upright, tiptoeing around Kraglin to retrieve the next log from the stack. Feeding it to the fire kept him alert through necessity - having a heat source in close proximity to your fingers, and other sensitive parts that were protected only by a loincloth, made it impossible to doze off mid-task.

In the end, he nodded off just as the fourth of the six moons was passing through the gap in the trees overhead, its small silver face casting a cooler light in comparison to the stifling warmth of the fire. He tucked one hand around Kraglin’s knobbly wrist, just to reassure himself he was still there, that he was real, that he hadn’t been the product of a particularly potent dose of teku.

Somehow, Kraglin found it in him to drift into an uneasy doze. Since landing here he had been shot at, dunked in a swamp, attacked by two bitey beasts and been clattered around the ship on landing, which led to an all-over very sore and bruised man who didn’t really want to have to deal with too many responsibilities tomorrow. So it was little wonder he woke up now and then in the night, making sure not to wake his sticky sleeping companion. The last thing he wanted to add to his list of grievances against this planet was nightly assault.

Come morning though, he woke up stiff and pained along his back, his shoulders and chest on fire, and a throbbing behind his eyes that echoed the restless night. He did his best not to groan as he dug fingers into the mud and tried to shift himself, aching muscles refusing to co-operate for a few moments.

“Are we goin’ now?” He asked groggily, not sure where Yondu was but hoping he was close enough to hear him. Almost anything had to be better than sitting out in the swamp for any longer than they actually had to. “Yondu?”

He didn’t expect to sleep long enough to be caught. And he wasn’t. Yondu blinked into consciousness to the watery gloss of morning light and a faint drizzle, sizzling as it struck the dwindling fire. The first of the day’s rains.

Rain fell across Anthos’ body at regular four-hourly intervals; Yondu hadn’t overslept much by his standards, but what seemed like a good idea to a bone-tired brain just became bone-headed once that brain had recharged a little.

Yondu cursed himself for giving into his dumb, childish urge, unpeeling fingers from Kraglin’s hairy forearm. They’d tacked together with sweat, and Yondu held his breath as he unstuck himself, praying his companion wouldn’t wake before he’d extracted his hand and retreated to a distance where he couldn’t be accused of sentiment.

That wasn’t encouraged, in a society where you could lose your entire hunt-troop in a day. Kraglin wasn’t a fellow hunter, wasn’t even initiated - unless stars had a similar ritual. But, as Yondu was discovering, that didn’t stop him feeling things for the git.
Frustrating things. The sort of things that made a snoring, slack-jawed face, stiff with blood and mud and stubble and crowned by that ridiculous oversized nose, look *fascinating* rather than just *hilarious*.

Yondu scoffed, balling his fists into his crusty eyes. Must’ve gotten too much smoke in ‘em.

Shuffling away from Kraglin, he sat and stretched his spine, hands over his head and back arched. His crest rose half-heartedly to its usual upright position after having spent so long crushed under his bodyweight. It was kinda like falling asleep on a limb. Yondu scrunched his nose as pins-and-needles percolated the numbness, followed by the usual flood of awareness of the living, breathing, photosynthesizing world around him.

And Kraglin, of course. The lone blip in that world, the one thing that did not Belong. Yondu honed his attention on the nearby corpses of the *taabshqa*.

They didn’t feel dead, exactly. Nothing felt *dead*, because on Anthos’ face, death was just another stage of life - not that that was reassuring when you were being chased down by hungry *aku*, but still. He could already feel the bacteria feasting on their guts, the gas and the heat and the moisture bloating them like the footballs the village children made out of *vash’ryk* stomach-sacs.

As Kraglin awoke, Yondu pulled his hunting knife from its sheathe, built into the base of his quiver. “Breakfast,” he said.

“Good morning to you too.” Kraglin replied. He wasn’t entirely sure if that was what had been said, but at this point he was willing to make his own conversation as it came to him. “Yes, thank you, I slept great and yeah, I always look this good when I wake up, don’t you worry about that. Just one of my, uh, charms.” He waved a hand absently, squinting at the knife. He didn’t feel worried - if there had been plans to stab him, he would have been stabbed by now, Yondu wouldn’t have bothered waiting for him to wake up just to clock his protests about dying.

The drizzle was nice, if he was honest. Not enough to catch in his hands, but he turned his face up anyway and used the moisture to gently rub away the muck on his face. It wasn’t like he could show up to wherever Yondu was going to take him covered in mud and gore. Unless that would win him points for style or bravery or something, but he was sure Yondu would tell him if that was the case. Probably by flinging a handful of viscera at him.

No, the knife was for the weird jackal hounds that he’d dispatched last night. Kraglin felt a little frisson of pride up his spine for that - sure, Nova Corps were all issued their blasters and their batons, but he’d never been too much of a fan of them. Too much distance. If you wanted to kill something, he’d been taught at home, you got in real close and ripped it apart, just so that the thing you were killing knew it was personal. There had to be spite involved, which he had enough of in spades.

“Are we gonna eat those?” He eyed them a little, dubious but not unwilling. “Well sure, I guess one each, right? You got another knife?” He pointed at the blade, then mimed slicing, just in case.

So the star-man wanted to select his own prime cuts? He was welcome to. Yondu only carried the one knife, but there were always his arrows. Not that Kraglin was gonna lay a hand on them.

While the village blacksmith was tasked with fixing broken arrows, carving the ore and whittling in the fletching so it flew true was the prerogative of the hunters themselves. From the Zatoans’ yearly pilgrimage to the lava beds at the mountain’s peak, where the yaka was pure and strong and the earth itself seemed to shudder whenever you whistled, to the moment an arrow was wet with first-blood, to
the day it shattered and returned to the earth, it belonged to one hunter and one hunter alone. It answered only to their whistles - although a particularly sharp note from a warband leader might have it jiggling in its holster.

Yondu had been an initiated hunter for seven rainy seasons. For each of these, he boasted an arrow. Lending one to Kraglin for the ignominious task of chipping taabshqa-meat from the gristle, was unthinkable.

He held out the knife, hilt-first.

“This better not wind up in my back, is all.” Not that he thought Kraglin would; and anyway, he’d already proven that he could defend himself with teeth alone. But the guy couldn’t understand him, so what did it matter?

Nodding to him, he darted over to the furthest taabshqa, using the roots that broke the swamp’s surface like squares in a hopscotch game. His bare toes dug into the algae, slipperier than ever from the rain.

“We gotta hurry. Won’t be long before the fire’s out - and lemme tell you, if this shit tastes mank cooked, it’s way worse raw.”

Kraglin took the blade with a pleased little flip of it - knives, he could get behind those as a weapon. You still had to get in close, and they were useful enough in their own way. He let it twist around his knuckles as he followed along, feet slipping and catching on every root that Yondu seemed to skip over. He was not built for this place, he was reminded for the upteenth time in less then a day, crouching down by the jawless one. He felt along its side, noting he seemed to have broken a rib or two on the animal as well.

He remembered biting into it and almost mentally recoiled from the taste - he could still feel the phantom tickle of fur stuck between his teeth. Nevertheless, if Yondu wanted meat to eat, he could provide it, as thanks for his somewhat unorthodox hospitality. While he couldn’t make fire, he remembered how to butcher something well enough, or well enough to eat.

He remembered being the only one in his troop on that training day willing to stick their hand in the dead animal and make a puppet out of it. For some reason, he’d been disciplined for that and told off for being insensitive.

The thighs, he figured, once he’d given the animal a gentle prodding. He settled down, shifting to get stable as he started to cut the leg off. The knife handled like a dream, he was pleased to feel, finding the joints of the leg and working around them. It was quick enough work, though he was only cutting meat for one - a pile of meat in one hand, and he set the bones aside too. Two thighs, and he held them up to Yondu to check if this was enough for him; gesturing from meat to Yondu with a questioning noise.

Yondu, teeth gritted as he tried and failed to use the arrowhead as a saw, gave in, and set to stabbing out his frustration. He looked up at Kraglin’s little grunt. “Hell, I don’t know how much you eat. Scrawny thing like you… Although yer mighty tall; perhaps them legs are hollow.”

And with that, he went back to mutilating his taabshqa, gouging away the tacky, bristly hide. There wasn’t much blood left in the thing - Kraglin hadn’t been thoughtful enough to hang it up to drain, but the force of its pumping heart had squirted most of its sanguine out the bite-sized hole in its neck. It was still sticky enough inside for Yondu’s arrowhead to keep skidding on the raw flesh, disrupting the flies that had already begun to feed on the taabshqa’s glazed-over eyes.
What the hell. He weren’t no stranger to raw meat. He was only eating this to fill his stomach, not for pleasure. Settling cross-legged on his root, Yondu hauled the taabshqa into his lap, stinky swampwater and all, and buried his face in its glistening flank.

“Yondu.” Kraglin said, a little impatiently and reproachfully before he turned to the fire. He was smart enough to skewer the meat and set it to cooking before he turned back to Yondu and tried tapping his shoulder. “Yondu! That one is yours, idiot.” He pointed at the meat again, with more emphasis. “Have that one, fer crying out loud, you blue ball of crazy.”

Yondu, ear-deep in stiff taabshqa, didn’t identify Kraglin’s little speech as separable from the hiss of rain on the fire and the quiet thrum of mosquitoes and midges, swarms of which circled above the swamp like dust devils in a desert. He did however notice the tap.

Didn’t Kraglin have enough meat on his own damn taabshqa? This one was Yondu’s, and he wasn’t sharing.

But when he raised his face to treat Kraglin to a gore-smeared snarl, he noticed that the man was gesticulating to the neat little pile he’d extracted from the other corpse in the time it took Yondu to break through the skin. Well, look at him showing off. Not all that impressive though - Yondu’d been the one to give him the damn knife. Arrows were awesome, and Yondu wouldn’t trade ‘em for any weapon in the world, but skinning critters just wasn’t what they were designed for.

Deciding that he was being teased, he stuck his tongue out at Kraglin and ignored him in favor of the gnawing through the congealed, contracted muscle.

“I hate you.” Kraglin stared at the back of the bald blue head, fin bobbing away as Yondu apparently decided being an ornery asshole was more important than eating cooked meat. Kraglin could believe he was enjoying it if he didn’t look so pissed off, and if he had been intending to eat it raw then he wouldn’t have bothered trying to prepare it. So instead Kraglin turned around, picked up one of the toasting skewers of meat, and resisted the urge to stab him with it. He paused, stooped and picked up one of the bones he’d discarded as well, and turned to his idiotic companion.

He held out the meat to him, in obvious offering, with a growl and light kick of Yondu's thigh. Kraglin waited for him to turn before he took a bite off the end of the bone, chewing it and shaking the skewer lightly to make his intention obvious.

“Eat this one.”

Things made decidedly more sense after that. A lesser man might have felt sheepish, having rejected Kraglin’s previous offers. Yondu just dumped his taabshqa back in the swamp, dodging the splash.

He wiped the mess from his jaw, then snatched the skewer and set to gnawing, shuffling a little higher up the root so he could look down on Kraglin rather than the other way around. Conveniently, this also put him out of reach, in case Kraglin changed his mind.

But despite his brusqueness, Yondu did appreciate this offering. Sharing food among Centaurians was just on the secular side of sacred. In the village, mealtimes were organized communally. Everyone ate their fill from one black pot.

The pot was carved from a boulder that had marked the village center since before Yondu’s great-great-great grandparents were swinging around the trees, and was broad enough in diameter to fit a whole yolopp. Meals occurred twice a day, three times on a feast-night, and it was considered a great snub to miss them. Only hunters were expected to forage for themselves - and they too partook in the feasting between expeditions, when the village was flush with meat and hunger felt like a long-
forgotten dream.

As for sharing food between two individuals... Officially, that was reserved for the Season. But sometimes things happened on hunts, things the older generation never talked about and would smack you - or worse; fetch the chief - if you tried to bring up.

The chief being Yondu’s father, caution was ingrained in him as a matter of self-preservation. But the threat of his father’s temper - mild in comparison to Yondu’s mother or Yondu himself, but no less deadly - couldn’t quell the memory of dicing up a vash’ryk’s tiny heart with a long-dead hunter, one he’d considered making his brother before he’d fallen to an aku’s beak. They’d shared it between them, each pressing the rich, dark copper-tasting slivers against the other’s lips.

And now Kraglin had given Yondu half of his portion, without quite comprehending what it meant. Yondu inclined his head to him. His crest emphasized the motion more than he’d intended.

“Thanks, I guess,” he said through his mouthful. The meat wasn’t cooked all the way through, but it was a helluva lot less repulsive than cold gungey muscle.

Kraglin felt - well, pleased, though it was embarrassing to admit it. It was a simple enough thing, wasn’t it? He killed something with his teeth, and given the meat to the man who rescued him. There was nothing weird about that. He pushed his tongue against the prickle of teeth in his gums and hummed, focusing on eating the bones with no small relish. It gave a more satisfying bite, and didn’t taste nearly half as bad as the meat.

He set the knife between them for Yondu to retrieve, not sure by the others posture if he wanted company right now. That was fine by Kraglin - he was used to spending most of his time in quiet company with surly men who could kill you very easily; that was practically what the Corps was. At least, his troop had been.

They would be fucking livid with him by now, he realised. He’d skipped out on all of them. And here he’d thought the whole, ‘feel like a family’ thing had just been a fun tagline on the poster on the councillor’s wall. He’d been supposed to teach Runtz how to watch his peripheries better today. That kid was gonna get himself killed unless someone took him under their wing...

He crunched through the rest of the bone with his second set pushed through, better to grind it down. He sat back when he was done, letting them slide away again as he waited for Yondu.

Champing through the meat as fast as his single and relatively blunt set of teeth would allow, Yondu made it to the bone five minutes after Kraglin cracked his open. But hey, the guy had had a headstart. He also seemed entirely comfortable with silence. He sat within stoking distance of the fire, staring into the middle-distance and thinking about…

Well, who knew? The stars he’d left behind?

That was cute and all, but there wasn’t time to indulge his companion’s moping. As soon as he’d finished, Yondu pinged the bone into the swamp and stood, catching his balance by splaying his toes over the gnarly, asymmetrical root.

“We best head,” he said, remembering to point at the trailing end of the clearing so Kraglin had some idea of what he was saying. “Issa fair march to the springs, and uphill all the way. Course, it’d be easier if you could tree-run, but…” He recalled the way Kraglin painstakingly picked his way across the swamp to sit besides him, a smirk ticking at the corner of his mouth. “But you got about as much balance as a pouchling, Kraggles. Seriously. Kinda amazed you can walk in a straight line at all.”
It was fun, insulting someone who had no idea what you were saying. But he suspected it might be even more fun if Kraglin could give as good as he got. Maybe he’d teach him a few simple clicks on the way, or try and garble through more of Kraglin’s weird, bestial language. For now though, he had to get him up and moving.

Yondu’s hand hovered above Kraglin’s shoulder, meaning to give him a flick or a prod to encourage him to stand. Then, after a brief consideration, it drifted to his short-clipped hair.

It was soft if you stroked it the right way. It was also a very effective method of coercion, as proved when Yondu pinched his nails around a few short strands and pulled them upwards until Kraglin’s scalp stretched.

“Hey, woah, hey-” Kraglin found himself stumbling up a little - though not far, given the reach of Yondu's arm. He tried to worm his way from the others grip, one hand coming up to bat at Yondu's arm, having to twist his neck to keep things even vaguely comfortable. “I’m up! You can relax, buddy, cmon-”

The last thing his teenaged hormones needed was a burly blue man hauling him around by the hair. Then he’d have to go hiking with a confused erection, never mind meeting the rest of the - village? He assumed it was going to be a village. He pulled on his undershirt once he was freed, trying not to grumble or glower with reddened cheeks.

“Alright, lead on then…”

Yondu laughed when Kraglin swatted him, his usual morning grumps evaporating. His star-man was far too fun to tease. It was like Anthos had made him just for Yondu - and while Yondu was still eager to drag Kraglin to the village and play show-and-tell, a part of him tightened at the thought of being forced to share.

Kraglin was his. His find, his friend, his star-man. He fell into line behind Yondu when he darted over the semi-submerged roots - even if his passage was noticeably more cumbersome. He shared his meat with him, and he let Yondu prod and poke and pull his weirdly extensive bodyhair without too much complaint. He was, in short, perfect. And Yondu was determined to enjoy his company for as long as it lasted.

...He was also worryingly pink. Frowning as Kraglin burrowed headfirst into his shirt, Yondu hopped over to share his root, so he’d be right in front of him when he emerged. Once there, he wasted no time in pressing his palm to his forehead.

Yes, Kraglin was very red. And turning redder at a rate that was honestly alarming. By Anthos, Yondu’d never seen a fever come on so fast.

There was only one thing for it. Yondu grabbed Kraglin’s hand, intertwining white fingers with blue, and dragged him towards the forest’s edge. He needed to get him to the hotsprings, stat.

“Uh, okay.” Kraglin tried not to stumble as he was dragged along, keeping his still free hand on the trees and rocks as he passed them. He needed some form of balance, something to keep him grounded, and while Yondu was reassuringly solid, he was also quick and unpredictable in his movements. Kraglin scrabbled to follow him, aware vaguely that the air was getting warmer and wetter the further they went along. He worried that Yondu's people lived underwater, in rivers, and he was about to have to explain that he didn’t grow gills.

Gradually the trees petered out to a more controlled amount, the ground underfoot a little firmer and rockier. Less vegetation meant more light, and Kraglin blinked up at the hazy sky with the two pale
disks - he knew from his charts that there were two suns here, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t a pleasant thing to see. And the plants up here seemed less likely to try and kill him, plus the ground…

Rocks, he could deal with. He kept pace with Yondu much easier, so he wasn’t sure what the hand-holding was for, unless Yondu was worried he would walk his fool self over a cliff.

“Hey, Yondu,” He waited until he could mime. Then gestured at their joined hands, and made a hopefully-universal motion of confusion - a shrug, his free hand palm up by his shoulder and a confused tilt to his head. “I’m not going anywhere, buddy. You’re kinda my only lifeline right now.”

Yondu had been marching along at a fair stomp, more engrossed in keeping ahead of Kraglin (stupid long legs) than their joined hands. Now he wrenched his out of Kraglin’s grip, making show of wiping it off on his loincloth.

They’d breached the treeline in good time - no more than two hours. It was barely midday, the largest sun at its peak and the smaller scooting valiantly after it. Yondu was impressed with how well Kraglin had managed, despite his stumbles in the swamp. The man didn’t even seem to be breathing heavily. That was good - it only got steeper from here. The hotpools were on a rocky plateau fifty feet above them, and the path was winding and bolder-studded, dangerous on a windy day. Today looked to be mild enough though; so long as they reached the top before the afternoon rains, they wouldn’t be tempting a long drop and a quick stop.

Enthusiasm returning when he saw how close they were to their goal, he turned to Kraglin with a broad grin. He pointed to where a wispy clot of steam shredded into cloud above.

“There. We go there. C’mon, big guy - don’t slack on me now.”

Kraglin tried not to be too amused when Yondu treated his hand like a slug - it hadn’t been him who got all grabby-grabby and invasive of the other's personal space. He followed along with his usual loping stride, hands pushed deep into his pockets.

Out here, he felt far more at ease, less likely to glance over his shoulder and feel watched by everything in the leaves. Sure, as they went up, his back started to protest this ill-treatment, but it was easy to grit through that and carry on.

“Up there?” He sounded doubtful but nodded, squaring his shoulders and ignoring the stab of pain that brought on. He could hop from one rock to another if need be, even if he had to pause after each to hold his hip.

Kraglin deserved some R&R after this. With any luck, he’d get it.

“You know, you guys living all the way up here must be pretty annoying sometimes,” he said, though he couldn’t see anyone else or, in fact, anywhere to live. “Doesn’t it get tiring?” He asked, before trailing off when he saw the pools of steaming, rough-smelling water.

He knew that smell, and breathed deep, shutting his eyes. For a moment, a brief, between-heartbeat moment, he was back on Hrax, following his pod like a train of ducklings as they were taken down to the salt-waters to be dunked and bathed and scrubbed for the week.

Adults used other pools, he’d found out, with different rock linings and minerals in the water, said to keep you strong. These were volcanic in some way, he guessed, opening his eyes to follow the lines on the cliff-face, tracing the different types and bands in the rocks.

“Oh, I guess you don’t wanna head home all covered in shit, right?”
He guessed right. Yondu scraped swampgunk off under his fingernails and flicked it to one side to illustrate - and pointed to Kraglin’s grimy coating too, just in case the guy thought he was getting out of a bath. Hygiene wasn’t hugely important to the Zatoan, so long as you didn’t give yourself or anyone else dysentery, and you weren’t so stinky that your nest was shunted outside the village boundary at night. But while Yondu appreciated mud’s usefulness as camouflage, he didn’t enjoy being covered in the stuff.

“It’ll feel good,” he promised, taking stock of how Kraglin was holding himself: angular and stiff against the complaints of his battered body. If the guy wanted rest, he should’ve asked for it. Yondu wasn’t good at sympathy. But he motioned for Kraglin to mount the thin track, which looked better suited to goats than men, ahead of him. At least this way he’d be able to grab the idjit if he fell.

“Course, we could go the long way round. And there’s clean cricks closer to the village, where we get drinking water - but they’re frigid as Anthos’ ballsack.” He gave Kraglin’s back an encouraging thump, hoping he’d avoided the worst of the injuries. “Trust me, star-man. It’s worth the climb.”

Kraglin nodded a little bit as he went along the path, noting that he was ahead of Yondu now. Hopefully the blue man would let him know which one to pop into - unless this meant he’d be allowed to do something like pick his own. It was far too easy to put his hand on the cliff beside them, following the path without too much of a worry. In truth Kraglin suspected he would find it easier to swarm along the lower edge, just past the path but hell, he was told to go here, and he’d do it.

He was glad when they topped the crest of the cliff, stretching with a little groan as he looked around - a lovely spot. The steaming pools of water looked so inviting he grinned to himself, reaching down and tugging his undershirt off in readiness.

“Point one out, blue man, or I’m gettin in the nearest and you won’t be able to pull me out for an hour.”

Yondu didn’t reply, having already discarded his bow and quiver and sprinted into the steam. The rocks were slippery under his toes, but it was no worse than the jungle after rain. He sprung from one to another as he searched for a pool that looked deep enough to dive into.

A loud whoop and a splash indicated that he’d made his decision - as did the loincloth, which flew out of the billowing cloud and (with what was either uncannily good aim or luck) smacked Kraglin in the face.

Kraglin wasn’t bothered, as he was too busy trying to shuck his pants, hopping on one foot with some degree of success. He shook his head to get the loincloth off - though, damn, that thing was going in the pool after them - and hurried along as well. He dropped the clothes to one side before he got in. Granted, a lot more carefully than Yondu did, given the state of him, but he relaxed back against the rock with a low, throaty sounding groan.

The hot water stung and ate at his open wounds, but it was the kind of pain that meant good things, clean and scoured. His muscles screamed in relief, finally getting to unknot. Kraglin sunk back against the edge of the pool, mouth open and tipped back as he shuddered, the heat turning him pink under his hair.

Having dived headfirst into the center of the pool, Yondu took his time surfacing. The water swirled milky and opalescent, a thousand colors mingling and spreading, splitting into their primary reds, blues and yellows when he carded them between splayed fingers. The splash of Kraglin’s entry was loud and disorienting. The light fractured around him, a dizzying kaleidoscope, and it took Yondu several seconds to place what had just happened - coincidentally, the same amount of time it took for
he bubbles surrounding Kraglin’s long, gangly legs to disperse.

This left Yondu, underwater, staring at Kraglin’s hairy shins.

It was far too much temptation.

Pushing bubbles through his nose, Yondu pulled himself along the rock-lined poolside until he was directly under Kraglin. From here, he could see… Well, he could see everything.

Yondu sternly reminded himself that firstly, Kraglin was not blue, and thus was in no way attractive; and secondly (and far more importantly in the eyes of all-seeing Anthos) it was not the Season. Even if it was, unless cross-species male parthenogenesis had miraculously become feasible overnight, reproduction would be biologically impossible.

Locking his eyes instead on those blade-thin calves, he wriggled a little closer, floating upside down so his tahlei-crest was beneath him. Then, with a grin and a squirt of bubbled laughter, Yondu grabbed an ankle in each hand and wrenched Kraglin under, as hard and fast as he could.

**Why.**

That was the first thought that went through Kraglin's mind when he felt his legs being grabbed. Wasn’t he wounded enough? Hadn’t he suffered enough? Apparently not. The universe had decided to saddle him with a blue imp as well, because that’s what his life had been missing up until this point. A mean, pokey little blue imp who’d decided it would be fun to try and drown him...

Unless this was where the village was, and Yondu was trying to take him there without first checking that Kraglin could breathe underwater.

Kraglin thanked every deity for the small mercy of not having his head smashed on the way down. Instead he thrashed his legs with a bubbly snarl, grabbing at Yondu to make him let go. Then another thought entered his mind.

**Fight fire with fire.**

He straightened out again, keeping his head and face up as close to the surface as he could. Yondu was in entirely the wrong place, Kraglin thought to himself with a smirk, bringing his feet up behind him, closer to his ass.

When he promptly farted.

**Ack!**

Yondu should’ve known that his star-man came with internal bioweaponry. As if the teeth weren’t clue enough…

How dare Kraglin violate the sacred rites of water-wrestling though? Using such underhanded tactics… It was ignoble, crude, disgusting…

It was utter genius. Yondu only wished he’d thought of it first.

Growling, he flapped at the tizzy of bubbles that were popping round his head. He couldn’t smell anything - inhaling right now would register high on his ‘bad ideas’ list, and only in part because it would drown him. But the knowledge of what Kraglin had just done, and what Yondu was thereby floating in, was more than enough to stop him immediately dunking Kraglin again.
Retaliation had to be made though. Yondu was a Zatoan, a man, an initiated hunter. He would not be defeated by gas. Plowing determinedly to the surface, he sucked water into his mouth (clean water, he prayed) and, once he’d burst through the skein, grabbed Kraglin by his stupid skinny shoulders and squirted it right into his grinning mug.

Kraglin was pleased when he broke the surface and was able to breathe again - call him picky, but air was on his priority list. He kicked back, mindful not to hurt his guide, but enough to get himself to the edge of the pool again and loop his arms over it to keep himself there. He watched the vague shape of him thrashing, and when he emerged Kraglin opened his mouth, ready to laugh.

...Only to get a mouthful of water. He spluttered, surprised more than anything else, and found himself laughing anyway.

“Alright! Draw, draw! I wanna let some bits of me heal, cmon!”

Yondu ducked under the water, dodging Kraglin’s attack - before realizing it wasn’t an attack at all, and that the star-man’s hands were waving for truce. Well, he supposed he could grant clemency. Out of the goodness of his heart. And only because he was so sure he’d win that rubbing it in felt unnecessary.

Yondu kicked away from Kraglin, using the rock as a springboard. He floated in a lazy circle, flat on his back with his body’s natural buoyancy keeping him on the surface. This pool ran deep, connected directly to the geothermically heated source beneath. As a result, there was a weak tug of current, and if Yondu laid perfectly still it pulled him from one side of the pool to the other, until his crest bumped the bank.

As nice as it was to just float - and as rare as it was that Yondu allowed himself to do so - he really did want to get the mud off. Swimming to the shallows opposite Kraglin, he stood waist-deep and (after briefly resubmerging to dampen the crust) selected a porous looking rock from the pool’s bottom. Kicking up a foot to attack the grubby sole, he set to giving himself a thorough scrub.

It’d be nice to look blue again.

Kraglin, once he was released from the terror of the deep, took his time with getting clean. Aside from being full of aches, he wanted to check all the places he was leaking red into the water, pinching at the cut edges to check that nothing was on the verge of dropping off. The claws of that beastie had been sharp enough not to leave any ragged scars, he was glad to see, and a few turns with the water meant he managed to get them clean enough to see the raw redness of them instead of brown and green. The ones on his shoulders were deeper than the others, used as a gripping post instead of just for hurting him - he dabbed at those with a little more care, hissing through his teeth as he did.

There. Nothing looked infected, nothing looked like it was going to rip further as long as he was careful with it, and a check behind him on his spine showed that although he was luridly purple back there, there wasn’t anything life-threatening there either. The blood on his face had to go though. He ducked under to scrub it, coming back up only when he felt his lungs would burst.

Finally, his pride and joy.

He reached up and tweaked the edge of one of the cuts, enough to make him clench a fist with pain before he felt his teeth start to glide out. He didn’t want to think of them sitting in there, soaked in disgusting blood and who knew what. So he ducked his head to suck in water, wooshing it around before spitting it out the side, polite enough for that, at least.
It didn’t take long for Yondu to reach an appropriate standard of cleanliness. But then again, some would argue that Yondu’s standards of cleanliness left a lot to be desired. He was back to his good old blue self though, and - after a quick dunk and paw at his face - no longer felt more mud than man. Satisfied that he was as clean as he was going to get, he turned to Kraglin. And found him digging around in his cuts, rooting out the leaf mulch and the dirt, his funny pale face looking more like a caricature than ever as his lips drew back from his teeth.

And wow, there were a lot of teeth. Yondu marveled at them a moment. Sharp and yellowed from good use, but not in the least bit brittle-looking. The thought of what those teeth could do to a taabshaq or a vash’ryk was thrilling. Yondu tried to convince himself that it was thrilling in the way that watching a good hunt was, not thrilling in the way he was only permitted to feel in Season.

Not the Season. Not the Season.

It was about as successful as his attempt to convince himself that he wasn’t imagining those teeth on him as well. They’d glide across his skin, deadly but restrained, Yondu secure in the knowledge that Kraglin would only ever bite if he told him to...

Not. The. Season.

Yondu stared at the sky for what felt like forever, picturing the stars behind the blue and forcing himself to count them all in his head until those forbidden tingles died. The rain would begin again soon. He and Kraglin would be stuck in the hotpool until it had passed and the cliff had had time to dry. Of course, they could always go down the back route, but that was for village-sitters and elders and children, not hunters. This also gave Yondu more time to lounge about pruning in a pool with only Kraglin for company, but hey, that was incidental.

...Speaking of Kraglin, it’d be a helluva lot easier if he had someone else check the bruising on his back. Not that Yondu cared; it was just boring to watch Kraglin half-dislocate his stupid bony gibbon-arms to reach.

Kraglin spat water over the edge for a third time before he was satisfied. He’d been careful, checking the edges and points of his teeth to make sure none of them had cracked or chipped - no huge trouble if they had, but it was good to make sure of these things. He shut his mouth, feeling them slot together in a perfect bear-trap of points, flexing his jaw briefly to feel the grind of them together.

When he looked up and saw Yondu watching him though, he paused, confused.

“Uh,” He looked at the water, then back at Yondu guiltily. “Are we not meant to put this stuff in our mouth? It aint like. Sacred or anything, right?”

Kraglin was making noises at him again. Shit. Had Yondu been caught staring? Probably not - Kraglin wasn’t glaring or rearing away in disgust (or, to Yondu’s disappointment, reciprocating). He was just cleaning his fangs, swilling water around his mouth before spitting. That was all fine and dandy in Yondu’s book. Although he really ought to warn him...

“Just so you know, this stuff ain’t for drinking. Don’t go glugging it down - won’t do yer stomach any favours.”

They’d found a few conical leaves full of rainwater on the trip up, which had sated their thirst from the climb. If Kraglin was still dehydrated, he’d have to wait until the next load fell. Which, judging by the darkening of the skies, wouldn’t be long.

Yondu waded deeper, until his feet floated out from under him. He bobbed across to Kraglin,
banishing all thoughts of… things that were only for the Season from his head.

He tapped Kraglin on the bicep when he reached him, as if the guy hadn’t just watched him swim across, and pointed at the striations of red that broke up his hairy white chest.

“C’mon,” he said gruffly. “Let’s make the most of the suns while they last. Lemme help clean you, if yer hurt. I’ll be real gentle, I swear on Anthos.”

Kraglin had no idea what it was that Yondu had said, but then, given that was the rule across the board - he didn’t really give it much thought. He hadn’t been smacked for daring to put it in his mouth, so he figured it was fine to deal with. Instead he settled back and shut his eyes for a moment, just breathing in through his nose while his teeth crept back into hiding.

The movement of the water made him open his eyes though, seeing Yondu come over to him. And - and he was no stranger to this. Hot tubs, the uniform, some battle-worthy injuries? Kraglin stifled a sigh inside and settled back more comfortably, watching the blue man approach with a satisfied smile.

 Granted, he would probably be too injured to do anything too strenuous, but he could muster something for an attractive male... whatever Yondu was.

“I’m probably only gonna be able to have you ride me,” He said, one arm moving from the rock in greeting and welcome and oh- Oh. Yondu was pointing at his chest and babbling.

Well done.

“Oh, uh. They don’t hurt that badly.” He said, letting Yondu come and inspect them, if he wanted. Kraglin settled his arm back on the rock sheepishly, giving a little grin. “They’re fine, see?”

The star-man could look after himself; that much had already been established. Between the two dead taabshqa and those interlocking piranha-teeth, Kraglin was fairly suited to jungle-travel. He couldn’t start a fire for shit and seemed to have no clue where he was going or why he was here - but hey, that just meant he needed Yondu around.

And if he didn’t need Yondu to wash his cuts, as the friendly smile seemed to indicate (although Yondu’s stomach turned topsy-turvy at the sight of those teeth and tried to insist it meant something else entirely) then perhaps Yondu could appease his curiosity a little.

Taking Kraglin’s face between his palms, checking continually for any hint he was about to be snapped at, Yondu tred water and gently hooked Kraglin’s lips away from his incisors, examining the enamel right up to the gum. This close, he could see what he hadn’t been able to before. The second layer had retreated back into the roof of Kraglin’s mouth, leaving only tiny divots, the details of which were too dark to discern.

“Dammit,” he muttered, thumb stroking the sharp front tooth almost of its own accord. “Hell, Anthos. Why’d you have to make the star so weird and bony and… and…” Curse it all. “Y’know. Cute?”

Kraglin drew in a breath when Yondu didn’t stop approaching, looking a little apprehensive. When he felt cool hands on his face he breathed out a little, trying to keep still in case this -- Oh. He should have guessed. Kraglin tried not to smile, because doing that when someone’s hands were near his mouth was seen as a threatening gesture, and he didn’t want Yondu to think he was about to bite him. Instead he let him manipulate his lips and jaw open, tilting his head to let Yondu see the little dips behind his usual row of teeth.
If he was blushing, that was fine too. Aside from very literally being part of his body, his teeth were very private as well, something that usually only his nearest and dearest would get to inspect. Pod elders did for children too young to push out their rows, and occasionally brothers in the fighting bands would check each others as a sign of respect before a bout. But on a day to day basis? They would have to be someone special to have the honour of handling his deadliest weapons.

Kraglin let Yondu poke around for a moment before his hands reached up, slow and easy in case he spooked. One settled on Yondus shoulder, giving a soft squeeze to reassure and let him know to wait, while the other came up and tweaked one of his own wounds. Patience, and he shifted his head a little to let Yondu see the tips of his teeth breaking the gumline again, pushing out slowly. The edges were serrated, angled slightly away from the row in front to create a dragging effect on anything stupid enough to venture in.

With the second row out, it pushed the third line of divots out a little more, making them noticeable too. But he’d only ever had to bring those out for a few fights in his life, so he didn’t press for them right now.

Wondering, Yondu ran the pad of a finger around the under-layer of teeth. He was careful, thinking of how much pouchlings screeched when they teethed. Kraglin didn’t seem to be in any especial agony though, bar the squinting when he rubbed his own cut. Was that the trigger then, to make this second set grow? Pain?

Yondu smiled to himself. That made what Kraglin was showing him all the more special.

In the end, this venture proved more hazardous for Yondu than Kraglin. He brushed his finger over the serrated ridges one too many times. There were still tiny shards of glass in his skin, too small to be pinched out with fingers - Yondu would borrow tweezers from one of the shamans when they reached the village. Whether the tooth clipped one of them, wedging it deep enough to draw blood, or if Yondu sliced himself on the tooth itself, a sharp burst registered, like he’d been pricked on a thorn.

Yondu winced, hand jerking - and accidentally smeared his bloody finger over Kraglin’s tongue.

The amount of self-control and mastery it took for Kraglin not to clamp down hard on the feel of skin and blood was all-too evident. His jaw went tight and hard, fingers gripping Yondus arms suddenly to stop any further movement. He had no wish to bite him - the upper part of his brain was well aware that he was in no danger, Yondu wasn’t going to hurt him, and he was not His to bite.

He breathed out through his nose after a moment, shoulders raising a little as he tried to push the tension into them instead of his jaw, trying to let it leach out as naturally and painlessly as possible.

He kept his expression neutral, despite the dark eyes and low, almost inaudible growl that tickled out of his throat. Calm was the name of it, he tried to tell himself, a shiver running down his back as his tongue flicked, catching the next blue drop.

He was absolutely going to be thrown into a volcano.

Yondu yelped when Kraglin caught his arm, lips pursing to a whistle on instinct - not that it’d do anything, with his bow and arrow abandoned at the entrance to the pools. What had happened?

When yanking only made Kraglin tighten his grip, Yondu pictured himself being devoured from the finger up, Kraglin’s rows of teeth champing independently of each other like some nightmarish deepswamp lamprey. But there was no more pain. No biting. Not even a cheeky nibble. Only the faint sting of Kraglin’s tongue, wet and soft, as it dragged over his fingertip and lapped the blood.
Was it Yondu’s imagination, or were Kraglin’s pupils huge? Maybe it was the darkening atmosphere, or just how close they were standing. Yondu tilted his head to one side, peering around the nose to clock a better look at the man’s nearest eye, hoping it would contain some hint as to whether or not he was about to be eaten.

Kraglin did his best to let his grip loosen, finger by finger as he breathed out again, hot air washing over the hand by his mouth. His tongue lathed over the hot spot of blood, chasing it away again and again until no more came to the surface, checking once more before he relaxed. He let go of Yondu’s arm, drawing his head back a little to signal that maybe he should get his hands out of there for the time being.

His eyes were still dark though, and his breathing carefully controlled. Yondu was not prey or enemy, and that hadn’t been intentional, so it wasn’t an offering of self, of bleeding themselves together.

“Are you okay?” Oh flark those were supposed to be words, not growls, garbled a little though they were around Yondu’s hand. Hopefully the tone could be understood, at least.

Yondu was alive, and unbitten. That was an excellent start.

He pulled away as soon as Kraglin’s grip loosed. Adrenaline gushed through him, turning his legs to lead and making him sink low in the water. Despite Kraglin’s attempts to make himself non-threatening, the fact remained that his finger had been held captive between two very pointy rows of teeth, and - dammit, dammit, that was not supposed to be a turn-on.

Yondu had always sworn that the universe was against him. Apparently, it was trying to prove him right. If he didn’t know better - from his father and old Aja’s stories, both of whom were far more educated on the subject than he was - Yondu would assume Anthos was an outright sadist.

His finger felt too hot, like it was pulsing. It was slippery too. Not with his blood (Kraglin had sucked out everything that small cut had to give) but Kraglin’s spit. Yondu regretted sticking it in his own mouth as soon as he’d done it. He could taste his own coppery tang and beneath it, something sour that was uniquely Kraglin. It was an automatic response though, honed from a childhood of sucking on popped blisters and bark-cuts, cleaning them with his tongue.

Maybe, thought Yondu a little hysterically, he could get Kraglin to give the shallow slices on his arm the same treatment. Their vampire-session had worked the glass shard from his finger. Why stop there?

But no. Yondu was (as he had been repeating throughout this little scene) a Zatoan hunter. There were certain lines that had to be drawn.

Snarling, rising half-out the water like an angry blue swamp-demon, he wagged his sore finger in Kraglin’s face just to prove he wasn’t scared of him.

“Don’t’chu ever do that again. You hear me, boy?”

Kraglin blinked a little at the finger being jabbed in his face, the snarl making his shoulders rise up again and his own mouth part in mirror. He was barely calm enough to deal with Yondu staying so close to him, so a threat like that made react.

“Don’t you get high and mighty pissy at me,” He snarled back - the words may have been gibberish to him, but the tone and the finger was unmistakable. “You cut your damned idiot self, not me!
Flarkin’ Terran...”

He leaned back, hard against the rock and forced his mouth shut, eyes tight following as he willed himself to relax and not lash out. He needed Yondu to find him funny, needed him to still be willing to help.

“Get offa me,” He said, jostling his body to dislodge the other. He could handle being scolded like a child if he had genuinely done something wrong, but to be blamed for another’s mistake made him bristle and snappy, all indignation. “Go on, get. Ain’t we got places to be?”

That didn’t sound much like an apology. Yondu may be inexperienced with deciphering Kraglin’s alien dialect, but it also didn’t sound much like a promise to never again besmirch the temple of his body with his teeth.

Yondu narrowed his eyes. When Kraglin bucked, he wrapped his legs securely around the other man’s waist so he couldn’t be budged. Zatoan warrior-hunters submitted to no one but their troop leader - and as his mother refused to relinquish the title, Yondu had deserted the pack and struck out alone seven rainy-seasons ago.

Speaking of rainy seasons... The first pitterpatter of drops into the pool went almost unnoticed. Yondu gripped Kraglin tight as he could, slippery thighs scraping bruised obliques. He could feel the man’s ribs through his hairy sides, and knew that if he squeezed he would cause him a fair bit of pain, thanks to those presents from the taabshqa and the crash.

He resisted the temptation, holding on only as tightly as was required to ride out Kraglin’s thrashing. And, as the skies opened above them and the drizzle turned into a downpour, he pointedly raised Kraglin’s hand to his own mouth, glowering at Kraglin the whole while, and delivered a sharp nip to the tip.

There. That’d show the star-man - on his own terms - that Yondu was not to be messed with.

Kraglin stared at him.

There must be some crossed wires going on here, he was sure of it. Some sort of cultural, or spoken fuckup that meant his day, like all other days before it, was spiralling from bad to worse and giving him a headache, not to mention a lapful of wet, slippery blue man with apparent anger issues. He was the higher species, he reminded himself, feeling his blood boil and forcing his mouth to stay closed, jaw stiff. He was the more evolved and, as his troop leader had told them sternly enough, he should act like it.

So he breathed hard a few times, staring at Yondu past his finger, doing his best to calm himself. He held up his other hand, palm towards him, fingers slightly spread - the ‘stop, just a moment’ gesture, something he hoped would be understood, then brought it up to rub his temples with a weary, aggravated sounding noise.

He wasn’t smart enough for this, he thought to himself glumly. People had never been his strong point. Everything about him felt heated right now, from the short, huffing little breaths he used to try and calm himself, to the flush on his chest and neck, creeping in blotches to his cheeks and ears.

“I think,” It didn’t matter that the words weren’t understood, he hoped the tone of them would be enough - flat, tired, confused and patient. “We ain’t understandin’ each other right. Obviously. I don’t,” He pointed to himself, shook his head. “Wanna bite you,” He mimed biting, then pointed at Yondu, shaking his head. “And you,” Another point at Yondu. “Don’t bite me,” A mimed bite, a point at himself. “Unless you wanna fuck.”
He wasn’t sure how to mime that one, not with Yondu hooked onto him like that, so he settled for miming something like a mini explosion, with a little ‘boomf’ noise added.

“We clear?”

“Boomf,” Yondu repeated solemnly, nodding. It was an odd way of declaring defeat, but he’d accept Kraglin’s surrender, out of the goodness of his heart.

Having knocked Kraglin backwards during their scuffle, it wouldn’t take much effort to push him under the water and hold him there as long as was required for the message to sink in. But Yondu didn’t think that would be necessary.

He squirmed about on Kraglin’s hips, trying to keep his grip on that long bony body, which, despite its hairy pelt, was slippery as an eel when wet. But when it became clear that Kraglin had been attempting communication, rather than distracting him with his hand signals so he could throw him off, Yondu grudgingly dismounted and hauled himself out of the water to perch on the rock by Kraglin’s elbow, kicking his feet to splash him by faux-accident.

The rain was plopping around them audibly now. The cool streaks made a pleasant contrast to the warm, soothing waters of the pool, even if they did make the connections in Yondu’s crest fizzle uncomfortably, like someone was tickling it with a feather.

“So that was fun,” he said.

Kraglin sighed in no small amount of relief when Yondu decided he wasn’t any good as a chair anymore. He watched the blue man clamber and sit, getting comfortable despite, it seemed, the new chill in the air. He relaxed back with another pleased groan, tensing his spine and relaxing as soon as he could, shutting his eyes as he turned his face up to the rain.

It felt amazing, if he was honest. There were few times in his life he had been allowed to just sit out under the rain and not have to worry about anything - though the heated water made up for a lot as well. Absently, he thought about cleaning his clothes off but dismissed it for now. It wasn’t like they’d be able to dry on their trek back to -- wherever it was Yondu was taking them.

Kraglin opened his eyes and gave Yondu a glance when he spoke, trying to decipher anything from the tone, but, nothing came to him. He smiled and nodded though, given that the words hadn’t involved anything violent, he felt it was safe to agree.

“I wish you could tell me about where we’re goin, you know.” He said, keeping his tone light, conversational. “I would really like some advance warning on if you’re gonna eat me or not. Mostly cos I ain’t gonna feed a fullsize village, so I like to think I’m more of a VIP snack, you know?” Unless he was going to be taken back as an oddity. Who knew?

Kraglin pulled himself out of the pool to sit on the edge after a few moments, letting his feet trail in the warm water with a hum.

“Are we going?” He asked, pointing to them both, then miming walking.

Setting off before the rain stopped? Either Kraglin was far more confident in his climbing abilities than Yondu had seen cause for; or he was tired of Yondu’s company, and would rather tempt death on a rain-slimed hillside than spend another minute with him.

Which would be a shame, because for a guy made of eighty percent elbow-joint, he hadn’t been a bad seat. Bit knobbly in uncomfortable places, but that discomfort had turned to prickles of heat when Yondu straddled him and rocked over his skinny, fuzzy abdomen...
Best not to think about that though.

Yondu reassured himself that Kraglin wouldn’t be contemplating suicide after a day spent by his side. After all, he was a delight. He’d been told as such by the hunters in the troop he left, as part of their farewell/good riddance speech. And they hadn’t even been under duress! (Unless you counted the three arrows Yondu had been casually notching, but that was a joke. Not his fault they had such poor senses of humor.)

Yondu shook his head, then tipped it until his crest crinkled around his neck, basking in the pelting rain. “Nah, starman. You can relax - yer stuck with me a while longer yet.”

Not yet then. Kraglin made a soft noise of agreement and nodded, mirroring the other unconsciously as he let the rain wash his face. It wasn’t so bad out here, and not wildly far from where he’d come from. Sure, it had been a bit of a stab in the dark, but it didn’t make sense for the planet to have remained so -- backwards.

Which was mean to think, sure, but they seemed advanced in other ways. Some civilisations just went at their own speed, he guessed. Speaking of.

“Hey, Yondu.” Kraglin looked at him, waiting for attention before he pointed at himself. “Hraxlian. You?” He pointed at Yondu, then gestured to the place around them, his other hand spreading to try and communicate something like ‘broadly’ or ‘all’. “What are you?”

He wanted to know the name of this place?


His frowned at the knobby knuckles on Kraglin’s hand, still upraised from his last charade. “You… I’m still tryin’ to figure that one out.”

Kraglin noticed one word popping up a lot, and tried to mimic it a few times. Ansos? An’tos? He scrunched up his face a little, copying a few sounds clumsily before he managed something that sounded close enough.

“An’tosh?” His expression made it clear, he hoped, that this was an honest attempt at sounding something out, and not making fun of the others language. “This planet is called An’tosh by your lot? And… You’re An’tosh too?” That didn’t make a whole load of sense, but people did as people wanted when it came to their planet name and their people name. Maybe it made more sense in his language.

He couldn’t recall reading or seeing anything about an An’tosh. Even if this place had been visited way back when, enough to get records from, it hadn’t been somewhere he’d found on his late-night sprees into the records archives. Unusual, unless it really was more backwater then he thought previously.

Still, no harm in a little bit of fact finding, right?

“I, Hrax,” He pointed to himself, his other hand making the same motion for ‘broadly’. “We live underground,” He made a tunnel of one hand, then aimed it down, pointing under the ground, his hand next to it making a sweeping motion downwards. “Do you, An’tosh,” He pointed to the trees. “Live, in trees?”
Yondu, never one to resist a laugh, snorted at Kraglin’s pronunciation. “Don’t let the chief catch you saying that. We ain’t had a za’gah in decades, but there’s no time to bring ’em back like the present.”

He stretched his legs, flexing his feet so his heels stayed immersed while his toes waggled above the surface, sprinkled by the rain. It slapped his cheeks, cold in comparison to the pool. Wouldn’t be long before he had to hop back in and splash around with Kraglin to warm up - but for now Yondu was enjoying the dynamic temperature contrast.

“Anthos is our everything,” he told Kraglin, as the rains burst over his scalp and shoulders. How was he supposed to explain to a star-man what all Centaurians knew from the day their crest broke the skin? “Our God,” he said, squeezing his hands together and raising them palm-up into the rain, as if in prayer. “Do you have gods, star-man? Or are you like the heathens on the valley floor?”

Not that Yondu cared much - or expected a coherent response. But it’d be nice to know if Kraglin was a godless infidel before he presented him to his father.

Kraglin studied that hand motion, repeating it a few times in puzzlement. There wasn’t anything he could refer to with it - but it was interesting. An’tosh - An’tos? - and the motion again, but wasn’t that the planet and people name? He gave Yondu a confused little look, collecting water in his palms in the rain. He had been asked a question, that was clear from the tone, but he wasn’t sure how to answer when he couldn’t understand it.

“I’m not sure what you’re askin me.” He admitted, letting his hands fall back to his lap, trailing his feet in the water. “I’ve never,” He pointed at himself and shook his head, then gestured at the planet. “Flew here before.” He made his ship motion, then the planet again, shaking his head. “Brand new here.”

Rain plus Kraglin didn’t make for a particularly attractive spectacle, but Yondu was willing to make an exception and refrain from mocking the man for how his hair stuck in clumps like the quills on a vash’ryk, and droplets collected, dangled, and splashed from the end of his nose in an incessant stream. Only because it wouldn’t be nearly so funny as it was in his head, if he had to mime it all out and repeat it five times.

Instead, he studied the expressive flurries of Kraglin’s hands and tried to work out what he was saying.

“You,” he started, prodding one of the few non-raw patches on Kraglin’s chest. “You fly. I know that.” Flappy hands, emulating an aku. “And it’s… what, your first time here?” He thought of Kraglin’s tenuous picking through the bog, lip twitching up.

“Huh. I’d never have guessed. You…” Another point, “are as stupid,” (this shown through a stuck out tongue and crossed eyes) “as a child.” He held his hand a foot from the water to demonstrate. “You’d be dead,” (finger across throat; meant death) “without me.” (Big self-referential point, and a grin to match.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Kraglin laughed as he took in those mimes, disbelieving. He understood dead, yes, but he wasn’t going to kill Yondu - not unless he was attacked first. And he wasn’t dying himself, either, so he wasn’t sure why Yondu seemed to be implying that he was. So he just gave the blue man a politely baffled look and shook his head, patting his arm gently to show that although he didn’t understand, he wasn’t going to hold it against him.

And he definitely wasn’t that short either.

“One day,” He said, his expression open and pleased. “When we can understand each other, I’m
gonna ask you to tell me what you’ve been sayin. Cos I really gotta know.”

No one should look that happy about being told they were an idiot. But hey - ignorance was bliss.

Yondu slid over the edge of the pool, holding himself at an awkward angle so he didn’t scrape his crest. The burn of hot water over rain-chilled flesh was incredible; a sizzle just on the pleasurable side of painful. It came as close to those earlier tingles as Yondu could get without risking the wrath of Anthos. He sunk to his neck, then his chin, then his nose, and burbled happily, his star-man besides him and buoyant water all around.

His crest didn’t work so well when they were away from the foliage. But he could still sense Kragln, even if he couldn’t get a grip on his mind. It was like trying to grab a handful of molasses or tree-sap; the more Yondu tried to squeeze the more splurted out the sides, leaving him with a sticky mental hold on something that felt very much like peace. Giving up, he shook out his crest until the residual glow faded, letting the comforting dimness of daylight cloud-cover eclipse their rocky grotto.

The water didn’t look so bright and appealing now there were no sylphlike glints of light dancing in the shallows. As such, Yondu felt no need to chase them. Rather than bouncing about, splashing, and causing a general ruckus, he relaxed completely, draping over the rock and letting every limb go slack. Kraglin’s jabbering made for some real nice background noise.

“Can ya talk like this every time I gotta sleep?” he asked, jaw popping around his yawn. Then he realized that he’d just as good as asked Kraglin to sing him a damn lullaby, like he was some fussy pouching.

Growling at himself as his eartips darkened to royal blue - he blamed it on the humidity - he pointed at the clouds, through which sunbeams were starting to show, still fuzzy like they’d been daubed over in grey watercolour.

“Look. Won’t be long.”

Kraglin watched Yondu slip into the water with a hum. No doubt when their languages became a little more intelligible to each other, it would be easier to share time and company. He wasn’t much of a socialite, that much was true, but it would be fascinating to try and learn things about Yondu and where he currently was. Hell, having anyone to talk to was a blessing right now, staving off the space madness.

Kraglin slid back in not too long after, just to keep the chill at bay. Like Yondu, he was much calmer about the dip this time, content to relax and mentally drift - if he couldn’t get the parts and the fuel for his ship, he realised, there was no way he was going to get off this rock. Making friends with the natives here could seriously lengthen his lifespan.

He watched where Yondu pointed with a nod, mostly understanding - they would leave when it stopped raining, he guessed, and was glad for it. He patted around the edge for his clothes and found them, soggy but a little better for the rain beating some of the muck out. They’d do for travelling, since he figured that the heat was going to come back once the sun came out.

And when it did, the rain petering off to nothingness, he stretched a bit and looked to Yondu, just to make sure it was finally time to start travelling. By now he was a little hungrier, and would be glad to put the rest of this travel behind him.

“C’mon then,” He said, giving Yondu a little poke. “Take me home to meet the folks and all that. Can’t wait.”
First came the rain. Then came the sun.

Yondu had them wait five minutes before starting their descent, enough time for the majority of the rain to evaporate. The entire cliff-face looked to be smoking. Water vapor peeled off in great gouts with every breath of breeze, rocks creaking as they expanded. But Yondu knew the path like he knew his own loincloth - tied on again in a practiced motion as he walked towards the precipice. He could hear Kraglin getting into his damp clothes behind him, hopping about and stretching the fabric and making some of his weird grunts that were probably cusses.

Yondu’d ask him to teach him them later. Most important part of learning a foreign language, that - getting the swearwords right. Zatoans didn’t have many, besides evocations of Anthos and the obvious Krz-qa-sza slur for ‘crestless’. But the Ignokai from down the valley had some zingers, heathens though they might be.

Once they’d returned to the treeline, the midday suns were at their hottest: a bright red disc and a smaller, paler, and fiercer one. Forest life crept back into Yondu’s awareness, tickling low in the root of his crest.

Grasping Kraglin’s less injured shoulder when the man glanced at him, directionless, he spun him round and used that big nose as a compass point, aiming Kraglin in the direction of the village where Yondu had been born (and, if he were lucky enough to survive all the yolopps and aku for the next fifty years, where he would die as well.)

“Now, let’s see if I can teach ya to say ‘Anthos’ well enough that my dad don’t stick you straight in the stewpot…”

“An’tos?” That word again! Maybe it was the name of the village too - it didn’t seem like Yondu had too many words under his belt, unless there were variations in the whistles and clicks that Kraglin couldn’t pick up on. He smiled at Yondu hopefully, clearly willing to learn and walk as he went, feeling the fabric drying on his skin. It would be a little bit stiff, sure, but the rain had worked most of the filth off, and he would bend it out again as he walked. It was a military grade uniform - it was built for getting shit on.

“An’thiis?” Closer, he felt, and he frowned as they walked along, his hands in his pockets as he struggled with it. “Antis. Antos. Anthos?”

Finally.

Yondu treated Kraglin to a wide grin, like he was a village brat who’d just whistled their first bullseye.

“S’right,” he said, dropping a pace so he was in stride with Kraglin and digging an elbow between his ribs in congratulations - hoping that he’d avoided the bruises. Overhead, the trees closed in a verdant arch. The vegetation was thin enough for light to percolate - for now. Yondu’s blue skin was surprisingly hard to see, the dapples melding into his tapestry of tattoos and miniature scales to create something that looked to be an extension of the natural environment. Which of course, in Yondu’s mind, he was.

“Anthos, yeah. You’re getting it. God.” He made another little praying motion, in case the meaning had escaped Kraglin the first time round, and went through his little routine again: pointing this time at a fat-trunked, waterlogged swamp oak, the trailing creepers, the small mammalian critters that scurried between the boughs, himself, and the fungi-pitted ground. “Anthos, Anthos, Anthos. All of it. Me, Zatoan. That? Tree. But also Anthos. Understand?”
The village wasn’t far. But his initial excitement having been tempered by a few hours in Kraglin’s company (which, dare he say it, had led to him actually liking the guy) Yondu could see now that things had the potential to go horribly awry. If his father protested him dragging home a crestless wanderer and claiming he’d fallen out the sky… If he thought Kraglin was too much a threat to the village peace…

The chief was capable of mercy. He exercised it frequently nowadays, as the za’gah were a thing of the past. But his son’s obsession with the night sky was a sore point that’d blackened with infection as the years passed and Yondu grew, and still climbed the za’gah tree every other night, crawling out along the emergent branches so he could feel like he was floating amid the stars. Who knew how he’d react? The best Yondu could do was educate Kraglin as much as possible before they arrived, and hope for the best.

Anthos forbid his mother dislike him, though. That didn’t bear thinking about.

“Anthos-Anthos-Anthos.” Kraglin replied agreeably, nodding as he followed the points, then that motion again, hands pressed together. It seemed important, so he mimicked it, watching it with a hum.

Oh!

“It’s your deity?” He asked, aware that didn’t cover the broadness of their language barrier. He gestured around them, as if to confirm. “Anthos is all of it, it’s like. Your local spirit or something. I getcha,” He nodded sagely, feeling relieved. Finding out about that after he met what was probably a high priest would have been a terrible thing.

“Don’t worry buddy, I ain’t gonna go rubbin my ass on any sacred rocks.” Kraglin gave him a reassuring smile and nod, patting his arm. “I gotcha.”

It was a shame, Yondu thought as the narrow path to the hotsprings widened into a well-trodden track, ferns and shrubs stunted by the passage of a hundred bare blue feet. If there hadn’t been genuine danger, he could’ve had some serious fun with his guest. He could’ve convinced Kraglin that it was the height of etiquette to enact his lil’ farting trick on everyone he met. He could’ve pretended it was an honoured Zatoan custom to strip starkers before entering the fortified coppice of the village fence. Heck, he could’ve told Kraglin to go right up to the zah’gah tree and give it some good old fashioned fertilization, while his father gaped on in shock.

Mulling over missed opportunities wasn’t nearly so good as putting them into practice. But Yondu resisted his urge for mischief. The forest was still light and airy, a contrast to the oppressive swamp, and the village was only around the corner.

“Kraglin,” he said, drawing to a halt so his star-man had no choice but to stop. Not that he’d get lost without him anymore - the path ahead was clearly defined, the forest chopped with machetes and pruned back upon itself to create a braided natural tunnel. You could even hear the village, if you listened hard enough - the sound of voices raised cheerfully, children laughing without fear for what might hear them and adults gossipping as they sorted berries for the evening meal; all set against the background rumble of the bonfire. But Yondu wanted to savor this final moment alone. Here, it was just the two of them. Krah-glyn and Yon-toot, Yondu and Kraglin. Cross the village threshold, and all that would change.

Yondu didn’t like sharing his things. But sometimes, he recognized the necessity. He forced a smile.

“If we wind up eating you tonight, m’sorry in advance.”
The forest walk was fascinating, for someone brought up in caves and rock tunnels. There was so much air, so much natural plant life, that Kraglin found himself marvelling at it despite himself. As they walked along, he let one hand trail along some vines, the trunks of trees he couldn’t even see the top of, doing his best not to crane his neck to track the sounds of birds and other small critters as they leapt from branch to branch.

He wasn’t sure he could spend the rest of his life here - it felt too open, and he was sure the presence of the sky would get oppressive from time to time. But for an extended vacation? Hell, he could taste the exotic fruit juices and rare alcohols already. Kraglin breathed as deep as he dared, savouring the dark and heavy smell of a nature he knew nothing about.

But what a place to learn, if he had to be stuck here a while.

His guide stopped, and out of habit Kraglin stopped with him. He was saying something, though his smile didn’t seem quite right, not like the ones at the springs. Kraglin smiled a little uncertainly in response, glancing down the obvious road. Somewhere people travelled often he realised - probably Yondus home. For all the joking and playing he’d done, and his eagerness to meet people who might be educated in a language he could work with, Kraglin found himself nervous.

There was fair reason for that. Maybe Yondu's people ate their visitors alive, which was why he hadn’t been killed yet. He didn’t like that Yondu didn’t seem much himself either, and reached out, putting a hand on the other man’s arm in a way he hoped was comforting, reassuring, and smiled a little with a nod.

“I’ll behave, buddy.” He said, trying to get his voice to sound a little quieter, gentle. “Trust me, I wanna live through this too.”

And now the star-man was reassuring him. Wasn’t it supposed to be the other way around?

Snorting, and with an eye roll so exaggerated it threatened to strain his optic nerves, Yondu slapped Kraglin’s hand off and led the way.

Zatoan huts were shabby and ragged, mulched reeds and mud used as a fibrous glue to hold the larger twigs together. The roofs were messy thatch. The prettiest things about them were the carpets that were used for doorways and partitions: dyed with muted colors squeezed from berries and crushed bugs. The wool of their domesticated kihaq was stretched and spun, and woven on horizontal ground-looms by the village-sitters into stunning configurations of old legends. They told the tale of the first Zatoan, Oola, who had climbed the mountain solo and dedicated herself before the Great God’s eye; and of Amikya her son, that old trickster who’d pestered Anthos until the Great God flicked him from his cheek like a mosquito and sent him flying to the valley’s far end, where he pouch-reared the heathen Ignokai and their ilk.

The carpets looked drab from a distance. It was only when you got close that the piebald colors shifted into trees and dramatically posed figures, and you realized how many hours of workmanship had been poured into their creation.

Carpet-making was a skill, alright - and not one Yondu possessed. The life of a village-sitter had never appealed to him. And while his father, head of the village-sitters and spiritual guide for the entire tribe, maintained that each role was equally important in Anthos’ creation, as an initiated hunter Yondu had always nurtured a healthy sense of superiority over those who chose to stay within the safety of the fence.

While the hunters’ roosts were situated halfway up the trunks that crowded the village on all three sides but the cliff face, and the first rows of huts were interspersed with shrubbery, the trees became
sparser and sparser the further into the village you got. By the time you reached the center, dodging the scuttling flightless *jskveh* his people cultivated for their eggs, the ground was barren granite, ivy and lichens all that would grow. Which is what made the *Za’gah* tree so striking: a towering sentinel that loomed over Yondu’s world.

You could spot it from the village entrance. Heck, you could spot it from the hotpools on a clear day. Its roots had wrenched apart the rock over centuries or millennia, gnarled and vast like petrified swampsnakes. It was ancient, twisted, older than the Zatoans’ history on this mountain. There was a solemn air to it, and even from this distance its base looked blue-navy, as if the repeated coatings of blood throughout the decades had stained the bark.

No children played around it. They knew better.

Instead, sensing the crunch of Kraglin’s clumsy boots over leaflitter and compacted, well-trodden earth, they scurried to the gates so they could boast at supper that they’d been first to lay eyes on the hunters’ spoils. The adults weren’t nearly so curious. When they sensed that ineffable alienness of Kraglin’s footfall, his presence a wrinkle on the surface of the forest they knew, they hissed for the children to hide, and reached for their bows instead.

Yondu smartly insinuated himself in front of Kraglin. Not that this gave him much cover. The starman’s stilt-like legs elevated him several inches over Yondu, and while Yondu could hide him if he turned to the side and let his crest do the work, exposing the large surface area of a primary sensory organ went against every instinct.

Sure, the villagers would never fire on him. He was one of their own - and while the Chief could always sire another heir, they had to wait for the rainy-season to pass before it was time to breed again. And anyway, the old man was getting on. The village wouldn’t want to risk being left with a squalling infant, should Chief Uzuko pop off to join Anthos before his time.

Yondu stuck up his hands, plastering on a bright and sunny grin.

“Mornin’, fellas,” he said into the bristling arrowtips. “Look what I found!”

It was beautiful - something so wildly, vastly different to anything Kraglin could have been imagining. He had been picturing little platforms and homes wrapped around trees, higher up in the branches, with winding staircases or ladders rolled down, made of silks and patterned to let people know who lives in which tree. He certainly hadn’t been expecting so many of the blue-skinned people, and he kept his hands in his pockets whenever they passed someone, just in case.

For all his misgivings and worries about the crowd, he wasn’t a threat, and he wasn’t going to pretend to be one. There was nothing dishonourable about accepting help and aid when your only ship had crashed into a swamp, not if you wanted to be able to live long enough to get off the planet again. So when he heard the scurrying footsteps retreat, to be replaced with heavier, more determined tread, he chanced a peek around Yondu.

Oh. That probably wasn’t the welcome committee, unless Yondu had done something to piss them off already. Having spent less than a day in his company, Kraglin felt confident that might also be the case. Though the thought that he was only the second most unwelcome thing in the camp wasn’t very reassuring either.

Seeing Yondu move, he lifted his hands a little, enough to show his palms, and that he was unarmed. Thankfully, he only twisted his arms, not lifted - with his height, trying to make himself taller would be threatening no matter what he did. He kept himself square behind his guide, and willed his nerves to stay steady enough that his smile wouldn’t be taken as a call to arms.
Somehow, he didn’t think declaring himself a member of the Nova Corps (now untrue) and here by accident (true) and willing to leave the moment his ship was fixed (mostly true) would be very helpful, given how hilarious Yondu seemed to find his speech. And given that the only two words he knew with any real certainty were ‘Yondu’ and ‘Anthos’ he couldn’t exactly try to greet them.

“Hey Jaku,” Yondu greeted. He nodded to the young huntress and her friends, chief among the bow-bristlers. They must have been stationed on watch, bored games of i-spy disrupted by his and Kraglin’s entry. Really, they should thank him for injecting a little excitement into their day. ‘Hey Mara. Hey Dro. Remember how I stole all your bowstrings and tied them together last time you nicked my catch? Every night for a whole month? Yeah? Well, this one’s mine too. Hands off.’

For some reason, this didn’t make them any more amenable to his and Kraglin’s presence. Although the bows did lower, which was something.

Jaku stepped forwards, all proud red crest and swirling tattoos. While most village women walked about bare-breasted, hunters needed support for swinging round the trees - and Jaku more than most. Yondu managed not to get distracted, concentrating instead on the calloused blue finger hovering close enough to his forehead to make him crosseyed.

“You,” Jaku spat. “What sort of monster have you dragged into our village this time?”

Aw man. Was she still upset about that thing with the yolopp? That had been weeks ago.

Kraglin was glad to see that there was a lowering of weapons - that usually meant good things, like being allowed to continue living for a little while longer. They didn’t look happy about it, which was fine, he could deal with his continued existence being begrudging.

Their - leader? Kraglin wasn’t sure - threatening Yondu, that was something he was less okay with. Maybe it was because Yondu had been the first friendly face he’d seen on his planet, but he felt his shoulders get up a little about the whole idea of him being told off or hurt just because he was alive and here. On his best behaviour, he didn’t growl or snap, merely made sure Yondu knew he was still behind him, hands going down a little as he eyed the woman coolly from his place.

He had a lot of nose to look down at people, and while he didn’t make it overt, there was the barest hint of something protective in his stance. He didn’t want a fight here, wouldn’t start one and would back out of one if Yondu told him to. But that didn’t mean he had to look like he was alright with someone threatening him.

Yondu wasn’t used to having a sidekick. Since leaving the warband he’d had to watch his own back. Feeling Kraglin position himself behind it, skinny and sharp as a blade, the earth under his stupid stiff bootsoles registering each readjustment of his weight through a ping in Yondu’s crest, was…

Well, not reassuring. Yondu didn’t need to be reassured. He could handle Jaku and her posse anyday. But he’d be lying if he pretended not to like it: the powerful predator skulking in his shadow, gloverning at the trio as if he’d very much like to bite, and it was only Yondu’s unspoken order that stopped him.

Yondu smirked at Jaku, folding his arms across his chest. She copied - which was distracting and gratifying in equal measure.

“Make way for your future chief, Jacky. I’ve gotta see my father.”

Kraglin really hoped Yondu was saying good things about him - things like, ‘doesn’t take up too much space, can eat scraps, could reach things on tall shelves.’ He wasn’t sure if the other person
believed whatever Yondu was saying, sure, but it looked like there was some sort of negotiating going on. Unless this was a kind of mating display, which Kraglin had been trying very hard not to pay attention to.

What? Nipples were nipples, he couldn’t be blamed for being surprised at them. At least he didn’t stare, he had better sense then that. He wanted to keep his eyes, thanks.

Were they all supposed to be crossing their arms? He didn’t, just in case, but he did glance at the other two in the little group, keeping their position known to him. Surely this wasn’t the last stop on their trip, and Yondu’s talking seemed to indicate there were other plans. As long as he wasn’t being taken to a kitchen, Kraglin decided, he could go along with this.

The tension was broken when the blue woman stepped to one side, though not without an air of ‘this should be fun to watch’, Kraglin decided. He really hoped that didn’t mean he was about to be released and chased for some sort of hunt.

“After you,” He said, though regretted it when their little audience seemed to dislike the idea that he could speak and glowered at him. He put his palms up again, though he couldn’t help the crack of a grin. Well, if he’d known his voice was that scary…

Yondu kicked Kraglin’s ankle, glaring at Jaku as if daring her to comment. Sure, it wasn’t the starman’s fault he sounded like a weaning Vash’ryk, but those animal squeals were still disconcerting when they came from a humanesque mouth.

Zatoanesque. Whatever.

He pushed past Jaku, swaggering through the crowd of onlookers who’d gathered either to gawp at Kraglin or (equally likely) in the hopes of watching their renegade sort-of prince get his ass kicked. (Hey, Yondu’s personality was an acquired taste. Like arsenic.) They backed up, spreading away from him and his charge, watching Kraglin with the wary eyes of a species who knew they were far from their planet’s apex predator.

Yondu strutted with his crest held high.

The chieftain’s hut, unlike the flimsy timber constructions around it, was hewn directly out of the bedrock. It was as decorative as it was sturdy, patterns and carvings and the scar from Yondu’s first arrow-whistling attempt glowing silver in the sun. It had been erected so the shadow of the zah’gah tree clipped its roof squarely. This probably had some ancient significant ritual meaning that Uzuko had informed Yondu of a thousand times and Yondu had promptly forgotten. But mostly it just meant that smoke blew in off the bonfire whenever the wind changed, and the hut roof, never quite drying from the thrice-daily lashing of rain, was prone to moulder.

Yondu could smell it now: rotting reeds in need of a rethatch. No need to be embarrassed as a host though - Yondu had scarpered from his father’s large stone antiquity of a hut on the eve of his manhood ceremony, and never looked back.

He banged the wall, sensing this wasn’t the time to barge in unannounced or commit a knock and run.

“Remember,” he said to Kraglin out of the corner of his mouth. ”I do the talking.”

Well, this looked like a fine place - sort of. There were only so many standards he could apply to huts like these, but since it was standing and Yondu was knocking on it, he assumed it was important. The crowd of blue had followed the, and Kraglin had to stop himself from glancing over
his shoulder at them too much. The sea of pink eyes made him feel prickly, but he was supposed to be behaving.

Or at the very least, not getting himself killed. That was a fine goal to go with.

Kraglin did give Yondu a bit of a look when he spoke, not sure what he’d said - just something to reassure maybe, or a command to stay quiet and still. Either way he nodded a little and clasped his hands behind his back, as the footsteps stopped behind the door, a grumble of speech cutting off as it was opened.

Seemed Kraglin was capable of following orders. Yondu already liked this guy more than half the hunters in the village. He stepped back instinctively to avoid being flicked by the tassels on the chieftain’s doorcloth as it was batted aside, his father’s broad tattoo-wound chest filling the space beyond.

Yondu hadn’t inherited his height - much to his disappointment. Mogi, the village elder, claimed that sometimes Centaurians kept growing until their twenty fifth rainy season though, so there was still hope.

He made the customary bow - rather shallower than was vogue. ‘Hey dad.’

His father’s face, which had been settled into calm benevolence, the expression of a chief ready to mediate any dispute, divide any spoils, and listen to any grievance his people may wish to air, aged fifty rainy seasons in five seconds.

“Yondu,” he said. He made those two-and-a-half syllables - one long ‘yon’ and two sharp clicks - drag into an entire soliloquy-worth of vented frustration. His tahlei, pierced once for each of his years as the Zatoan leader, jangled as he shook his head. “What have you done now? And…” His eyes flicked to Kraglin, shrewd and red and mistrustful. He was the spiritual guide of the tribe; he carried no arrows. But that didn’t make him harmless.

“What in Anthos’ name is that.”

That felt mean - Kraglin wasn’t sure what had been said but he knew that he felt offended by it, even if it didn’t show more than a wrinkle of his nose and a slight furrowing of his brows. The bow implied this was the - king? Of Yondus people, and the jewelry seemed to support this theory. Not that the other blue people didn’t have some sort of similar adornments, but these were placed in the wonderful, red crest that flowed over all of them. Truth be told, Kraglins fingers itched to poke at one, see if it was as supple and soft as it looked, and warm too.

Somehow though, he felt that would be a terrible idea.

Still, when that gaze fell on him he breathed in a little and kept himself steady - this was no different to staring down a troop leader, or keeping calm in the face of an exploding air-duct in a deep mine. He kept his expression neutral but open, polite. The aim of the game was to look harmless.

“Some monster he brought in from the swamps.” A voice from the crowd muttered to their neighbour, keeping a firm hold on a curious childs shoulder. “A sick one, maybe…”

Okay, so far the introduction hadn’t gone brilliantly. But chiefs didn’t get anywhere with that sort of attitude, even ones who had yet to suffer their first ceremonial piercing rite.

Yondu turned from his father, knowing he’d be hardest to convince. Uzuko Udonta was the sort of man who could deny a yolopp’s existence even when his son dragged one all the way back from the deepswamp, a fresh-spawned baby drugged to its gills on enough teku root to put a hundred Zatoan
warriors into permanent comas. And he could do it so emphatically that, had the yolopp been conscious, it might have withered on the spot from the force of the chief’s conviction.

Instead Yondu focused on the villagers. Specifically, the children. They at least could always be counted on to enjoy a good story.

Taking note of their big, bright, curious gazes - and the restricting hands of their parents - he settled cross-legged on the dirt and patted the space besides him for Kraglin to do the same.

“Once upon a time,” he said, using the contraction that the elders always recited before launching into one of their fables. “Anthos was not all there was to creation.”

“Yondu. The villagers have had enough of your nonsense.”

“Once upon a time,” Yondu repeated, loud enough to drown his father out, “the Zatoan knew this. They knew there was more out there, and they searched for it - like Oola searched the world for our great god’s face, so many rainy seasons ago.” He looked at each of the children one after the other. Their little blue wedge-shaped faces all angled towards him, even as their parents, noting the chief’s mounting frustration, tugged on their crests to lure them back to their play. “But you see, that was where we went wrong. When Oola found Anthos, we thought we could stop looking. Our village hasn’t changed its ways since, for all of five hundred years!”

“We stopped the za’gah,” Uzuko interjected. One pierced eyebrow was raised, as if he couldn’t quite believe he was hearing this. Yondu waved him off.

“Five hundred years and we stop one dumb little sacrifice ritual? And we like to think we’re better than those Ignokai savages?” Yondu laughed. “Yeah right. We should never have stopped wanting more, never stopped reaching. I’ve always said it. Now I have proof.”

And he pointed to Kraglin in all his glory: prickly scalp, hairy forearms, clothed legs, sallow skin, and the distinct lack of anything approaching a crest. ”Meet Kraglin, everyone. The star who fell from the sky.”

For a moment, there was dubious silence.

“I thought stars were smaller.” One little blue being finally said, its voice a little uncertain. It craned its head back to look up at its parent, holding tight onto both hands. Kraglin, for his part, didn’t understand what was being said as he sat next to Yondu, all joints and angles, trying to keep himself presentable looking. But he turned to the voice, angling his head to spot the little blue face.

He was not impolite enough to smile wide, but he did offer a small, close-lipped smile, and a wave of his fingers. He could tell, obviously enough, that he was the current subject of discussion and that the community here seemed -- divided on his continuing existence. At the little display of apparent sentience though, more of a buzz travelled through the crowd.

“-so ugly-”

“Stars light up!”

“Can it understand us?” One voice called, tinged with uncertainty and worry. “Is it dangerous to us?”

“It doesn’t seem intelligent.” Another answered, scooping up its small blue package and nuzzling at it, quieting any protests from the child.

“Did Anthos call it down?”
Patience was a prized quality in a chief. Yondu pretended to possess it.

‘No, brat. He’s from beyond Anthos. That's the whole point.’

Okay, so he didn’t make a good job of it, but at least he hadn’t made the kid cry. Yondu liked children well enough - they were small and cute and made him want to pick them up and squeeze their chubby cheeks and press them comfortably against his pouch when they got snivelly. But he couldn't eat a full one, and certainly didn’t see the appeal of lugging one about inside him for six months.

His father insisted he just needed to meet the right woman in the Season - but Yondu’d known all the girls his age since they’d first been toddling about balanced on their fathers’ feet. God, what if he wound up paired with Jaku?

Anyway, Yondu’s father had copulated with his mother. He obviously didn't know what he was talking about.

Yondu raised his voice so Uzuko knew it was directed at him, leaning onto Kraglin to tousle the star-man’s hair (and could he please stop being so tall, especially when they were seated? This was just embarrassing.)

‘His name is Kraglin, and he came to us from beyond-Anthos. He fell from the sky in a burning star - I saw it with my own eyes.’

Kraglin had ducked a little with the tousle, a curious little noise in his throat. He was beginning to realise, dimly, that Yondu might be introducing him as his new pet. Which was insulting, but if it let him live, then he could deal with it for now. He’d wait until there was less of a language barrier to complain. Around them, the crowd was still buzzing a little.

“A burning star?” One seemed to be asking. “The fire in the sky, night before last?”

“I thought it was a burning lightning bolt,” another admitted, rubbing her chin thoughtfully. “No one had been out to check the damage yet…”

“Aja-!” one man cried, his voice hushed. Kraglin turned his head as best he could in Yondus grip to see an older blue woman hobbling out of the crowd. “Aja, come back, it could be dangerous-”

“Tch, tch,” The old woman waved a hand over her shoulder, dismissive of the concerns. Older than most - some said all, but it wasn’t certain - in the village, Aja had seen some things. She was not about to be scared of this ugly, jangly man that the Chiefs fool-headed son had said came tumbling out of the sky. Aja made the bow before her Chief, as best as her back would allow, before coming closer.

“Aja-”

“Hush your coward mouth,” she called, not bothering to look over her shoulder as she tugged the fabric around her to crouch down easier, peering at Kraglin. He flinched back a little, a barely noticeable motion to all who didn’t have their hands on him and she paused. Aja turned her hands palm up, and smiled, making a soft, shushing sort of noise, one used to calm fretting pouchlings in a heavy storm.

“He is more afraid of us then we should be of him. Shh shh, there you are. Come, boy,” Directed at Yondu, old enough not to bother for titles as she stretched out her hand to Kraglins head, not touching as she maintained steady eye contact - like training a guard-animal, keeping her voice low. “Let it know I wont hurt it.”
“Y’know,” huffed Yondu, scooting around on his ass to face the old bat, who was now making googoo eyes at his star-man like she’d felt the randy gust of a Season around her loins for the first time in fifty years. “He ain’t actually an animal. Even if he sounds like one. You don’t gotta be all quiet, and shit.”

Aja may be maintaining a careful inch of space between her and Kraglin, but she had no qualms about slapping the back of Yondu’s head. And Yondu couldn’t even gripe about it! Aja wasn’t quite the oldest in the village, but (as she liked to tell Moghi when the senile old fart was shuffling through the fruit-groves) it was only a matter of time. Rather than snarling at her, he scrunched his nose, flapping his hand about in front of it.

“Phew. You smell that, Kraglin? S’real, bona fide old-person. Ain’t so many of them round these parts, so take a good whiff.”

“Yondu,” snapped Uzuko. “That is not how we address our elders -”

“Apparently we’re supposed to be respectful. But don’t bother with Aja. This old biddy’ll give as good as she gets.”

Aja turned a charming wrinkly smile on him.

“Oh, it’s you Yondu? I didn’t recognize you with your loincloth on.”

Dammit.

“That was one time,” Yondu hissed. “And I was tryin’ to give you a damn heart attack so I could practice my dead-rites. Y’know. For when I’m chief, and I outlaw any old village-sitters who backtalk me.” Aja all-out chortled.

“If you think a little thing like yours would scare me… I changed your damn nappy-rags, kid.”

“Aja...” He did not whine. Yondu was not a child, and therefore whining was beneath him. But while Kraglin was still making that ridiculous lost-Vash’ryk-pup face he’d mastered on the trek over, and probably didn’t have the first clue of what was going on, having Aja rail on him in front of the guy he maybe, possibly, just a little bit wanted to impress was not Yondu’s idea of fun.

She must see something in his eyes - projected it there herself no doubt, what with how she was treating Kraglin like he was some delicate eggshell, crackable if squeezed. She decided to be merciful.

“So,” she said, turning back to Kraglin with a kindly smile. It disguised the strength with which she pinched his hollow cheeks, manipulating his funny, fuzzy face this way and that. “I suppose it’s useless to ask for a name.”

“Hello,” Kraglin said as his face was squashed, even if the nice old lady didn’t seem to have the foggiest idea what he’d said. She patted his jaw and let her hand follow back to the back of his skull, probing and testing there. Then she fully leaned over him, peering down the back of his neck, to his apparent consternation, as he squeaked. “Yondu?”

“Well, he knows your name, at least.” she said from behind Kraglin, her hand shoving under his undershirt and wagging around on his spine. “And its not like he was Crested and it dropped off. Probably some-” She hummed suddenly, Kraglin tilting his head questioningly, looking between her and Yondu with vague concern.
Aja reached for Kraglin’s shoulder, much slower this time, and peeled down the fabric to reveal the gashes there, moving to let Uzuko view them as well. She traced the raw skin between them, humming a little.

“*Taabshqa,*” she said, for those at the back who couldn’t see. “Looks like your star-man had a bit of trouble on his tumble, hmn? Untreated, but they’re clean, at least.”

“Yeah, the *Taabshqa* didn’t scrape his crest off neither, if that’s what yer wondering. In fact, *I* think…” Yondu lowered his voice dramatically for the benefit of their younger audience - who obediently ‘oohed’ and leaned in, enraptured. “I think he never had one to begin with.”

“Impossible,” Uzuko scoffed. “No child is born without a crest. If any are, they ought to be drowned in their eggs as affronts to Anthos.”

He may be talking neutrally, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t considering righting this perceived past failing on behalf of Kraglin’s parents. Or... perhaps not. While Yondu’s relationship with his father was described as ‘strained’ by diplomatically-minded bards, the tension between them did occasionally lead Yondu to forget that Uzuko Udonta III wasn’t entirely heartless. There was a reason he had remained chief for so long, and it certainly wasn’t for his prowess in battle - why would a chief fight when they had trained warriors to act on their behalf?

Uzuko was, as he liked to remind Yondu, the man to have called a cessation on the *za’gah*. He knew mercy. And as in this situation, surrounded by the pleading red eyes of the village’s curious youngsters, he knew when to exercise it.

“He is a *Krz-qa-sza* of some description, that much is evident.” Uzuko stepped from the shadow of his hut and hunkered besides Aja. His loincloth, tinkling with the same bright gold beads that were strung through his crest, was scooped over one knee to prevent it from dragging in the dust while preserving the chief’s dignity. He ran his hand across Kraglin’s short-shorn hair. “I imagine he’s from the Ignokai tribe, outcast for being so ugly. The pain and shock must have maddened the poor creature.”

Yondu decided against admitting that had been his first guess too. He wanted to snarl at Aja and Uzuko, both of whom were now prodding his star-man’s face, paying especial attention to the rounded ears and the oversized nose. But if he told them not to crowd Kraglin, they might get the wrong idea and start thinking he cared about the idjit.

When Uzuko made to check Kraglin’s teeth though, Yondu couldn’t restrain himself. For some reason, the thought of Uzuko running calculating fingers over those hidden fangs made Yondu’s blood run hot. He grabbed his wrist.

“Don’t,” he growled, nails digging. “They’re sharp.”

Kraglin took all the poking and prodding with surprising good humour - he didn’t even seem to mind when Aja honked on his nose teasingly, just to surprise a smile from him. If nothing else, it certainly seemed like he’d been socialised with older people a little better than with children, some of which were trying to strain forwards now that their Chief was busy playing with the new thing.

Kraglin kept glancing at Yondu though, trying to keep some gauge on what was going on here; if this was simple curiosity that was one thing, but if they were trying to figure out his prime cuts to cook then they were looking in the wrong places.

“Yondu,” Kraglin was going to start using that as his alarm call, that much was obvious. He didn’t jerk back from the hand near his mouth so much as his eyes went wide, his head trying to lean away
from Uzuko's hand as politely as he could, averting his eyes.

Enough of this. He had his own methods of communicating simple ideas. So he put a hand on Yondu's arm, very briefly, before giving as polite a look to the taller blue man as possible.

He pointed to himself, and his mouth, and shook his head - then gestured to Uzuko, his crest, his teeth again, then he frowned, trying to get the idea across.

“What is it doing?” Aja tilted her head a little as Kraglin repeated the mime; crest, teeth, both hands, and a headshake. “Can’t it speak at all?”

“Well yeah, just not our language. He talks, but we can’t understand him, so he’s making shapes instead.” Yondu gave her a nudge. “Right now, he’s telling you you look real fat in that loincloth. And that yer tits are all saggy, grandma.”

“I’d certainly hope so. Breasts as perky as your friend Jaku’s -”

“She ain’t no friend of mine!”

“- Have no place on a woman of eighty-some rainy seasons. You’ll understand, when you reach my age.”

Yondu shuddered, imagining himself with wrinkles. “I’ll have dedicated myself to Anthos long before then, don’t’chu worry.”

But as for Kraglin though… Well, his charade had been all too clear. Yondu cleared his throat, shoving his father’s captive hand back against his chest.

“He don’t like it when you touch him.” Slight exaggeration - Kraglin’d only really shown signs of protest when Uzuko tried to pry open his mouth. Which worked fine for Yondu. He couldn’t explain the odd possessiveness he felt towards Kraglin’s teeth, but his finger prickled at the recollection of having them in such close proximity.

They were a secret weapon, Kraglin’s last line of defence. One warrior to another, Yondu wasn’t going to reveal them. Especially not here while Kraglin was surrounded by hostile blue faces, probing fingers, and Uzuko’s clinical stare.

Uzuko who must be realizing that alone, Kraglin wouldn’t last a week in the jungle. By the laws of hospitality laid down by Oola before she fed herself to the Za’gah tree, the Zatoan were thus duty-bound to extend the offer of kinship.

Yondu being Yondu couldn’t help but rub it in.

“So dad? What’s the verdict?” He rumpled Kraglin’s hair again, like he was one of the dogs that the village-sitters trained to herd the kihaq into their pens at night. “Can I keep him?”

Kraglin seemed relieved when the Chief’s hand backed away from his mouth, and he gave a small smile and nod of what was obviously gratitude to the man - he made a motion that looked like him giving something from his chest, closed hand to open, one that he knew was taken on several planets as a ‘thank you’. Yondu was saying something again and petting his head which, probably should have felt weird but didn’t.

It felt reassuring, all things considered. Yondu probably wasn’t going to kill him, or let him be killed, or else he wouldn’t have bothered getting him all the way here. In truth, Kraglin was a little bit worried about how far this place was from his ship, seeing as he knew he needed to be able to fix it,
but that could wait as a consideration for later.

Aja, at least, knew better than to declare a decision like that. If she tugged the shirt off their hairy visitor and made a low noise of grandmotherly concern over the gashes in his chest, which made some of the softer-hearted mothers cluck their tongues, well, that was all just poor timing on her part. Probably could blame it on the braincells farting in the wrong direction.

Kraglin did his best not to look alarmed at an octogenarian stripping him, being given his shirt to hold onto to stop the confused expression.

Yondu sniggered, patting Kraglin again. He liked the feel of springy hair against his palm. And thanks to Aja, he was reminded of what he’d discovered in the hotpool - that that hair ran down, down, all the way down, beyond where it grew on any Centaurian. So long as Kraglin didn’t mind, Yondu planned on scratching his head for the next hour at least. Possibly the rest of the day.

(Of course, if Kraglin did mind, Yondu would reiterate his stance on not caring about the idjit or what he thought of him, and do it anyway.)

“S’okay,” he said to his befuddled face as it emerged from the bottom of his shirt. “She ain’t gonna jump your bones. Even if there’s plenty of bone to jump, you skinny streak of piss.”

Aja gave Kraglin’s bruised back a cursory once-over, urging the man to spin so she didn’t have to rise onto her arthritic old knees. “Don’t worry,” she whispered conspiratorially. “Insulting people is that one’s way of showing affection.”

“He must love me then,” said Uzuko straight-faced. Yondu sputtered denials. The villagers, sensing the main spectacle was over, took the opportunity for a good laugh at Yondu’s expense. They dispersed gradually, casting furtive glances at their new guest but willing to trust the chief’s discretion. The children were gently but firmly steered far enough that their short attention spans found some other shiny rock or butterfly to latch onto, and (after a final glaring bout with Yondu) Jaku-and-co retreated to their posts.

“He may stay,” Uzuko decreed, standing and extending a hand to Aja. “But I expect you to take responsibility for him, Yondu. I know this is not a concept you’re familiar with - but who knows? Perhaps this will be a good lesson for you, in how to care for others besides yourself.”

Yondu grated his molars. Sure, he wanted to keep Kraglin around - but on his own terms, not his father’s. This felt more and more like being saddled with babysitting duty. “What do you want me to do with him? Cart him about in my damn pouch?”

Uzuko shrugged. He didn’t even crack a smile at Yondu’s suggestion, the humorless git. “Teach him our ways, our language, our dances and our hunt. If he is to live with Zatoan, he must become one - so long as he’s not too mad and broken to learn. And what is ‘Zatoan’ runs deeper than the height of our crests or the color of our skin. It comes from here.” He placed his warm heavy palm on Yondu’s chest, over the first tattoo he had ever given his son. The heart thrumming beneath his fingertips beat just as strongly as his own. “It comes from Anthos.”

“And if you get sick of him,” Aja shrugged as she was pulled up, patting her Chiefs hand with real affection and gratitude, easing a crick in her back. “Just put him back where you found him, I suppose.” Not that she was angling for a reaction there, oh no. She reached down and motioned her hand infront of Kraglins face, waiting for his attention before she smiled.

He smiled back a little, clearly understanding that he was not due for the stewpot today. He would wait for Yondus signal to stand though, giving him a brief glance as Aja stretched a little.
“Stop by if he needs poultice for those cuts.” She said, starting to hobble off in her own direction, whatever that was. “And don’t forget to take him for walks and water!”

“Walks and water, walks and water,” muttered Yondu to himself. They had an hour to kill before the evening meal, having missed lunch - after which the rains would begin again, the second sun would dip below the mountains, and the Zatoan village would settle in their nests to sleep.

Yondu was currently leading Kraglin on a guided tour - which amounted to Yondu stomping past the myriad attractions (the *kihaq* pen, the drooling dogs, the horizontal looms, the fruit grove and the *za’gah* tree) at breakneck speed and barking at Kraglin to stay close or be left to the mercies of the village children, who peeped at them from around houses and behind parents’ sturdy blue legs. Other than that, there was little conversation - but Yondu could talk enough for two. “Walks and water - the hell does she think you are? She’ll be tellin’ me to wipe yer ass next, I swear…”

Yondu trailed off.

He thought about things logically - the meat they’d shared in the morning, the fat ripe fruit he’d plucked on the way back from the hotpools, pointing out to Kraglin which were edible and which were strictly not. Assuming that stars had comparable digestive systems...

“Uh. Okay. Basic rules. If you gotta piss, you do it on any old tree - just not the *za’gah* one, or there’ll be hell to pay. If we’re talking number twos, we got a compost heap with some squatters over it out beyond the groves.” He pointed, making Kraglin’s head rotate on his spindly neck in that general direction. The distraction gave him time to ponder how he was gonna mime all this out without making a fool of himself. “Raking that out is dad’s favourite form of punishment, so best you don’t sass him none. I ain’t hanging out with you if you’re stinky.”

Kraglin had taken in the walked map of the village with the concentration of someone who had a knack for this sort of thing - in truth he was compiling a mental layout, a picture in his head. He could tell the difference between the styles of houses, though he wasn’t sure what the significance of them was. At a guess, he thought the ones with animal markings and skins out front must belong to hunters or herders of some sort, and there were some with more drapery than usual which he figured must be someone who dealt in something fancier than meat. Jewels perhaps, or pottery, if they were at that stage yet.

If not, Kraglin wondered if it was breaking a directive to teach them how to fire clay. He wanted to repay them for the kindness of letting him live here while he fixed his ship - be of some use. Part of that was his troop training, which he resented, and part of it was from something further back, an echo he did his best to ignore the source of.

On Hrax, everyone had a job or a role assigned to them. His had been something fairly low on the food chain, at birth - an unexpected extra, he was expected to give over his organs, his blood, anything his stronger siblings needed in case of an emergency. And while there had been one or two times when they’d shoved a tube in him to drain him, here he was, alive and well, and crash landed on a planet that none of them had ever seen, or ever would. Most Hraxlians never left their planet, simply because there wasn’t enough time in the day to.

There was always much work to be done tomorrow.

Kralin shook himself out of those thoughts, taking a deep breath and focusing on what Yondu was saying to him, or at least where he was being directed to look. The groves of trees, with ripening fruit on the branches, and he nodded a little to show he was willing to be listening. This whole point and guess routine was getting old though, and he was impatient to start communicating in a more two-way street.
Miming was working well so far, and he’d learned that the children of the village adored it when he waved at them, returning the gesture with such gusto he’d almost been worried their little arms would drop off. But speech was really the only way to go, and he resolved to start on it soon.

“Your village,” He gestured at Yondu, then the area around them. “Is beautiful,” He smiled, an open palm to try and denote something good. “And thank you,” A hand from chest to Yondu, hand opening from a fist. “For keeping me here.” He paused, then pointed at himself, then the area.

Yondu took in that miniature performance, watching Kraglin’s spindly fingers spread and flex. Sussing that this implied gratitude - well-deserved, of course - he let out a whoop of a laugh. Having been reminded of the extent of Kraglin’s torso-injuries by Aja’s stripping of the man (and suffering twinges in his arm that had been peppered with glassy flak during his assault on Kraglin’s star) he kicked him jovially in the shin instead.

“Wait to see where we’re sleeping before ya thank me,” he said. “Ain’t no luxury accommodation, that’s for sure.” But Kraglin’s acknowledgment of all Yondu’d done for him thawed the ice a little. Rather than nurturing annoyance at his father for making him the man’s primary caretaker, Yondu decided to enjoy this excursion.

It was a conscious change in demeanor but an effective one. Yondu showed Kraglin around with markedly more animation.

He tugged him to the trees at the edge of the clearing. Intermittent huts creaked in their boughs, small simple perches meant to shelter the look-outs from the elements - and, should the Ignokai mount a raid, enemy fire. They were intended for a single watchman, which meant it’d be cozy when he and Kraglin took their shift later in the week (because even as a lone huntsman, there were certain expectations piled on the son of a village chief; one being that he would contribute as much to the safety of his home as any other initiated warrior).

It’d be just the two of them, trapped in a dingy drafty box for the four-hour period between the rains. Nothing to do but kick their heels and play ‘I-spy’ and target practice with the furry critters that scurried between the trees. Yondu couldn’t wait.

...Because it would be an excellent opportunity to teach Kraglin more of their words, of course. Not for any other reason.

He waved at Jaku’s box and dodged the rotten fruit projectile. Then, noticing the position of the suns, turned to Kraglin an instant before the gong rang.

“Hey, twiggy. You hungry?”

Kraglin did his best not to yelp when he was kicked, not bothering to reach down the considerable distance to try and rub it better - he’d only take too long and get kicked in the head, he figured, so it was easier to cross one leg behind him and rub his shin on his calf with a grumble and almost-fond little swat in Yondus general direction. He had the feeling that spending time in the mans company was going to be a lot like being saddled with a younger pod to keep an eye on. Not that it was a bad thing, just that he was going to have to stay on his toes a lot more than he’d anticipated.

The little nest boxes seemed more like what he’d been expecting though, and their purpose was clear enough from the armed people inside them. He gave them his best little smile and wave, though it faltered when he saw Yondu get ‘offered’ some well-ripened fruit.

Kraglin was beginning to get the suspicion that Yondu might not be as popular around the town as Yondu thought he was.
The gong didn’t make him jump, just turn his head curiously to the source of the noise. He could see the blue people starting to mill their way in one direction, and he looked back at Yondu with the expression of someone who had figured out that yes, there was somewhere to be when that noise rang out. He just wasn’t sure where it was supposed to be.

“I’m gonna guess that's either food,” Well, he could smell something on the wind, and it was pretty good. “Or my stew bath is ready and this was a nice walk to keep me distracted.”

The firepit had been scraped into a natural dimple in the rock, twelve feet across in every direction. It was only filled properly at night, when it had to blaze bright enough to ward away enterprising vash’ryk. During the daylight hours, aku were the main threat to the village, and it’d take more than a few flames to keep them off. So while it was constantly tended, during the day it was kept hot and small, concentrated for cookery rather than light.

There were three village sitters watching it at any one time, turning the spits and raking the coals. Yondu may have a deficit of respect for those who stayed behind the village fence, but the fire watchers at least he knew better than to mess with. Living out their lives daubed in soot, their blue skin darkened and stained from frequent application, they looked like the chunks of charcoal they pried from the ember-bed with hands toughened from years spent dipping in and out of the flames. That charcoal was used to decorate their huts: black dusty murals that were washed away and replaced every time the rains came.

Their teeth glinted, smiles unnaturally white against their sooty skin. They didn’t speak much, throats gravelled from constant smoke inhalation. But they welcomed the pair to the circle, even when the rest of the tribe shuffled away, staring at the newcomer and whispering behind cupped hands.

Yondu took the crude wood bowl he was offered and passed it to Kraglin before receiving one for himself. He stuck his nose over it, inhaling the earthy odor of stewed tubers and salted meat. Stocks were running low, but his mother’s huntpack was due before the end of the lunar-cycle, dragging fresh kills for the pot and skins for clothes and ornaments.

‘Tuck in,’ he said to Kraglin, plonking himself in the center of the empty circle cleared around them. ‘Ain’t poisoned.’

Kraglin didn’t like to admit that the noises coming from his stomach when they got closer to the inviting smell of stew were his - he’d had the bones in the morning, and fruit on the walk, and before that he’d been on base. It had been getting a little long to wait for more food, but this was something else. He took his bowl with a smile, more to the chefs then to Yondu, before he sat himself down as directed.

He did glance around though, seeing the suspicion on the other faces. While he couldn’t blame them, he did resolve to try and act in a way that would make them a little more accepting. There was no need to be rude to these people, given that they’d taken him into their home and hearth, fed him and not - fed on him. It was greatly appreciated.

Kraglin picked up a few bites of the meat, chewing on them as he did his best to ignore the not-too whispered questions from children, asking their parents -- well he didn’t know what, but he knew what about. He decided to just smile and get through their period of being curious, and kept his attention on Yondu, as well.

He figured he could learn a lot.

Aja accepted her bowl of tubers with smiles and thanks, and hobbled her way over to where she wanted to sit. She patted and pinched smaller babies cheerfully, tousled a few heads as she went,
before sitting herself with an aching little bow near her chief, where she could talk and be heard to him.

“A curious thing,” She said, watching the way Kraglin picked vegetables and meat together between his fingers, eating while keeping his head down. “I have seen and known our land for longer than most have been alive here today, and I have never seen anything like it.” The invitation for his thoughts was clear, without demanding or asking them of him.

Had Uzuko been his son, he would’ve grunted noncommittally and returned to more pressing matters - like shovelling food into his mouth as fast as he could swallow. But Uzuko was not his son. Uzuko was a chief, a respected man, and (dare he say it) a mature and responsible adult.

He placed his bowl on his lap and treated Aja to a warm smile. The office of chief brought with it an enduring loneliness; the sense that he was surrounded by his people all day, but never truly among them. Aja, who had carried Yondu over her withered shoulder when his mother was away on a hunt and his father had disputes to settle, the penances for which were not be suitable for young eyes (and who had done the same for Uzuko himself when it had been his father amassing hoops of gold through his crest year-on-year) was the closest confidant he had.

“I concur,” he said, words almost lost in the crackle of the fire. “This creature - whatever it may be… He is… different. A foreigner, I believe. From the deepswamps, or perhaps the plains beyond the mountain range to the east. I cannot think of any other reason why Anthos would react to his presence like this.”

He tapped the wood to demonstrate. The contact caused a tiny flare across both their crests - in contrast to Yondu’s latest pet, whose presence felt disturbingly muted, like he was walking on stilts. Perhaps those strange contraptions on his feet - made from a hide Uzuko couldn’t identify - contributed to the problem?

There were logs around the fire, trunks too large to burn that’d been dragged in close to have their branches stripped away then left, a loose ring of makeshift benches. They baked dry on their fire-facing side, moist-veering-rotten on the other. Being chief, Uzuko was guaranteed a seat. He hadn’t had to ask, hadn’t had to demand - hadn’t even thought about it. When the young weaver who’d occupied the spot sprang to his feet, Uzuko had accepted with a gracious nod and, in the way of those accustomed to power, immediately put the boy out of his mind as he and his friends moved to the other side of the blaze to give their chief and the elder some privacy. He continued to talk - Yondu had nabbed enough of the village’s attention by dragging this stray home that Uzuko didn’t have to worry about eavesdropping gossips.

“He is of little concern. Our customs our foreign to him - it won’t be long before he becomes homesick, yearns for wherever it is he came from, and returns.”

“But?” Aja asked. The firelight was gentle to the million creases, softening her wizened raisin of a face. However, there was no hiding the sharpness of those red eyes. The eyes of a woman like Aja never grew old. “Something disturbs you, chief. I see it weighing on your forehead. Careful - you do not want to wind up as wrinkled as I am. Not before you hit your sixtieth rainy-season.”

Uzuko’s smile fell. He considered denying the charge. Aja knew when to back down; she would bow her head and shuffle away to harass some other brooder who stared into the quickstepping flames as if they held all the answers in Anthos’ great head. She would also smirk at him for the next moon-cycle. It was easier to get this over with.

“Yondu,” he said heavily. “He lives in a dream world, speaking of the stars as if they are alive. This man, innocent though he may be, encourages him through his very existence.” He raised his gaze to
hers. “I have entrusted him to Yondu in the hopes it will teach him responsibility. But now… I wonder if I should have separated them instead.”

Aja hummed a little in understanding, stirring her vegetables around thoughtfully. For a moment, she balanced her spoon on the edge of her plate, mimicking aiming it at someone she had previously found rather irksome - it was obvious by the little mimed gesture of firing it, and the almost silent ‘feewww-boompf’ noise that she muttered that she had imagined it finding its mark.

“It could make things worse.” Because she was not in the habit of lying to people she’d changed the nappys of, and she shrugged a little. “Or it could fix things, if it turns out that he isn’t a star. Who can say? Your son has been asking questions, and Anthos has provided him with a riddle, one he must solve for his answer. I’m certainly not going to ask him for the cheatbook.”

Aja chuckled a little and took a mouthful, watching as one tiny blue child managed to wiggle free and scamper its way over to the pair. It reached up, and just managed to get a tiny handful of nose before it was retrieved, with some laughter and various apologetic noises. Kraglin, for his part, just laughed and rubbed his nose, and Aja clucked her tongue.

“He seems very young, my chief. I don’t think we need to worry about Yondu taking too much from him.” Aja paused, pondering- “Are we sure its a male? I hope so, because if thats a sample of its species fairer form, well…”

Uzuko stroked his chin. He observed the way his son interacted with the stranger, stealing juicy tidbits from his bowl and laughing as he was shoved, loud and gleeful.

“I certainly hope so,” he said.

By the time they’d eaten their fill, the first raindrops were spluttering out in the firepit and the remains of the meal were being scraped from the cauldron’s bottom to be fed to the dogs before they got soggy. Before long, the fire would be weaned down to a few bare sticks and covered so it wasn’t doused. The fire-keepers’ lid, a tarpaulin of hide treated so as not to be flammable and coated in so many layers of ash that it was stiffer than a slice of slate, covered the entire pit from one side to the other.

Yondu hung back longer than usual, supposing Kraglin would like to watch. But by the time the tepid rain had saturated his shoulders and loincloth and he was bobbing from one foot to the other to keep warm, he, Kraglin, and the fire-keepers were the only souls left under the downpour.

“C’mon, up and at ‘em,” he said, plucking at Kraglin’s ears to get him standing. He pointed to the far-off suns, the last of which had dipped below the mountainous horizon-line, glossing the sky in amber. “Time for bed. The village wakes early, and if you ain’t bright-eyed and bushy-tailed and so forth, I can and will dunk you in the creek.”

His arm really was itching badly now. He’d stolen tweezers from Aja’s belt-purse when she was conducting her inspection of Kraglin’s wounds. With the dry twigs he kept by his nest he could create enough light to see by, and then (once Kraglin was asleep, and after a fortifying swig of teku-milk) let the operation begin.

Kraglin found everything fascinating - of course he did. He liked watching the village go about its pace, and even enjoyed being in the rain a little. Granted, he wasn’t entirely sure why Yondu had kept them out there that long, but he was pleased to follow him back somewhere warm and snug. Understanding this was where they were sleeping for the night he rumbled a yawn and some thanks, curling up where indicated. He felt the aches and the sores, and did his best to focus past those. He had to start getting things ready for his ship, he told himself tiredly, drifting off.
It wasn’t until later in the night, not too much, that he rolled onto his side and hissed a little, the stab of sore ribs waking him. For a moment, he was disorientated, sitting and scrubbing his eyes until he pieced things together again.

Crash landing, blue swamp devil, village. He blinked and turned his head to the source of light, his back curved as he stifled a yawn, seeing a figure by the flames.

“Yondu?” What was he doing?

Yondu swore again, an invocation of “Anthos!” that trailed off into a sharp hiss. He had his forearm propped on his knees, back to the sleeping star-man, facing the vivid glow of his fire. The tweezers were in the other hand. His mug of teku-concoction (the concentration of which had been steadily upping as Yondu dug shard after shard free, scraping more of the root to dissolve in the hot dog-milk for every glittering piece he extracted) sat on the floor besides.

In short, he was as ready as he could ever be. But he hadn’t counted on how much it would hurt.

Yondu was good with pain. He was a hunter; he could handle anything the forest threw at him and come up swinging (so long as that ‘anything’ wasn’t an angry yolopp.) But that was in the field. Here, there was no adrenaline to distract him, no further task to be accomplished. Just Yondu and the fire, and the giddiness from the teku, and the pain.

Gritting his teeth, he brandished his tweezers once more. Best get this over with.

“Hey,” Kraglin didn’t want to move too much, given that this was a nest and he didn’t like his chances of tumbling out of it. But he did scoot over a little, making sure his movements were obvious enough that Yondu would hear him, or something.

He frowned a little when he saw the tool in Yondus hand, the little pile -- and it twigged. The window (which he was going to have to replace and deal with some other time) must have caught him when it broke. Kraglin winced at the idea of Yondu having carried those around with him all day, wrinkling his nose.

“Yondu? Let me help, you dumbass.”

Head spinning from the teku - damn, this stuff was potent - Yondu almost didn’t recognize his name when it mangled past Kraglin’s alien vocal cords. The rustle as Kraglin shifted made him jump though. His tweezers jabbed him painfully in the wrist. “Aw, hell…”

Chits of glass glimmered in the firelight. They looked like the shining stones the hunters dug from the lava bed when they were extracting yaka-ore - the ones Yondu liked to steal for his hoard of shiny things, which resided under the pelts that lined his crude oval nest and made sleeping in it only marginally more comfortable than bedding down on a rock. That was okay though. Yondu slept under the stars most nights anyway. Perhaps he ought to make it a little more hospitable for his guest - but Kraglin had yet to complain. He could suck it up.

Yondu kept getting distracted by the glass, turning the pieces over and over and watching them split the light into the colours of the sky after rain. He had lost track of how much time he’d wasted, eyes scrunched up, squinting at the tiny shards pinched between his tweezers.

The teku enhanced his concentration - if not always on the task at hand - but it also made everything swim like Yondu was turning circles underwater. His last three attempts to gouge out the shards had been more like stabs. But hey. On the plus side, his arm didn’t hurt any more. Yondu could wiggle all his fingers, he just couldn’t feel them move. That was a side-effect of the teku, not something
that’d make him worry about being able to draw his bow come morning. It’d be worse if he left the splinters to fester.

When his vision focused on Kraglin - finally - he waved at him with the bloody instruments, gripping them just tight enough that they didn’t fly off into the fire. His hut was built against the fence, as far from his father’s as he could manage. As such, the wall behind him was flat, perfectly situated for shadow puppets. Yondu’s danced enthusiastically, animated by the small fire and his own exuberant greeting.

“Kraglin! Ain’t morning yet. Why're you awake, idiot?”

“Hey,” Kraglin had little to no idea what Yondu had said, of course, but he knew there had been a greeting in there and smiled a little as he waved to show it was returned. The other’s movements, and the glass of something next to him, lead him to believe he was drunk on - something gross, by the looks of it. Kraglin put his hand out gently, offering to take the tweezers, pointing to the others arm with his free hand.

“You want someone with steadier hands to give that a go?” He offered Yondu a wry little smile, nodding at the cuts a bit. “Looks like you might be missing a bit there. Lemme get them out and we can both go back to sleep, yeah?”

Yondu let him take the tweezers, after a brief tug of war. Kraglin seemed curious about them, and Yondu had promised to teach him their ways. But in truth, he was disappointed. First he couldn’t make fire, then he was intrigued by tweezers... Maybe the stars weren’t as advanced as he thought? Then Kraglin gestured to his arm. Oh. He wanted to... help?

Since leaving the pack, Yondu had dealt with his injuries solo. It was a matter of pride. He couldn’t very well go running to mummy every time he twisted his ankle, not after he’d called her the swamp-breathed spawn of a yolopp and stomped away from her warband, proclaiming over his shoulder that if the older huntress didn’t know when to back down and let the new generation take over he would strike out alone.

Admittedly, at the time he’d expected some of the younger hunters to follow him, but hey. More fool them.

If the wounds were more serious than he could handle (or simply out of reach - like that time a taabshqa had shredded half the skin off his back and only narrowly missed clipping his tahlei) he’d head over to Aja and badger her into bandaging him up. Old biddy had steady hands, for a woman of her advanced years. Sure, it meant Yondu had to suffer through her cheek-pinching and clucking and giggles at the faces he pulled when she applied the salve, but that was better than tempting infection.

Similarly, while a part of Yondu wanted to proclaim he could handle this himself and shove Kraglin away, the teku had mellowed his temperament into something more compatible with cooperation.

Kraglin wanted to help him. Kraglin liked him.

That was rare enough, in this village. Yondu didn’t give two shits for the villagers’ opinions (especially when they portrayed him as a half-feral unpredictable lunatic more interested in stargazing than the future of their people). He would never change himself for something as sentimental and stupid as others’ affection. However, Kraglin’s concern still made a warm flutter reverberate inside him.
Must be the *teku*.

Scooting his pot to one side - and slopping the grainy milk as he went - Yondu dazedly thrust his arm in Kraglin’s direction. As there were currently two Kraglins blurring in and out of each other, he aimed between them.

“Go on then,” he muttered, head drooping onto the crook of his other elbow, where it rested on his upraised knee. “Knock yerself out.”

That had been way less of a fight then he'd been expecting - not that he was going to argue getting to deal with a more mellow version of Yondu’s little fits. Kraglin made a small noise as he arranged Yondu’s arm over his lap, gently tracing near the lines of cuts.

This was a task he could manage. Brothers in the fighting bands did this all the time- he’d often seen some of his own tending to each other with care and respect, never causing the other more pain than necessary. He gave Yondu the same attention, slipping the tweezers gently between the folds of skin to pull the twinkling little shards out.

“I’m gonna make you say thank you for this when you speak Xandarian.” He said, a low and pleased murmur just to keep some noise going, something to focus on. “I have a holopad or two in the ship. Might be something on learning it in there.”

Yondu rocked on his heels, trying to correct his spinning vision without squirming so much that Kraglin clipped a vein. The quiet rumble of the star-man’s voice created a cocoon of sound, so different from the clicks and whistles he knew. Having surrendered his arm, and with the *teku* bolstering his confidence that Kraglin wouldn't hurt him, Yondu was at peace.

Each dig of the tweezers felt far away. He watched his arm as if from a great distance. Outside, beyond the feathery aku-skin slung across Yondu’s doorway, the buzz of mosquitos and cicadas was like sawing wood. Everything was magnified yet muted at the same time, and he could’ve sworn he heard Kraglin’s heartbeat, mingling with the pound of his own.

His arm became a conduit, channeling something unspeakable. Yondu thanked the gloom for disguising his navy face.

Just heat from the fire, he told himself. But not even he believed it.

“Almost-” Kraglin cursed as the little chit of glass escaped him again, wincing almost on Yondu’s behalf. That one was hard in there, no doubt about it, and he sighed as he carefully slid the tweezers out.

“Hey,” He said softly, waiting for the others somewhat hazy attention to weave it's way back over to him. He offered a reassuring smile and tapped Yondus arm very gently, then pointed to his mouth.

“You jammed that one in pretty far,” he explained, miming with delicate fingers against the blue arm, showing how far. “I can get it out.”

It was gross, sure, but it would work. And he'd be lying if he said he hadn't liked how still and steady it made Yondu last time he had his teeth on him.

Life put you in strange places. Like lugging a doped baby *yolopp* home to show your father, or having a star-man press whiskery lips to your wrist, looking up at you with liquid-black eyes before pushing his tongue into your wounds.

Wet muscle ghosted Yondu’s arm, feeling out the gashes. When it wriggled inside, Kraglin applying
a little suction to work the glass to the surface, Yondu made a noise before he could stop himself - something breathy and quiet: Anthos’ name amalgamated into a moan.

Hugging his knees tighter, he watched Kraglin work with fever-bright eyes. He didn’t know what he was thinking. Didn’t know what he was feeling - only that this felt good, and that it was disgustingly easy to share this intimacy with a stranger, and that he would regret this in the morning.

But the morning was many hours away.

Yondu focused on the wobbling circle of Kraglin’s head as it bobbed up and down the length of his forearm. The firelight reflected from his scalp, highlighting every individual hair.

“Damn,” Yondu whispered. It seemed like a conversation for whispers. Something shared in privacy, far from the judgmental eyes of the villagers. They’d never understand. Not… this. Yondu’s spare hand crept to cup Kraglin’s crown, crushing those velveteen hairs under his palm - and coaxing Kraglin to continue his exploration, delicate and careful as if he were licking knife blades. “You ain’t half bad at this, star-man.”

Kraglin was infinitely careful, giving the soft flesh under his mouth the same care he gave his ship - crash-landing not included. The blood welling against his tongue worked as a caution, and Kraglin eased his movements to find the correct path. He kept his teeth back from his skin, never pressing more than the flat to blue, providing pressure to help push the shards to the surface.

If he had been told three years ago, as he dithered in the open cargo bay of a courier ship, that he would one day be sitting under an impossibly starry sky, teasing glass from the arm of a blue-skinned Terran with his mouth while strong fingers carded through his hair, well-

He still would have gone to space, that’s for sure.

Kraglin shut his eyes with a noise that was more a rumble against the skin then anything audible, fingers flexing around Yondu’s elbow and wrist, keeping him pinned there as he worked. A part of him was thrilled to have his mouth so close to a life vein, so trusted.

One day, he wanted to ask Yondu if their cultures had anything similar to this, to pressing bared weapons against a wound with intent to heal. Kraglin leaned back, a sliver of glass nipped carefully between his front teeth, dripping a thin line of navy down to his lips.

Yondu didn’t quite stifle his shudder. But the temperatures at night dipped below 20C - cold by Centaurian standards - so at least he had an excuse. Not that it was chilly like this: tucked in a ball, roasted between Kraglin’s warmth and the waxy-red flames. But… Eh.

Thinking was a surefire path to blacking out. Yondu quit while he was ahead.

Swaying, he let his hand slide from Kraglin’s hair - too short to get a grip on; he’d just wind up scratching the man’s scalp, and Anthos knew Kraglin didn’t need any more lacerations. Soon his bony body would be more cut than skin. His palm dragged clumsily over Kraglin’s forehead. Lovelines brushed the bridge of that magnificent nose.

Yondu slid his hand slowly down, eyes locked in wonder, until he was no longer stroking Kraglin’s face but his own arm, touch hardly registering. The exact point of their joining had been lost somewhere in the interim, pale flesh melding to blue in a dizzy blur.

Wetness crept down his wrist. Spittle, or…? When he gathered the coordination to turn his palm over, bringing it close to his face to squint at in the wavering, wobbling light, Yondu saw navy.
A thought sprawled through his mind, unbidden. What if Kraglin liked the taste? What if he reacted as he had done at the springs, and latched on for more? Well, Yondu thought. If there was nothing left but a husk in the morning, at least he’d die happy.

He shuffled about, not freeing his arm for the duration it took his limbs to respond. After a half-minute of aborted wobbles that almost saw him crashing sideways into the fire, Yondu’s position solidified into a sturdy kneel. Even with the added height of his thighs, it was difficult to curl around Kraglin like he wanted. Stupid lanky star-man. But Yondu managed it. He kept his arm flush against Kraglin’s lips, like a pouch-teat to a child, and draped his torso over Kraglin’s stooped head and ointment-smeared shoulders in a sweaty blue blanket.

“Don’t you dare stop,” he slurred.

Kraglin had a flinch of almost-worry when he saw Yondu swaying about like that - some sort of alcohol for sure, he decided, keeping his grip careful. When he was tucked over, he had to stifle a soft chuckle at the hug, if that’s what it was. It was obvious enough that Yondu liked the attention, and Kraglin discreetly dropped the glass into his palm and set it in the pile with the others.

There wasn’t any more left in Yondu’s arm, but if he wanted this… Kraglin shifted, one arm carefully winding around Yondu’s waist, dipping low to avoid touching his crest without any invitation. He slid his lips along the length of the cut, tongue dragging in a slow, slick line through the worst of it to help soothe and ease any sting, lips closing briefly around one end in a vague, toothless nip before it started back up the other way, towards the wrist again. His fingers grasped Yondu’s hip as he teased, returning the petting Yondu had given him.

Yondu would purr, if purring was a thing proud Zatoan warriors did. He made do with humming under his breath: no particular tune, just a deep-chested drone that would broadcast his content to any Centaurian in the vicinity. Slackening over Kraglin’s back, he hoped that his star-man understood.

“Thas nice,” he mumbled, patting Kraglin’s neck above the jagged scratches from the taabshqa.

“Thas real, real nice.”

Those pesky tingles were back. But if Yondu clamped down on them, forced them into submission rather than stoking them into an inferno, they could almost be mistaken for the flood of relaxing endorphins that saturated a body before it drifted into sleep. Yondu lolled loose, a boneless deadweight held up only by his skinny crutch. The swirl of the room was too disorientating, so he let his eyes drift shut. And as Kraglin’s tongue painted slick murals along his forearm, and his rail-thin hands bracketed Yondu’s hips, Yondu followed the darkness deeper inside himself, not to resurface until the two suns next rose.

Kraglin eased back gently when he felt the weight of Yondu settle more solidly onto his shoulders. He couldn’t help but smile a little, one hand gently petting up and down the others side, trying to keep him comfortable and asleep.

Honestly, he was rather proud - he had the impression that Yondu didn’t let his guard down too much, so to be considered a worthy mattress was quite an honour. Not one to pass that up, Kraglin leaned sideways against the wall, making sure he was still comfortable and asleep before he shut his own eyes to try and sleep.

Hey, he had been in the army. He was used to sleeping in weird, uncomfortable and inevitably sticky positions. And for getting a knee in the stomach in the morning as a wakeup call, letting out a birdlike squawk that made at least three Zatoan children run for cover, and Aja throw a handful of berries at Yondu’s nest.
Chapter 3

The next few days were a pleasant blur - getting to trail along with Yondu as he walked the forest paths, chattering away with points and hand motions and expressions until…

Until it was sort of starting to make sense. Limited sense, no deep and meaningful conversation, but enough to get through a day. It delighted Kraglin into snuffling snorts of laughter, to watch Yondu stick his head out of the nest with a ‘What’ hollered in crude, creole Xandarian. It was even better when Yondu brought it back in, wearing a smug grin.

He learned, with points and repetition, which animals were good to chase when Yondu gave a nod, and which were best left to their own devices, skirted around. Which plants made good food, which plants made better treats to be slipped into tiny blue hands when they came over to prod and poke him. The children giggled at his still-rusty whistles of greeting. They were patient with his dialect, apparently treating it as a sort of slang.

One thing nagged at him, but there were no words yet for him to ask Yondu why his village had no maps, no charts of the planet.

And there was Yondu himself. While Kraglin still struggled with the intricate rituals of village life, he had gleaned enough to realise this was the son of the chief. The brash, tolerated brat of the village, more like, but Kraglin preferred that to some of the others. They seemed so untouchable, so much further up, that he wasn’t sure how to deal with them yet. Kraglin was almost selfish with Yondu, he knew this, but he only had a limited amount of time before -

He pushed that aside for now, and leaned back, scrubbing at his eyes with the heels of his palms. It was late afternoon, the sky awash with colour and clouds, and he pressed his hands there until he saw sparkles behind his lids. He had sat up with Yondu almost every night, pointing and naming the stars, scratching the paths between them into the dirt, showing them again and again, the slow sweep of his hand across the glittering sky mimicking the flight of his ship, the fall, the crash.

He’d crept his arm around behind Yondu, palm on the floor before it evolved, moved, slowly and steady, until his fingers curled easy and content around his side, his head tucked close to Yondus to help direct his gaze. If he was someone else, he might have blushed at the memory. Instead he let his hands drop, head tilting back with a low noise.

Kraglin wasn't shy around those he was interested in, but he was unfamiliar with this fragility. He didn’t want to ruin things.

“What’s that?” He asked, in their mix of both, this half-way speech that served well enough for now. He heard some noise, some creaking, and didn’t want to have to move to peer over the railing of their nest - their nest - to see who was entering the village.

Yondu sleepily removed his head from Kraglin’s armpit. It was nearly midnight. The last downpour had petered out hours back - although their duration was lengthening, in conjunction with the shortening days.

The rainy season was nearly upon them. And after that, the Season itself - although Yondu didn’t want to think about that. Didn’t want to consider what it meant for him and Kraglin, or what he and Kraglin were forging together...

Just friendship, he told himself, yawning and clambering over Kraglin to squint into the darkness
beyond his carpet door. It had been tied back to allow the breeze to stir the muggy humid air, and while the bonfire provided some light, it was hard to pick out the individual figures in the throng that had passed through the nearest village gate. *If the village wants those teeth bred into our bloodline, you oughta be happy the guy’s getting nookie.*

The Season was still a long way off though. For now it was more important to enjoy Kraglin’s grumbles and yelps as Yondu’s knee squashed his liver and his hand planted flat on his cheek, smushing his face against the knobbly shape of a gemstone, cut from the lava-fields and hidden under a tossed rawhide. Served him right for interrupting his doze.

But as the crowd closed and the image coalesced (seriously, screw Kraglin for making him get up to look at it; the lazy sod knew Yondu’s night vision was worse than his) Yondu felt a sickening certainty brewing in his gut, the sort of feeling a hunter got right before they stumbled into a *vash’ryk* nest.

Things were about to change - and not for the better.

“The hunt’s back,” he said, whistling for the middle word when Kraglin’s *Zan-dare-ee-ahn* version escaped his churning mind. “They’re early. Something must have happened…” And in the deepswamps, the unexpected was never good. Yondu would profess not to care should his mother take a dive between a *yolopp*’s jaws. In fact, if anyone asked, he’d claim that his first port of call would be to toss a *teku* root on the fire, summon up her spirit, and give the old bitch a hearty middle finger (his favorite new insult, courtesy of Kraglin) for farewell.

But what Yondu claimed and what Yondu thought were often two very different things.

He couldn’t see his mother in her usual place, striding at the pack’s head. That meant nothing. She’d either run on ahead to inform the chief of their arrival, or lagged behind to scold the scouts on lookout duty if she’d found them slacking. Either way she’d survived, every vitriol-filled inch of her. As she boasted fewer inches than Yondu, she had a lot of vitriol to pack in. And Yondu doubted she’d be as accommodating of Kraglin as his father...

He managed a grin, and slapped Kraglin’s back over the healing bruises. “On the plus side, now ya get to meet both my parents.”

Said mother had rushed ahead, slipping in what was diplomatically called ‘the back way’ to the village - a slender, dangling bridge of roots and vines, a last escape route should things ever turn dire. She hadn’t left her pack without orders - her Second knew where their catches were destined, and who was getting what.

But Pharaqa had news, and she needed answers for it.

“Chief,” It was easy to keep the village distracted with the hunt at the gates, and she knocked on the doorframe. No doubt he was already awake, having heard their arrival and the people gathering by the fences. She knocked again, impatient, and tossed a glance over her shoulder to make sure that everyone was truly gone. This was not something she needed eavesdroppers to listen in on.

Uzuko paused in tying on his loincloth. Pharaqa. Come to talk to him personally - willingly, at that? Something must be wrong.

“What is it?” he asked, adjusting himself to an appropriate level of decency before ducking under his carpet-partition. He took note of the dark sky, of the swamp-mud streaking her cheeks that had yet to be bathed away. “You return early. Are you hurt?”
He looked her up and down, assessing every visible stretch of skin. She was their lead huntress - it
would not do to have her laid low, especially so close to the rainy season, when the lower valleys
flooded and the Ignokai and Krushqa and the other heathen tribes migrated up the mountain into
Zatoan territory. Uzuko’s concern was all pragmatic.

Twenty-three Seasons ago, his and Pharaqa’s copulation had been a mercurial thing: designed to
combine the fierce independence and fighting prowess of a warrior with the new chief’s calm, stoic
nature. Instead, it had brought together her temper and his stubbornness, with a dose of star-madness
stirred in that was Yondu’s alone. Had they considered becoming an exclusive mated pair, Yondu
would have been the divisive wedge between them. If Yondu was Anthos’ sign that their
relationship was doomed to fail, imagining what the second child might have been like was beyond
nightmarish.

Pharaqa scoffed and shook her head. “You think so little of me?” she spat, pulling herself to her full,
diminutive height.

Ah yes. There was that damned pride of hers. But Uzuko looked down on her for no other reason
than necessity.

“Excuse a village sitter his concern,” he said mildly. He glanced beyond her, over her crest, to where
her pack were accepting the adoration of the villagers with the grace of any gang of jocks. There was
lots of flexing involved. But even among that lot, there was something a little off, in the way they
interacted. As if the entire warband was holding its breath...

“What happened?” Uzuko repeated, turning to Pharaqa. “Tell me, huntress.”

Pharaqa mirrored his glance, though her eyes tracked through the crowd, not her pack. She knew
they were all accounted for, and she narrowed her eyes when they didn’t find their mark. Even in the
gloom, Yondu was usually easy to spot. He’d be taking up the most space and making the most noise
- or commenting on her kills. Either way, he’d be snide and rude, but still present.

His lack of attendance was concerning. She looked up to the line of nests, unable to spot his
shadowy form at the railings and scowled, clenching her fist at her side. She just knew that boy was
the cause of this issue, and here was proof - he hid from his own people, like a common criminal.

Pharaqa did her best not to rub between her eyes when she turned to Uzuko, now confident they
wouldn’t be overheard. It had been a hard decision to call off the hunt early, but what they found…

“We found something,” she explained, keeping her voice low and her arms folded under her chest.
“In the swamps. And I’ve no doubt who brought it there. Your Son-” His son when Yondu
misbehaved, their son when he excelled at something. “Shot a star from the sky, and now it lies in
the waters.”

If Uzuko heard the word ‘star’ one more time…Well, Anthos forbid what he would do.

He dug his knuckles into his forehead, exhaling until the urge to stomp to Yondu’s hut, drag the idiot
and his pet madman out, and bang their heads together in full view of the village faded. Forget
fending off the wrinkles until he was sixty. Uzuko had aged ten years since Yondu returned to camp,
and couldn’t shake the certainty that if he crossed to the elders’ huts opposite he’d find old Aja
tucked in her nest, cackling at his misery.

‘A star,’ he said, striving to sound calm. ‘Tell me more.’

“It’s large,” Pharaqa squatted down, using her finger to draw the rough shape of it in the ground,
detailing the spikes. “And a bright gold colour, shining when light falls on it. And hard as stone, dead inside and out.” The sight of it looming through the trees had been one that tested their courage, that much was true. To see such horns breaking through the underbrush, the still-silence of animals having deserted the area... It was either something they could kill and bring the golden horns back to their Chief, or something to run and warn the village of.

Dead, she hadn’t expected. She’d clambered into it, tracing the shapes of muddy footprints - a struggle? There were more outside, one barefooted, Zatoan. And another, with curious hooves, and the remains of a fire. The tracks led off, towards the village before they veered away, to the hot springs.

“It was found by someone already - if they did not tell you of it-”

Massaging his temples wouldn’t dissuade this headache. Uzuko’s molars scraped in frustration. “Yondu,” he said.

Pharaqa’s scowl wasn’t especially becoming. But then again, little of her face was - hunting didn’t lend itself to beauty, and Pharaqa was proud of the scar that slit her cheekbone-to-cheekbone, twisting her mouth into a semi-permanent leer. “Your son. I knew it.”

“Our son, Pharaqa. We must be consistent with him.” Uzuko took a breath, mentally preparing himself for the yelling that was likely to ensue. “And there’s sometimes you must know. The star... According to Yondu, it wasn’t empty when it fell.”

“Yes, now that you mention it.” Pharaqa stood, scuffling out her drawing with a foot. “There were tracks other than your sons at the site. A strange, closed foot, no toes or clawprints. Why, have you seen the creature that was in there? Did Yondu bring it back?” She paused, considering the options, and added hopefully: “Dead?”

The last thing she wanted was for the boy to keep the thing as a pet and grow attached. That would make putting it down more difficult.

“Insane,” Uzuko said. “Wounded, disturbed, outcast... An oddball even by Aja’s definition.” He rejoiced inwardly at Pharaqa’s grudging smile. As much as they clashed (over everything from the distribution of hunters on watch-duty, to appropriate disciplinary measures to be taken when dealing with their son), Uzuko did enjoy making Pharaqa laugh. It was, as any hunter would tell you, a rare occurrence.

He leant on the hut wall, watching her hunters leap and whoop and re-enact their adventures prior to the discovery of that troublesome star, dancing around the fire for the children’s amusement. His eyes strayed beyond them though, to a rickety hut built on an outcrop a way up the cliffside that formed the village’s rear defence.

The insides were unlit and silent. Uzuko was used to Yondu sleeping outside, sometimes slung over a bough of the za’gah tree or further afield, past where civilization turned to wilderness. The boy liked to climb, liked to be closer to his precious stars. At least this so-called star that Yondu’d brought home was keeping his feet on the ground. They had been sleeping in that hut, piled side-by-side like brothers, since Kraglin’s welcome to the village several moons ago. And they were sleeping similarly now. The chief’s nocturnal vision wasn’t good enough to make out any hint of movement through the open door-flap.

“I don’t believe he means us harm,” he said, smile playing round his lips. “Nor is he dangerous. The poor boy can’t even whistle.”
He’d heard Kraglin’s attempts. He often emulated Yondu as they sat side-by-side on their little watch-platform, feet kicking in time. His efforts made those of last Season’s young sound pleasant to the ear, who were just progressing past the stage where blowing raspberries was their main form of communication.

Pharaqa’s amusement was quickly stifled at the chief’s dismissal. She scoffed. “You know our people, chief. I know danger. Let me be the judge of that. Just because he hasn't shown any sign of-" Pharaqa had to freeze suddenly, a movement of her jaw betraying the cause as she stifled a yawn. Frustrated, she continued, moving to stand by his side and stare up at the hut as well. "Sign of violence doesn’t mean he isn't simply biding his time. If he's sensible enough to learn our ways and our language, then he has a sound enough mind to make plots; to lie. Was he questioned?"

*Interrogated* might have been a word closer to what she meant, but she felt *questioned* was gentle enough not to hurt her chief’s soft heart.

"And boy?" She frowned. "A child?"

Uzuko shook his head. "No, not a child, even if his speech is on par with one. He is old enough to be initiated into the huntpack, if that is what you are asking. I believe he is far too vulnerable for such a career, however. He is not the best climber, he can’t whistle for arrows, he is thin as a fresh shoot… He would, as you say, make fine *yolopp*-chow."

“So!” Even bone-tired, Pharaqa wasn’t letting that little admittance slip her by. “You *do* admit that *yolopp* exist!”

Uzuko’s smile curdled. “After that stunt your son pulled, bringing that monster through our gates…"

“My son?"

Oh, they were not getting into this again. Pharaqa was eyeing up the doorframe like she’d very much like to lean on it, and it was only her pride and his presence that prevented her. Uzuko set his hand on her shoulder; a touch denoting companionship and fondness, which he had bestowed on every villager at some point in their lives.

“Go sleep,” he told her, not without warmth. “We will continue this in the morning. And I shall introduce you to this Krah-glyn. You will understand then that he is no threat."

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Up in their nest, Kraglin skated his hands up and down Yondus back, always leaving at least two finger widths of space from the crest splitting his spine. He had coaxed him away from the railing with yawns and that muzzy look he knew tended to get Yondu ambling back, then settled back down and made sure his friend was comfortable before starting to work out the knots and aches of the day.

Yondu lay pliant under Kraglin’s hands - or as pliant as he got, which admittedly wasn't very. He’d flopped onto his stomach as soon as Kraglin started kneading his neck - after his initial grumpy huff at having his glaring match with Jaku interrupted, who’d sprung from her guard post to meet her hunt-siblings like the little suck-up she was.

Now, with his face buried in the pelts and Kraglin’s long fingers unwinding his dorsal muscles, trailing up to his shoulder blades and back down the meat of his sides, Yondu couldn't imagine a better heaven in Anthos’ eternal embrace.

It could only be improved if the skittish idiot got over his aversion to his crest.
Yondu had never confronted him about it. But it hung between them, unspoken. Kraglin was always so so careful not to touch, never so much as clipping it when he tapped Yondu’s shoulders to get his attention. But while the thought of what he was about to do would send his father into paroxysms, Yondu liked to think he was more progressive.

A touch to the crest was special. It was given to children, to let them know they were safe - a gentle stroke. Otherwise the chief might pinch it for discipline, or a hunt leader might use it on an unruly member of the pack - a sharp wrench to the tip or a flick.

Besides that, custom dictated a crest was only to by handled by partners in the Season.

But what did Yondu care for custom? Once he was chief, he could do what he pleased. Why not start now?

Yondu rolled his head to one side, muscles puttyish and slack. ‘Touch it,’ he murmured in broken Xandarian. ‘You know you wanna.’

“Wont it hurt you?” Kraglin paused, his fingers curled by the base of Yondus spine. They shifted, just a little, to ease the grip on it and make movement easier, as he watched the Zatoan beneath him. It wasn’t like he didn’t want to touch that crest - it looked too inviting to resist, such a bright colour, soft looking. But it seemed to be something precious, something everyone else in the village shied away from. It was either polite not to touch it, he had decided, or it caused pain.

No, he wouldn’t sate his curiosity at the expense of Yondus comfort. He stroked his hand back up the curl of his spine, thumb barely brushing a little closer, swallowing gently.

“Naw. Won’t hurt none. It’ll feel good for me. Promise.”

Why was Yondu reassuring Kraglin? It was his damn crest that was about to get a jiggling. He angled up, pushing onto his elbows to brush the stretched velveteen skin past Kraglin’s knuckles. “Just don’t go twisting it or nothing. Else I’ll burn your only pair of pants, and you’ll have to wear a loincloth like the rest of us.”

He transitioned between clicks and Xandarian, sometimes fumbling for a word before giving up and relaying it in his own language. But there could be no mistaking the message when he grabbed Kraglin’s hesitating wrist - cumbersomely, as it hovered behind his back - and forced his hand to rest flat-palmed on the warm red tahlei.

Kraglin did his best not to look or sound surprised when he was snagged. His other hand reached down, pressing on Yondus back to get him to settle down again. He breathed out steadily, sliding his hand down the fin in a slow, sweeping sort of stroke, fingers spreading and dragging over endless red.

It was a little warmer than anticipated – he was used to Yondus somewhat cooler form clinging to him whenever possible to leech out his head. Something to do with heat regulation, he supposed. No expert on biology, he just concentrated on working the seam of spine and fin, kneading upwards gently.

He had been wanting to show something for a day or so now. It wasn’t something he saw displayed in the village, so he wasn’t sure if it was an idea foreign to the Zatoan, or if it was simply something to only be enjoyed in private. But given this chance…

Kraglin leaned down a little, mindful of the whiskers, and pressed a brief, light kiss to the side of Yondus crest, fingers curling soft and gentle against the skin.
Yondu froze at the contact. For an instant, he expected teeth - anticipated it even, steeling himself for a sharp ridged fang to scrape him where he was most sensitive.

The nerves in his back congregated around the crest base. They threaded across its surface in a complex net, mimicking the spark of synapses in a brain, or the flow of water and energy across the dense jungle. Its surface area was large, meaning Centaurians had had to adapt to it occasionally knocking on things or getting caught in low-hanging branches. As a result, Yondu could regulate the magnitude of what he felt from it.

If he was mid-fight, or tree-climbing, or having his mother pinch it between thumb and forefinger and give him a thorough shaking, he dampened the connectivity as much as possible. If he was asleep in a potentially hazardous place, or stalking prey, he let the neural paths flood open, absorbing all the information he could.

He’d never done this though - never let his tahlei’s presence fill his consciousness for the sole purpose of pleasure. Teeth catching on his underlip, Yondu let his eyes sliver to halves and felt.

Having Kraglin brush it with his fingers was electrifying. Having him dot his lips up and down its length was… well, weird, but Yondu guessed it was some sort of loyalty-display: Kraglin presenting his closed, unweaponized mouth to the Zatoan’s biggest vulnerability. And while the feel of spit on his skin was odd, Yondu decided it wasn’t altogether awful.

“The fuck you doin’,” he asked, testing out one of the cusses he’d insisted Kraglin teach him. The word sounded too harsh for the scenario playing out in the nest: Kraglin mouthing Yondu’s spine gentle as a mother lifting her cub. “You don’t gotta lick me, you idjit. Had a bath just last moon-cycle – which you were there for, so don't pretend ya can't remember.”

"I aint licking you." Kraglin gave a soft noise, leaning back when it seemed like Yondu found the affection strange. He shrugged one shoulder, fingers caressing and teasing where the crest joined Yondus neck, tracing down and along the fine edge. "It was a kiss. You guys don't do that?"

On Hrax, kisses were rare - at least, kisses on the mouth. Clashing teeth was usually a very violent affair, an underhanded tactic to take out your opponents weapons before they had a chance to strike. Given where their arsenal was located, open-mouth kisses were understandably far and few between. But indulging in gentler kisses was common enough between partners who could trust each other. With the trust displayed to him by Yondus offering of his crest, he had felt it appropriate to offer him something on the same level.

"S'fine if you don't. Might just be a planet thing, maybe."

Yondu rolled to face him, frown broiling across his features like a stormcloud. A part of Kraglin’s culture? One he had yet to share? Well, Yondu was greedy by nature. He wanted it all.

“Show me,” he demanded, jutting his chin at Kraglin in challenge. Red eyes glimmered in the gloom, throwing back the light of the far off bonfire. He licked his lips, gaze dropping to Kraglin’s own on instinct, as if there was a jewel inlaid between those fishhook-sharp teeth. “Show me properly. Now.”

Kraglin had to laugh a little at that, sitting back to give Yondu room to move. And if he had slightly pink ears, that was fine - it wasn't like Yondu had the night vision to pick that out. Probably. Kraglin resisted the urge to shake his head, very aware that they both knew that to be a signal of refusal.

Kraglin didn’t use it often.
“Just don’t freak out at me,” He warned, half-joking. The last thing he wanted was for this to end up some terrible thing that got him booted back out to the swamps or worse, killed. He leaned in, one hand slipping clumsily on Yondus arm before it settled on his side, steadying them both. There was no sign of teeth, no parting of his lips to show off a threat. Just a slow, warm and easy slide of his mouth against Yondus before he settled, enjoying the contact.

If his hand slipped back, fingers curlingly slowly against the base of Yondus fin, it was simple, idle curiosity. One new custom to another, so to speak.

It was… new. New, and a bit sticky for his liking. Yondu wouldn’t claim to be the biggest fan.

But hey. If Kraglin enjoyed it, he could be swayed. And there were those damn clever fingers of his, which went a long way to sweetening the deal. They smoothed Yondu’s tahlei, following the faint ridges of bone beneath the surface and painting spirals over where it was most sensitive, at that point where it joined his lower back, red molding seamlessly to blue. Yondu’s loincloth, wriggled down his hips to give Kraglin full massaging access, had slackened enough that Kraglin could trace from one side of his fin to the other without being interrupted by the strap.

First time fingers brushed his tailbone, a groan lurched out of Yondu’s throat without his permission. Second time, he had to grab Kraglin’s ears so he didn’t fall over.

Using them to hold Kraglin in place, he tilted his head to a different angle to avoid clonking that big beaky nose. He tasted tuber-stew. Chasing that flavor, mixed as it was with the earthy and unfamiliar taint of Kraglin’s skin, Yondu licked Kraglin’s lips, tongue lathing wetly over chaps and poking at the corners of his mouth. He squinted quizzically at Kraglin, the close range making his vision fuzz and his eyes ache from crossing.

Was he doing this right?

Kraglin had been a fool not to share this part of his homeworld until now. He sank against Yondu, shutting his eyes to drink in the minutest sensations, the slightest movements. He stroked over Yondu's skin, teased where the fin grew thinnest, flat to the base of his spine. He had to repeat that motion, chasing Yondu's moans as he gave a low, almost silent noise deep in his throat in return.

He liked the way Yondu grabbed at him, rough and needy. It was more thrilling than he suspected Yondu would be happy with him admitting, to have him pull on him like that. One arm curled around his waist, helping to keep him steady, his other hand skimming up the base of his crest to his jaw, grazing the red line against his skull. His grip tightened a little when Yondu teased with his tongue, his breath catching in his throat.

“Thats,” He leaned back a little, clearing his throat with a small noise, an embarrassed little flush on his cheeks. “I mean, if you’re sure-”

Why had Kraglin moved his head away? Yondu didn’t want Kraglin to move his head away. Yondu wanted him to stay right where he was, so he could keep their mouths locked together and Kraglin would keep touching his crest in long, smooth strokes, injecting sensation direct to his spine.

The tinges had returned, stronger than ever. Dammit. Must be related to… To the heat, as he tugged on Kraglin’s ears until he was close enough that Yondu could crush their lips together again, a little too fast, a little too desparate. The friction as their chests rubbed, Yondu squirming as he tried to press himself against all of Kraglin at once. The comforting presence of Kraglin’s arm where it looped around his waist. The infuriating, maddening, fucking magical dance of those fingers along his crest base and across his temple...
Yondu clenched his jaw so hard his neck muscles bunched. He started his usual process of clamping down on those sparks, stifling the wonderful sensation that trickled from his lower belly like warmth from an internal fire.

But then Kraglin’s hand splayed against the side of his head, snagging on the hoop pierced through Yondu’s left lobe. When he tugged to release it he dragged Yondu’s head over by accident. Noses banged. Teeth clacked. And Yondu growled, wrapping his arms securely around Kraglin’s neck as if he were wrangling a python rather than a skinny star-man. He swung up and on, depositing himself on Kraglin’s bony lap.

There. That’d stop him escaping.

Kraglin couldn’t help the small noise that escaped him when Yondu clambered onto him, all weight and warmth and skin to stroke. He swallowed a little, his fingers scrabbling for a good hold - one hand folded around his hip, fingertips kneading small, tight anxious circles onto his hipbone, doing his best to avoid scratching at him. The arm was snugged tight around his waist, and Kraglin could feel the shift of their chests as he breathed, trying to keep his cool.

This was not the first time someone had hauled themself onto his lap to kiss him. It was the first time it had happened without a chair being smashed over his head less than ten minutes later, and it took him a moment to realise this was real, not an attack.

He leaned into the kiss, his hand cupping Yondu’s jaw to try and keep some control of the other’s movements. If he could keep him occupied by cupping his hand over his crest, fingers easing over both sides of the seam, that made it easier.

“I just,” Even he didn’t believe his whispered, half-hearted protests, tilting his head to dot kisses against Yondu’s lips, teasing to the corner and his jaw, lips smearing gently over the curve of blue skin before he kissed his way back, daring to let his tongue slip through the seam of Yondu’s lips. It was a struggle to keep Yondu still, and Kraglin stiffled a low groan against his lips as he kissed him again, harder this time. His own hips remained perfectly immobile. He resisted the urge to hitch up against the form over him, glad that he wasn’t the one saddled with a loincloth.

Yondu started rocking without realizing he was doing it, as Kraglin’s tongue dipped between his lips and that slick saliva-sour taste of tuber root became more and more pervasive. He was making noises, noises he could barely reconcile with his own mouth.

The hands mapping his bare torso were like logs that burnt from the inside out, heat trapped beneath Kraglin’s skin except for those points of contact. When he tightened his grip Yondu only wriggled more, laughing against Kraglin’s teeth just to show that he could.

He hadn’t had a single drop of teku-milk. Why was he so delirious? Why was he pushing down on Kraglin, thighs sandwiched to the man’s slim waist, fingers trembling as they lost their purchase on Kraglin’s ears and wound through his lengthening hair?

The tingle in his stomach was eating him alive. All concepts, all thoughts evaded him - be they the respect for the Season that had been drummed into him since hatching, or the fear of Anthos’ wrath. Yondu’s head was an empty shell, echoing only the drumlike pound of his heart.

Something was building inside him. Something dangerous, evil, strictly forbidden. But rebellion was in Yondu’s blood, and dammit if those taboos didn’t make arousal blaze brighter. He could feel Kraglin’s tongue in his mouth. It was slippery and darting as a lizard, and when he chased it back into Kraglin’s there was a pulse from under his loincloth, as if he’d split into two halves, top and bottom, each vying separately for Kraglin’s attention.
Yondu had no idea what he wanted - only that he did want, and so badly that if his father burst through the doorway right now and demanded that he return every diamond he’d stolen from the lava beds on Anthos’ scalp, Yondu would probably agree. So long as he could do it after he’d finished kissing Kraglin.

...In actuality, if his father ducked under the carpet partition Yondu’d be too busy wondering whether he’d just be made crestless or if the za’gah would be brought back into fashion especially. But right now it was only him and Kraglin, and the sweaty slide of Kraglin’s palms and the wet thrust of his tongue.

Yondu squeezed his handful of hair, dragging Kraglin away so he could bury his face in the side of his neck and hide there as the muscles in his abdomen seemed to tighten, and tighten, and tighten until Yondu felt ready to snap in two.

Kraglin exhaled roughly when Yondu released his mouth, hands shaking a little as they dragged over his body. With so much skin on offer, it was hard to tell where was an appropriate place to place them, but he figured that Yondu would inform him swiftly enough if he overstepped. More maddening was how he was moving, rocking against him in a way that made Kraglin’s spine go tight. He did his best to keep his breathing under control. He still had no idea how Yondus people treated - - this. For all he knew it, all he was to Yondu was a casual grab bag – but he could deal with that later.

Later, when he wasn’t pressing warm, open-mouthed kisses to the line of Yondus neck he was presented with, teeth barely scraping against the skin, a low rumble in his chest. He could feel Yondus heart beating a wild tattoo against his own, knew the other would be able to feel the same and he shuddered a little, biting his lip when Yondu just kept moving.

Either he knew what he was doing and was being devious, or didn’t, and Kraglin had to stop this right now-

Kraglin groaned and slid his lips hotly under Yondus jaw as he held onto him, pulling him tighter against his body. They slotted together better now, and he would be embarrassed later about the way Yondu would be able to feel the hardness pressing on his thigh. For now he claimed teenaged hormones, or his want for the man squirming about on top of him. He let one hand slide down to grasp a handful of loincloth and flesh, groaning as he kneaded Yondu's ass.

Hell, let Yondu stab him if he wanted to. At least Kraglin would die happy.

He trailed his kisses back to Yondus mouth, nipping brief and careful before kissing him again, using the grip on his behind to pull Yondus hips closer to him, encouraging.

“Cmon,” He murmured, voice rough and low, muffled into the heat of Yondus mouth. “I want you-”

It was coming.

What exactly, Yondu had some vague idea. There had been those nights with the other juvenile hunters, and a few times when he’d simply been too young to understand why his hand kept lurching for his beltline, let alone why it was wrong. But now, overwhelmed by the sensation of Kraglin (there was so much of him; bony fingers clutching his ass, sizzling kisses under his jaw, and that solid lump that pushed insistently against Yondu’s inseam, almost nudging the bulge beneath his loincloth) Yondu couldn’t piece together the shards of experience and work out what was about to happen. Not until it was far, far too late.

It struck him in a wave. A tsunami, more like - an inundating barrage of yes and more and want.
Greed had propelled Yondu through life this far - greed for his mother’s pack, the respect of his father, and a myriad other petty desires. He didn’t see why he should lose his trajectory now.

He ground down on Kraglin. Messy, hard, rhythmless. He heard someone cry out, ragged and desperate - but it couldn’t be him, because that was a noise no self-respecting hunter or future chief would make. There was simply too much feeling for him to process.

Yondu kissed Kraglin until he forgot how to breathe. He clawed Kraglin from head to his shoulderblades, tracing the scarred-over slices from the *taabshqa*, muscles spasming and back arching. He rubbed himself over him with a hunger so deep-seated it felt primal, and he managed to gasp his name before his mind whited out and he sagged boneless.

Some dim part of him worried that someone would overhear a noise like that - any of those noises, actually, given that he couldn’t stop a possessive growl into Yondus kiss, teeth catching on his lips despite his best efforts. Kraglins grip shifted, his hands needy and wanting and unable to decide where they wanted to touch, just pulling Yondu closer and against him. He could feel the hard line of him against his stomach, thrilled at the notion that he was taking as much pleasure from this as he was.

Kraglin hardly had to move to rub against him in turn, Yondus squirming doing most of the work for him. He caught his breath when Yondu pulled on his hair, gasping against him when his shoulders bunched under Yondus hands. Everything was condensed down to the man in his lap, the fire and the village and everything a vague background blue against the sharp points of contact. He moaned when he felt something, hot and wet, through the by-now thin undershirt.

Had this been anyone else, he might have started laughing at the very notion of finishing so soon, just from kissing. But this was Yondu, and he’d wanted nothing more than to do this for him. Kraglin gasped against his neck, hips pressing up in a short flurry of hitches against Yondus thigh.

If he wasn’t going to worry about dirty clothes, neither was Kraglin.

Kraglin clutched him tight and close as he came, moaning low into his shoulder, some vague attempt at muffling the noise as his lips pressed searing kisses to his skin. He panted there, shoulders heaving gently as he tightened his grip, not wanting to let him fall just because he was feeling hazed and flushed.

A Bad Thing had happened.

Yondu clung to Kraglin in the aftermath. Or rather, when his vision returned he found himself clinging to Kraglin, and couldn’t muster the will to push him away.

There were no words for what they’d just done. Or at least, no specific ones. Yondu’s mind was a whirl of potential descriptives though.

*Shameful. Disgusting. Against-Anthos.*

Most he imagined in his father’s voice.

He could feel it, slippery and warm, soaking the front of his loincloth. And while he didn’t want to peel himself away from Kraglin to assess the damage, he knew from the tacky sounds as they moved that it had saturated the starman’s thin top too, a whiter stain to contrast the sweat-circles under his arms and across his belly where he and Yondu had been piled together, skin-on-shirt-on-skin.

It wasn’t the Season. Kraglin didn’t have a pouch, and he certainly wasn’t capable of egg-laying - that much had been proved by the jab of a cock against his thigh, the same one he felt softening now.
A matching wet patch seeped through Kraglin’s pants. It should reassure him, that he wasn’t the only one to disobey Anthos’ law. But instead it just made him feel worse.

Kraglin didn’t know this was wrong. Yondu hadn’t included basic sex-ed in his lessons on the ins and out of Zatoan life. And that meant he had a responsibility...

Yondu couldn’t help but laugh. It was entirely mirthless, and seemed to wrack the last of his energy out of him. Once it passed he slumped defeated on Kraglin’s lap with his arms weighing on the starman’s scrawny shoulders. When dad said that looking after Kraglin would teach him the importance of duty, Yondu doubted this was what he meant.

Kraglin was blissfully ignorant of Yondus inner struggle - he gave a hoarse purr of pleasure when Yondu seemed to snuggle onto him, wrapping his arms around him in turn. His fingers stroked slow and lazy over his back, with intent to soothe and enjoy rather than rile, and he shut his eyes with a soft hum.

“Tha’was nice.” He slurred in a low murmur, pressing a kiss to the top of Yondus head, resting there with a soft sigh. He would get up and sort out the, issue in his trousers as soon as he was done soaking in the warmth of the body atop his, if he could ever be done with it.

That laugh was a bit concerning though. Kraglin made a soft hum of questioning, petting pausing for a moment.

“Y’aright?”

Yondu’s pulse thudded far too fast. Wishing it slower didn’t help. Neither did squeezing his eyes shut and pretending he was alone in a tree, as he’d spent every other night before this stupid lanky star crashed out of the sky and ruined his life.

How could he explain this? Their mutual lexicon might be growing, but it couldn’t encompass the importance of Anthos’ natural law yet - wouldn’t even if Kraglin lived among them for the next decade. And their continued contact felt so damn good.

Kraglin’s lips brushing his crown. Kraglin’s hands mapping the tattooed, sweat-slicked muscle of his back. Kraglin’s soft cock resting against his own.

The slick patches were gonna get mighty uncomfortable once they started to dry. But for now, cleaning the evidence wasn’t on Yondu’s mind. He wanted to keep his face pressed to Kraglin’s shoulder, sharp collarbone bumping his nose, and forget that his world had rules about this sort of thing, rules Yondu’d just shamelessly flouted.

He snorted at Kraglin’s quiet question. Burrowed into his arms, squeezing his twiggy ribcage until sure it wasn’t going to vanish the instant he pulled away.

Because eventually, he knew he had to.

With a last shuddering exhalation, Yondu pried his face from Kraglin’s shoulder. He looked him over. He found no malice in his expression; Kraglin’s eyes were droopy and, bar his concern for Yondu, his smile satiated.

Kraglin was… happy. They had done wrong by Anthos, and Kraglin was happy. And, Yondu realized, if the idiot didn’t realize the gravity of their situation, there was a fair chance he’d go blabbing around the village come morning. Then bye-bye crest, bye-bye future chiefaintship. Hello za’gah tree and pain.
There was only one thing for it.

Yondu slammed Kraglin onto his back. The other man’s shock gave him time to decouple, swinging off his lap and springing away. The soggy loincloth slapped his thighs, reminding him of their shame and bolstering his determination in equal measure. By the time Kraglin had righted himself, Yondu’d snatched his hunting knife from its hilt. He tilted it so the blade caught the light.

“Don’t’chu tell no one about this,” he hissed. Brandishing a knife from the other side of the nest wasn’t exactly threatening, but it got his point across. Yondu didn’t dare come any closer, in case the urge to cup Kraglin’s dumb beaky face and practice more of those weird wet kisses grew too strong to deny. “No one, you hear?”

Kraglin yelped, everything too fast and blurred for his post-coital brain to try and catch up with. All he was really aware of was blue skin vanishing, taking the weight and the returned warmth with it. Kraglin’s hands groped a little in the air even as he was on his back, trying not to feel winded at the sudden loss. Where had he messed up? Hadn’t that been a good enough display to keep Yondu happy?

Kraglin pushed himself up a little, and froze at the sight of the knife. All of him felt like it was drooping, his shoulders sagging and a momentary look of betrayal and dismay flitting over his features. He lifted one hand, one of their signs for ‘wait, misunderstanding, words aren’t right’, and sat up fully, trying to figure out what was wrong.

Of course, some miserable, cynical part of his mind whispered; wasn’t that why he was a spare? Never quite matching up to what Yondu probably thought was beautiful, miles of blue skin and unclothed jiggling parts as far as the eye could see. He swallowed the need to spit something bitter, forcing himself to remember that there was a language and a culture barrier here - maybe Yondu thought he was going to attack him, take advantage of his relaxed state. The idea that Yondu might be worried about that was insulting, but he could push through it to find out the true cause.

“I don’t - did I hurt you?” He asked, voice thick. The fear and adrenaline from being pushed and threatened made him have to stop and press his tongue against his second row, trying to ease his heartbeat and the dread in his stomach. “What did I do-?”

Kraglin’s bewilderment made Yondu reconsider sticking his knife between his eyes and ensuring his secret was kept the easy way. Growling, he slammed it into the wall behind him. Luckily he’d picked one of the hut’s built sides rather than the cliff-face - the blacksmiths wouldn’t be pleased if he broke another blade.

And if Yondu broke the jagged bundle of nerves in front of him, he’d never forgive himself.

As tempting as it was to nod along and pretend this was all Kraglin’s fault, Yondu knew it’d be a lie. Stupid star-man. Not even knowing about this: the most sacrosanct form of bonding, designed only to conceive new life...

The Zatoan had special names for those who used others, especially for pleasure. Special punishments too. Until this moment, Yondu’d always considered them well-deserved. His shoulders slumped, crest drooping. Yondu sank from his defensive squat, sitting on the compacted grass floor. He plonked his head into his hands.

“No, idjit. I shoulda known better. Look, let’s just… go to sleep. We don’t speak of this again.”

That had worked with the hunters he’d shared trees with as a juvenile. Perhaps it’d be similarly effective here? In fact, Yondu thought to himself, willing away the memory of Kraglin’s fingers
chasing sparks up and down the length of his crest. If he pounded enough teku-root into their breakfast, he and Kraglin might forget about this entirely.

“I—” Kraglin cut himself off, shutting his mouth with a firm click, his expression somewhat amazed. It was not the first time this week - it wasn’t the first time today - that he was reminded he was on a totally alien planet. While he could understand the need for discretion simply because no one liked a bragger, the idea of never again- He shook his head and tried to reorder his thoughts.

On Hrax, the system of raising children and trying to temper the quickly swelling population had brought its own hoard of troubles. With bloodlines permanently in question, not enough room in the pod-raising nurseries and too much work to be done to waste time on pregnancies, several solutions had been tried, failed, and discarded. One had endured, an echo from the Fire Days of ages past. If you couldn’t be trusted to abstain entirely - and precious few teenagers could - then you had two options; your hand, or someone you couldn’t knock up until all the paperwork had been traced back and it was confirmed you were absolutely not related.

Granted, those fumbles tended to involve at least a level of friendship that was comfortable farting, bathing and being naked around each other, but that wasn’t difficult.

“I don’t think I understand. But I want to—” And how many times had he said that the past month? “So to be clear - that. That, doesn’t get to happen again? You don’t want it to? And, we don’t tell anyone? I mean, I don’t know about you but I wasn’t exactly gonna write it on my face and go roll around in front of the village… That would be boasting.”

The last thing Yondu wanted to do was talk about feelings. With an exaggerated groan, he flopped into the nest and rolled away from Kraglin, burying his face in a bristly taabshqa pelt.

“Footnotes,” he grumbled, waving a hand. “What we just did? Bad. Very bad. Anthos no-likey. If ya need more persuasion, Village elders’d get their loincloths in a right twist if they knew. Then bam, you’re outta the tribe, I’m crestless or dead, nobody’s happy. So keep yer mouth shut, and your stupid crest-tickling fingers to yerself.”

Sure, he’d been the one to invite those touches, which had stoked the coals that now sat ash-coated and cold in his lower stomach. Yondu couldn’t taste their heat anymore. Only regret. It was sour as Kraglin’s kisses.

He curled on his side, a ball of overtensed muscle and fury. Why like this? Why did he have to ruin everything Anthos handed to him? Son of the village chief, son of the lead huntress… Born with a strong hale body and a responsive crest…

He had everything, and he knew it. So why did he want more? Why did he want the stars? And why, damn it all, did he want Kraglin?

First real friend he’d ever had, and this was how it was gonna end. With Yondu’s turned back and Kraglin’s gormless face, the idiot not even registering how much he’d been wronged.

“Look,” said Yondu, speaking more to the furs than his baffled audience. “Ya want someone else to show you around? I geddit. Ain’t even gonna throw a fit. Go tell my dad we’ve had an argument and ya don’t wanna hang out with me no more. He’ll understand. Had that conversation a whole bunch of times, poor ol’ sod.” Unseen by Kraglin, Yondu’s hand crept under the pelt. It searched out one of the many stolen rough-cut diamonds he’d picked from the baskets that his fellow hunters used to haul yaka-ore up and down the mountain. He dug his nails in like he was trying to scratch it - impossible - and only flinched a little when they broke instead. “This ain’t a thing I say often, so you’d better savor it, alright? M’sorry. Now go already. Fuck off an’ let me sleep.”
Even as he said the words, the prospect of a Kraglin-less future ate away at him. Or worse: a future spent watching another warrior saunter through the village with Kraglin on their heels. Maybe even a warrior with the potential for biological compatibility, like Jaku...

Yondu lay stiff, waiting for the shift of Kraglin’s weight that would signify the star-man standing to leave. He’d consider the teku-root option come morning.

That was - a lot of information to absorb and translate, sorting through his mental dictionary for the words Yondu had clicked or whistled instead of spoke. He got the most of it. The parts he couldn’t probably weren’t important, and he was willing to dismiss them.

He was not willing to dismiss his hurt feelings, but he could channel that appropriately.

“You’re a right ornery blue cunt, you know that?” Good. Healthy use of that hurt and rage. Kraglin huffed as he lay down on his back, scrubbing his hands through his hair, now long enough to pull in his frustration, and he did, until some of the knots in his head untied a little more. It was hard to go from warm and happy and content to angry, and his stomach lurched at the turn of events.

“I would call you a fuckin’ savage but I think you’d take it as a compliment.” Oh he wasn’t done yet. “You think you get to just, just-” He waved a hand, trying not to growl. “Just get a guy to kiss you and then waltz off tellin’ em its nothing. I don’t know how you do things on this mudball, but where I come from, it aint nothing to get y’damned teeth that close and personal to someone without that someone meanin’ something to them!”

It was important to note, though, that he hadn’t moved. He wasn’t touching Yondu, respectful of his space and his own rage, but he was still on his back behind him.

“Now I aint gonna try and pretend to understand why your Anthos thinks its bad to do that,” he continued, gesturing with one hand because it was habit now, a sort of subtitle to what he was trying to get across. “And I feel we got some wires crossed here. You apologising is weird as fuck though, so don’t you ever do that to me again or I’ll fuckin’ make you sorry. So yeah. Blue ornery cunt. I also aint gonna shut up and go to sleep until you stop being a blue ornery cunt. Or at least the cunt part, you can’t help being blue.”

He paused, only long enough to catch his breath and remind himself to keep it down, to keep things - - not civil, he’d already crossed that line, but understandable.

“I like you. I’d consider you a Flame Brother if you had the teeth for it. I did that cos I wanted to, been wantin’ to for weeks, and thought you wanted to as well. If you didn’t, then I’m sorry and I aint gonna do it again. But if you did want to, and still wanna, that's okay with me too. I aint gonna go yellin’ about it to everyone because I can keep my stupid mouth shut, and not everyone likes their business everywhere, and one more thing!” He pointed a finger at Yondu’s back, not looking at him. “Don’t you ever tell me to go follow someone else. You don’t get to do that to me after you ruined my only dastdamned shirt here and cut yourself on my teeth.” Only one of those conditions was actually important, but Yondu didn’t need to know that. “Your Anthos doesn’t like it, thats fine. You can either be okay with that and keepin’ secrets with me, or its too much for you and you don’t wanna do that, fine. Any way we can make it fine with Him, you let me know. I’ll eat three hundred of your precious yollops if I gotta.”

No small threat. He’d heard about them. He could take em.

Yap, yap, yap. As if words made the slightest bit of difference to Anthos. There was only one thing for it. Yondu wormed into his makeshift pillow and faked a snore.
He almost cracked hearing Kraglin boast that he’d eat a yolopp. Imagining the skinny, sharp-toothed star-man hanging off the mossy shoulder of one of those behemoths by the teeth was just on the disturbing side of hilarious. Disturbing because if Kraglin tried a stunt like that, multiple rows of teeth or not, he would die. But damn if it didn’t make a funny image.

Yondu bit his lip until the urge to giggle faded. Then snored again, tucking his throbbing, crack-nailed hand to his chest.

Kraglin was angry. And Kraglin angry - beyond a tightening of those bushy eyebrows and a scrunch of that big pale nose - was a rare sight indeed. He’d meant what he’d said. And as much as Yondu tried to dismiss them, the words lingered in the air like the tepid white mists that shrouded the mountainside in the rainy season, the ones which made it impossible to see the yolopps and the other deepswamp monsters until you’d stumbled into their jaws.

*You can either be okay with that and keepin’ secrets with me, or it’s too much for you and you don’t wanna do that, fine.*

Honestly, if Yondu thought about it, that could be interpreted as a challenge.

There was no point keeping secrets from Anthos - Anthos knew all. But Kraglin insinuating he’d been too much for him? That was something Yondu couldn’t abide. He’d set him right, he decided, snuggling into the furs and electing to ignore the furious heave of Kraglin’s breaths behind him. Tell him that it was all very well for a star-man who was composed of different, non-Anthos related flesh and blood and bone to act like there was a way they could hide this from Yondu’s god, but things weren’t nearly so simple for a Zatoan. He’d explain that it wasn’t that he wanted to send Kraglin away because he was ashamed of him, or because he didn’t like what they’d done, but out of self-preservation.

The younger generation in the village regularly questioned the sanctity of the season. (Did it count if you’d had a really good dream? Did it count if you and another hunter *just happened* to be trapped in a burrow dug-out together while a yolopp waddled past, and you both *just happened* to be hard, and it was a choice between spanking one out together or potential death-due-to-distraction?) However, there were plenty more who still believed Anthos’ natural laws were absolute, Yondu’s father among them.

For now though, Yondu had committed to pretending to sleep. And so pretend to sleep he would. He’d make it clear that it was nothing personal in the morning. If Kraglin were still here, of course.

When he didn’t get any response, Kraglin sighed and rubbed his face. Fine. If Yondu wasn’t going to listen to him, he’d just act instead. He’d told him to go, so he wouldn’t. He simply rolled over, got comfortable and murmured something before starting to let himself sleep. He had stuff to deal with tomorrow, no doubt, like Yondu. This could all be worked out in the morning.

Come morning though, when he woke, there was one chore he’d neglected. He wrinkled his nose when he moved, reminded of the state of his clothes now. There was no way he could face a conversation like that, and it wasn’t like Yondu was awake yet… So he slipped from the nest, ambling his way down to the part of the crick he’d been shown was good to clean his clothes in. He left his other things in the nest though, hopefully as an understandable sign that he’d be back.

With any luck.

Being ambushed by a horrifyingly naked blue woman with a terrifyingly scarred face tended to put a crimp in ones morning plans. Pharaqa knocked on the frame of Uzukos door before hauling Kraglin in - she was sure the chief would understand that she couldn’t simply stand around with the
disgusting pale creature outside the hut until allowed in. Kraglin took the brief moment of staying still to pull his clean, albeit damp trousers on, eyeing this newcomer with no small amount of worry and trepidation.

“Chief,” Pharaqa called, a low hiss. “I trust this is the -- creature.”

Uzuko groaned. It was too early for dealing with complaints.

“What’s happened?” he asked foggily, sitting in his nest and hiking his loincloth a little higher around his waist, not quite registering the knocker’s identity. “Draghi, if you’ve been stealing old Aja’s jskveh again, I can’t protect you from her this time… Oh. Pharaqa. And. And Krah-glyn.” He looked the pair of them up and down: Pharaqa standing tall (not very) and proud (extremely), Kraglin bowed at the waist so her entire bodyweight wasn’t dangling from his earlobe.

The boy at least was wearing trousers. The same couldn't be said of Pharaqa.

“Pharaqa,” he said slowly. “I thought we agreed. Never again. And we must weather the rains yet, before the Season comes around…”

“What?” Pharaqa was - admittedly nonplussed by that for a moment, not sure how that tied into what she had bought before him. Was he implying that she mate with this disgusting animal, right here infront of him? She squinted at him, her entire expression and posture asking what on Anthos green lands was wrong with him.

Then understood and shrugged the crimson fabric from her shoulder, letting go of Kraglin with a sharp pull his his ear to remind him not to flee as she tied her loincloth on.

“As charming as I find the notion of breeding with this,” She gestured both hands at Kraglin, who did his best not to flinch. Uzuko presence seemed to at least reassure Kraglin that he wasn’t about to be breakfast for the village this time - he had always maintained an appropriate distance from the Chief, partly because of Yondus reluctance to spend time with him, but also out of honest respect. It looked like a hard job. “Before your approving eyes, I will have to decline. I have brought him here for questioning.”

Ugh. Hunters, always so crass. Uzuko shuddered.

“Keep your pants on, boy,” he ordered, in case the poor dim creature misunderstood. He was better at responding to their language now, even if he couldn’t speak it - or at least, with an accent none but Yondu could bear listening to.

Uzuko was perhaps a little relieved that he’d listened to Aja’s advice on that first day around the fire, when she counselled against breaking the pair apart. Yondu had matured, if he had the patience to listen to this madman’s whistles and clicks. Uzuko’d even seen them crossing to the creak once or twice to bathe together. But while Yondu had somehow crushed his repulsion at the sight of all that white hairy skin, Uzuko was not so strong-stomached. Who knew? His son might surpass him as a chieftain yet.

Luckily, both for Uzuko’s clean-swept floor and Kraglin’s continued welcome in the village, the pants stayed on.

“What sort of questioning did you have in mind?”

Kraglin watched the two talk, his head turning from one to the other. Granted, he wasn’t catching all of the nuance in this conversation, but he could pick up enough to know they were talking about him. Pharaqa gesturing at him in a dismissive manner, was sort of a give-away.
“We should take him to the star,” she suggested, folding her arms. “It will be easier for him to understand what we’re talking about, and perhaps there is a purpose to it that he can show us. You!” She turned to Kraglin, raising her voice and enunciating slower. “Take US, to STAR.”

“My ship?” Kraglin blinked, then tested the short whistle-sound Yondu had taught him for ship-star, but he had only understood it to be his craft. “Star?”

Uzuko winced, hand clapping over the ear that had the misfortune to be closest to that godawful sound. It was like Yondu had taught one of his precious yolopps to whistle. He had yet to find out the particulars of Krah-glyn’s life, mostly because of the persisting language barrier, but also because as sorry as he felt for the madman he didn’t relish having to spend time in his company.

Uzuko had a whole village of crazy to wrangle. Making Krah-glyn his son’s responsibility had prevented another weight from being added to his already over-laden shoulders.

But as atrocious as his elocution was, Uzuko still understood. Whether Krah-glyn had been listening to Yondu’s stories, or if his insanity came solely from within, here he was, standing in Uzuko’s hut, claiming direct ownership over the mysterious object that Pharaqa had found in the swamp.

Uzuko refused to call it a star like they did. That would mean acknowledging that there were things in this world he didn’t understand. And - well, Uzuko was the chief. The channel of Anthos’ voice. What he didn’t know about life wasn’t worth knowing.

“You would have me leave my post?” he asked, addressing Pharaqa. “My place is here, among my people.” It wasn’t that he never left the village. Or that he was scared to. Uzuko hadn’t lifted a hand in battle in years, not even during the rainy seasons when the Ignokai and worse were banging on their gates. But - as was custom for young chiefs - he had trained as a hunter before taking on the sedentary position of Anthos’ Most Beloved. He could walk the forest, even if he’d never ventured into the muddy algae-lit groves beyond it.

Nevertheless, while Uzuko remained convinced that the vast majority of stories from the deepswamps were just that - stories - they did play on his mind at night. Like now, as he realized there was no way they could take Pharaqa’s huntpack with them. They’d already seen this star once. Any more, and they might start getting… ideas.

Better he order Pharaqa to feed it to the swamp piece by piece.

“Would you have me take him into the swamps? Alone?” She arched an eyebrow, one hand shooting out to cover Kraglin’s mouth - no, no more noises, ugly tall man. He looked offended under her hand, and leaned back a little with what sounded like a soft grumble. “Me, with my short temper and wickedness with an arrow,” And maybe she was cribbing off what she knew people said about her. “And him with his. Foulness? How could we ever be sure he would return in one piece - if at all?”

Pharaqa put a hand on her chest, mimicking shock and surprise.

“Unless that is your plan, my Chief. I will do this for you, if you want.”

Pharaqa was far, far too smart for her own good. Sighing, Uzuko crossed to the wall where his bow and arrow were slung. They weren’t quite dusty from disuse - Uzuko had all the assistance with spring cleaning that he could possibly desire. Sometimes more than enough, as youngsters who’d never seen the inside of the chieftain’s hut piled in to poke at his things and affix him with big beseeching eyes until he sighed and made presents of them, or glared at their parents until he was rescued.
“The boy is our guest. I gave him hospitality, as was the custom in the days of great-great-great-great-great-grandmother Oola. I cannot allow him to fall victim to your…” He made a diplomatic gesture at Pharaqa’s everything. “And as such, I will accompany you.”

Who knew, he thought as he nodded for Pharaqa to start the procession from under his doorflap. This might be for the best. He had been dreading arbitrating over Aja’s jskveh-hens. Last time someone stole from the elders, she’d requested a full-scale za’gah, and considering the amount of headache-inducing bickering he’d suffered through during the trial, Uzuko had been tempted to acquiesce.

Pharaqa did her best not to smile on a day to day basis, but even she could be tempted to a cheeky grin when she pushed the Chief into doing her bidding. For all their fussing and sniping, Pharaqa did enjoy Uzuko’s company, if only because he was so much fun to poke at, her favourite squeeze-toy to work her snark onto. Anthos knew why he put up with her nipping at him all the time, she often thought to herself, but she was glad of it.

“Come on, ugly,” She said, turning and grabbing Kraglin's elbow to march out with him. At least this early there was very little danger from other animals to worry about, and no one to see them slipping outside the fences. Pharaqa only let go of him when she was sure Kraglin knew to follow them, and dropped to Uzuko's side with what looked like an innocent, adoring expression, appropriate for a hunter escorting their chief through wild lands.

“Are you doing alright?” She asked, clasping her hands behind her back, eyes downright gleaming with mirth. “Should I have brought herbs to ease your foot pain? I’m sure we could get the ugly one to carry you, if needed.”

Uzuko clenched his jaw. “Pharaqa, we are not five paces from the village.”

The trees loomed above him, overladen with fruit. They’d stripped back the branches only last week, preserving what wouldn’t dry in honey and salt vats, supplementing their stores for the rainy season. They’d need more meat - Pharaqa’s truncated hunt meant that supplies would dwindle before the swamp progressed into the forest, as it always did when the rains were underway. But Uzuko trusted her to do her job. Just as he trusted her not to lead him and Krah-glyn into a vash’ryk nest.

He did not however, trust her to make it through this mission without succumbing to the urge to poke fun at him. Just like her son.

He nodded ahead, to where Krah-glyn was picking his way uncertainly over roots and glancing over his shoulder every few seconds to ensure they were following.

“Can you imagine this boy bearing my weight? I’m afraid I would crush the poor thing. You wouldn’t believe we’ve fed him three hearty meals a day. What on earth do you think is wrong with him?”

“Probably a tapeworm.” Pharaqa shrugged.

“I will leave him to Aja’s tender care. Last time I complained of an upset stomach she made me eat an entire teku-root raw. I remember very little of that week, but it seems it did the trick.” Uzuko shuddered.

Pharaqa laughed, a short, husky sort of noise. Honestly, she should bring him out here more often, to raise morale of the pack and the village. She could be kind, could give a - a peace offering, of sorts. A reminder that no matter how much she jabbed, she did still respect him. Sort of. Pharaqa caught him eying the fruits and grinned, leaning over to one to half-climb, half-jump and -
Kraglin reached up and over her far too easily, onto his toes, all far too tall and long, and pulled off a small handful of the plum-like fruits, hesitating before offering them to Uzuko.

If Pharaqa could kill merely with her eyes instead of arrows, Kraglin might have crumpled. As it was, he seemed entirely unaware of the cause of her outrage, and wilted a little, uncertain.

“Well, dast woman, I’m just tryin’ to be-” Pharaqa took a step towards him, hand up to cover his mouth, but he covered it himself with his free one, glowering behind it.

Watching Pharaqa interact with someone who was both taller than her and had the guts to mock her was refreshing - if only because Uzuko knew how much it pissed her off. He laughed, cracking the brewing atmosphere in the hopes of relieving a little pressure. He knew that shade of royal blue on Pharaqa’s face, blotted as it was by the shade from the overhanging trees. Unless Krah-glyn deferred, he was going to have a full-blown explosion on his hands.

But Uzuko had been mediating conflicts since he assumed the rank of Chief, thirty years ago. He knew how to handle this.

He patted Krah-glyn on the shoulder, steeling himself to the feel of his unnaturally warm flesh through the shirt. Tugging Krah-glyn rearwards, he motioned that he should stay in stride with him while popping one of the plums into his mouth and spitting out the stone, letting Pharaqa storm on ahead. Used to people providing for him, he didn’t offer to share the gift. Krah-glyn was more than tall enough to retrieve his own portion.

“So,” he began, smiling kindly at Yondu’s pet madman. “How are you finding our village? Is my son treating you well?”

Kraglin relaxed when it seemed like the terrifying blue woman was going to take out her rage on the floor, stomping on through the underbrush with what sounded like very annoyed clicks. At least he was mostly assured the Chief wasn’t going to check his teeth again - it seemed like Yondu had got that message across loud and clear. He had to focus on what was being asked of him, picking apart the differences carefully.

“Its beautiful,” He had noticed from the hands slamming over ears whenever he spoke that he might be whistling a little too hard and too loud, and he made an apologetic face this time, trying for softer and quieter. His lexicon might still be horribly limited, but he could get some ideas understood, he was sure. “He is very kind to me. And very patient.”

Were they talking about the same person?

“Yondu,” said Uzuko, just to make certain. “Yondu is kind. And patient.”

He peered into the madman’s eyes, searching for uneven pupils caused by an overconsumption of teku. Poor Krah-glyn was crazier than he’d thought.

Kraglin nodded, enthusiastic. Yondu was a subject he could talk about, he understood that much. He put his hands in his pockets once the last of the plums had been taken, a small smile on his face.

“He makes sure I understand things. And he shows me how you do things. It's very good of him.”

“What is he blathering about?” Pharaqa didn’t look back over her shoulder, just yelling louder to be heard. “It's hideous, make it stop.”

Uzuko seconded that sentiment. But if Pharaqa was talking to them without cursing Anthos’ name every other word, that meant she was level-headed enough to hold a decent conversation. Leaving
Krah-glyn behind, he hastened to catch up with her, torn between watching the root-braided earth for trip hazards and her retreating back.

“How far now?”

Not that his feet were hurting. Just. It had been a while since Uzuko walked for such a duration, and even his out-of-practice mind had noted that the trees were becoming taller, the shrub layer denser, the air moister and wetter and darker as they moved towards the swamp.

“Further,” she replied shortly, pointing ahead. “Its in the swamps, oh glorious and noble Chief, where the waters reach the knee.”

Kraglin had made a confused noise when he was abandoned, trying not to wilt - had he said something so wrong? He couldn’t recognise the path they were taking, and it occurred to him rather suddenly that he was going into the woods with two armed people who he couldn’t understand easily.

In retrospect, he should have been warier sooner. No longer entirely certain that he wasn’t going to be left here to die, he gnawed his lip as he pattered after them, wishing Yondu was here.

The swamps had grown wetter and darker, despite it being the middle of the day. Patches of water steamed unpleasantly. Gone were Pharaqa’s jokes - now all of her words were quiet murmurs: warnings to her Chief when he was about to step somewhere deeper than it looked, or touch a vine that promised hours of itching. And behind them Kraglin dragged his feet, aware that this was not a fun adventure, but not sure how to find the way back to the village.

“There.” Pharaqa pointed ahead to a flash of gold between the branches, hesitating before leading them forwards. She pushed apart the bushes to reveal the towering, pointed ship, blazing beautifully in the sun.

Kraglin gasped.

“You see,” She growled, pointing at him. “He knows it.”

Uzuko stared. He had never seen anything like it. A rock formation, surely - but this deep in the swamps there were few rocks to be found. Only the bottomless mire: peat and muck and mud layered over the mountain’s flank. Anyway, Uzuko had climbed to the top of Anthos’ head several times in his youth. He knew rocks. It took him the duration of three blinks to determine this was not one.

He couldn’t stalk all the way around it - it had tangled in the canopy of a fallen tree, one too massive to be felled through anything other than an earthquake. But they had felt nothing at the village. There had only been that bright light in the sky, like the suns had risen early, which had had all the children twittering excitedly and the elders clasping their hands and raising them to Anthos...

If Pharaqa hadn’t pointed it out, he wouldn’t have noticed Kraglin’s reaction: too engrossed in the play of light across the star’s surface. (No; the thing. Not a star; never a star.) It was unnatural to find a clearing this far into the forest, on the cusp of the deepswamp. And the boughs above looked alarmingly ragged: snapped and splintered and twisted like they were lashed to invisible torture-racks. Couple this with the splatters of mud and bioluminescent algae that spread out from the star’s impact point in a grubby, green-glowing corolla and he could understand why Pharaqa thought it had fallen from the sky.

But that couldn’t be the answer. It couldn’t.
Asking Kraglin to explain his role in this meant listening to more ear-aching toots, but the boy seemed to have toned himself down a little as they walked. Uzuko span on him, clutching Pharaqa’s proffered forearm to keep his balance on their half-submerged log.

“What is the meaning of this? Where did it come from? And what in Anthos’s name does it have to do with you?”

Kraglin had been too busy running his eyes over his ship, calculating the damage. In truth, he felt guilty. He had spent so long wrapped up with Yondu and the village and learning things that he hadn’t spared more than a moment’s thought for the old girl. Seeing her here, rotting into the mulch and filth, made bile rise in his stomach and he grimaced, chiding himself. He should have come back for her.

Kraglin jumped in surprise at the demands. Pharaqa was glowering at him pointedly. It took him a moment to translate them, and then he nodded, trying to show he was willing to talk and explain.

“Its, my ship,” He said, mimicking the same motions he’d used with Yondu, thumb and pinky out of his fist to show how it flew. Kraglin made it swoop carefully downwards, towards the earth. “I crashed, and my ship,” A waggle of the ship before it changed - his hands held together, horizontal, fingertips together. “Broke.” He brought one hand down at a sharp angle, snapping the line.

For a moment, there was quiet.

“I’m going to kill him.” Pharaqa decided. “We can leave him here and burn the star. Tell Yondu a swamp beast got him.”

To admit that he was tempted was to admit, even momentarily, that he had considered breaking the decree of hospitality. Uzuko’s clenched fists creaked, knuckles unused to the strain.

“No,” he said. “We cannot kill him. Anthos watches all, Pharaqa - even here in the swamp. And anyway, I doubt the boy knows what he’s saying. It’s madness, plain and simple - but perhaps it’ll improve if we can at least destroy this… this star of his?” He laid his hand on her shoulder, not quite holding her back - he knew from decades of experience that nothing made Pharaqa more determined to pull away. She was so very like her son in that regard.

“Pharaqa, the village must not know. The rainy season is nearly upon us; we need to prepare for the encroachment of the swamp, protecting our territory against the Ignokai. This is a distraction. And one that may make our people question their faith, in a time where they need to be strongest in Anthos.” His eyes roved to Kraglin, staring at the star with the sort of pinched worry hunters usually reserved for their arrows when they had to go under the blacksmith’s hammer for repairs. “As for him… I cannot see a way out of this. We must look after him, Pharaqa. We swore it by Anthos. And that vow stands above all others. Until he explicitly threatens the safety of the village, Kraglin is under my protection.”

The same didn’t apply to his star, however. Taking a deep breath, Uzuko leveled his finger at it.

“Destroy it.”

Meanwhile, Kraglin had wandered a little closer to his ship, not paying the pair much mind since they were clearly busy. He put his hand on the metal, patting gently with a soft, loving little hum.

“Poor baby,” He said, rubbing fingers gently over a seam of metal, picking out some leaves. “Poor old girl. What did I do to you?”

Permission granted, Pharaqa stooped and scooped up a rock. She stood in one easy, fluid motion and
lobbed it at the craft, both horrified and pleased with the ringing noise it made. Kraglins yelp of dismay was louder than a stomped vash’ryk. And the way he flung himself in front of the metal, spread-eagled to try and prevent any further hits...

Pharaqa tossed another rock, hitting his shoulder in what she hoped would be encouragement to move. His ‘Hey!’ of response and offended look just made her shrug, and she ducked to find more ammunition.

“By Anthos, Pharaqa! What did I just say?”

Uzuko wobbled onto the neighboring root, wincing as his toes sunk into rot-soften wood. The swamp slopped and muclched quietly below. There were two lumps visible that might once have been half-eaten taabshqa, but to Uzuko’s untrained eye they could just as easily have been the heads of lurking yolopps, just waiting for him to misstep so they could latch onto his ankles and yank him under.

He couldn’t let himself fall prey to one of those creatures. Yondu’d laugh for years. He claimed the one he brought back to the village was but a babe - exaggerating as usual, Uzuko was certain. But Uzuko didn’t fancy testing his luck.

Once he’d successfully navigated so he was standing between Pharaqa and the star, his body a beefy blue shield - not that Pharaqa couldn’t whistle her arrows around him, or punt rocks over his head, but it was the statement of his stance that mattered - he crossed his arms over his chest and called to the madman behind him.

“Krah-glyn! Boy! Get back here. We must sink this monstrosity, and you are in our way.”

“He’s still alive!” Pharaqa groused back, as if it wasn’t her fault Kraglin refused to move. She crossed her arms with a scowl when Uzuko blocked her, tapping her foot impatiently. Fine, if he wanted to protect his son's ugly, hairy manpet, that was his folly. She had rocks to find, and she dedicated herself to that task for the moment.

Kraglin, for his part, turned to keep his back against his ship, fingers digging into the metal. He took a few deep breaths, looking between Uzuko and the stranger before turning a pleading look on the chief.

“Please,” He knew that whistle well enough, clasping his hands before himself in supplication. “I’ll - I’ll.” He made his hands form the broken motion again, then mimed fixing the tear. “I’ll repair the ship. I’ll leave,” He made his hand swoop up, away, to the sky. “Leave, and never, never come back,” A headshake over the ship returning, veering away again.

Dealing with villagers of all ages, from pouchlings to seniles, had made Uzuko adept at understanding concepts where language failed. This Krah-glyn wasn’t nearly so stupid as he appeared.

He was also giving them a solution to their problems.

“Pharaqa,” he said softly. The huntress grunted, digging about in the mud for more lumps of fossilized wood and rock to throw. “I believe Krah-glyn is offering a compromise.” Not one Yondu would be happy about, Uzuko was sure. But Yondu wasn’t here right now. This was his decision as chief, and he was already determined it was the right one.

“Is he offering to go down with the star?” she asked, hauling over an armful of rocks to stand besides Uzuko.
At the sight of them, Kraglin yelped and covered his head with his arms, clearly anticipating another blow but still unwilling to stop protecting the ship. Pharaqa wrinkled her nose in distaste, even as he peeped at her under his arm, keeping a close watch.

“I think I hate his freakish eyes the most. They’re horrible. What does it want?”

Kraglin redid the little pantomime, one arm protectively flung back over the nearest strut of his ship. The woman seemed less impressed than the Chief did, but if Zatoan culture was anything like the remnants of Hraxlian, Kraglin was pretty certain he only needed to sway Uzuko.

“How can you be sure he isn’t lying?”

“How can I be sure you won’t kill him if I turn my back? But look.” Uzuko turned one hundred and eighty degrees, arms outstretched and head level in an effort to look as dignified as possible while balancing on a slippery root. He faced Kraglin just in time to watch the next rock smack him in the solar plexis. “Pharaqa!”

“I’m just proving your point! You can’t know it any more then you can’t know he won’t attack us. Or lie and return with more of his kind! And then what do we do, when a rain of stars falls on our hills, and ugly, hairy men straggle their way to our village, hooting and squeaking-”

“I just,” Kraglin cut in, keeping his eyes trained on the chief as he moved his hands, trying to get the message across. “I want to go home. To the sky. I don’t want to hurt you. I-” He paused, struggling for the correct whistles and words. “I love your village. And the people. I do not want to hurt them. I will go if I am hurting them, if I am hurting you.”

Even Pharaqa didn’t have much to say after that. Uzuko cast one last look at the star, its bottom half smeared with muck. Tree branches were caught and cracked around its upper spikes like grasses in the quills of a nash’ryk.

“You will leave and never return,” he repeated, just to be certain. Forsaking a vow of hospitality meant that it became null and void - if Kraglin agreed to this, Uzuko could send him on his way once the blasted star was ‘repaired’ (whatever that entailed) and not have to worry about Anthos’ displeasure when he next channelled his spirit at a ceremony.

He couldn’t wait. For all his forced politeness to Yondu’s pet, for all his pity for the mad creature, his very existence was an affront to Uzuko’s faith. He couldn’t bring himself to like Kraglin, with his overabundance of body hair and sallow, scale-less flesh. If Kraglin could be returned to the skies - or just turned out into the forest once he deemed his star complete - Uzuko would not have to concern himself with the whispers of the villagers.

Snatches of overheard gossip around the evening fire had included questions about where the bright sky-light had come from, and how much of a coincidence it was that Kraglin had arrived so soon afterwards. A few of the more easily swayed had actually pondered aloud whether there was merit to Yondu’s teku-induced theories on the existence of life beyond Anthos.

Uzuko couldn’t tolerate that.

“Yes.” If Kraglin sounded dejected and miserable at the idea, it was because he was. He hadn’t been lying when he said he loved the place - these people had been nothing but kind to him (barring the recent addition of rocks) and the village was beautiful. He’d been pleased and proud to help out where he could, whether it was reaching things for those too old or too young to manage it themselves, helping look after the small, squeaking blue babies for the brief moments parents needed to get something else, or just bringing Aja water when she called for it. He’d liked it here.
But the destruction of his ship would be very, very final, and he knew there were still stars he needed to see. Places to go, things to steal. Having the option of escape removed was something he couldn’t bear. Maybe if he had been here longer, really put down some roots, he could have accepted it, but now…

“I’ll never come back, if that’s what you want.”

“It is.” Pharaqa confirmed, watching his shoulders droop as Kraglin nodded in understanding. “He should speak nothing of this to anyone. Act as if nothing has changed.” She paused suddenly, narrowing her eyes at him. “If the worst should happen, and the star cannot be fixed…”

“We deal with that when we get to it,” Uzuko cut in. The star seemed complete to his reckoning, bar the mud and the grime, and the shards of odd transparent material that gathered around the cavity in its main body like teeth in an eel’s mouth. Hopefully, it wouldn’t require much work. The last thing he needed was for his elation at the thought of finally getting rid of this pesky, ugly creature to be tarnished by Pharaqa’s naysaying.

Although on that point… There was another concern, one neither of them had yet to address. “Pharaqa. What are we going to tell Yondu?”

“Nothing.” Pharaqa said after a few moments of careful contemplation. Content that he was being ignored, Kraglin clambering into the ship to dig around. He hadn’t had much when he left the Corps, but he knew there were some things of use. “If he has seen the star already then there is no harm in him knowing this creature is fixing it. As long as it doesn’t tell Yondu of the deal, I don’t see any harm in them speaking of it between themselves. It’s not like it can do any more damage.”

“I’m going to need to move her.” Kraglin said, leaning out of the hole in the window, looking down at the two blue people. “If you say the waters will rise, I need to fly her somewhere higher, or she’ll be ruined. I have enough to get her to a bluff of rock, I can hide her.”

“Maybe he’ll crash and die?” Pharaqa suggested, her tone optimistic.

Uzuko scoffed, hands on hips. The boy was definitely insane.

“It can’t fly,” he explained to Pharaqa, with a superior little smirk at the huntress’s stupidity. Honestly. They spent all their days running through the deepswamps, so they thought they knew everything. “It has no feathers. And it’s obviously dead, look at it. I don’t know what Krah-glyn thinks he’s going to do, but -”

“But it should be amusing to watch,” Pharaqa said. And… well, she wasn’t wrong. This was new, and while new meant dangerous, it also meant a deviation from the daily rigmarole of the village.

Uzuko loved his village. He really, truly did. But sitting on his backside all day listening to complaints and deciding who’d stolen whose jskveh-chicken got tedious, after thirty years.

He didn’t reply, deciding it was better not to be accused of conspiring to manslaughter if they let Kraglin keel his star over face-first and drown in the swamp. Instead, he gave Kraglin a decisive nod, permitting him to do as he pleased - and scurried to the cover of the nearest felled tree in case anything exploded.

“Okay well I mean if you’re gonna be fuckin’ assholes and throw rocks at me, and tell me to get the fuck out of your village even though I love it and would help out forever-” Maybe he was bitter. “Then I hope you like getting wet.” With that, Kraglin leaned back into the ship and started to do something. Pharaqa wasn’t sure what, but she crept closer to listen. “I’m gonna take her to a cave
under the hot springs!”

“He said something about the springs-”

That was all she got out, before the star roared.

Pharaqa was a brave and noble hunter. She was also alive after several decades of being a brave and noble hunter, and that included the presence of mind to know when something was huge and harder than her, which was why she was instantly up the tree closest to her. She was cursing and swearing a wild streak, and a rock came sailing out of her branches to clang against the side of the star as it hovered, the heat and force spraying water while Kraglin tried to get the mapping functions to work. He knew where the cave was, he just needed to let the ship know too.

Uzuko didn’t fall in the swamp. He was very proud of this. He did however try to hide behind Pharaqa - foiled both by the fact that her crest came to his chin at a generous estimate, and that she was already halfway up a tree. How could she forsake her chief so easily? Hadn’t she vowed to protect him on the night of her initiation?

He didn’t have time to shout a prayer before the star lifted into the air, trailing shredded vegetation and pondweed, and a tidal wave of filthy water doused him head to toe.

At first, he thought Kraglin’s touch must have awoken the beast, and it had consumed him. But then he realized that the Kraglin was not writhing in terror, but methodically prodding bits of the star’s interior, the details of his expression lost behind the blaze of the thing’s eyes.

Pharaqa’s assault had pathetically little effect - but the chief cheered her on anyway, wondering whether he should have trusted her gut instinct and let her kill Kraglin to start with. This madman wasn’t half as pathetic and helpless as Uzuko first assumed. And now, that may well be the death of him.

But as the star hovered, not advancing on them nor making to attack, the lead lining was chipped from Uzuko’s limbs. He scrambled to relative shelter, cowering behind Pharaqa’s tree trunk. “What’s going on?” he hollered up to her.

Pharaqa, having run out of rocks, was busy readying her bow.

“I don’t know,” she snarled. “But whatever it is, I’m sure it’s your son’s fault.”

Kraglin grumbled when he heard the dull clunk of a rock hitting his poor ship - as if she hadn’t suffered enough indignities. There was barely enough fuel to get her to the cave he had in mind and he sucked on his teeth, hissing a little. He could hear the two outside in various forms of panic, and couldn’t help but feel a bitter wash of glee - tell him he wasn’t welcome and to never come back, would they?

Well fine. He’d get right to work. First Yondu told him to fuck off, now these two. So why the dast was he bothering? Kraglin pushed on the steering rod, easing her up over the layer of canopies.

In her tree, Pharaqa dropped her arrow. She had expected the creature had merely raised itself a little but that - that was-

“That’s flying,” she informed her chief, in case he had suddenly gone blind. “He said - the springs-”

Uzuko wished she hadn’t said that. If she hadn’t said that, he might’ve been able to pretend this was (as Yondu might call it) one helluva bad trip. Uzuko had sworn off teku-root when he became a chief, and was suddenly saddled with the responsibility for three hundred other souls in addition to
his own. But he could’ve trodden in a vash’ryk burrow on the way over. Yes, perhaps if he prayed hard enough he would wake in old Aja’s shack with a wet rag over his fevered head and Yondu, sans-starman, grudgingly stationed by his bedside, ready to perform the ritualistic death-dance if he croaked.

But alas. Pharaqa had confirmed the signals reported by his eyes - that the star was flying. Or rather floating, like the air was a liquid. It didn’t seem to flap, its stiff angular featherless wings doing nothing to aid its buoyancy. But Uzuko could see heat-haze wobbling beneath it, like there was a topsy-turvy fire in its guts.

He blinked at the trees, which shook from the downwards gust of the Nova ship’s engines. Then at Pharaqa, grimly hugging her trembling branch and glowering at the star as if she could make it crash from the evil-eye alone. She was staring at him expectantly. Uzuko realized she was waiting for him to direct her, tell her what to do next.

Well, that’d be perfect - if only Uzuko knew himself. In fact, the only thing of which he was certain was that Kraglin was in possession of a weapon the power and magnitude of which Uzuko’s mind failed to fully grasp. And that the hotsprings were only a short trek from the village. If it flew over… If the villagers saw…

“Follow it,” he yelled, setting off in what he hoped to be the right direction before Pharaqa had the chance to spring from her perch. “Don’t let the star escape!”

Pharaqa had been told to do many things by her chief, some of which had been unsavoury. One of those things had been to take a young Yondu deep into the woods to train him as a hunter. Right now, she was sure she’d rather suffer another year of that than follow the floating - whatever it was.

On top of that, now Uzuko was running through the swamps and damn if she didn’t have two conflicting orders in her head; protect him, or go to the springs.

“Right,” she growled - he could follow the star itself. She darted off through the trees, the mass of the gleaming gold creature easy enough to follow. Though she had to notice it was staying low. Crashing through the trees, only rising as much as it had to. It was injured, lame, and she was sure if they just found its weak spot…

It lurched upwards a little and she cursed, quickening her pace.

For his part, Kraglin was taking the long way around. For all their assumptions about his intelligence, he wasn’t stupid. They didn’t want the village to know about his ship and the plan, fine. He could creep up the side of the cliff furthest from the village and nestle onto an outcropping. No problem – rocks were his speciality.

Pharaqa quailed only once - when she saw the craft start to rise along the rock face, she had to bite her hand to get back to herself.

He’d told her to follow.

She jumped onto one of the prongs from her perch, clinging grimly to the ship as it rose along the cliff face, Kraglin keeping watch for a wide enough surface.

Technically he’d said ‘follow’, not ‘board the goddam ship and leave your poor chieftain floundering about in the mire’. Uzuko recalled traveling from the deepswamps to the hotsprings as a young initiate, but that had been many, many years ago. Puffing at the wet, unsatisfying marshland air, he selected a direction and started to jog.
Now to hope there were no yolopps between him and his goal.

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Rolling out of his nest at midday was not a common occurrence. This was because Yondu usually slept in trees. There was a lot more staked on him not falling out of them. Yes, Centaurians were designed to bounce - but there were usually a lot of branches between you and the floor, and if you were seriously unlucky, maybe a snake or two as well.

In contrast, the distance between the lip of his nest and the floor was not nearly enough to scare his subconscious mind into stillness. Yondu woke up flailing, overbalanced past the point of no return, and flumped onto the floor belly first.

“Ow,” he complained. Then louder, in case Kraglin hadn’t heard him the first time and was feeling inclined to sympathy: “oooow!”

There was no reply. There was also an itchy dry patch on the inside of his loincloth. It took a solid minute of rolling around, yawning, and scratching his balls for the reason to register. Then Yondu bolted upright, stumbling over the cushion he’d managed to propel from one side of the hut to the other in his sleep, and stared aghast at the place where Kraglin was supposed to be.

The place where he wasn’t any longer.

Flark. Had Kraglin taken him seriously, when he said to go find himself another guide? He should know by now that half of what came out of Yondu’s mouth was bullshit! Honestly, Yondu expected better of him.

But… but given what they’d done together, he couldn’t really blame the star-man for striking out alone. Yondu slunk slowly to his side of the nest, stroking the indent left by Kraglin’s body. It was cool. He’d been gone a while. Yondu hesitated before he brushed the small white stain left on Kraglin’s blanket. When he failed to chipping it off - stupid broken nails, stupid diamond-squeezing session last night, stupid, stupid Kraglin - Yondu gave into frustration. He bundled up the supple old hide and tossed it into his firepit with a hoarse roar.

He stood there a moment, shoulders heaving, glaring at the pelt, as it settled over long-extinguished dusty grey charcoal. Then he turned on the jacket. That was Kraglin’s only other known possession - and he’d left it draped over the nestside, as if in mockery. Yondu fully intending to give it the same treatment.

Kraglin had evidently forgotten it when he left; that meant it was his to defile as he so pleased. Maybe he’d shred it and take the rags along next time he had to use the compost toilet? Or he could just add it to the firepit.

Starting fires when the suns were at their peak wasn’t the norm, but dammit, Yondu had evidence to burn. He wanted to eradicate it all. Scour it away. Go back to the way things had been before he’d demanded Kraglin touch his crest and kiss him, before he’d clambered onto his lap and made the biggest damn fool of himself since that time with Aja and the misplaced loincloth.

However, as he held the jacket above the ashes, he couldn’t bring himself to let it drop.

Yondu remained hunched over the firepit for a whole five seconds, willing his fingers to unclench, willing this last shred of Kraglin to fall. When both refused his orders, he strode to the door instead, poking his head out into a disgustingly warm and sunny day. He balled the jacket, crumpling it in furious motions. Then set his eyes on the chief’s hut, and hurled it as far in that direction as he could.
“And good fuckin’ riddance!” he called.

He’d used all his spare tinder, and needed to collect more kindling from the treeline before he could give the remnants of his and Kraglin’s relationship a proper send-off. Before that though, he needed a bath. Jumping over the rocky parapet that formed a natural balcony at the door of his hut, Yondu skidded down the last six feet of the cliff-face. He stalked through the village, back a taut mass of muscle and tattoos and expression so fierce that if anyone noticed the crusty stain on his loincloth, they didn’t dare mention it.

Yondu sat in the stream, tinkling water gushing over his legs and belly up to the line of his pouch. It was icy cold, springing from deep within the mountain. Most of the time, Yondu liked to splash his face in it to wake himself up - or better yet, push Kraglin into it. The bony a-hole’s screeches worked better than any cockrel-alarm clock.

Right now though, that bony a-hole was absent from his usual place at his side.

Yondu hadn’t enquired as to his whereabouts as he stomped through the village, in part because he didn’t want to pause long enough for anyone to ask about his dirty loincloth, mostly because he just didn’t care. The chilly gush of the creek was less reviving and more numbing. Just what Yondu needed.

He sat there long after the stain had washed away, long after all hint of sweat and grime and filth had been cleansed. He sat there until he couldn’t feel the shingle biting his ass or the slip of little fish between his toes. The mid-afternoon rain began, pounding on his crest so loud it almost drowned out the jumble of thoughts ricocheting off the insides of his skull. It was warm in comparison to the stream, but Yondu was still shivering, gripping his biceps in an effort to trap the tremble inside.

He was so focused on this task, futile though it was, that he didn’t hear Aja’s laborious progress along the bank towards him.

“So.” Aja leaned on the tree by the stream, watching the blue little princeling get even bluer in the chill. The rain didn’t bother her - how could it? With the amount of it she had seen through her years, anything below a lightning bolt striking her didn’t tend to register. She hummed as she came over, standing behind him on the shore. “Madness is contagious then, is it? You seem to have caught a touch of it, sitting there. Or are you hoping the river will rise for you and cover you up?”

Yondu, bristling at having been caught in a moment where he was anything less than the proud, indomitable prince of the Zatoan, stood in a flurry of water and rounded on Aja, ready to yell. He probably would have done, had his numb knees decided to make the journey upright with the rest of him. As it was, they flopped inwards, limp as two jungle-vines, and Yondu sat down rather more heavily than he’d intended.

Water slapped up, a shimmering light-laden gout of it. Aja was too old and slow to dodge. Served her fucking right. Yondu followed the unintentional attack with a middle finger, brandished furiously at her in place of an arrow.

“The hell do you think yer doing, oldtimer? Sneaking up on me like that?” He gestured down at himself. “I know I’m irresistible, but please. Save it for the Season.”

For some reason, the teasing didn’t come as naturally as usual. As soon as the word Season left his lips, the reason he’d been sulking in the stream in the first place flourried about Yondu’s mind like a blizzard. It was a total white-out. The surrounding forest blurred, replaced by Kraglin’s mouth sliding hot and slick over his, Kraglin’s fuzzy chin scratching his own, Kraglin’s nails biting into the meat of his ass, like the stones on the riverbed...
Yondu hastily rearranged so he was sat on his knees. He didn’t bother trying to stand again - didn’t want to give the old biddy more fuel for her jibes. He’d wait until she’d had her amusement, then crawl out of the stream like a goddam invalid. Which was fitting, considering that was what thoughts of Kraglin reduced him to.

Aja had been a little surprised by the water spout - while Yondu was known for being quick and all over the place, the water tended to stay where it was. She chuckled once it was down, wiping off her face despite the rain and shuffling to sit on the rock. She could let him rant and rave, if he wanted to, and she nodded a little through it all.

“I came to ask you a question,” she said when he was done, resting her arms on her knees. She let her feet dangle in the river, hissing a little at the sting of water on sore areas. She was old; she knew this. She could deny it all she wanted, but each year took more and more of a toll on her body, and this year was the year of Feet.

“Can you tell me,” she said, gesturing out past the creek, far out into the distance where a mountain sat, dark against the darker clouds. “What is past that peak?”

Yondu groaned. Great. Now it was fable-time. He resisted the urge to drown himself.

“More of Anthos I guess. Beyond that… well, who cares?” He certainly didn’t, not anymore. Or at least, he was trying to convince himself.

Aja hummed a little, pointing in another direction.

“And what is past those hills?”

Yondu nursed a large yawn, tongue flicking out to catch the rain. Fat drops burst on chilled skin, making him even more sodden and miserable-looking. His glare dared Aja to comment.

“Dunno,” he said shortly. He didn’t have the patience for her games, not today.

Aja nodded a little, clapping her hands between her knees. She was quiet for a moment, gazing off into nowhere, nursing the withered insides of her cheeks with her tongue.

“It has always surprised me,” she said, once the pound of the rain had been the only noise for too long. “That for all your whining and bitching, and wanting to know, you never just got off your ass to go look.”

If he wasn’t in the mood for games, he sure as hell wasn’t in the mood for some old village-sitter to act all high-and-mighty superior, like she was better than him. Yondu’s lips drew up the gum.

“Fuck you, old bitch,” he spat. “You don’t know nothin’ about me.”

Big words to the woman who’d changed his nappy-rags. Yondu wisely selected another mode of attack.

“Look. I got duties to this fucking place, right? Much as I wish I didn’t. It’s all I know, s’all I’ve ever known. Maybe the Zatoan used to be nomads, wanderers, but we sure ain’t now. You think I don’t wanna get out of here? You don’t think I wanna see the world? But as soon as I go, I ain’t gonna have nothing to come back to. What’m I supposed to do, if there ain’t nothing over that mountain? If there’s nothing beyond those hills? Come crawling back here, face dad and know he was right all along? I’d rather nail myself to the za’gah tree.”

Aja nodded along, but it wasn’t condescending or cruel. She had seen most children in their rages at
some point or another, and was used to bearing them out. Yondu's was nothing new, nothing she hadn’t suffered before, and she sighed as she sat back.

“I know.” Aja looked up to the sky, watching the clouds struggle against the wind. “You think I don’t. And you think I don’t believe you. That’s fine. You’re young, and allowed to think old people are nothing but stupid, doddery old things. But I was your age and younger, once. And I remember a lot. Yondu, you believe all things come from Anthos.” It was a statement, said without doubt. “I believe that includes your questions. Sometimes I wonder why he neglected to provide the answers, don’t you?”

Aja shrugged, as if to cut off any reply before it could be given.

“Would you let me tell you one thing, before I leave you to your riverbed?”

“No,” Yondu scoffed. But he sat a little higher in the water, the conversation distracting him from the pervasive, leaching cold. Aja was good for that, at least.

“When I was younger, I had a brother.” She stood, dusting the puddle from her loincloth, the collected water. “And one day, he went away. His hunt brothers said he vanished on the hunt, but I knew he had taken a cloth bag of his things with him when he left. And a few years later, during a terrible sickness that was sweeping the mountain, do you know what happened? A woman came to our village—a heathen. She came to us unarmed and told us, that a man had come by the village and said we had a plant to cure her daughter. We asked where she was from, and she pointed,” Aja pointed too. “Over that mountain. I cannot say for sure who the man was, passing through her town, knowing where we live, knowing our cures and our plants. But I know she lived there.”

Yondu tried his hardest not to give a shit. But sometimes, his hardest wasn’t good enough. And if Kraglin was here, he’d probably have made some innuendo or another that would’ve had Yondu sputtering and Aja falling in the stream—but Kraglin wasn’t here. Thinking about mights and maybes wasn’t gonna do anything but piss Yondu off.

He edged a little closer to the bank.

“Your brother. Did he know what he was looking for, when he left?”

“Oh, he wouldn’t have told me. I was just a silly little girl, who couldn’t hunt or whistle or even climb with him.” She chuckled, leaning to work the crick from her back with a grunt - a pained one, even if she covered it as quickly as she could. “But if I remember him right... And remember how he spoke with his friends, his favourite word was always ‘anything’.”

Anything. It’s been a long time since Yondu laid on his back beneath a star-strewn sky and considered the absolute infinity of possibilities beyond it.

“So you’re saying,” he said, draping his wet loincloth over one shoulder and pulling himself over the sharp riverbed until he could loop his forearms over a rock a little ways away from the one Aja had folded onto. “That if an opportunity came… If I got the chance to go… I should take it? Leave my father? Leave all of you behind?”

He was just waiting for her to go back on her word. Yondu was the future of the village - his father told him often enough. He must’ve told Aja too. Yondu was fully prepared for her to laugh and claim she’d just been telling him stories, something to cheer him up on a murky day. The plop of rain into the stream intensified, surrounding Yondu and Aja with a wall of muted sound. It soothed away the stresses, the anger, the fear Yondu would never talk to Kraglin again and they’d live out their days in the village avoiding one another like they had the Fever. Yondu propped his chin on his
damp arm, squinting suspiciously at Aja’s smile.

“What?”

“You are my young chief in waiting, Udonta.” Aja replied mildly. “I am an old fool. I would never presume to offer you advice that wasn’t asked for, or counsel your personal feelings. But if Yondu himself asked me, as Yondu and nothing and no one else, what he should do if he wants to do something? I would tell him he already does what he wants, so why bother changing things now?”

Which was an answer, certainly.

“But do me a favour, if you do go,” Aja chuckled a little, waving at him a little. “Make sure you go to the hills. I already know what’s beyond the mountain, don’t I?” She turned, starting to hobble away from the creek. “And send someone back soon enough so they can tell me before I die!”

“I’m going to the stars, not the hills!” Yondu shouted after her. But with the old bat’s shoddy hearing, he doubted she’d understood. “Crazy old grandma.”

He sighed, wriggling his toes so the tiny freshwater fish that were considering nibbling scattered. They flitted along the fast-flowing stream, quick and frenzied as the light that glanced from the surface in all directions, split by the ripple of falling rain. It took Yondu five minutes to haul his freezing body onto the rocks - something he’d be frustrated with himself for, if his brain wasn’t turning Aja’s words over and over, repeating them like a mantra to Anthos.

_Yondu does what Yondu wants._

Yondu plastered on his favourite grin. For the first time that day, it felt genuine. “Damn right he does,” he said, and lashed on his loincloth with a practiced motion. Who the fuck cared what Anthos thought? It was time to find Kraglin.
Pharaqa did her best not to seethe as she stomped into the village, sending some children scattering. Seeing them only reminded her of Yondu, when he was still small enough to toss into high up places and leave him there until she was ready to deal with him again. Kraglin had hidden his star, promised to work on it when the weather was fine enough for him to, and to say nothing to the village or villagers about the plan to leave and never, ever return.

As far as their behaviour, they were to act as if Kraglin was going to be a permanent fixture in the village which, Pharaqa thought savagely, meant including him on hunting missions. Nothing too risky or too far from home, and she’d let Yondu handle it, but if they got lucky he’d die sooner rather than later. She snarled off any attempts at soothing her rage, now not being a time to try and handle her.

She had her nest to retreat to and she did, woe betide anyone who came knocking.

“Why is this here?” Kraglin stooped to pick up his jacket, from where it had been whipped around by winds and used as a toy by several infants. He was drenched, and cold, and furiously unhappy with all of this, only made worse when a little cluster of blue children came over to hang off his arms, delighted with how high he could dangle them. It made his heart hurt, pain evident on his face for a moment before he smoothed it over, smiling for them and finding a little stash of nut-like berries in his jacket pocket for them to feast on.

“Am I excused, sir?” he asked Uzuko, keeping one hand on the child on his shoulder, one arm cradling another to keep it from falling.

Uzuko waved him away. He was trying his utmost not to reveal how much this episode had spooked him. Seeing Kraglin piloting that gargantuan hunk of … whatever it was (Uzuko hadn’t asked for the specifics of its composition, but it looked like knife-metal and resounded like a gong, and its eyes glowed with the power of fifty bonfires) had given Uzuko an unfamiliar and uncomfortable certainty that he was out of his depth. Now, he wanted to get back to the drudgery of chicken-complaints and pretend Kraglin wasn’t his problem.

Which technically, he wasn’t.

“Go find my son, have him help you mind the children,” he ordered. “Just remember - not a word of our little, um. Discussion.” It did Yondu good to have tasks to keep him out of mischief, and since Kraglin’s arrival Yondu had been performing even the dullest chores with verve, eager to show off to his new friend.

Uzuko would encourage their friendship while it lasted. And when Kraglin vanished in the night - well, that’d teach Yondu a valuable lesson about trust, one that’d support him throughout his tenure as chief. Yes, thought Uzuko, forlornly rubbing his sore feet as he entered his gloomy hut. He had everything under control.
Kraglin nodded a little, though it wasn’t until the cloth swung back behind Uzuko that he remembered Yondu hated him. With everything that had gone on - from an early morning, to being kidnapped, threatened, rocks thrown at him and now a vow to Go, he had almost forgotten that the one he cared for the most here had decided he wasn’t worth the time of day and that they shouldn’t ever spend fond time together again.

“At least you don’t hate me.” He said to the baby currently grabbing his nose, giving a small ghost of a smile. He sighed and hitched them down a little, covering them with his jacket as he cast around to try and find their parents. Kraglin put a solid bet on the fire pit and started off that way, tickling them a little whenever they tried to get too uppity about where they were able to climb to, cooing at them when they squeaked. “Maybe I should just hang out with you guys.”

Yondu expected to see many things as he trudged back to the village. Kraglin and Jaku getting cosy by the fire. His mother preparing for the continuation of her disrupted hunt. His father giving him that patented disappointed look that meant ‘I know exactly what you’ve done (flashed Aja/dragged a yolopp home/missed dinner because you were stargazing/upset the poor defenceless madman I put you in charge of) and I’m not happy about it.’

What he found - father and mother in respective huts (and mother, judging by the volume of crashes, practicing her aku-wrestling technique on anything breakable she could find), and Kraglin being smothered by the latest batch of younglings - wasn’t on that list. Yondu faltered. The guy looked so disarmingly happy, sat there with children using him as a climbing post and pulling his hair and papping his nose. Did Yondu really have it in him to storm over there and ruin that?

Yes, he discovered, grin stretching cheek-to-cheek. Yes he did.

Yondu crossed around the far side of the fire, hidden among the smoke and the milling figures: hungry blue civilians and hard-working black-stained fire-watchers. Kraglin’s vision was suitably impaired by the baby currently testing its climbing prowess on his face. Yondu could see his shoulders quaking with restrained laughter from here. And perhaps it hurt a little, somewhere deep down and buried, that Kraglin could be enjoying himself so much after he’d left. But what the hell. Aja’s little pep-talk had powered Yondu out of his slump better than any well-placed boot to the backside. He was going to do what he wanted, because he was Yondu Udonta and that was what Yondu Udonta did. And if what he wanted was Kraglin…

Well, Anthos himself couldn’t stand in his way.

Yondu caught the gaze of a small blue critter - girl or boy, he couldn’t tell at this age. He put one finger to his lips, giving them a toothy conspiratorial grin. The sight of Kraglin’s jacket, wrapped around the little blue bean on his lap like an oversized sweat-smelling swaddling blanket, gave him pause. Hadn’t he thrown that from his hut…? Kraglin must’ve found it: crumpled in a forlorn heap, baked by the sun and drenched by the rain, and doubtlessly pounded by a half-dozen feet who’d mistaken it for a discarded loincloth, either outgrown or broken. He was lucky it hadn’t been tossed on the bonfire.

What had he thought, when he saw it? Had it made him all the more determined to never take Yondu back? Well, there was only one way to find out.

Winking at the children, several of whom had by now noticed his sneaking approach and were giggling behind cupped palms, Yondu held the prize he’d snatched from the creek in one hand. He peeled back Kraglin’s collar with the other. Then, before the man could turn to face his attacker (admittedly, he was encumbered by the sheer number of younglings who’d managed to cram themselves on his lap, but hey, Yondu’d never claimed to fight fair) he dropped the frog down Kraglin’s back, ribbetting loudly the whole way.
Kraglin could never say no to a tiny, beeping face. So when parents piled their babies onto him to give them free hands while they ate, he found it impossible to try and give them back. They were just so squishy and chirpy, and given his mood being at an all time low, they were remarkable at cheering him up just because they didn’t talk about him or try to hurt him. He could tickle with one hand, steady with another and frankly, his nose was the perfect size and shape for nuzzling the one trying to conquer Mount Head.

If nothing else, he could always console himself with the fact that at least the babies were always happy to see him.

The wet, slimy thing suddenly being introduced to his back would have made him stand up and squawk, if that hadn’t meant dropping all of his precious bundles into the fire. As it was he yowled a little, trying to clutch them to make sure none fell while also wiggling and yelping, trying to free himself from the attack.

“What-” He arched his back, trying to provide a way out for the animal, seeing a flash of blue and grin behind him. The children were laughing now, and he flushed, right up to his ears, as he strove to stop them falling or hurting themselves. “Aaugh!”

“Writhe beaky-man, writhe,” said Yondu cheerfully, scooping the brat who clung perilously to Kraglin’s head out of harm’s way. He tucked him under one arm, then relieved Kraglin of another bundle of joy to haul about under the other. The rest looked old enough to survive a little rough-housing. If Kraglin fell over backwards and squashed a couple, they’d make decent landing pads and reinflate afterwards.

Yondu folded down besides Kraglin. The heat of the fire brought a sheen to his cheeks, but it was a comfortable slow roast - only a little painful, thanks to the pins and needles stippling his still-chilly toes. Warmth, comfort, food on the way and Kraglin besides him, where he belonged. This could not get any better.

Or perhaps it could. Kraglin made some truly exquisite facial expressions, as the frog slithered lower and lower, webbed feet sticking to the wiry hairs coating his lower back. If Yondu knew what a camera was, he would’ve wished for one.

As it was, he made do with pulling a kid into his lap to use as a chin rest - the one who’d spotted him first. They squeaked at him in welcome, slapping his face with tiny blue palms. The two tiny ones he draped one across each thigh, using himself like a clothing rack.

They weren’t especially interested in him. Kraglin was a stranger; he had weird hair and a weird face and a gangly body that was dauntingly tall yet very easy to climb. Yondu, on the other hand? They all knew him. Whether from hours of punishment/babysitting that had to be endured rather than enjoyed on both sides, or from watching him prance about with the other hunters in front of the fire, telling stories with his shadow, he was familiar enough to be comfortable.

Living as part of a community meant that even ornery bastards like Pharaqa who claimed to hate everything about the younglings, had to learn to handle them. When mommy was away on a hunt and daddy was off stealing Aja’s jskveh-chickens and baby was crying, it was considered a kindness to everyone’s ears if the nearest neighbour scooped them from their basket and juggled them about until they quit screaming or puked. Yondu had plenty of experience dealing with kids.

What he didn’t have experience with was an upset Kraglin. But hey, the best way to learn was through practice.

With one arm now free, Kraglin reached back and under his shirt, trying to contort himself. The frog
slipped away from him twice before he was able to close fingers around it and pull it to the front,
glowering at the poor little thing until it surely felt shame at being an unwilling participant in his
torture deep in its little froggy heart. He had to quickly banish the expression though, not wanting to
worry this children, and let the frog rest on his open palm for the kids still on him to coo and pat at
with gentle, curious hands. Kraglin took a few deep, steadying breaths, waiting for the chuckles to
die down from around the fire, to go back to the sound of quiet adult conversation and eating.

Yondu was next to him. Yondu didn’t seem bothered by the fact that he’d been gone in the morning
and missing all day and had crammed a tiny frog down his back, which was really sending mixed
signals if Kraglin had ever been a judge of it. He avoided looking at Yondu, focusing on gently
stretching a little leg of the frog out, showing the children the little webby, sticky feet for them to
chirp at.

There was no way to ask Yondu what the hell was going on or where they stood - or sat - without
mentioning the thing he had been ordered almost at knifepoint not to mention. But frankly, his day
had been horrible. He felt wretched and strung out, tired and angry and abandoned all at once. And it
wasn’t like he hadn’t seen others their age relaxing together, as friends or siblings would. And if
Yondu had an issue with it, he could push Kraglin into the fire pit and be done with it, because it
would sure be easier than struggling through anything else.

So he leaned to the side a little, offering more room for the kids to sprawl and play - and if it meant
he could use the cover of children to let his arm press against Yondu, his thigh tucking up against his
as well, then that was fine and convenient and easy to wave away if Yondu had a freak out.

Kraglin was tired, he tried to communicate with a glance at Yondu, his expression haggard behind
the noise he was making to entertain the blue beanlings now that he’d released the frog to hop away.
He’d had a Day. If Yondu was going to make this more of a Day, he was invited to just get it over
with.

The seam between their bodies felt hotter than the fire. Yondu found himself nursing tingles again,
and gave his mental self a thorough shake - firstly because they were surrounded by children and
there were some things Yondu really didn’t want to explain, and secondly because that was a little
pathetic and a lot embarrassing, to have the brush of Kraglin’s arm and leg make his head bob off his
shoulders and into a faraway cloud.

It was only later, after they’d been handed their bowls - the firekeepers taking pity on their inability
to come collect them and passing them over personally - and Yondu was protecting his dumplings
from the enterprising fingers of the kid on his lap, that Yondu realized Anthos’ wrath had never
crossed his mind.

That felt… good. A little dangerous and a lot rebellious, but freeing too.

‘I would tell him he already does what he wants, so why bother changing things now?’

Yondu doubted Aja had intended for her talk to bolster Yondu’s resolve to willfully break Anthos’
laws. But he’d made a habit out of doing the opposite of what that old crone expected. For now
though, Yondu had more pressing issues on his plate. Or in his bowl, to be exact.

He stuffed three dumplings into his mouth at once, mashing them into his cheeks so he had room to
poke his tongue out between. The thieving brat made her eyes look big and shiny. It was a she,
Yondu was fairly convinced; he recalled her parents calling her Oola at some point in the past, which
was a big name for someone so small. But regardless of the kid’s gender, or the potency of her
puppy-dog eyes, Yondu didn’t believe in coddling.
“No,” he said firmly - as firmly as he could when his mouth was ninety-percent dumpling. Her little hand, which had been creeping for the last dumpling as if she thought looking him in the eyes made the movements of the rest of her body invisible, started guiltily and disappeared behind her back. Yondu smirked, spilling half-chewed dough. Laughing at her grossed-out expression made more pepper her face, but it was worth the waste to make her squeal.

The younglings balanced on his thighs looked to be barely past the pouchling stage. They were either late developers or they’d been born outside the Season, which incurred shame on their parents and shunning on them. But at this age, children cared little for the quirks or bigotry of their elders. As the twins waggled their arms and legs like they were swimming, rag-swaddled backsides bobbing cheerfully in the firelight, Oola wiped the remains of Yondu’s dinner off her face and stroked their backs, over where tiny crests were peeping through the skin.

They really were cute. It was a shame they wouldn’t survive to adulthood.

The delight on Oola’s face was reassuring. Times could change. Banning the za’gah was just the beginning. And, Yondu thought to himself in classical heretical fashion, swallowing his oversized mouthful in increments, if a child knew nothing of Anthos’ laws then perhaps they weren’t so innate as Uzuko liked to claim.

Seeing as he hadn’t been shoved, smacked or threatened with a knife again, Kraglin relaxed just a little bit. Enough to put some of his weight onto Yondu's side, with a small, appreciative noise for the help whether it was intentional or not. He straightened at once when he heard a heavy tread go past them, Pharaqa stalking to get her bowl.

“Are we allowed out to the woods tonight?” Kraglin asked, his voice low and quiet as he focused on tearing up some of his dumpling to share with the little one he had, just to keep his head down and his lips obscured. “I’m not very tired.”

Yondu started at the sound of his voice. Then smiled. Thank fuck. Nothing had changed. “Don’t see why not,” he said, forcing his tone to remain level, hammering his excitement deep down inside him, to join the tingles that had never quite left. He distracted himself by wafting his last dumpling back and forth under Oola’s nose. “We best make the most of it though. Rainy season’ll be here in two blinks, and then we’re stuck in the village until the swamps go down and the Ignokai bugger off back to their own damn valley. Idjits shouldn’t have built on a floodplain if they didn’t wanna get washed out of their home once a year. Honestly. Some people.”

Oola, arms crossed and pout taking up the entire bottom half of her face, lost patience and tried to snatch. Yondu whipped the bowl away, chuckling. Uninitiated children tended to be fed after their elders, as a mark of respect. Little Oola here was getting greedy. That was a sign of future greatness though - or so Yondu had been reliably told (by his own reflection in a mountain pool).

“Don’t spoil him,” he said, nodding to Kraglin’s own blue-and-red jacket-wrapped bundle. “Or at least if yer gonna spoil him, hand him back to the parents afterwards. And take note of his name so I know who to avoid next time dad puts me on babysittin’.”

“Why don’t they build their homes on stilts?” Kraglin asked quietly, sneaking his borrowed baby another bite of dumpling. It grabbed at his hand to gnaw it off his fingertips, and he smiled, tickling its nose gently with other fingers until he was released to little squeaking noises. “Then the water would flow under it.”

He still felt off - still sounded off. Worn down and tired, his words more a low noise of absent fluff to keep his mouth busy. He didn’t like the way Pharaqa was glaring at him from over the fire pit, and he sighed, eating another dumpling. He hated the way being so defeated made him sound, and tried
to summon some more energy, something to bat back with.

“That's probably stupid though. Must be some reason why they don’t do that. Trees I guess, gettin’ knocked over in the flood waters.”

Why did Yondu get the feeling Kraglin didn’t want to be talking about Ignokai construction methods? The timbre of his voice was off, but if Yondu concentrated on the loud snaps and crackles from the fire pit and the snippets of quiet conversation that filtered through the smoky air - “Back out on the hunt tomorrow” and “Rainy season soon” and “They’re my goddamn jskveh-hens, you crazy old bitch” - he could pretend he hadn’t noticed. At least, long enough to contemplate what was the cause of Kraglin’s misery.

First option: himself. In hindsight, Yondu hadn’t been the most courteous to him this morning, what with the whole knife-brandishing threat and the command, however insincere, for Kraglin to select another guide. But hey. Yondu’d brought him a frog. He’d sat next to him, and endured the slow dispensing of Kraglin’s weight over his side - even pressed back, just a little. What more did Kraglin need to know that all was forgiven and they could get on with their lives?

Second option: his mother, who had been the focal point of Kraglin’s nervous side-eyes for the past half-hour. And who had, to Yondu’s consternation, been glaring back.

“Oh fuck,” he said aloud, using Kraglin’s favoured cuss not for the benefit of the young ears around him, but just because he liked the way it sounded. “Whatever you’ve done to piss that bitch off, I promise you’re gonna regret it.” When his words made Kraglin sag a little lower, like someone’d pulled the plug on him and let the air out, he barged his shoulder affectionately. “Don’t worry. I'll protect ya. I wish I could say Pharaqa’s all bark and no bite, but I’ve been dealin’ with her tantrums for years. You’ll be safe, so long as ya stick with me.”

Kraglin did his best not to groan, letting the beanling put its fist in his eye with an affectionate little ‘brrp’ noise. It was honestly only the knowledge that he was cradling a child that stopped him from just rolling backwards off the log and into the wilderness - that and the fact he was sure Pharaqa could find him easier in the woods then elsewhere, and he didn’t want to be mistaken for something horrible and ‘accidentally’ shot full of arrows.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he said, a hand coming up to rub his face tiredly. He was relieved of his tiny bundle by the parents, who beamed at Yondu a little.

“You let us know when you’re heading out to hunt,” One gushed happily. “We’ll be happy to keep him busy with her!”

“You’re welcome.” Kraglin said, which was only half correct. They smiled at his nonsense and patted his hair, going off with their child. Kraglin let his hands drag down his face and looked at Yondu for a moment, then the fire. He could wait until they were outside, in the trees and the wilderness before he vented. He was polite like that.

It took Yondu a while to work out the pattern, but work it out he did. Kraglin’s antsiness increased in indirect proportion to the number of children on their laps. Parents peeled from the bonfire in cliques, carrying extra portions for their young and beaming smiles. They swung the brats into the air when they retrieved them, balancing them on hips and over shoulders. To Yondu and Kraglin, crests were inclined in thanks. Some seemed surprised to find their prince willingly looking after their spawn. But hey, showed how little they knew him. Yondu wasn’t all star-madness and hunger for the hunt.

In fact, he was almost tempted to ask them to leave the sproglets to play a while longer. That might make Kraglin smile, like he had been before Yondu plopped himself down and ruined his day.
Yondu scoffed at himself. He scraped the two tots off his legs, passing them one after another to their parents. The father was young, younger than Yondu. He tucked the first of the children into a pouch that looked painfully stretched, the mother taking the other to cradle against his chest. Of course. In the rare case of twins, a hunt-brother or a fellow gatherer was usually roped into helping out, letting one kid nap in his pouch so the poor father didn’t have to handle two at once. No such kindness would have been afforded to a pair who’d coupled out-of-season. Now he put effort into noticing, Yondu realized how the conversation bubbling around them cut to silence when they passed by, and restarted as they left, the mother bobbing her head at the last minute, as if only just recalling how to interact with the son of the chief.

See, a little voice murmured in Yondu’s head. That’s what awaits you, if you keep up this nonsense.

But Yondu did what Yondu wanted, as Aja had established. And right now Yondu wanted to drag Kraglin away from the fire and his mother’s pervasive glare, into the woodlands where the sky was bright with stars in every clearing, and they’d only be disturbed by the whuffle of nocturnal creatures across the forest floor.

Looking anywhere but Kraglin, he sought out his hand where it stretched into the darkness behind them, propping up his lean torso. His fingers were warm and thin, even though they’d been sheltered from the fire by their conjoined shadows. Yondu intertwined white with blue. He tugged as if he didn’t already have Kraglin’s attention.

“Wanna split?” he asked gruffly.

Kraglin had waved to the littler ones as they went, even as they were nodding off with peeping noises, being put away. In truth, he wasn’t sure how to handle the whole - pouch, thing that seemed to be going on there. He figured it was polite to just smile and wave though, settling back and shutting his eyes to enjoy the warmth and the fire and-

And that, apparently. He tightened his fingers around Yondu's for a brief moment, feeling tension turn his shoulders to rock. If this was going to be Yondu reiterating how terrible things were between them, then he was tempted to say no. He’d had a hard enough day, thank you.

But even being yelled at and stabbed (probably) would be better than suffering Pharaqa’s glares. So he nodded instead, giving a brief squeeze before he let go and stood up, stretching with a groan and yawn.

“Let’s go.”

Yondu knew of a clearing, a place he’d come often when he was first initiated and allowed unsupervised beyond the village gates. It was to this space that he steered Kraglin, a space saturated with memories of first-freedom, when exploring the forest had seemed like an adventure and every new tree was a new friend.

It was safe enough. No known packs of beasties had marked it as their territory, and Yondu pointed out the *vash’ryk* nest at the clearing’s far side, demonstrating how they stuck leaves to their quills to create camouflage and then waited for an unsuspecting hunter’s foot to be impaled. So long as they avoided that - which they would, unless they got into a full-blown sparring match (which Yondu wouldn’t be adverse to, but Kraglin looked like he had bags under his eye-bags, and there was no fun to be had in kicking a guy who’d already been chewed up and spat out by life) - there was nothing to worry about.

There was a pile of rocks at the clearing center, dragged over by hunters still in-training as part of some exercise or another. Yondu took great delight in knocking them down. The racket as they
pummelled the ferns and bracken of the undergrowth would scare off any lurking taabshqa - they
didn’t need a repeat of their first meeting.

“Follow me,” he said, crossing to one of the rocks when the dust had once again settled. He sat, the
ferns towering above him, encasing him in a dark and dew-wet cave. Above, visible through the
waving fronds, each star could be picked out in perfect singularity. The sky was clear as a lustrous
adamantine. The deep inky navy stretched up, and up, and up, beyond the point Yondu’s mind could
fathom.

Kraglin was pleased with the niceness of the clearing, even if it was a dim sort of happiness. There
was so much to enjoy on this planet, so much to explore and wander around staring at. It was such a
shame that he had to-

Kraglin slumped down next to Yondu, shutting his eyes and letting his head clonk back against the
rock. Honestly, he just needed ten minutes where he didn’t have to worry about anything coming to
get him, or going away, or even what he was going to do once he hit space again. Was it possible to
go back to the Corps and say you were very, very sorry and here’s your ship back?

“So,” First things first - Kraglin cleared his throat to stop it sounding so hoarse. “You don’t seem to
hate me. Thats a good thing. That's good to know.”

Oh yeah. Last time he’d seen Kraglin, he’d waved a knife at him and as good as ordered him to get
the fuck out of his life.

Zatoan’s didn’t have ‘water under the bridge’ as an expression - mostly because there were no
nearby rivers wide enough to require bridging. They did have ‘arrows in the air’, which meant much
the same thing, with an added edge of ‘if what I said hurt you then that sucks, and I recognize that
once words are spoken, much like loosed arrows, they can’t always be recalled.’ But unlike with
arrows, it would take more than careful whistling to get Yondu out of this.

Rather than fumbling through an idiom, Yondu kept things concise.

“I don’t hate you,” he said simply. “You ain’t done no wrong by me. In fact… Uh, you remember
that thing I said about apologizing?”

“That you don’t do it?”


Kraglin studied him after that, just a tired, heavy sort of gaze. There were so many ways he could
take that, if he chose to. It would take a great linguist than him to pick apart all the threads and
meanings of Yondus language and how it did and didn’t translate over, especially through pidgin
Xandarian and a translator that had seen better days. He was no student of languages, but he had
spent quite some time learning how to decipher this odd, surly, blue man next to him.

“So you’re not sorry.” He said, slowly, feeling out the territory. “‘Cause sorry means you don’t do it
again. So if you aint sorry-”

Maybe he was right. Maybe he was wrong and going to get a knife in the ribs. He could find out.

“I ain’t sorry about what we did,” Yondu broke in, voice rasping harshly in the still night air. “I
oughta be. But I ain’t. I’m sorry that I…”

Oh yeah. No apologies. Yondu stubbornly sealed his lips and hoiked one foot onto his lap, turning
over the sole and checking if he’d stepped in any vash’ryk dung, picking at his callouses until
Kraglin got the message that it was his turn to break the silence.

“Yeah.” That seemed to satisfy him, and Kraglin relaxed back a little, letting his shoulders untense against the rock a bit. It wasn’t even the idea of not getting a regular good time down here, it had been the thought of Yondu disliking him so intensely. He didn’t have the energy to keep up with that. So instead he waited for Yondu to finish what he was doing before snagging his hand, curling his fingers with his again. “Good.”

He wasn’t stupid - he let their hands drop into the grass between them, so it wasn’t the first thing someone would spot if they came in.

Kraglin let his eyes wander the night sky, working the angle around in his mind until he could see the correct alignments of stars. There was a leisure system, he knew it. And that one was one of the major paths in and out of the courier systems, vast tracts of open space where ships sped along, carrying all sorts of goods. He knew some people made their homes out there, in the winking darkness between stars, just biding their time, away from everyone and everything.

Yondu fluctuated between wanting to squeeze Kraglin’s fingers so tight he risked crushing them, and pretending he hadn’t noticed the warm unmistakable pressure of a hand on his. He opted for somewhere in between, curling blunt blue digits between Kraglin’s longer, slimmer, paler ones. He cleared his throat before speaking again, staring straight ahead to avoid getting caught in the never-ending loop of watching Kraglin watch the stars.

“Which ones did you come from again?” Then quickly, to show he’d been paying attention - “Think ya tried to tell me once, a while back. But didn’t really understand. Thought you was one of them at first, y’know. A star-man, not a man-who-travels-between-stars.” The words sounded clunky, threaded together by his tongue. Yondu flashed a smirk. “Bit of a mouthful, I know. Think I’ll stick to callin’ ya ‘Kraglin’.”

“I didn’t. I,” He chewed his lip a little, shifting a bit to let his shoulder rest against Yondu's, to get a better view on the stars. He held up one hand, moving the right-angle of thumb and forefinger to get his bearings before he found the correct cluster. “I flew from there. But I come from somewhere else, before that.”

Kraglin had to smile though - he had laughed when Yondu explained the idea of being a star, and to be fair to him, his ship did look the part. But he had been glad to explain the difference, watch the way Yondus eyes had gleamed at the idea of countless, brilliant worlds out there, waiting for people to come see them all.

“I flew from Xandar space, that's...” He mapped out a shape in the air, encompassing some star systems. “All of that. I got there from...” He trailed off, seeking the correct lines and shapes in the sky, seeing trade routes behind his eyes. Finally he pointed, a populated patch of sky.

If Kraglin leaned his head against Yondus gently, to make sure he was looking at the right one, that was fine.

“See the darker one, there? Fainter? My planet is somewhere in that area. Hrax.”

Yondu squinted, disappointed when he failed to discern the speckles at the far end of Kraglin’s point.

“Can’t see ‘em,” he said, voice a soft gravel. He pressed back, but not enough to budge the weight of the head leaning on his or insinuate he wanted Kraglin off him. “Can’t see shit. Yer eyes are better than mine in the dark.” He managed to say it without sounding jealous too. Stealing Kraglin’s attention from the sky, he took his stubbly chin between thumb and forefinger and twisted Kraglin’s
head until they were nose to nose. As there was considerably more nose on one side than the other, the proximity hovered on the cusp of intimate, their mouths several inches apart. Yondu didn’t breach that distance. He didn’t want to push this.

Or rather, he did want to push it. He wanted it very, very much. But he wasn’t sure this… thing with Kraglin could handle another freakout. Not what that’s what Yondu’d spent half the day doing (oh no; that was a very manly introspection session; not a freakout, no siree). But better be safe than sorry.

He took the opportunity to look in Kraglin’s eyes. Really look in them, not just absorb their odd coloration from a distance. There were flecks of green and gold buried there, interspersed with earthy brown. Like Kraglin’s eyes were an amalgamation of the forest, the topsoil, and the sunlight that fell on both.

“What’s Hrax like?” he asked, keeping the conversation ticking over. It was a way of generating background noise, and Yondu only paid half a mind to it, absorbed as he was studying the details of Kraglin’s face. That nose was quite magnificent, once you got used to it. Noble-looking. Like the beak on an prime male aku.

Kraglin, considerably scrawnier and less feathered than even the runtiest of that species, nevertheless managed to do it justice.

“Did ya hate it? Why’d ya leave? Bet it weren’t as pretty as my. Uh. Plah-net.”

Kraglin felt himself falter a little bit when Yondu pressed on the idea of Hrax. He’d mentioned it once or twice, in passing, but never gone into detail about it. But anything to pass the time was something good, a few more minutes of peace and quiet and this closeness Yondu seemed to be enjoying and working with. It wasn’t something Kraglin was going to argue with, certainly, and he enjoyed a brief moment of nuzzling his nose against Yondu's snuber one.

He had to shut his eyes for a moment, enjoying it with a low hum.

“I coulda liked it,” he said quietly, opening his eyes again, surprised to see Yondu still studying him. “But I didn’t. It wasn’t as -- beautiful as here. We don’t have any of these,” He waved a hand at the area. “Trees. Grass. We live underground.”

In a way, it was only fair that he started talking about home. He had spent so long immersed in Yondu’s. And the idea of taking Yondu to visit, even in his wildest dreams - he couldn’t do that to him. It would destroy him.

Yondu preened when Kraglin called his planet beautiful. To tell the truth, he was still adjusting to the idea that his world was one of many. He’d suspected, he’d dreamed, but these were very different things to knowing. He trusted Kraglin, of course he did. After everything, how could he not? But there were still so many questions.

“You have no trees?” Incredulity. At least the Hraxlians’ living underground made sense, given Kraglin’s whacky night-vision. Yondu frowned, a crinkle appearing between his brows as a new thought struck him. “Does that mean… you have no Anthos? You have nothing like him? Or is your Anthos dead?”

The body of a dead god, floating in a depthless chasm… Kraglin said space was just that: nothingness. Emptiness. A complete absence, a void infinite and cold and breathless, as deadly as it was dark. Yondu couldn’t quite get his head around it.
But the thought of Kraglin’s planet-god deceased and drifting, his massive cadaver cooling year by year until it faded into the rest of deadspace, would have made a lesser hunter shudder. Yondu just squeezed Kraglin’s knuckles tighter.

He dug his ragged nails into the dirt, convincing himself they were still firmly pinned to it by gravity. Kraglin’s stories hadn’t put him off star travel; if anything, they’d made him more determined to discover these faraway worlds for himself. But here and now, Yondu was glad to have stability from the rock under his ass, the ferns brushing his sides, the damp earth grinding between his toes and the warm hand in his.

Kraglin was honest when it came to things he told Yondu about things outside of his planet. It didn’t seem right or fair to lie to him when Kraglin personally felt he’d been lied to enough. He let Yondu squeeze his hand with a soft sigh of his own, relishing the tighter contact even if it was only to make his friend feel better.

“We used to have something. But we don’t have the name anymore. Just Bloodfire.” He paused, trying to make sure that translated. “It’s, not a thing like Anthos. It’s when your blood goes hot in a fight or, or a hunt, and you’re the one that’s sort of, making the choices about life and death. Some people have it and some don’t. Some people have too much of it. They go into the fighting castes, to stop them going mad.”

At least, that’s what Kraglin had heard. He knew the fight bands were dangerous, snarling levels to venture into, darker even than the usual trade tunnels and kept in tight control. He had never been to one himself, but others had, and came back shaken and raw from the experience. But oh, the fighters themselves - Kraglin had seen them, on their way up to the ships.

Hrax exported more than minerals, especially when one of their resources was so readily available. There was no better bodyguard then a loyal, loving Hraxlian in your shadow, a mouthful of bristling, sharpened teeth with keen eyes to spot every threat. They were lean, they all were, but this was the thinness of a whippet, trained and blessed by genetics into a ripping machine.

“You? You don’t have this… Bloodfire, surely.” Yondu didn’t quite manage to swallow his laugh.

He’d seen Kraglin chewing on the gristly throat of a taabshqa, but he had yet to see him actually fight. Right now, the image from earlier that evening - he and Kraglin overloaded with grinning, giggling blue wriggly beans - was predominant in his mind. Kraglin was far from a man going stir-crazy for the want of a punch-up. The competitive part of Yondu (okay, the competitive majority) insisted that skinny, willowy Kraglin, whose center of gravity sat a good half-foot higher than Yondu’s own and who moved so clumsily through tree and across swamp, couldn’t possibly be of any use in a scuffle.

The zatoan had an affinity for guerrilla tactics. They knew their forest, and they made use of this: laying traps for the Ignohai, leading them into vash’ryk nests and aku haunts. But young hunters needed to release pent up energy. Quick punch-ups, bloody noses, and claims of falling out of trees were per-the-course.

Occasionally, once in a blue moon (so once a month, when the fourth azure-coloured satellite was visible from their mountain) fights of a more ritualistic kind broke out. These were more common in the village than on a hunt, when two citizens rubbed each other the wrong way to such an extent that no other form of reconciliation could satisfy. A fight to first blood was most common, and a fight to knock-out used for extreme cases.

Yondu, unsurprisingly, had been challenged to more than one. Having handled himself well, he was of the opinion that he’d be good in a brawl.
As for more severe cases... The only time Yondu'd heard of Centaurians fighting to the death was when the Ignotai broke through the treeline to sack the village and enact Anthos-knew what savage atrocities on their women and children. Then things got really nasty. But that had only happened a few times in Yondu’s living memory, and he’d always been up a tree, bow drawn, sniping them from a distance in true Zatoan style: deadly, unseen, at one with the forest.

So, Yondu concluded, kicking his heels against the dirt with his face tipped back to the stars. If he and Kraglin ever were to engage in fisticuffs, it was pretty obvious who the winner would be.

“Getting into fights is how I got myself stranded out here.” Kraglin either didn’t notice the mocking in Yondus tone, or chose to ignore it, his own voice kept mild and calm. He could understand Yondus disbelief - it wasn’t like he’d seen him fighting anything sentient since he got here. He’d taken down animals for him, sure, but that was a different sort of thing.

He knew he didn’t look anything like what the Zatoan considered strong. Muscular, tall, toned through constant use and work. Kraglin was too gangly, too skinny and nowhere near as graceful in the grass and against tree roots. But then, Kraglin considered, Yondu had never seen him underground. Tight spaces and pitch darkness, and he could hold his own in any fight.

“There was uh, a disagreement that I got involved in.” He admitted. “And the Corps - uh, they’re like.. People who keep the peace, like guardians or watch-people, I guess? - they picked the whole group up and arrested us.” Kraglin realised there were a lot of things here that might need explaining. “They were going to send us to jail - where, you get locked in a room for a set amount of time until you can be released again - or we had the choice to join the Corps and work things off by helping people.”

That, he hoped, would be a familiar notion. He had seen some younger Zatoans put to work if they misbehaved, doing chores and tasks around the village.

“I picked the Corps, cos I didn’t wanna be locked up. But I um.” He laughed a little, self-conscious and awkward and suddenly worried about Yondu's reaction to what amounted to assault, thievery and ship-jacking in his past. “I didn’t want to do the Corps either. So I, took an old ship and. Escaped.”

“So yer an… uh, outcast, or something? Krz-qass?” There were no prisons among the Zatoan. But the thought of being trapped in a single room, your movements controlled... To a man who'd been running through the forests since he was old enough to see off hungry taabshqa solo, Yondu couldn’t think of anything worse. He already felt trapped in the village and its surroundings, and he was free to trail through swampland for miles upon miles, so long as he returned home once in awhile to watch the wall and mind the children and check old Aja hadn’t died.

Yondu thought of Aja’s brother, cramming belongings into an over-the-shoulder sack in the dead of night. He thought of faraway mountains, and of further stars.

His fingers carded Kraglin’s hair of their own accord. The Zatoan had no need for brushes, and it showed. When they snagged, Yondu untangled the fine matted clumps as best he could, taking care not to tug - or at least, no more than he suspected Kraglin liked.

“So, what were you fighting for? Must've been pretty important, if you’d risk your freedom for it.” Nudge and a wink. “Was it a woman?”

That happened sometimes, deep in the Season when everyone was vying for the attention of the toughest, healthiest breeders, desperate to give their offspring the best chance of survival in Anthos’ merciless world.
"I mean. I dunno if I’m an outcast, but I probably shouldn’t go near any of their controlled zones for a little while. Not until it all blows over and the Corps calms down." Maybe get a new ship, he thought to himself, adding that to his to-do list. Trade in the old girl and get something a little less recognisable. It would be a shame - Corps ships were beautiful, glittering things that soothed the flashy bastard in his soul, but if it came to a choice between only sticking to the backwaters, or being able to get work, well…

Kraglin sighed a little, his eyes shutting as he was petted. There was no real way for him to reciprocate right now, and he didn’t worry himself too much about it - just leaned his head a little to give Yondu better access, the motion displaying the line of his neck to him inadvertently. Kraglin didn’t pay it much mind; he felt good about it. They’d had a squabble, sorted it out, and he was comfortable letting Yondu get to him if he needed to. It was fine.

“No, No. Not that time.” He snorted a little, averting his eyes a little. Kraglin lowered his voice a little, almost - ashamed? It didn’t feel noble and important, lying here being soothed and questioned. “No, it. It wasn’t anything like that. We,” He cleared his throat, embarrassed. “We were hungry. It’d been days and we didn’t have any - any anything, and we were hungry-”

And he wasn’t proud of it, that much was obvious.

Hunger. Yondu knew hunger. When the rains fell and the swamps rose and the Zatoan people huddled in their houses to escape the deepswamp monsters and the Ignokai and the percolating damp, their stocks either lasted or they didn’t. But food thievery wasn’t a familiar concept. Everything you found in the forest was given freely with Anthos’ blessing.

“So you… ate something you shouldn’t have?” he guessed. Then thought of those teeth, hidden behind Kraglin’s downturned lips. “Or someone.”

“No, not really.” Kraglin had to blink and laugh a little at the idea of eating someone. No, he hadn’t been desperate enough for that, though he knew others who had been.

Hey, when you get trapped in a tunnel and rescue is two weeks away, all meat is meat.

“No, we just didn’t have any units to buy any. Like, trade for it?” He offered, hoping that was understood. “So we had to steal some. We weren’t like, stealing from someone who didn’t have any, they had loads, it’s just..”

Kraglin realised that this idea probably wasn’t translating over well. As far as he had seen in the village, there was no real economy beyond what you could bring to the community with your skills. No money traded hands, most things being offered freely, or a favour thrown in if something was difficult. Part of him really wished he didn’t have to be the one to explain this to Yondu.

“Out there, if you don’t have any units, you can’t buy things like food, or shelter. And we didn’t have any units left, so we didn’t have anything to trade for food. So we found a storehouse and - took the food. But some guards broke in halfway through, we fought them, and then the Corps came. We were outnumbered. I mean,” He gestured around a bit. “It was a station, not a planet. There was nothing wild to hunt or pick.”

Yondu nodded along, putting on his wisest face. If it looked a little constipated, it was because he’d learnt it from his father.

“Of course. A. Uh. Station. One of those things.” He plowed on before Kraglin could call him out. “So you were hungry, and you took what you needed, because you wanted it more than the people who owned it. What’s wrong with that?”
Necessity trumped individualism in the forest. If there was a famine and the fruit crop failed, even old Aja’d give up her precious chickens for the stewpot.

But whatever the reasoning, Kraglin didn’t look proud of his extralegal exploits. Yondu didn’t like that. Kraglin should be crowing over victories, not wallowing in defeats. He lifted the hand he’d been holding, clasping it between both of his and looking earnestly into Kraglin’s eyes.

“Fuck ’em Krags. You did what was needed. And ya survived. That’s all I care about, so that’s all that matters.”

Kraglin had done his best not to snort at the idea of Yondu understanding the idea of a space station; he’d explain it to him one time, he decided, maybe while he was working on his ship. The idea of a craft thousands of times bigger than the one currently hiding in a cave should blow his mind suitably, even if he didn’t grasp what it was like to live in one. The earnestness of Yondu’s little declaration made him nod a little, looking down at their hands a moment.

The surly blue thing had a soft spot, or if he didn’t, he was very good at pretending he did have one. Kraglin decided he didn’t mind if most of this was all a show to try and make up for earlier, because as far as he was concerned, it was making up for earlier. For most of his day, in fact.

“Thanks.” He said, tone muffled a little when he lifted their hands, pressing his lips gently to Yondu’s fingers in thanks. He gave the other man a small smile as he settled back, letting him keep his hand for the time being. “Shoulda had you as my spokesperson durin’ the trial then. But anyway - that’s all done with. Nothin to worry about now.”

There was his weird mouth-thing again. That petal-soft brush of lips, the moistness of breath, the scratch of stubble; the faint impression of teeth through the skin, stowed out of scratching range. What had Kraglin called it?

“Kiss,” whispered Yondu. Then realized he’d spoken aloud and burnt navy all the way up to his ears. It was just the memory of what that kiss had led to last time, that was all. He tried to convince himself the night was dark enough that Kraglin wouldn’t notice.

“Why’d ya wanna come out here anyway? Look.” He gestured around them with the hand not clutching Kraglin’s - despite that display of affection, which threatened to lose an entire flock of butterflies into his belly, he couldn’t bring himself to toss it away. “Big ferns. Big trees. Three of the moons. Stars. Ain’t all that. Nothing you ain’t seen before.”

“Its relaxing.” Kraglin grinned a little and shut his eyes, slumping down lower with a pleased, pointed groan. “Don’t you feel relaxed? I’m very relaxed. I had,” Oh boy. “One heck of a day. Did I tell you, a big blue scary lady kidnapped me from the creek and dragged me infront of your Dad because she didn’t know who I was or if I was meant to be there?”

He could talk about it if he didn’t mention the deal. That part was fine.

“And she threw a rock at me too. Which I feel was unfair.”

“A big blue scary lady?”

Given Kraglin’s height, Yondu couldn’t think of many those adjectives would apply to. Maura was a giant, but imagining that ol’ sap saying a mean word to anyone, least of all their Anthos-honoured guest, was beyond him. He gave Kraglin’s fringe a cheeky tug.

“Bet you liked being dragged around by her too. You star-people… uh… Hrax-lee-ahns, sure are weird.”
“I mean built like a brick.” Kraglin protested, his face flushing a little. He couldn’t help the way his head followed the tug, trying his best to look grumpy about it. “And I didn’t enjoy it. She threw a rock at me,” He felt that needed repeating. “If that’s how your women show interest then it’s not Hraxlians who are the weird ones.”

“You won’t get no interest outside of a Season. And even then…” Yondu wanted to say that it was unlikely. But hell, he’d seen Kraglin’s teeth. And. Y’know. Ground himself off on his lap only a night ago. He trailed to silence. Then dug his elbow into Kraglin’s ribs in an effort of restoring normalcy.

“C’mon then. Who was it. I wanna picture ’em lobbing rocks at your sorry scrawny hide. Y’know, if you just turn sideways on, you’re probably too small a target to whistle through from a distance, let alone smack with a pebble.”

“The one that kept tryin’ to glare me to death over food.” He replied, not bothering to squirm away from being poked and prodded at like that. “The one you told me was gonna make my life hell for something.” Which, granted, he was sure was going to happen but didn’t want to think about what she could possibly have in store for him. Something, he was certain of it, that was going to leave him more than a little sore at the end of the day.

Seemed Kraglin’s claims of an extortionately awful day weren’t all that far-fetched. Yondu burst into laughter, half-startled, all-hilarity. He rocked backwards to the rhythm of his guffaws - then remembered his rock didn’t come with rear support, and had to windmill to stop himself falling. Catching himself braced with hands on knees, he tried to catch his breath, stop the last of the giggles, and listen for any approaching taabshqa that might’ve been drawn to the sudden whoop, all at the same time. The result wasn’t especially productive.

Luckily, no snapping jaws exploded from the undergrowth. There was only the fizzle of fireflies disturbed by Yondu’s accidental smacking of the ferns as he flailed, and the soft susurrus of the canopy, and the moons’ judgmental eyes watching them from far above.

Yondu wiped away tears, hearing the last echoes of his laugh siphon between the trees.

“Fucking hell. Well. I suppose introductions’re in order. Kraggles honeybunch, you just had the delight of my mother’s company.”

“Your mother is terrifying.” Kraglin replied, his face amused but honest, frank and open even as a smile was curling around the edges of his lips. “I mean that as, as both a compliment and just because it’s true. She’s gonna haunt my dreams tonight and it’s gonna be real bad.”

In retrospect, he should have really seen the family resemblance - short, angry, and they both tended to make Uzuko cover his face and sigh in the same aggravated tone. He laughed a little and covered his face with his free hand, shaking his head.

“I would say it was a pleasure but I feared for my life a few times, so…”

“Yeah, she has that effect on people. Me included. Though if I ever hear you repeat that…” He showed Kraglin a pointedly clenched fist. Then, once assured his secret was safe, thought back over what his stargazing companion had said.

“Ya don’t seem all that surprised.” A horrible thought struck. Yondu stared at Kraglin aghast. “You ain’t saying we’re alike, are ya?”

“Well…” He trailed off a little, grinning as he tried to word it diplomatically. “You’re both. The
same height. To me, at least, I mean, I know I have a better vantage point than most, but it's what I notice. And you’re both sorta loud, sometimes.”

These were probably bad life choices, but he made a lot of those on a daily basis.

Yondu should be more offended. Insinuating that he was in any way similar to his mother? Preposterous. If he were chief, he’d have reinstated the za’gah just for Kraglin. As it was, he huffed, wriggling his hand from Kraglin’s grip so he could fold his arms. Kraglin wanted quiet? He’d show him quiet.

Predictably, it wasn’t five minutes later that he turned to Kraglin again. “I can’t fuckin’ believe you think I’m as loud as Pharaqa. How does that bitch even walk through the forest without screeching so loud every yolopp surfaces for a bite? I sure as hell don’t know.” But beyond the anger - mostly feigned; Yondu wasn’t gonna admit it, but suspected his small smirk gave the game away - there was genuine curiosity, and a little trepidation.

“So what’s her verdict, skinny? Are you going in the stewpot?” He pinched Kraglin’s bicep, feeling how the wiry muscle sat tight to the bone. “Ain’t much on you, but you might make a decent appetizer.”

Kraglin couldn’t help but laugh a little when Yondu called truce on his little sulk just to yell at him again, and answered that tiny smirk with a fond little grin of his own. If Yondu didn’t want him to hold his hand, then fine - he looped his arm around Yondus shoulders instead and pulled him against his side to keep him warm, nudging his nose against the top of his head.

“I’m happy to say she doesn’t wanna eat me. Probably, anyway.”

Yondu wriggled into his warmth.

“And if she tries…” He jostled his quiver, the strap of which was digging into Kraglin’s forearm. His bow, never far from his side, was pointedly stroked.

He wasn’t even joking. If anyone dared take this perfect moment away from him, they’d be facing down the unfriendly end of Yondu’s arrow, mother or not.

Familial relationships weren’t meaningless among the Zatoan. The fathers were expected to take a far greater role in the care and upkeep of a young child, the mother being able to hunt and forage as soon as she laid her egg while her partner was encumbered for the next three seasons. Yondu’s father, busy doing chiefly things, had left most of Yondu’s rearing to Aja (bar the actual pouch-warming, which she was ill-equipped to provide). His mother, on the other hand…

Well, she’d taught him to string a bow. Yondu’d always be grateful for that.

Kraglin was crushing his crest flat to one side. That was all fine and dandy, but they were kinda relying on it to warn of impending taabshqa attack. Wouldn’t do for it to get numb. Yondu shrugged the arm off his shoulders to allow the flexible bones that held the red fin erect to adjust. Before Kraglin could get the wrong idea and retract the gesture, Yondu replaced it, budging over on his rock to encourage Kraglin to share space rather than awkwardly leaning on him for the next one over.

“Easier to see stars like this,” he said. Somehow, he suspected Kraglin saw through the excuse.

If Yondu thought he needed an excuse, he was sorely mistaken. Kraglin hummed a little, waiting for Yondu to get comfortable before he shifted, tucking the other closer to him. He was warmer than a lot of them, he’d noticed, and he was happy to share the heat however needed. More than once, even before all of - this, he’d woken up to find Yondu sound asleep, drooling on his shoulder and trying to
steal every inch of warmth he had.

“You wanna know some more of them?” He asked, quiet and soft. “I’ll tell you anythin’ about them if I know it. Oh!” He didn’t jerk up, but he lifted his head, eyes gleaming as he looked at Yondu. “Oh, I forgot! Yondu, I brought you a present - I left it in the hut, if - if you wanna we can head back now, I’ll show you.”

Present? Well, the idjit sure knew the way to his heart. Yondu bounced upright, dragging Kraglin along as an afterthought.

“Enough stargazing!” he said, as if it had been his idea. “We’re goin’ back to the village.” He stretched, cricking his neck from side to side and putting his hands on his hips before popping his back. That’s what you got for letting a bony Hraxli-whatsit use you as a pillow. Turning a bright grin on Kraglin, he reeled him in by the arm that’d been slung across his shoulders and - wussing out of kissing his nose at the last second - planted a solid poke there instead.

“And uh, you better not tell me nothin’ on the walk over. I like surprises.”

He laughed a little as he was pulled along, admittedly a little starry eyed when Yondu leaned him in closer and - he blinked when what he expected wasn’t there, but smiled anyway, nodding.

“I won't. Not a word.” He promised, following along at a quicker jaunt, just to get there. He quietened down when they reached the walls, not wanting to wake or disturb anyone; it was late enough that he could pick out the forms of the nights watch on the higher nests, see them peering down to their shapes entering the village. He grinned gleefully to himself, ducking his head.

Once at their nest - their nest - he wiggled from Yondus grip and motioned for him to go and sit as he darted around. He was pulling the cloth over the door to close the outside world out better, made sure to push the flaps over the windows down as well. He needed darkness, as close to pitch as possible, and turned to where he knew Yondu was.

“Now, you don’t gotta worry,” he said, moving effortlessly through the dark to where he’d hidden it earlier, pushing aside some pelts. It had been hard enough keeping these out of the kids reaches, but he grinned when he pulled it from its hiding place. “It ain't gonna hurt you. Might be a bit of a surprise though. You ready?”

Oh…..kay.

Kraglin grinned to himself as he sat, as close to the center of the hut as he could. Honestly, part of him was chiding himself for having forgotten, but he had also wanted to go outside for a while. With any luck, the gift would make Yondu forgive him for having put it off. With that in mind, he took a
breath - and pressed a button on the holopad balanced on his lap.

At once, the pre-set projection lit up the room, filling it with stars and planets, systems smattering through the air and against the walls. It had been easy to leave it to charge, and it turned out two suns were better than one when it came to solar power. There were usually grids and letters all over it, paths dotted and tracking the usual courier routes, but given that they were so far off the track, none showed up locally. And he’d turned that overlay off anyway, no need for it. If Yondu wanted to learn about it, he’d show him another time.

“I -” He bit his lip, grinning in the no-longer pitch darkness as the stars wheeled around slowly, finding their location as the center. Kraglin forced himself to be quiet, waiting for Yondu's reaction.

Yondu stared.

And stared. And stared. If he could eat with his eyes, right now he was gobbling.

The lights… There were so many. Fireflies. As if Kraglin had tapped out a jarful of them into the dark hut, like Yondu’d done to amuse the other brats who’d named him their de-facto leader as a child (and to piss off his father, of course).

But unlike with fireflies, these hovered perfectly still. When he clapped his hands over the nearest, he didn’t feel its furry body burst. And when he turned his palms up, there was no squelchy innards stuck to them, no phosphorescence leaking over his skin.

The dot remained, flickering slightly, levitating in midair. Yondu waved his hand through it twice, squinting with first one eye than the other, heart thumping rapidly in his chest. Nope. There was no plausible explanation for this. His father’d been right all along; all that stargazing had turned Yondu barmy.

Or… or Kraglin was showing him something magical.

Yondu pushed to his feet. He flinched as, despite his best efforts, his shoulders barged several clustered dots along the way. But there was no sensation. He seemed to pass through them - or they through him - and when Yondu looked down he saw them glowing on his bare chest for a second, highlighting the tattoos and the crease of his pouch, before they slipped back to their original place, wobbling like they were being viewed through a settling pool.

Was this what his father felt when he merged with Anthos? Yondu turned a slow circle, arms outstretched, marvelling all the way. Bright sparkles flowed along his arms and over his crest, encasing him in a revolving column like the ever-changing dapples of light that illuminated the forest undercanopy. Yondu realized where he'd seen something similar - if over his head and static, and on a much larger scale.

“Stars,” he breathed. “They’re beautiful.”

Kraglin couldn’t stop watching him - the stars played over blue skin beautifully, and his face… He had hoped this would make Yondu happy. Might ease the insult of it when he finally had to leave, would give him something to remember him by and learn with and maybe - maybe stay in contact, even, but that was a thought too far.

But Yondu, once he got over his confusion, seemed to be enthralled with the projection. Kraglin set the pad down on the floor gently and leaned back, propping himself up on his hands.

“You like it?” It was only half a question, enamored with watching the other man. “You gotta keep it a secret. But I’ll show you how to use it and everything tomorrow, if you want.”
Just the basics, nothing too complicated. Unless repairs took over a year, he didn’t see Yondu picking up some of the more complicated functions, but he’d take it one day at a time for him. Kraglin felt his cheeks heat up when he realised he was still staring and cleared his throat, looking down at the pad to check on it.

Being surrounded by stars made Yondu dizzy - but dizzy in a good way, in an I’m so excited I can’t walk in a straight line way, in an I could do this forever way. Dizzy like Kraglin made him.

He tried to catch another star. He remembered jumping for the night sky as a child. Disappointment when climbing to the top of the za’gah tree didn’t bring him any closer to them, and the creak of old Aja’s laugh. Here and now though, the stars were in reach.

Plucking them out the air was futile. But Yondu worked out that if he cupped one between both palms, careful not to brush the small bright corona. and pressed his face to the hollow between his thumbs, he could see it fizzling away,

When he turned, he found Kraglin studying the weird slate-like thing he held in his hands with an intensity too great to be genuine. But Yondu was too elated to unpick Kraglin’s expressions.

He stumbled over, letting stars sluice between wide splayed fingers, and treated Kraglin’s nose to a well-deserved kiss.

Kraglin glanced up when he heard Yondu’s approach, just in time to receive his gift, blushing more than any seventeen year old boy would happily admit to. He grinned though, the expression a tad dazed as he tilted his head up, enjoying the closeness without pressing for another one. He had the vague notion that Yondu was still a little - uncertain about where he was comfortable with boundaries, so he would wait until they were indicated to him. Or ask, later, when he got impatient.

“You like it.” He murmured happily, his smile in his voice as he shut his eyes, letting his nose brush lightly against Yondu’s. He had planned on showing Yondu a walkthrough of the system around him - show him how far he was from the two suns, the moons orbiting, the closest planet. But his plans seemed inconsequential to this, just enjoying the excited huff of Yondu's breathing, watching his fingers curl and open around the little specks over and over.

He tapped a button, letting the stars move - they rotated lazily, finding the correct pattern to match the planet's rotation. It was soothing, supposedly a way for pilots to study the correct paths and layouts in various systems they were visiting. But for those who were addicted - in love - with the sky above them, it was a way to keep your barracks feeling a little more wonderful, less oppressive.

“I used to - when I was a kid. When I had one of these, I used to set it up like this in my dorm until they found me.” He said, just to fill the gap, something to keep Yondu closer to him still. “You asked me why I left, why - why I wanted to go. This is why.”

“You were chasing the stars.” That Yondu could understand. His mind was whirling, much like the stars themselves, and he couldn’t be certain if it was his vision or the entire room that was spinning. He turned so his back was to Kraglin, bending his crest carefully so he could rest with his spine flush to Kraglin’s chest, using him as a full-body prop as the pair were immersed in rotating starlight.

“Don’t turn it off,” he said, in case the idiot was worried about how unsteady he seemed on his feet. It was just amazement, excitement, the giddy sense that every one of his childhood dreams had come true. He rolled his head back to rest on Kraglin’s shoulder. “Don’t you fucking dare.”

The patterns moved. He knew this. Once upon a time, that was how the Zatoan had navigated to this mountain, determining North and South from the subtle changes in the angles between one
constellation and another. But as they became sedentary, that gift had been lost. Yondu had never felt such a connection to those star-watching, fire-dancing ancestors as he did now.

Dad always claimed they revolved around Anthos. Not like *this* - all the stars flowing to a far greater rhythm, like they were nutrients in a root-system written across lightyears rather than miles.

He reached behind him, hooking the loops of Kraglin’s belt to keep him close. Not that Kraglin needed persuasion.

“Where would you go first,” he asked softly, unable to break his gaze from the starscape. “Y’know. If you could.” Because Kraglin’s ship was broken, and he wasn’t leaving anytime soon. Perhaps it was wrong of Yondu to be glad. “Anywhere.”

Kraglin wouldn’t have dreamed of turning this off before Yondu had his fill. He nodded a little, carefully draping his arms around Yondu's waist, sighing soft and happy when he tilted his head back against him. He answered it with gently resting his chin on his shoulder, all the better to see the stars and feel the thrum of the body against him, his pulse against his cheek.

Chasing the stars - sounded about right to him. Ever since he’d spied them winking through the clouds of smog and filth, he’d been drawn to them for reasons he couldn’t understand. Whether it had been their beauty, their strangeness, or just because they represented anything other than dying young and choking with mud hundreds of miles beneath the surface of a planet that used to be their own, he never thought to question. Only that they’d been the only path he cared to take.

“Maybe here,” Kraglin circled a system with his fingers, a smaller one then some of the others. It leeched life off another one, the two orbiting in a strange figure of eight, working around three suns. “It's out of the way, sure. But all the planets support life, and they’re all populated. It’d, be easy to get work there, ferrying people and parts, and one of em is a resort planet. Just, good drinks and fun as far as the eye can see.”

‘A resort planet?’ Yondu wasn’t sure if he was asking out of legitimate curiosity, or if he just wanted Kraglin to keep talking. (What? The guy was cute when he got all flustered explaining things.) ‘What’s that? And what d’you mean, *good drinks?* Like, *teku-milk* and stuff?’

He hadn’t convinced Kraglin to try that yet, but it was only a matter of time. He wondered if resort-planets were like the ceremonial feasts: all dancing and all drinking, all the time. Not long before the final feast of the summer, when the warriors painted their tattoos in viscous sap and said goodbye to the suns: letting fire lick them while they span, stomping dustclouds from the dry earth.

Yondu couldn’t wait. Not just for the exhilaration of the flames on his skin, the adrenaline and the danger and the smell of smoke. But because Kraglin would be watching him.

Imagining a whole planet dedicated to such revelries was intoxicating. Yondu wanted to visit. To see it with his own eyes. Really, he thought as he reached to brush the bundle Kraglin had isolated, smiling as stars span past his fingertips, he wanted to visit them all.

“When a planet that's just based on visitors.” Kraglin smiled as he watched Yondu play with the stars, the light gleaming against his fingers and palms. Like this, with the other tucked up securely against him and no one else awake, it felt easier to forget how bad things could get. All he had to do, he reminded himself, was get through the time, enjoy it, and maybe leave with some happy memories instead of misery.

*Teku-milk* though, that wasn’t something he was going to put in his mouth any time soon. He had no idea if it was toxic to him, or if Yondu was just pulling his leg by being so enthusiastic about it.
Besides - he could barely keep himself under control around Yondu without any chemical help lowering his inhibitions. He flushed at the idea of it and shook his head.

“Kinda like teku, I guess. There’s a ton of alcohols out there, some other stuff too. It can be a bit of a gamble on what works for your system but it’s fun. There’s usually huge parties going on all the time too - I know there’s one that takes place underwater, in a dome so you can see the moonlight coming in through the water.” He grinned, risked a kiss to the side of Yondu’s jaw, just a little one. “I’ve never been there though.”

‘Hmmm.’ Yondu purred in his chest, rubbing his cheek lightly against Kraglin’s lips. Then figured what the hell and twisted around, tilting his head more assertively, slanting their mouths together for the duration of a blink and a breath.

‘Maybe one day we’ll go together.’

Kraglin flushed a little, pressing back to the kiss for just as long as it lasted, enjoying the heat-flare in his chest, just behind his ribs. He found himself nodding to Yondu’s suggestion, as nonsensical as it was. Part of him even wondered if Yondu knew how little sense it made, to suggest something like that.

Another part of him quailed at the idea of what the chief would say, or think, if he knew anything like this was even being allowed to cross Yondu's mind.

“We should turn this off,” he murmured, giving Yondu a brief squeeze with his arms, sighing. “But, remember what I said about it, yeah? It's gotta be a secret. You can’t tell anyone about it, okay? Promise me?”

A part of Yondu wanted to reassure Kraglin that his ship would get fixed, because the star-man was obviously upset about it. But he wasn’t stupid. Zatoan didn’t leave the village. Or if they did - like Aja’s brother - they didn’t come back. No, if Kraglin fixed his ship he’d go and Yondu wouldn’t be able to follow, because what did this swampy mudball have on a non-stop party planet and the open stars?

Yondu wished he’d never brought it up.

‘Yeah,’ he muttered, holding onto Kraglin until the last possible moment, when he had to release him to let him turn the projection off. Darkness flooded the hut, a suffocating tide. Yondu couldn’t see anything of Kraglin but the faintest reflection from the whites of his eyes: like two dull stars, nearly extinguished. “I'll keep yer secrets”

“Good.” Kraglin smiled a little, leaning forward against Yondu to tap the button. He sighed in the darkness, letting his eyes adjust - it was quick, sure, but it still needed a moment for his brain to catch up and blow his pupils as wide as they’d go, picking out the greys and darker blacks of the room. He nudged his nose against Yondus shoulder, turned it into a nuzzle and grinned a little. “I’ll teach you more of them tomorrow.”

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With the change of the seasons came more new, interesting things to learn about the Zatoans. Kraglin watched and learned as more food was pulled in, meat set to smoke and salt to preserve it, fruits dried in the sun and packed away in the dark. More often than not he was piled with the blue babies, keeping them out of people’s hair while Yondu pitched in, helping to bring down animals or butcher them. Either the village didn’t know he was able to, or just preferred to keep him out of the way while this was going on, he wasn’t sure. But he certainly didn’t mind.
Then he understood why. When the heavens opened here, they threw down what felt like a river's worth of water a day, a relentless thrumming and pounding on the hut roof, turning the ground in the village to a treacherous soup. Taller than most, Kraglin found it a little easier to keep above the new ponds springing up in ditches of the village, but even so, going outside now was an unpleasant task.

There was always the holopad to keep them occupied. Kraglin brought up the language building programs, went through words and exercises with Yondu until the other man lost his patience and tried to get them to do anything more interesting. Then he'd turn on the charts, show him the planets and the stars, use the same methods he'd used to recognise their names, positions, some background of as many as he could think of.

It didn’t matter that Yondu would never need this information. If he wanted it, Kraglin would give it to him, no arguments.

One night, as the rain was finally easing to a soothing whisper instead of hammering, Kraglin was jolted out of his half-doze with a snort. There was a hard rap at the doorframe, and he cringed a little, glad that whoever it was hadn’t just invited themselves in. With the weather being as it was, that had become the custom around the village - which was naturally playing havoc on Kraglin’s nerves, nevermind what he was sure it did to Yondu’s. They kept their affections, if that was what it was, to the later hours, when less people were prone to wandering around.

Which, given the cooler weather and Yondu’s incessant need to be warm, meant it was a very good thing that their visitor hadn’t barged in. Kraglin enjoyed being the man’s pillow and personal warmer, and it felt good to wake up with someone tucked to you.

The impatient knock came again.

“Yondu!” Kraglin flinched at Pharaqa’s voice. While the woman had left him alone for the most part, he couldn’t help but feel her eyes tracing him with disgust every time they happened to be within sighting distance of each other. Being hated wasn’t an unfamiliar concept to him, but he didn’t think she needed to make it so very obvious. “And - Krah-glyn! Hurry! Scouts have seen a troop of Ignokai, heading to the southside.”

She didn’t like the idea of Kraglin fighting next to Yondu, true. But if they were lucky, she’d reasoned to Uzuko when putting together a spear for the boy, the Ignokai would take him out. And if not, well… Insane affront to Anthos or not, an extra pair of hands in the battlefield was still an extra pair of hands.

“Look at it this way,” she’d said, when he covered his face with a groan at the idea of simply sending Krah-Glyn out to be battle fodder. “He’s hideous. Maybe they’ll think we’ve trained a monster and never come back?”

Pharaqa slammed her hand into the wall by the door, sending a small river off the roof and snarled. “Up! Now! Make sure he has his spear!”

Yondu groaned. He swung to sit, using his pillow-come-nestmate as a ladder. Kraglin wasn't the most comfortable mattress - the man had more sinew than a starving taabshqa. But he was warm and fuzzy as the surrounding pelts, and when he casually tossed an arm over Yondu’s waist, dragging their bodies snug together, it felt as if there was nothing in the world that could come between them.

However, Pharaqa was not of this world. She was a demon, a wicked monster spawned in Anthos’ armpit who didn’t respect her son’s need to sleep.
She was also blathering some nonsense about the Ignokai.

The thrumming thunder of the rains almost drowned out her words. But there was no mistaking the kamikaze scream as a watchman threw themselves into the raiders’ band, arrows substituted for a machete. Or the corresponding twinge in Yondu’s crest as he fell.

‘Up,’ he snarled, hauling at Kraglin’s elbow. He snatched his quiver from where it had been fumbled off his back the evening before, Kraglin hoisting it off over his crest while Yondu helped him with his shirt. The same shirt he lobbed at him now. Then, while Kraglin was struggling into it - ‘He don’t need no spear though. Trust me.’

On the other side of the partition, Pharaqa scoffed. ‘What, you expect him to whistle? Spear, Yondu. I will see you on the other side.’

And then she was gone in a splatter of bare feet through mud, her fierce red eyes slitted against the rain. An ululating warcry heralded her arrival on the battlefield, as did the sudden increase in Ignokai screeches.

Yondu didn’t explain to Kraglin what was happening. Didn’t even check over his shoulder to make sure he followed when he sprinted out into the mulchy, murky dark. Rain slapped him in gouts, beating so hard it was painful. It stung his eyes, blown horizontal by the wind, and made his lungs scream from the effort of drawing breath. It was all he heard, all he knew: that boom of rain on earth and the roar of a battle not yet reached.

Other sounds filtered in only laterally, filling the edges of Yondu’s hearing. His straining inhalations. The hammer of his pulse. The squelch and suck of his footprints, and those of the man who’d flung himself into the night by his side.

Kraglin had been told, either in an effort to scare him off, firestories by the pit or as a genuine warning, that this was something that tended to happen during the rainy season. Looking at it as an outsider, it made sense to him - resources were limited, tempers frayed in the weather, and civilisations who hadn’t reached steam-power yet tended to be a little bit snippier than usual when it came to sorting out disputes.

So he wasn’t entirely surprised when Yondu seemed smacked into action, hauling his clothes on as fast as he could manage. He stooped on his way out to pick up the spear he’d been given because - because having the option of using it was better than not having a back-up plan. It wasn’t entirely the need to stay by Yondu’s side that pushed him out into the darkness, creeping with him to catch the idea and flow of the battle before they moved closer.

On Hrax, to not defend one’s pod was a great and terrible dishonour. While it was rare that such things came to blows, when they did, trying to back out of it would be more shameful than fighting and losing. And as much as certain people may have wished for him to leave and never come back, Kraglin had a real affection for these people - and a very real wish to help.

So he didn’t need prompting to feel the low growl in his throat, unconsciously opening and shutting his mouth a few times to stretch out his jaw. He could feel the bunch of his shoulders and the curl of his neck, keeping his head lower and his spine coiled. While the fighters here used and excelled at distance, Kraglin felt the itch to close with his opponent, gripping his spear a little tighter.

He was glad of the darkness - it only meant he could see better.

*Keep low*, his mind whispered as he shifted, breaking from Yondu's side. *Give him room to shoot; don’t move erratically, use the spear to advertise your movements to him so you don’t get hit.* It
wouldn’t be perfect, but he could trust Yondu not to shoot him, to avoid the one pale form against
the others. He found it easier to use the spear to catch them, pull them in to meet his jaws with a snarl
and dig against the softer areas of their bodies, their necks. For now, that would do.

There wasn’t a lot of muscle on him, granted. But what there was, was concentrated in his jaw.
Kraglin snarled hard as he shook with his spear to get it to loosen even as his face flashed forward,
burying into the intruder’s neck. The muddy skin split easily under both rows and he clenched his
jaw, rearing his head back, a hot gout of red following the movement.

The whirl of limbs and flying arrows and the occasional decapitated head (thank you, Pharaqa) was
disorientating. Yondu ran through a tornado of sights and sounds, coupled with the splat of rain,
mud, and sanguine. They all blurred together after a while. There was only him, his bow, his enemy
- and Kraglin.

Kraglin, who carved a fucking valley through the Ignokai warband. He was using his spear like an
angler’s harpoon, hauling those unlucky enough to be pierced in until they were within snapping
distance of his jaws.

And then… And then…

Well, Yondu had always loved Aja’s stories about Anthos’s familiars, the half-feral animal man you
saw lurking out of the corner of your eye when you walked the forest paths alone. He’d told plenty
similar tales to the youngsters. He’d exaggerated here and there - just a little - acting out the part of
the monsters with arms raised above his head and face spit-flecked from the force of his snarls.

He’d also made them bawl, and been banned from babysitting for a week. Their loss.

But back to the point: Kraglin was blood-bathed and beautiful in a way no carved face on the za’gah
tree could hope to match. If Yondu weren’t busy notching his arrows, shooting them into the fray
and whistling them back to his quiver once they’d impaled three or grazed seven - this being the
maximum damage he could inflict without them losing momentum and falling to the floor to be
snapped under scuffling feet - he’d be tempted to offer up a prayer.

His muscles strained in a line through his chest. The resistance of his bow was as familiar as the slick
of mud between his toes, the shriek of warcries and the relentless battery of the rain. Zatoan combat
styles suited distance sniping best, and he positioned himself accordingly, several paces from where
the melee began. There was no time to climb a tree to get a suitable vantage. Or cover, for that
matter. Yondu found himself giving up two arrows, shooting the Ignokai who charged him in quick
succession.

There was no time to count their numbers. No chance to crow internally over having cut a hole in
their ranks, however minor. As soon as the last man dropped another clambered over his back, mud-
smeared face split to show a jawful of broken teeth - and another arrow, fletching matching his own.

Yondu’s fingers stilled on the string. It bit between his callouses, but he didn’t release. He met
Pharaqa’s eyes, exchanging a nod - and lost his third arrow to the Ignokai warrior about to put his
axe through her neck.

Pharaqa, whose machete had been poised to strike, tugged it out of his chest as he fell and hurled it
into the air hard enough for Yondu’s whistle to pick it up, bear it round against the cut of the wind,
and into another Ignokai’s head.

“We need to regroup!” she hollered. “I’m calling the huntpack to the trees!”
Yondu glanced around. The nearby huts were deserted, unarmed villagers having fled when the fence first caved under the Ignokai stampede. They could afford to let them advance a little way, if it meant the Zatoan could reach a distance where their arrows were more useful for their designed purpose than as makeshift knives.

“Do it!” he yelled back, as if she cared about his opinion. Then frowned, peering through the writhing tangle of bodies and blades and muddy rain. “Where’s Kraglin?”

“Who cares?” she yelled back before darting away on her own business. There were people to gather and alert, shrill whistles recalling people to her side, in whatever formation they could gather. She had more important things to worry about then a disgusting, hairy man getting himself killed in the middle of this. If he could buy them a few moments with his death, then so be it.

He’d lost the spear - the spear was holding him back. Kraglin pushed through the mess of people, was led by his nose to the fringes of the group and there, the way was clearer. It was easy enough to startle the archers on the side, to silence them if they saw him slinking through the darker, pitch shadows of the huts.

And when he reached the back of the pack, he turned, watching for a moment. All arrows and eyes focused the other way, towards their prize. Kraglin couldn’t stop the wet, hungry growl that slipped past three rows of serrated, pointed teeth as he charged.

There were more targets then the warm, wet throat of an opponent. Kraglin crunched down onto the spine of the nearest one, the first in line, pushing him down and spitting out bones as he bounded forward to the next. It would cause confusion, the mob faced on both sides, and Kraglin delighted dimly in their yells to turn, face about - go forward, others called, the group torn. Kraglin had one aim - plough through them, ripping their lives in his teeth until he could reach Yondu again. If he could divert their attentions away from the Zatoan, it could give them another edge to use.

There was one flaw in Kraglin’s plan, and that was that Yondu was no longer where he had been. Ignoring Pharaqa’s piercing whistle-shriek (retreat, in a dialect of Zatoan so ancient reverberated through Yondu’s bones) he whistled his arrow back to its quiver and drew his hunting knife in its stead. He didn’t know whether he was dodging over the bodies of fallen comrades or foes. He didn’t even know if they were dead or alive. He was scanning, watching for a hint of white among the blue.

The first Ignokai to plow into him was big. Or at least he seemed that way when his shoulder socked you in the kidneys, diving you to the ground. Yondu’s knife skittered from his grip. He wriggled in his captor’s arms, forcing him to use both hands to pin him so he had no time to ready a weapon. Then, gouging a handful of claggy earth, he twisted and flung it at point-blank range into the Ignokai’s eyes.

Dirty tactics - literally and figuratively. But it worked. His hold loosened. A kick and a punch and Yondu was free, darting under a wide hook and scooping his knife from the ground in time to ram it into the nearest knee. He wasn’t letting go of it again. He just hoped the blood-spurting limb didn’t belong to one of his mother’s packmates. Or at least, if he’d stabbed a hunter, let it be Jaku.

“Kraglin!” he roared. There was no way his voice would carry above the noise. Clashing knives, whipping wind, stomping feet and screams. But he tried anyway, throat cracking hoarsely around the alien vowels. “Kraglin! We’re retreating! Fall back!”

Kraglin reared up, squinting into the rain - he was only partway back now, but he could see the throng moving away from the fences. Dimly, shrill whistles reached him over the sound of wind and rain, but they made no sense to him. All he could think of was that it was a signal for the Zatoan
forces.

And hadn’t he been told sternly enough that he was no Zatoan?

But there was another voice, one he felt more of a pull to - an almost literal one as he shoved his way through the crowd. Words grew fuzzy when the roar was in his ears like this, when all he felt was a thirst and hunger in his mouth that ached to be sated. He couldn’t discern much, but his mind whispered translations for him - *return, return, your master calls.*

He saw the body drop from the tree onto Yondu's crouching, searching form. He heard the yell, and saw red. Kraglin roared, a thick, starving sound as he pushed forward, over and through the crowd before he launched himself at the attacker. All bony limbs and meagre weight aside, Kraglin rolled with the Ignokai, surging forward to bite, to latch on-

Kraglin let the body drop after the third mouthful of Ignokai face, panting hard and staring at its form. His head swung round, eyes black in the rain, two gleaming circles above a gore-filled face. His growl was lower as he approached, lips twitching away from his teeth as he shut his eyes.

There was no word for what he wanted to say, a low croon of hunger and rage and anger that was softened somehow, predatory in a way that wasn’t directed at Yondu. He stepped around him, winding his side against Yondu’s in a caress that was as protective as it was possessive, turning fully around him to stare in the same direction, his body curved to keep his eyesight on the same level as his Zatoans.

He was expectant, waiting, a trembling wire to be directed at Yondus will.

Yondu got a mouthful of mud when the Ignokai smacked his back. Then a mouthful of blood when Kraglin wrenched his weight away, ripping and growling and shaking his head like a furious dog. As Kraglin tore off the Ignokai’s face, Yondu licked the salt from his cheeks, tasting how it mingled with the dirt.

He heaved to his feet, pushing through the ache in his arms from repeatedly drawing his bow, the dull throb in his side where the Ignokai had caught him as they wrestled. Nothing serious. Nothing life-threatening. He would survive.

The same couldn’t be said for Kraglin’s victim.

“Flark,” breathed Yondu, taking it in. This was Kraglin at his most spectacular: a wild thing of flashing fangs, eyes glinting feylike in his face. In the poor light, the sheer amount of blood coating his chops made him look like he’d been dipped in tar. More flecked his shirt when he wrenched his last mouthful of cheek and earlobe free. Yondu glimpsed multiple rows of teeth as he spat warm flesh to the ground. They seemed innumerable in that moment. Just teeth, and teeth, and teeth, as far back as there was Kraglin.

And then he raised his head and looked at Yondu.

Yondu grinned.

When Kraglin brushed around him, Yondu dragged his hand over his head and down his back: a single, congratulatory stroke.

“Clear me a path,” he ordered, ramming his knife into its sheathe and pulling another arrow in the same fluid movement. It swung between the remaining Ignokai. The Zatoan had retreated - or at least, those not to wounded to move. And now it was Kraglin and Yondu alone in a sea of hostile blue, the Ignokai alerted to their presence by the crunch of Kraglin’s teeth through bone. “I gotta
climb a tree.”

If anything, Kraglin seemed energised by the touch, pressing his head up to the hand with a curl of his lips. The command was simple enough and he focused forward - there was one, near where the junction of fence had been, that would do nicely. It wasn’t too far, a simple stroll if it had been before the rains and the fence caved in, but he knew it would be perfect. The branches hung over to other trees, could give Yondu other paths to nip along if he needed to.

He curled his body down a moment, a tension of the spine that coiled and rippled up to his shoulders. When he propelled himself forward into the mass, it was with the certainty that Yondu would follow, and that he’d leave the Ignokai busy and too distracted to lash at him.

Or reeling from the loss of blood. Either way was fine by Kraglin. It wasn’t as if the Ignokai weren’t landing their own hits on him, he simply couldn’t feel them. And he wouldn’t until the Bloodfire had cooled to embers again, everything burning away except the need to protect and to tear.

The path cleared.

Yondu ran.

He hit the bark with his feet, not bothering to use his hands. Using the trunk he launched himself vertically, landing in the lowest boughs. He span around, keeping his weight low over the swinging branch, and whistled his arrow through the eyesocket of the Ignokai who’d raked his knife along Kraglin’s side.

Had it cut? Had it glanced off? Yondu had no way to tell. He couldn’t see blood - but he couldn’t see much at all, relying on his crest and the pulse of Anthos transmitted through the ground, the roots, the tree and the leaves to orientate himself and aim.

Kraglin’s otherness, that thorn of discomfort that pricked Yondu’s mind whenever he tried to read him, now marked him out. It let Yondu weave his arrows around him, holding off any offensive attacks while Kraglin laid waste to the Ignokai within biting distance. The other Zatoan were stationed around him, some in the same tree, others sprinting through the branches to the willow next door. Between them they’d already significantly thinned the Ignokai numbers. And with Kraglin on the ground… They were unstoppable.

Of course, that’d change if Pharaqa shot him.

Yondu whistled sharply, a tone that had several Ignokai (and some of the less experienced hunters) clutching their ears. He sheared Pharaqas arrow in two before it could puncture Kraglin’s thigh, ignoring her angry screech. She’d been a hunter far longer than him. She had plenty to spare. But there was only one Kraglin, and Yondu didn’t appreciate her attempt to skewer him.

“Watch where yer aimin’!” he roared, projecting his voice so every hunter would hear it through the endless drumroll of rain. “That one’s mine! Anyone who hurts him answers to me!”

Mine.

If Kraglin had been enthusiastic before, he was a man possessed when that word crashed into the back of his ribs. He didn’t roar - didn’t need to, not around a mouthful of gristle. He whirled and slashed, using his longer reach to haul them in closer for his fatal kiss, using their bodies to fling at others, or a shield in case an arrow took an honest, mistaken route.

Pharaqa notwithstanding, he would forgive any mistakes. It was heaving down there.
He sank back against the tree when the horde seemed to have receded a little, getting into the range of the archers instead of trying to swarm the trees. He was breathing hard, eyes open and staring at the mass, picking out individuals as best he could as he tried to catch his breath, gather his thoughts and his plans.

Kraglin tilted his head to look up, to get a glance at Yondu. Still alive, still there - good. The crowd seemed thinner now, some breaking away to run back to the treeline as those with arrows took them down, and Kraglin patted the tree behind him before he pushed off it, waiting.

He could run after them, if Yondu wanted. But he wouldn’t try to guess.

Yondu, squinting through the downpour, saw Kraglin’s skinny figure directly below him. He sure hoped the guy had bypassed any prudeness, because he’d be getting a delightful view up his loincloth right about now. But his grin faded when he saw the tense preparation in the line of Kraglin’s back. If he ran into the woods after the Ignokai… In this rain…

Yondu wouldn’t be able to track him, not amidst the confusion. And there’d be more Ignokai waiting beyond the treeline. Their numbers were far greater than the Zatoans, the latter defending their territory through a mixture of guerrilla tactics and advanced weaponry - the Ignokai had yet to master arrow-whistling; how primitive! (Not that this was their fault when the Zatoan held the monopoly on yaka-ore, but Yondu still liked the sense of superiority.) If Kraglin gave chase, he’d run into an ambush.

But Kraglin didn’t spring after the Ignokai, not even to snap the heels of the stragglers who hobbled and limped after their companions, trailing blood across swirling muddy footprints. It was like watching an aku turning up its nose at wounded children. Yondu could scarcely believe what he was seeing.

Until it registered that Kraglin wasn’t itching to pursue. He was preparing, ensuring that should the order be given he’d be capable of executing it.

Yondu shut his mouth. Hooking his bow in its customary place, he slithered down the trunk, shaking raindrops from his crest. He laid a hand on Kraglin’s shoulder, heavy enough to insinuate restraint. Those dark eyes were almost completely pupil. They reflected the orange glow of the hut fires, black liquid glosses, holes in Kraglin’s face.

“Stand down,” Yondu said, testing the waters. Was he really going to follow his orders? “The village is safe for now.” Taking a risk, he ran his thumb along Kraglin’s underlip, wiping away a stripe of blood, already diluted by the rain. “Thanks to our arrows and your teeth.”

Kraglin hadn’t jolted at the touch, just turned his head to track Yondus movements in front of him. He was calm, stilled by the hand on his shoulder into listening and focussing - granted, he scanned Yondus form, just to make sure he wasn’t hurt, but he snapped back to attention at the words.

He growled once, a low, soft pleased noise and shut his eyes, enjoying the touch. He opened his mouth in a half-yawn, half-pleased display for Yondu to be proud of, his shoulders dropping from their protective hunch around his neck, his spine relaxing. No more battle until he was pointed in the correct direction and released, he understood, and ducked his head to press his cheek to the other man’s hand, a sign of surrender and obedience.

Yondu gave his star-man’s chin a cheeky tweak mid-yawn, his fingertips skating the serrated fangs. Then drew him into a tight, fierce hug.

“You did good,” he muttered in Kraglin’s ear, words for only him. “You did so damn good. Made
me real proud, you did.”

The rain scudded off their backs, slicking them together. The wet fabric of Kraglin’s shirt clung to Yondu’s bare skin. Now the sensory saturation of the battle had passed, Yondu noticed all the little things - how Kraglin’s fringe was plastered down, how they were both daubed with a blue-brown concoction of blood and wet soil, and how they were rocking some serious morning breath. The first two were easy to combat, and he didn’t give a flying fuck about the third.

Raking his fingers through Kraglin’s mop, he styled it into a tiny Mohawk. It’d be flattened again in no time, but for a moment Yondu could almost imagine it was a crest. He cupped a hand until he’d gathered enough droplets to wipe some of the muck from his face, rubbing at the gore gumming Kraglin’s stubble.

“Les wash off,” he said, without waiting for Pharaqa’s dismissal. Collected more water to soak the caked mud from Kraglin’s temples. “Then we’re headed back to our nest. Fuck the village. If the Ignokai mount another attack, they’re welcome to it.”

“Allright.” The first word he’d spoken since this all began, and his voice was rough and hoarse with snarling. He did his best not to cough though, enjoying the touch of Yondus hands against his skin, shutting his eyes and drinking it in until he was dizzy with it. He nudged at his hands with his nose until he could stand again, hissing as his hand moved down to his side - his shirt had been cut through, and his hand came away red, but he didn’t seem worried by it. They’d wash it off, and it’d be fine. He was still floating on the cloud of post-battle, and he slung an arm around Yondus shoulders as they started off.

“Whatchu say about me not havin’ any Bloodfire?” he asked, his tone pleased and heavy, teasing gently. “Toldja I did.”

Yondu scoffed, steering him past the gristly remnants of the fight. He ignored the pleas from injured Zatoan who’d be cared for and Ignokai who’d be put down. There were others who would deal with them. For now, he and his star-man deserved the rest of their interrupted sleep.

“Yes,” he said, feigning sarcasm. “Might have to see it a few more times to believe it, though.”

Because now the danger was over, the memory of Kraglin’s jaws dripping from where he’d chewed open the Ignokai who’d gotten the drop on Yondu, made Yondu pulse with a need so deep he didn’t know what to name it. His efforts at sponging Kraglin off had only smeared more viscera around his mouth - they’d need to swing by the creek come morning, if the rains didn’t do the job for them before they reached their hut. For the moment though, Yondu was enjoying a swell of primal satisfaction.

Kraglin had saved his life. And he’d looked fucking magnificent while doing so. That was an image Yondu’d be cherishing for years to come: Kraglin rising above the fallen Ignokai, chewing slowly, eyes pinned on Yondu. This was his warrior. His beast. And he’d keep him by his side for as long as Kraglin would stay.

Kraglin chuckled a little, tilting his head up to give the rain more of a chance to get things done, rubbing his face tiredly to help get the worst of it off. At least they weren’t the only ones covered in muck and grime, so no one could be too annoyed about it - if they were alright to. While some part of him nagged to help the wounded, the currently-stronger voice made him fall in step with Yondu, heading to their nest.

Once they were in he peeled his shirt off, turning it inside out to get to the relatively cleaner side. He used it to rub his face off, groaning a little when he emerged, mostly pink skin instead of gore. He
blinked at Yondu a little, the same pleased, hazed expression in place before he tossed the shirt away, nearer the fire that Yondu’d stooped to start in sutomqtic as soon as they pushed open the carpet partition.

It could be washed tomorrow.

Yondu toed the shirt away from the flames as he walked to their bed. Not that he would mind if Kraglin’s only top caught light and he had to wander around shirtless, all that fascinating chest fuzz on display. But he’d only bitch when it got nippy at night, and Yondu’d get jealous if every Zatoan intrigued by body hair and pale skin was allowed to poke and prod.

He stood over it a moment contemplating. Weighing up the possibilities. Then, after spending far more time than was strictly necessary arranging his remaining arrows, rubbing the mud from their tips and rinsing his hands in the rain - enough time for Kraglin to curl in the nest, eyes his only discernible feature as he settled in the shadows - he unpicked his knotted loincloth and hung it over the bed’s shallow lip.

“What?” he said defensively. “S’all wet. I ain’t sleeping in that.”

“S’up to you.” Kraglin replied, his tone relaxed and easy, stretching out his back with a low noise. His own trousers were sopping, now that he thought about it, and he waited for Yondu to get comfortable before he shifted, kicking them off over the edge of the bed. Much better, and less chance of mud tracking all over the pelts and glueing them together come morning. The cut in his side had already stopped bleeding, shallower than it had seemed under the run of rainwater.

He wasn’t a stranger to seeing Yondu naked. They bathed together all the time, out in the freezing creek. Or dried off on the shore when there wasn’t anyone around, and they’d shared the nest for months now. But there had always been some sort of line, Kraglin keeping his eyes up and away for common decencies sake, something he wasn’t sure about Yondu being alright with.

And never in bed. Even when it had been its warmest, that was one neutral territory. He had been respectful of Yondus apparent reluctance when it came to a repeat of their first little folly, keeping his touches above the waist and kisses only as heated as Yondu would let them get.

“Hey,” Kraglin murmured, his voice low and rasping as he shifted, stretching out an arm in his usual invitation of somewhere to tuck up and rest. He wanted Yondu, he wouldn’t deny it, but he was more than happy to have this too. His palms itched with the want to stroke over his skin, the third row slipping into his gumline with a soft shiver in his shoulders.

“Hey,” muttered Yondu in return. He clambered into the nest, trying not to reveal his eagerness - but remained unconvinced that he’d succeeded.

His feet were fucking filthy. He understood Kraglin’s attachment to his weird boot-things now; they at least could be left on the far side of the hut, rather than trekking half the mud in the Zatoan village across Yondu’s pelts. Oh well. The whole damn nest needed a wash - it smelt of him and Kraglin and home, and if Yondu didn’t eradicate that comforting reek soon he’d never want to be without it.

He ran blunt nails over Kraglin’s oblique, near where he’d seen the flash of the Ignokai knife. He mapped the wound through Kraglin’s hisses and twitches rather than relying on his eyes, never pushing hard enough to hurt. Then, moving slowly as if he didn’t want Kraglin to spook - although if he was being honest, it was more for his own sake; the knowledge of what he was doing warred with his want, every new motion an electric surge that spurred his rocketing pulse - he shifted over him, mounting his bony knees. Keeping his eyes on Kraglin, he stooped at the waist until his lips ghosted the cut, agitating it with his breath. Then licked, long and slow and luxuriously wet.
Hey, even shallow cuts got infected in the rainy season. He was just helping Kraglin keep it clean. And if his digits wound through the hair on Kraglin’s lower abdomen, perilously close to where his cock rested on a slim white thigh - well. Blame it on his shoddy night vision.

Just having Yondu come to bed to curl up with him was gift enough - there were nights when Yondu was either in no mood to be held or, Kraglin suspected, trying to break the habit of it. He tried to respect that, really he did, but when Yondu nudged up against him in the night, making grumbling noises in his sleep and seeking his warmth, how could he turn him away? It was much easier to just get comfortable when they settled down, and not wake up in a choke hold.

Kraglin let his gaze flick up and down Yondu’s body when he settled on him, his hands shifting to rest on his knees, fingers tracing light spirals and patterns just past them. He swallowed thickly when he leaned down, shoulders shifting against the pelts and trying his hardest not to flush. The tenderness of the otherwise painful little motions did away with most of the sting but he hissed anyway, doing his best not to squirm.

The chill of drying rain and pervasive damp in the air did nothing to slow the fire building in his gut - it had never gone out, still smouldering quietly after the battle. Kraglin made a low noise at the next silky pass of warm, wet flesh against his skin, his cock stirring next to Yondu’s thigh.

He’d noticed a slight difference in how they were built, sure. But it was more obvious as he filled out, tapered thin at the top and thicker by the base. There were raised ridges on the underside, where it joined his body, softer for now but raising with each lick. Right now, he didn’t look too unusual aside from the slight shape difference, but any time they’d - fooled around, diplomatically speaking, it had always been hidden from view. If Yondu had felt anything different, he hadn’t said anything.

Mutual jerk off sessions with your hunt-brothers were one thing. Actually desiring what was nudging the inseam of his leg, quite another. But Anthos already owned Yondu’s world in its entirety, from the misty swamps to the far-off shimmer of the ocean, visible from the crater lip at the top of the mountain on a clear day. Surely this small portion of it was allowed to be off-limits?

The space between them was monsoon-hot, syrupy with sweat and drying rain. Yondu rolled his tongue along the lowest tip of the wound, an inch above the crease where stomach met thigh and groin. He tasted hair and dirt and Kraglin’s blood. It was more metallic than his own, like he was licking a clump of crude yaka ore.

Sucking contemplatively on his tongue, Yondu shuffled until his ass rested on Kraglin’s shins. He’d probably have two neat grooves by the time he’d seen this hazy, half-instinctual plan to its climax. Stupid bony git.

He followed the trail that led down Kraglin’s belly. So convenient - like a landing runway of scraggly hair. He sunk lower and lower, past the wiry definition of his abdomen until all he could smell was cock. Musk saturated his olfactory system, as pungent as the copper on his tastebuds was sour.

He nuzzled him there. Inhaled deeply. Ignored the fur tickling his nose and forced himself to wait as the rising heat bulged against his cheek.

He wanted to be in control of this. It felt important somehow, that Kraglin see him as a suave and collected warrior, not the village clown. But he was so warm beneath him, a furnace incarcerated in a narrow skin bag. Yondu was breathing like the battle was still in full furore, and they’d barely begun.

He also had no idea what he was doing.
He’d heard about this form of… contact, between men. It was the sort of taboo subject young
hunters incorporated into their taunts - and got their ears boxed for, because what if the chief heard? The za’gah penalty has been given for less.

If a Hraxlian’s mouth was their weapon, a Zatoan’s mouth was their muse. Lowering his to the
fleshy, sticky pink head felt almost as sacrilegious as denying Anthos himself. Yondu swallowed,
spit crackling in his throat. Gripping Kraglin’s cockbase to steady it (and blinking when he found
rather more meat than anticipated) Yondu let his mouth rove over the vein, never quite touching.
Kraglin’s pulse was a stick beating the drum of his parted, sensitized lips.

He looked up, pink eyes emitting a little of that natural phosphorescence produced by so many
creatures of Anthos, from the Zatoans to the algae that lit the swamp. He wasn’t sure if the question -
can I? - could be relayed through eye contact alone.

Kraglin filled his hands, solid and weighty, and Yondu’s mouth was leaking almost as much as his
purpling head. He licked saliva from his underlip. Peered through the gloom, hopefully in the
direction of Kraglin’s face. And waited.

Kraglin made a strangled sort of sound when he realised exactly what it was that Yondu seemed to
have in mind, the flush high on his cheeks darkening to something closer to crimson. He opened his
mouth, not sure if he was going to protest when the other man moved down lower, breath warming
and tickling against his skin, making him shiver and bite his lip. The sheer heat rolling off him in
waves countered the comparative coolness of Yondu’s mouth and lips, the sensation making Kraglin
hyper-focus along his cock.

The - somewhat unintentional - squeeze around the base of his cock made his voice break on a
groan, feeling a throb against Yondus fingers. Part of him wondered if he should have warned him
about that, the way the knot started to thicken and harden a little more against his palm, Kraglin
fighting a hard squirm against the pelt. The urge to move, to grind that harder flesh against the grip
of him was almost overwhelming, a thin dribble of clear, sticky fluid leaking from his head. Staying
still was the main effort, feeling himself pulse in Yondus grip, so tantalisingly close to that warm
wetness the most welcome distraction.

Honestly, he scolded himself a tad deliriously, it wasn't like he’d never had this before. Granted it'd
been some time, and he'd had a lot to think on during his time here, but he could hold out a little
longer than this.

"Uh," He stopped, biting his lip at how low his voice sounded to his own ears, aware that Yondu
seemed to be waiting for something. He nodded, reaching down and stroking his fingertips with
great, delicate tenderness against the curve of Yondu's crest, trying to return some of this. "If you -
only if you wanna-

He wasn't turning it down; his heavy, heated expression and the cock sitting warm in Yondus hand
made that obvious. But he needed to be sure.

When the knot bloated, turgid and carnelian and so big it forced open Yondu’s grip, Yondu couldn't
bite down on his growl. Damn. To know Kraglin’d been packing this in his pants whenever they ran
together, hunted together, waded through the creek side by side…

Yondu flashed back to the first time he’d had Kraglin pinned beneath him, beautifully receptive to all
Yondu gave. And yeah, okay, at the time he hadn’t been doing much giving. He’d been so
bewildered by the sensations he hadn’t considered what Kraglin might be getting out of it until the
white splatter had dried on his bedpelts.
But Yondu’d sat over this cock, hadn’t he? The same one he held now, scarcely able to girth it with his fingers. And he’d ground down like a mad thing, letting it nestle between the cheeks of his ass...

There was a dark potential in those thoughts. Yondu let them float away, nebulous and unrealized. He concentrated on Kraglin’s cock as it felt in his hands: long, tapered, brutally thick at the base. A beast’s cock, like Kraglin had a beast’s teeth. After several gulps - both to moisten his tongue and psych himself up for the challenge - Yondu positioned himself at the dick’s least daunting end and slithered wetly down.

It went a lot better in his head. In his head, Yondu encased Kraglin to the root, ridiculous knot and all: a mellow, sucking warmth that dragged him to the edge and held him there while he writhed. Maybe moaning Yondu’s name too. He’d be wracked with pleasure, nails scratching the sides of Yondu’s crest and thighs juddering as they fought the yearn to thrust…

Actuality was a lot sloppier.

His cheeks bulged. His eyes watered. He couldn’t make it to the ring of his index and thumb, where they pinched the loose bunching skin above Kraglin’s knot. It was as if Anthos had built a wall across his throat. Punishment for thinking blasphemous thoughts, enacting blasphemous deeds...

When Kraglin’s cockhead poked the wall, Yondu’s stomach spasmed and he had to yank back smartly so he didn't retch.

The slimy pop as he decoupled would have been amusing under other circumstances.

Scowling at the drool-smeared tip, Yondu wiped his jaw and reset. He would not be defeated. Anthos was gonna have to try a lot harder, if he wanted to convince Yondu this was wrong. Because how could it be wrong, to have one palm flat against Kraglin’s straining hips, the other stroking where his mouth couldn’t reach in uncoordinated slides? Even if the jab of it made tears prickle his eyes and sour bile crawl up his throat, Yondu refused to admit surrender.

“Woah hey ah-” Kraglin was cut off by a groan as he shuddered, forcing his hips to stay still. While he appreciated the enthusiasm and admired the effort Yondu was willing to go to, some of those noises had been more alarming than sexy.

There were only a few species he knew that expressed pleasure with secretions from their mouth, and he doubted Zatoans were under that umbrella. Yondu had considerably less suckers than those.

“Yondu, just,” he shuddered again, biting his lip to steady himself, fingers curling against the other man's crest. He reached down, under his jaw, and gently guided him back up a little, out of the danger zone; his thumb stroked his cheek as Kraglin caught his breath.

Okay so maybe it was a little clear Yondu hadn't don't this much before. Kraglin forced himself to take a deep breath and think past the heat sweeping through his body, his focus constantly attempting to veer south.

“You're gonna hurt yourself like that,” he said, breathless. “Ain’t gotta do all that… y’can just, move where you wanna and use your hand, it’s fine-”

Part of him was very, very worried that Yondu was going to try and swallow much more than he could, and get Kraglin’s knot locked past his jaws until he deflated. He was still young, still in the prime of his life. That thing wasn't as big as it was going to get.

An involuntary whimper escaped Yondu when Kraglin eased him up. It pushed through his nose as his mouth was full, a nasal mosquito whinge that any self-respecting warrior would be ashamed of.
He bit down on it (not literally, for which Kraglin had better be grateful come morning) and focused on breathing, lips squeezing the tip of Kraglin’s cock. He rested there, incisors just grazing the bulb, and waited until his guts had stopped churning and the salty taste of Kraglin’s precum only made his stomach flutter rather than violently flipflop.

Having Kraglin guide him over his prick was okay. But it wasn’t what Yondu wanted from this. He wanted to know his limits, to be comfortable enough to push the both of them to breaking point...

And hey. Uzuko always said impatience was his biggest flaw.

But Yondu didn’t dive back down immediately. There were few people to whom he extended the courtesy of listening when they talked. Kraglin was one of them. Gagging wasn’t conducive to a sexy atmosphere. Looked like Yondu was gonna have to experiment.

He dragged his thumbs under and around Kraglin’s knot, testing its weight. It lay atop the thick, scented tufts of hair around Kraglin’s crotch, flattening them outwards like the trees around his fallen star. His fallen *ship*, Yondu corrected himself. Rather than trying to swallow as much as he could, he instead concentrated on the head, sucking without a care for the wet, lewd noises. They’d be hidden by the rain, so what did it matter?

And they made Kraglin’s mouth twitch like he was trying not to giggle. So of course Yondu slurped louder, sucking him like he was a wedge of honeycomb, tongue looping messy spirals over the tip and drool slithering out the sides of his mouth to dampen the pump of his hand.

That was moving steadier now. Less frenzied and uncertain, more like how Yondu might handle his own party piece (if masturbation was an action approved of by Anthos, of course). He spread his fingers to encompass the knot, kneading its throbbing mass. Then dragged upwards, until his knuckles bumped his chin, slow enough to make Kraglin squirm.

“Izzah’ guh’?” he asked around the head, pausing with it behind his teeth like a spongey bridle-bit. “You wike dis, yeah?”

Any concern for Yondus throat disappeared when it seemed like he was taking his advice. Kraglin let himself relax back a little, shoulders pressing down into the pelts as he groaned, trying to keep his appreciation at something below the sound of rain. His fingers skittered, anxious and wary of pushing, over the red line of Yondus crest, tracing it as far back as his neck before back again, fingertips lighter on the edge then by the seam.

Kraglin arched with a moan that tapered into a low growl when Yondu started to work the tighter flesh, hips giving a brief push up before he controlled them with a shudder. One hand slipped down from Yondu’s head to his shoulder, fingers curling and digging in whenever Kraglin had to hiss air in through his teeth, hips trembling in their effort to keep still.

“S’so good,” He didn’t mean to drawl, but it was the only way to keep his voice as low and even as he wanted it to be, and his fingers dug in again when Yondu gave another slow drag of his knot, teasing it. The motion felt electric to Kraglin, making him want to grind it in deeper, his hips hitching to smear the wet top of his knot against Yondus lips. It was at full swell now, thicker and firmer around then the rest of his shaft and blushing darker, and he groaned as he repeated the little motion.

He wasn’t pushing for anything, really. But the sweep of Yondus lips against it, the feel of a warm mouth dragging over the flesh, made him pant and whine something like Yondus name, his grip tightening on his shoulder again for a moment.

“Y’gon’finish me off if y’keep that up~”
It took Yondu several heartbeats to piece Kraglin’s slur into a comprehensible series of words. Then he smirked, best he could, letting Kraglin watch his lips stretch around the head. If he let it pop free, he could grind his chin on the knot while kissing his shaft, peering at Kraglin from beneath it, spittle glistening under the faint glow of his crest and eyes. He still could hardly see a thing, except where the bioluminescence reflected off Kraglin’s stomach, glossing his bony hips like Yondu was observing him through a glass of red wine.

But he could feel how his muscles trembled, the force of his impending orgasm wracking him like he’d grabbed a live wire on his own ship.

And Kraglin could see him. He could watch as Yondu stretched out, wriggling until he lay belly-down between Kraglin’s legs rather than awkwardly kneeling on top of them, and rose on his elbows so he could bob over those first few inches, before the stretch became too daunting and he had to substitute his hand. He could see Yondu sneaking his spare hand between them, under his torso towards where his pelvis was rubbing on a cured hide, texture almost too intense for pleasure.

Unfortunately, this meant he could also see as Yondu’s clumsy attempts to fist his navy cock were thwarted by his own body getting in the way.

His frustrated growl made his chest vibrate. The ripples reverberated all the way through to his throat and the tongue currently curled around Kraglin’s leaking tip, smearing precum with saliva.

“Dammit,” he said thickly, letting him slide from his mouth. His thighs kept rubbing without his permission, body tight-wound as a bowstring before it snapped. He needed more… something. He just had no idea what that something could be. “Gimme a sec. I gotta rearrange or somethin’, I dunno…”

Kraglin shuddered when Yondu let him out, blinking his eyes open where they’d slid shut. He did his best not to curse or twitch, having been so close…

“Cmere,” He said instead, pushing himself to sit with wobbly arms. He held his arms out a bit, indicating for Yondu to come and sit on his lap, like before. This time though, he had something else in mind. He was flushed and doing his best not to pant, fingers running over Yondu’s skin where he could reach it, and his cock twitched when he swallowed. “I’ll get us both off, I wanna.”

Yondu did so - although not without posturing a little, just to make it clear he’d been perfectly capable of finishing the job, and was only accepting Kraglin’s assistance out of kindness. He settled himself gingerly, all too aware of the hard prick jostling for space with his own. And while a part of him was tempted to sit over it, crushing it flat to the pelts and forcing Kraglin to suffer Yondu’s weight without any hope of relief, his curiosity about what Kraglin might propose won out.

So he straddled Kraglin’s lap, arms crossed in feigned indifference.

“Go on then,” he said. He couldn’t keep the eager husk from his voice. He pushed their crotches together, rough and untrained, and nearly jolted off his seat at the sharp flare of sensation. Not that that stopped him grinning sleazily and leaning in to nip Kraglin’s earlobe before whispering his challenge up close and personal. “Show me what’chu got.”

Kraglin couldn’t help the low growl of pleasure at being able to wrap his arms around Yondu, his hands smoothing up and down his back a moment, on either side of the crest. There was something to be said for just being able to hold him - Yondu was usually such a ball of energy and momentum that snagging him long enough to soothe Kraglin's more sedentary soul was tricky.

He leaned in when Yondu did, letting his jaw graze against the other man’s as he pressed his lips to
his neck, working slow kisses up and down the line of skin.

“Sure,” He murmured, one hand dragging over the curve of Yondus hip covetously, dipping between their bodies to run fingertips over his cock. The plates needed some exploring, testing the ridges and little bumps slow and easy as he kissed on him, teeth pressing flat against the skin for mere moments before the sensation was kissed away again, chasing his pulse. “S’all yours anyway. All I got, s’all yours.”

Kraglin leaned back a little, back curved to keep his mouth and teeth within adoring distance of Yondus skin - and to get a better view as he pushed his hips up, wrapping longer fingers around both their cocks. It was a clumsy movement, spit-slicked skin against heated blue, but he groaned as he pumped them slowly.

“All mine,” Yondu repeated. He tipped his chest up and arched his spine, propping himself with a flat palm on each of Kraglin’s legs, opening his tattoos to the restrained scrape of Kraglin’s teeth. He let his head fall back, neck bared, so absolute in his trust that his eyes quivered shut, bioluminescence tracing the veined underside of the thin lid. “Mine. mine. You’re mine.”

He sounded like he’d taken a headshot in the fight, what with how he kept parroting Kraglin’s words back at him. But right now, feeling the grip of another for the first time in years, his head could be forgiven for going a little swimmy.

He lifted himself, pressing down with his hands and raising his hips so Kraglin clasped his own damp cockhead to the lowest and most sensitive of Yondu’s navy plates. Right by the root, it made stars fizzle and burst and turn to supernovae in his belly.

More, chanted around his head, spoken from a hundred mouths at once. More.

And maybe Yondu really was sporting a hitherto unnoticed headwound, because he found himself repeating that too.

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He lifted himself, pressing down with his hands and raising his hips so Kraglin clasped his own damp cockhead to the lowest and most sensitive of Yondu’s navy plates. Right by the root, it made stars fizzle and burst and turn to supernovae in his belly.

More, chanted around his head, spoken from a hundred mouths at once. More.

And maybe Yondu really was sporting a hitherto unnoticed headwound, because he found himself repeating that too.

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borderline weblike whereas Kraglin’s was all liquid. As the white-out faded from his mind, consciousness blurring in like a reflection in a settling pool, Yondu raked trembling thumbs over where that stripe had landed on Kraglin’s stomach, coating the dark strip of hair.

“Mine,” he reiterated, between a snarl and a satiated purr. There was no question in that word - just a simple statement of fact. He slumped against Kraglin’s wet chest, uncaring for the stickiness between them, and buried his head under his chin, angling so the slim front of his crest rested against Kraglin’s panting mouth. ‘Yer mine, you Anthos-damned fool. Ain’t no gettin’ rid of me now.’

Kraglin’s trembling lasted until he felt the almost-subconscious pressure ease in his mind, hips grinding to a slow stop. His hand held them both, cradled low at the base, where he could feel the knot start to soften and ease. He ducked his head a little to kiss the thin line of red, the arm looped around his waist keeping him warm. His hand traced slow, lazy circles on his hip as he caught his breath, shutting his eyes.

“All yours,” he murmured, hating the slight stab in his stomach at the lie of it, smoothing over it effortlessly as he nuzzled on him. Kraglin didn’t want to move, enjoying the warmth of contact and the heavy, comforting weight against his front. They’d have to eventually, sure, but he’d hold onto this for as long as he could.
Chapter 5

Pharaqa finished her list to her chief of those who had fallen - the list before that had been those wounded, in order of severity. Her own arm was bound tight, leaves stuffed under the cloth to sting away the infection that could set in. In truth, the fact that she’d allowed it bound at all was a small nod to the pain it must have caused, cutting close enough to the muscles of her shoulder. If nothing else, she could bow to the knowledge of the healers when they pointed out it was a main area for her bow - she should take care of it.

By rights, she knew she should be dismissed. But she had other business, and merely waited for his word.

This had been, by all accounts, a rather trying day. Uzuko waved his hand at Pharaqa for the second time, wondering if perhaps she hadn’t seen the gesture - too distracted by the slice in her shoulder and the burn of Old Aja’s poultice, or still immersed in the headspace of war. When that failed to incite any movement towards the door, Uzuko sighed longer than a freshly-killed man and lowered himself onto his seat.

The Chief’s Chair was carved from stone, much like his house and the vast cooking pot beyond it. A woven throw and a few pelts didn’t go far towards making it comfortable. But it’d be unseemly for a Chief to pile cushions around himself while his audiences stood. This chair represented the trials and hardship every chief had to suffer, which wore into his mind like the sores on his backside.

Yondu’d taken one look at it and declared that his first chiefly decree would be to toss it in the volcano.

But if Uzuko let himself start worrying over the future of the village in his son’s less-than-mature hands, he’d never stop. He nodded to Pharaqa instead. The hoops in his crest clattered in mimicry of the pummelling rain outside.

“Your report is done. What more do you wish of me, huntress?”

Pharaqa’s gaze didn’t flicker, even if she sucked in a short breath. Anyone else, she would trust not to notice it, but this was not anyone. At least they were alone, she consoled herself, trying to let herself relax enough to speak.

“I wish to speak to you. Not…” She had to pause already, and inwardly cursed herself for it. Words were not her strong point, never had been, and she raised a hand to ease any concerns he might have for her. Her body, wounded and sore though it was, was not the worry here. “Not as your huntress, and not to my Chief. I wish- I need, to speak to you, as the mother of our son. Will you hear me as such, Uzuko?”

It was a gamble, granted, but not one she felt was too high. If he refused she could apologise, pay her respects and leave. But there was no other way to state the tone of the conversation she wished to have, and she respected him enough not to trick him into it. This time, at least.

Not what he’d been expecting. Letting the formal mantle of a chief slide, Uzuko slouched lower on his chair. He rested his forehead on his palm, stretching out the wrinkles, and beckoned that Pharaqa could approach.

“By Anthos, I don’t like the sound of this. What has Yondu done now?”

“He was in fine form in battle tonight, so I’m not about to bend your ear about letting me take him to
the woods for another year or so.” Pharaqa allowed herself a small, wry smile at that, coming over to stand by the side of his chair. She would not touch it, but she did allow her shoulders to relax, as best as she could.

Her feelings for him, such as they were, had always been simple enough to understand. Uzuko was fun to poke at, and on the rare occasions he took her side to tease Yondu, she could see herself wanting to be friends with him. But those were not the circumstances of his life.

“But I am concerned. And yes, it involves Krah-Glyn. I worry that they are too close. Now that I have been in the village and seen them - does it not concern you that they are never out of each other's sight? I even saw them embrace after the battle, as sworn hunt brothers would.”

‘Hunt brothers,’ said Uzuko quietly. It wasn’t a foreign concept. While Uzuko’s awareness of his future station had made him shy away from making close filial bonds, the hunt-brothers and hunt-sisters were a common fixture around the village.

They ate together, drank together, danced and fought and slept together, coiling side by side in the same nest, as close as two of the same biological sex could get without thwarting Anthos’ law. Their bond was respected, and while they were still expected to contribute during the Season, and share some form of custody over children with their Seasonal partner, it was their hunt-partner they returned to. Children raised by hunt-brothers had stability. That was something those born from a relationship of convenience and selective breeding, a relationship like his and Pharaqa’s, could never know.

Uzuko ought to be overjoyed that his son had formed such a deep bond with another. Concerned, because Yondu’s future lay in chieftainship, not family - an heir was expected, mandatory even, but beyond that a chief was servant to his village first and foremost. But delighted for him nevertheless. Just... why did he have to choose Krah-glyn?

Uzuko didn’t doubt Pharaqa’s assessment. Pharaqa knew hunters. She’d even had a sister of her own, back when she and Uzuko decided their village needed a prince. That woman was long dead now - but although Pharaqa never spoke of her, Uzuko wondered whether she was ever far from her mind.

‘What do you suggest we do?’

It was a hard thing for Pharaqa to admit she was wrong - in all her time, it had happened perhaps five times, and she'd been proven right after two of those. But now, as she weighed her words, sorting her feelings with the ineptness that came from lack of practise, she could feel a sixth line get added to the tally she had no doubt he kept.

“I think,” she started carefully. “That perhaps, we were too hasty in our judgement of Krah-Glyn. I do not know what his - machine was. I do not know much more of him then I did before. But I know that I have seen kindness from him to our people - you saw yourself, when he learned of the child that was failing to thrive, how he shared his own food without any thought. And tonight, he walked into death over and over for our people, after all we told him about leaving.”

Although one twin had died, she had to admit the starman’s stubbornness in feeding and caring for the other was something she had been surprised by. It wasn't like Krah-Glyn had the weight to be going without food.

“I think he has been a good influence on Yondu - and could continue to be going forward. A Chief with a hunt-brother isn't so unusual. My thinking is,” Pharaqa said, her tone a little more decided
now. “If Kraglin were female, and blue, we would surely be speaking to her and Yondu together, discussing the Season ahead. With that in mind, I can only wonder if we should be open to the idea of him - contributing to the village on a long-term basis, conditioned on his behaviour.”

Which was to say nothing of what she'd overheard some women saying. One hurdle at a time.

Feeding a shunned child, born out of Season and unloved by Anthos? That was no kindness.

“You are forgetting,” said Uzuko, “that Krah-glyn is leaving. You know the threat his existence puts on our way of life.” He looked at her over steepled fingers, his voice ringing solemn and low.

“Pharaqa, I know you are a warrior before you are a villager, and that you clash with our son at the best of times. But…” He drew himself up, spine straightening against the carved rock chair. ‘I did not expect you to be so cruel. To allow Yondu a hunt brother and take him away again… Is that not worse than him having none at all?’

He knew she hated it when he did the Intransigent Chief-thing. But sometimes it was necessary. Not just for Pharaqa, but for the sake of their son as well.

“Krah-glyn leaves,” he decreed, bringing one hand down flat on the armrest, palm smacking stone with a finale-like crash. “I will not be opposed on this.”

“I fear you misunderstand me - I am telling you that I doubt that threat.” Pharaqa replied, an eyebrow arching. “I am telling you I feel we were in error. Have we not made them before? Our better qualities did not produce a perfect heir, but perhaps Anthos gave us those better qualities in another, to help our son. Today has been very trying,” she continued, stepping away from the chair. “And perhaps I do not make my words clear. But for the sake of our son, will you at least think on them?”

She didn’t expect much - but she rarely called on Yondu being her son. If she did, it was because she meant it.

It was odd, for Pharaqa to walk away from him before an argument was over - or before it escalated to screeching.

Uzuko waited until the curtain fell behind her, eclipsing the bandage-bound swoop of her muscular back. Then folded into a more comfortable cross-legged position, glumly propping his head in his hands.

She thought him mistaken about Kraglin? Well, he couldn’t hold it against her. She was just a hunter, rather than a spiritual guide - Uzuko supposed it was only natural that she failed at grasping the gravity of the situation.

Kraglin might be willing to snap his teeth at the Ignokai on the village’s behalf. But that didn’t lessen the danger he and his star posed to the villagers’ faith. Uzuko had been entrusted with their spiritual purity when he knelt for Aja to push the first piercing needle through his crest. Every single soul in this village relied on him, trusted him to deliver them to Anthos. He would not let them down. He would not let them become Godless heathens. And although he could see the pragmatism of allowing Kraglin to remain during the rainy season, once the suns returned to the skies, Uzuko would stress the necessity of speeding his ship repairs.

As for Yondu....

Well, as all Centaurians knew, the rainy season was followed by five languid heat-drenched weeks when the suns were never obscured and the swamp was baked back into submission; five weeks in which the next generation of warriors, hen-chasers, carpet weavers, teachers and firesitters were to be
The full-pouched men from last year’s season were nearing the final stages of gestation, protected in the huts at the heart of the village and far from Ignokai attack. Their children would emerge as soon as the rainy season loosed its grim grey grip on the world. This would give them time to grow and become strong before the next one - time those shameful twins had never had.

Uzuko’s lip curled at the thought of them. Pharaqa had spoken of Kraglin’s kindness towards those creatures, babies that should never have been born, as if it was anything other than repulsive. Still, the surviving one wouldn’t make it through the rainy season. Let that be another lesson to his people. Anthos’ laws were not meaningless. The existence of their race depended on their adherence.

And thinking of such matters… Perhaps this year would be the year that Yondu finally gave in to Uzuko’s needling and offered that nice Jaku a bite from his bowl around the fire.

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If Uzuko thought Pharaqa was willing to back down or make herself any less of a nuisance about something she believed in, he clearly didn’t know her as well as he thought. In the morning, after her dressings had been changed and she’d eaten her rations, Pharaqa made her way out into the rain. She was drenched at once, and she hastened her step to Yondus hut out of necessity - if that poultice washed off she’d only have to sit through it being applied again.

“I’m coming in,” she called after knocking on the wooden frame, ducking in past the sopping cloth covering. She turned, sighing as she shook the water from her crest, keeping it by the door. “I hope you’re both awake.” “What the dast.” Kraglin kept his tone neutral, which was difficult. Already wake, sure, and cleaned off. Kraglin had simply used his shirt, soaking it in rainwater outside to clean them both off, but now he was forced to dry his clothes by the fire which - this village needed more concerns about nudity, in his opinion, has he dragged some pelts over himself a little more and tried not to scowl at Pharaqa when she turned to face them.

She stared for a moment, nonplussed. Then caught sight of his clothes drying by the fire and made an understanding noise. Of course, he had resisted loincloths so far and she doubted that would change.

“Good morning,” she said, trying not to grin at them too much. Nest sharing, even! This only made her mind up more.

Yondu, as every young adult before him, had gone through a phase where defending his territory against parental invasion was of the utmost importance. It was during this phase that he declared to his father he was more than capable of building his own hut, away from the gloomy shade of the za’gah tree. What had followed was a blissful five years when he woke up and fell asleep on his own terms, no father watching over his shoulder and demanding he go splash his face in the creek before supper.

Yondu loved his freedom. So why did Pharaqa have to take it away?

“Mooooom,” he whined, channelling the spoilt pouchlings soon to be delivered into the world.

Pharaqa’s mouth made a sharp veer for the unamused - she’d always hated being called that. Copying Kraglin and grabbing a handful of pelt to cover his private bits - his very happy and sated private bits, which had seen more action last night than they’d gotten in all the years of his existence - he rolled over and hooked his elbows on the nest’s rim.

It took effort not to look nervous. Nervousness implied guilt, and if Pharaqa suspected - the lack of
brandished weapons suggested she didn’t - having Yondu show fear might tip the balance. He opted for a jaw-cracking yawn instead, followed by a grumble.

‘What d’you want?’

Pharaqa chuckled, either ignoring their discomfort or using some hitherto unknown mother-powers to make it that much worse. She came over and plunked herself down next to the edge of the nest, folding her arms on her crossed legs to grin at him.

“Your...” she waved a hand at Kraglin, who was currently trying to become a cocoon of pelts and self. He stared at her from the little headhole he’d left herself, his expression somewhat bewildered. “I am curious about what I saw last night. I know I cannot ask him myself and be understood, but I wish to examine his teeth.”

“Why does she keep waving at me.” Kraglin asked, his voice low and somewhat concerned. “I don’t wanna be eaten.”

Yondu ran his foot along Kraglin’s calf under the pelts. If Pharaqa was anything like as tired as he was - and she must be, after staying up long after the battle ended to finalize the dead-count and report to the Chief - she wouldn’t notice. “Ain’t no one gonna eat ya, stupid. Why would we? Ain’t nothing on you.”

Then, in his own language, to Pharaqa -

“No can do. He don’t like it when people touch ‘em.” People that ain’t me, he finished in his head. Sure, he hadn’t exactly asked whether Kraglin would submit to his mother poking around in there, but Yondu was still thrumming with the memory of that mouth roving over his neck and chest, the promise he’d wheedled out of him that Kraglin would show him how to suck a man properly...

But those were thoughts best entertained when they were alone. Definitely not with his mother, whose face was scrunched in a smile that was as uncharacteristic as it was disturbing. Watching her plaster jovialness over her usual irritable personality was like watching a yolopp try to simper and stuff itself in a dancer’s grass-skirt.

Pharaqa raised an eyebrow, though she supposed it could be understood. Kraglin and his culture was still a total mystery to her, so she guessed that there was something in the act that was special. Still, she was not one to be deterred by a simple ‘no’ with no reasoning.

“Would it change his mind if he knew the request came not from myself, but from a few ladies interested in him for the Season?” she asked, glancing briefly at Kraglin (and shuddering at the thought). Unsure of what was going on, he simply looked back, tilting his head. “Provided he’s not too young, of course. We still have no idea about him...”

Yondu’s jaw dropped. He looked from Kraglin, to Pharaqa, to Kraglin, to Pharaqa, to Kraglin, to Pharaqa and back again.

“What?”

“What?” Pharaqa echoed. “He’s taller than us, we have no idea how old he could be. But, part of the appeal I’m told, is his reach. And those teeth. There are some women from a strong hunter bloodline that would be interested in having children with those attributes.” She paused. “I, assume they will be shutting their eyes during the act.”

Yondu’s bottom jaw was still dangling a few inches below his top one. If he didn’t shut it soon, he’d start drooling. But what Pharaqa was insinuating… Surely she couldn’t mean…
Honestly, he didn’t know if he was more horrified at the thought that Kraglin might be a kid, or that the huntpack girls had set their eyes on him. They were a tenacious lot. Kraglin’d be fending off spoonfuls of food from every direction, once the weather got dry enough to allow for an evening fire. He wouldn’t put Jaku past pinning the poor sod down and forcefeeding him.

And… and what if Kraglin liked the attention? Yondu, while boasting enough self-confidence to toe the line of narcissism, was aware that the girls had several attributes he was lacking. Tits, for one thing.

And when they lay with Kraglin, when they had him spill inside them, they would be able to breed.

Or not. Kraglin was lacking a few vital anatomical facets himself.

“What about the pouch?” Yondu asked hoarsely. Kraglin wasn’t as fluent in Zatoan as Yondu was in Xandarian (Yondu didn’t blame him; while Zatoan relied on an innate knowledge of tone and pitch, Xandarian required only a basic aptitude for language and the ability to ignore a sore throat.) Yondu’d have to translate later. And maybe ask him how old he was, so he knew whether they were good to keep fooling about or if he should fling himself into the volcano at the next available opportunity.

“The fuck’s the egg supposed to go? He can’t just… tuck it in his shirt. Needs nutrients.”

“We’re not even sure if he’s compatible with them.” Pharaqa pointed out, though she had to admit, the look of horror on Yondu’s face was priceless. “But if the tree does bear fruit, so to speak, there are always those with empty pouches to tend to the egg if need be. I’m sure there would be a few volunteers willing to help out such a close friend of the son of the Chiefs. An oddity, at that.”

She spread her hands, her expression shifting as if to say ‘what can you do’?

“Besides, it’ll give you something to talk about with him in the gestation huts, if you finally pick someone to share the season with…”

Oh no. He got enough of that from his father.

Yondu, clenched from shoulders to fists, shut his eyes for the duration it took to remind himself that yelling at Pharaqa would only make her more determined to annoy him. Such an infuriating trait. He’d never met anyone else so stubborn, so irritable, so prideful…

On another plane of existence, a cosmic deity was holding a mirror to his face and laughing. But Yondu only believed in the One True God, Anthos, who would never stoop to such lowly mockery. He elected to ignore them.

“For the last time, mom,” he said, over-enunciating the word in the hopes it’d make this creepy cheerful demeanor crack into rage. “I ain’t making the two-backed beast with none of your precious huntgirls.”

The incline of Pharaqa’s eyebrow ridges implied a ‘why’. Yondu was only too glad to answer.

“Because they’re a bunch of stupid suck-ups who’d rather follow you than me!” Sure, he’d barely been a man when he declared himself a superior huntsman to his mother and ordered the pack decide which one of them led. But forgiving and forgetting was about as akin to Yondu’s nature as an aku to babysitting.

He wanted her to leave so he could push Kraglin to sit against the edge of the nest, long thin legs stretched out into the pelts, then settle himself between them so his back and crest was sandwiched to
Kraglin’s toastrack ribcage. Then he’d have Kraglin open up his star-chart and teach him about some of the systems they hadn’t discussed yet. He’d scroll through the cyclical revolutions until the star was within cupping distance, letting Yondu peer at it up close. He’d answer every one of Yondu’s questions, no matter how rambly or excitable. And he’d touch him: those careful circles over his torso and bare legs, following the spiral of his tattoos.

There’d also be no Pharaqa. It would, in short, be perfect.

Yondu bared his teeth at her; a grin any skull would be proud of.

“So if ya can’t touch his teeth and we don’t want none of your matchmakin’ skills… Why’re ya still here?”

Pharaqa studied her son for several long moments; long enough for Kraglin to start looking between the two with a growing degree of worry. Long enough for her to make a point about staying here for as long as she damned well wanted to. But she could hear the rain easing a little outside, and it was better to take her chances with it now than later.

“Just think about it.” Anthos, how she hated having to tell people to think. This was why she preferred the woods and her pack - less thinking, more doing. “About both things. And maybe teach him how to say ‘thank you’ for when the girls ask him if he’s interested.”

She stood, stretching sore muscle, and gave Kraglin an even once-over. When she seemed to have communicated something - Kraglin’s shoulders drooping a little - she left them to it, letting the partition swing shut behind her.

“Why does your mother only talk to me when I don’t have any pants on?”

Yondu slithered back into the nest, letting his body submit to gravity. He wound up belly-down in the pelts, crest pronging up at an angle from where it’d been squashed while he slept, face buried in scratchy rawhide.

“Congratulations,” he said huskily. There was still a conversation to be had here - several conversations actually, starting with how old Kraglin was and progressing to why he wasn’t allowed to accept any offers of food made at the firepit. Yondu’d get to them in good time. For now, he wanted to savor his hut being a Pharaqa-free zone once again. “I think she’s starting to like you.”

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He worked up the courage - no, poor wording; Yondu was brimming with confidence; he had an abundance of the stuff rather than a deficit - to ask his first question later that day.

It was as they were slopping through the mud, lugging woven, waterproofed tar-coated baskets filled with dry meat and salted fish from the stores to the village huts. The pouch-full men got priority - and the bulk of the supplies. They were eating for several, after all.

The mother of the remaining twin hadn’t begged for more food. But she was looking mighty thin and her milk’d be running dry any day. Yondu had looked around to make sure no one was watching before stuffing a loaf of bread in her hands and marching off before she could stutter her thanks. Just so Kraglin didn’t keep doling out his food. Skinny dumbass hadn’t quite grasped the concept of mass conservation - he didn’t have tire to spare.

Currently, the rains were at their lightest - a mild spit that flecked the skin. The suns shone through the drizzle. Rainbows stretched over the forest, birdsong audible for the first time this month. Yondu and Kraglin plodded through the mud side by side, Yondu’s bare feet squelching in time with
Kraglin’s boots.

The silence felt comfortable. Yondu regretted being the one to break it.

“So,” he started, shuffling the strap of the basket onto his drawing-shoulder, where the muscle was more accustomed to strain. “Kraggles.”

How did he begin? Is every member of your species this hairy? Is that like, an adult-thing? Yondu clicked his tongue frustratedly off the backs of his teeth, failing to find words.

“How’s it going?” Kraglin was concentrating on making sure he didn’t slip and end up spilling the precious food - while he was sure there were people hungry enough to eat muddy food (from personal experience, mostly) he didn’t want to have to be the one to look into their eyes while he handed it over. And, as he tended to get exasperated glares whenever he exchanged someone else’s less than stellar portion for his own to make up for it, so he had the vague suspicion he wasn’t supposed to do that.

Not for the first time, he marvelled a little at the difference between their homes. On Hrax, food wasn’t anything special beyond pastes, powders and gels - but at least there was enough of it. Granted, because none of it was natural and all of it was synthesised, but that wasn’t the point.

It looked like Yondu had been chewing something over all day though. Any other time, Kraglin would have asked, but given that their morning had involved quite a lot of Pharaqa whistling at them, he didn’t want to barge in on what he was sure was a deep, emotional mother-and-son moment. As he had no experience with parents, he decided that sticking his big beaky nose in was probably unwelcome.

“What’s the matter? Did I fuck up?” It was a fair question. He liked to make sure all his bases were covered. He couldn’t help shooting Yondu a cheeky grin though, nudging his side with a pointy elbow. He felt safe enough to flirt in Xandarian. “I’ll make it up to you later if I did~”

By the stars. They’d gotten each other off a grand total of twice - but Kraglin’s words still made the blood in Yondu’s body polarize, half rushing for his face and the other half down below. He had to lean away from the weight of the basket so it didn’t drag him over.

“Shaddup,” he muttered, although he couldn’t quite hide his grin. “Not that uh, I ain’t gonna take ya up on that. But I wanna say this first.”

Pausing, he heaved the basket round and rested it on his feet rather than in the mud. Not that there was much difference between the two, grubbiness wise, but having the woven underside imprinting itself on his toes felt anchoring, a weight that kept Yondu tethered to the wet brown earth.

“Kraglin,” he said, squaring up to his partner.

They weren’t alone. As the rains lessened, life started to emerge from shelter - in the village as well as the forest. It would be weeks yet before the drizzle ceased completely, but the clouds were lessening their load every day. Tomorrow they might be able to light a fire, if they kept the tarpaulin half across, and have a cooked meal rather than a cold one for the first time since the rains began.

Which also meant that tomorrow, the women of the tribe would unite in their efforts to get their stew into Kraglin’s gormless face.

It wasn’t that Zatoan didn’t steal bits off each other’s plates at other times of the year. But it took on a very special significance in the weeks prior to the Season. You had to feed someone direct from your bowl, lifting the spoon and putting it to their lips. If they accepted, there was a tacit understanding that they were willing to enter your hut after dancing to Anthos for fertility, and copulate until either
you conceived a child or passed out and died of dehydration.

...A little dramatic, perhaps. Yondu, having rejected the few offers that came his way - because despite his father’s goading, the last thing he wanted was some dumb brat to tote around in his pouch - wasn’t quite sure of the ins and outs of it (euphemism fully intended).

He’d thought his mother was on his side. But apparently, she’d jumped on the *chiefs need an heir* bandwagon - so both he and Kraglin would have to be on high alert.

But that wasn’t the topic Yondu wanted to broach today. He glanced up at Kraglin, trying not to reveal how nervous he was about the answer.

“Where you come from… This *plah-net* of yours, where you all live underground and have *bloodfire* instead of Anthos… By their ruling, are you old enough to be initiated as a man?”

Kraglin looked back at him. And, unreassuringly, he didn’t look like he entirely understood the question.

“What do you mean?” He shifted the basket around in his arms until he found it was easiest to mirror Yondu, resting it on the top of his boots. At least his boots were strong and firm enough that he didn’t have to worry about his toes going numb, though he kep his hands on the rim to make sure it was steady. “There’s not really much difference. You work as soon as you can walk, pretty much, so I’m not sure what you mean. Unless it’s something else?”

‘Something else’ was one of the first phrases he’d taught Yondu, just because it was such a good catch-all. It was so much easier to throw that into a conversation than to try and narrow down what they were thinking. Sometimes, despite all their best efforts, the words just wouldn’t align properly and they had to play one of their old guessing games, getting closer and closer to their intended meaning with every charade.

“Or do you just mean how old I am?” Because that did make more sense then Yondu worrying about his work permit papers being in order, now that he thought about it.

Kraglin’s babble about working and walking was distracting, mostly because it was so different to what Yondu knew. Zatoan children certainly weren’t coddled - the ever-present threat of *aku* and disease and the rains meant that few survived to reach their initiation ceremonies. But you were free to run around and live life under your own ruling - or at least, under the ruling of your parents and any associated hunt-siblings - before you were made a man or woman and became a child of the entire village. But Yondu wasn’t asking to probe Kraglin’s past, as fascinating as it was.

“How old you are;” he agreed, nodding. Who knew if Hraxian and Zatoan means of measurement were in any way compatible? But it would give him a benchmark, at least. “Yer older than me, right? I mean. You’re taller. And ya fly about in a starship and stuff, and ya know more about…”

He didn’t finish his sentence. The only villagers who’d bothered to learn Kraglin’s native tongue were the children, whose porous little brains sucked up any language spoken around them. And they certainly hadn’t been taught these words. Not that Yondu gave two shits about cussing in front of kids, but he didn’t have the patience to explain what a cock was and what he and Kraglin had been doing with them. And anyway, if there was a sin worse than flagrantly breaking Anthos’ laws, it was telling kids about it.

Or worse, involving kids directly.

*Please Anthos,* Yondu thought. *I know I ain’t yer favorite person right now. But I could really, really*
do with a break. Don’t you dare make him not of-age, or I swear next time I need a piss I’m doing it against the za’gah tree.

“Well, I left Hrax pretty much right after my fourteenth cycle,” It wasn’t as easy a question to answer as Yondu might have hoped. Kraglins brow furrowed as he tried to work it out, lifting fingers to help him keep track of the numbers he was juggling.

Given how time differed from one planet to the next, there was almost zero point of reference out in the galaxy for someone’s age. While yes, you could kill someone and age their remains to try and find out how old they were, that was a rather permanent solution to a momentary problem. Unless someone had been registered under one of the main ruling powers and kept track of all their paperwork - Kraglin had the former, but not the latter - you had to take someone’s word about their age at face value.

That said, some species had their own method for keeping track. It looked like Kraglin was constipated for a moment, a worrying concept given that the food basket was below his knees. Then his mouth shifted, the shape of his tongue poking through the wall of his cheek as he seemed to be counting something?

“My last check was right before I joined the Corps and I was sixteen in the universal cycles… But I’ve got an extra notch since then, the next one isn’t out, so. Seventeen.”

Okay. So not an awful age-gap, even if wasn’t in the direction Yondu initially expected. He himself had been initiated - and thus made able to participate in the Seasons - at the grand old age of fifteen. And (in the eyes of ignoramuses like his father) Kraglin was a hell of a lot maturer than he was. He sighed, hauling his basket back onto his shoulder and continuing his stride for the village center.

“Thank Anthos. I don’t need to swing by the volcano after all.”

“Why would- Ooooooh.” Kraglins smirked a little as he scooped up his basket and hurried after Yondu. Or, as best he could without falling and drowning in the mud. He turned that smirk down at Yondu with a wicked little gleam in his eyes. “Don’t you worry, my buddy, my pal. That’s all above board. I have had a thorough education in the galaxies ways. And aside from that incident on Alberaan, I’m not too young for any of it.”

“Alber… whassit?” Yondu shook his head. He probably didn’t want to know. Then changed his mind and stopped again, a few feet away from the huts where the hungry soon-to-be fathers were waiting. “Okay, ya can’t just leave that hanging. There’s a shitty first-time story here, and I wanna hear it.”

“Oh, it wasn’t my first time. Well, it was my first time with an Alberaanian, sure, but not my first-first time.” Kraglin seemed entirely too relaxed about this, speaking with the sort of confidence that comes when you know only one other person on the entire planet understands what you’re saying. He paused alongside Yondu, hefting the basket in his arms and chuckling at the memory.

“Alberaan is this - well, it's sort of a pokey lil planet, way out in the upper nines of the quadrant. Nice place though. The people there are real great, real friendly. Which is kind of the problem. So I went off ship on leave, was looking for something to eat and they offer, alternative forms of payment.” He laughed a little. “So there's me, fifteen and hungry and now been told I’m also allowed to pay for food with sex? Sounds great. Until I get my skids off and she looks at it and goes ‘yeah that's not gonna cover it’ and since I’ve already eaten, she tries to charge me with theft. Had to have my CO come down and bail me out of that one, not to mention he had to cover the bill. Which he did. Thrice.”
He wasn’t entirely sure his CO had to maintain full eye contact while doing so, but he had. Kraglin had felt years come off his life.

“And Alberaanians look pretty fuckin complicated so you know. Props to him, he definitely multitasked.”

Yondu wasn’t sure if he’d understood all of that, but what he had made sense of was fucking hilarious. Grinning, he gave Kraglin’s side a ram with the arm not securing his basket.

‘Hey, Zatoan are pretty complicated too.’

He’d certainly never made himself cum before - at least, never on purpose. And here was Kraglin, getting Yondu off nightly in an average of five minutes.

‘You ain’t doing too badly yerself. Y’know, for a kid.’

And if he emphasized that word a little too much, just to piss Kraglin off… Serves the guy right for letting him assume he was the young one in this relationship.

“Not my fault I’m still all spry and youthful,” Kraglin breezed, grinning as he fell into step with him, heading for the huts. “Why, am I moving too fast for you or somethin’, old man?”

After all, he could always get older, but Yondu would find it hard to unage himself. “At least I’m assuming that means you’re older. You can’t blame me for thinking it was the other way around.”

“Wait, you thought I was younger too...?” Yondu returned the grin, sticking out his chest and jabbing a proud thumb into it. “I must look mighty fine, for someone of my advanced years…”

From inside the first hut there came an exaggerated groan. Then, in Zatoan:

“You two, dammit. Quit flirting like you’re partners in the Season and bring us our damn food.”

Letting his pose drop for as long as it took to shoot the window a heartfelt middle finger, Yondu reached down to pick a slab of salted abaqat flank to wave mockingly.

‘What’chu gonna do ‘bout it, Toki?’ he called, switching seamlessly between languages as he mimed taking a bite. “Come out and smack me with your belly?’

A thump on the wall, as if someone lying prone had kicked it. “If I could walk, I’d be tempted.”

Kraglin chuckled, hefting his basket up a little. While he wasn’t sure what had been yelled at them, he could get the general gist that people were hungry. And maybe, if he was lucky, there would be tiny little hands waving out for him to try very, very hard not to make unmanly noises at.

Tiny blue fingers. They were his only weakness.

“Come on,” he said, heading towards the hut with a smile. “Sooner we’re done, sooner we can go lie down again, right? Nothing to worry about. Hey,” He knocked on the doorframe, just to let people know he was coming in, before he poked his head in, smiling brightly. “I got some of those fish, things. I think they’re fish. You can’t understand me, but it’s the fish things. You feeling okay?”

There was a loud shriek.

“Yondu! Your pet is entering our hut!”

Yondu affected a long-suffering sigh.
“Yeah, Toki. I have eyes.”

“Well, what are you waiting for? Get it out!”

Okay, Yondu always knew the guy had a penchant for drama. But add pregnancy to the mix, and he’d gotten downright ridiculous.

“He ain’t gonna eat ya,” he said, standing on his tiptoes so he could peer through the window. Ah yes, there was Toki and the three other men he shared this hut with. All looked bloated and uncomfortable. Toki bordered downright miserable. Yet more reason to never have kids.

Yondu couldn’t stay still for five minutes at the best of times, even on hunts that necessitated stealth. Being corralled in a single hut for his own protection would drive him crazy.

“Not that you don’t look mighty appetizing, a fat lil’ blueberry like you. What’chu so afraid of Kraggles for?”

Toki, keeping Kraglin in his peripherals, turned his aggrieved face to Yondu. He held one arm over his swollen belly, as if shielding it from Kraglin’s view. “What if my pouch cracks and he’s the first thing my baby sees? What if it imprints on him?”

Toki was a young hunter, a year Yondu’s junior. This was his first child, ergo he was wont to get a lil overprotective - possibly to the point of paranoia. Yondu should be calm. Yondu should be patient. Yondu should tell him that that was impossible, because Centaurian children weren’t ducklings, and the pouchbond shared with the father was something only death (or, in Yondu’s case, years of mutual grudges and forced, plastic smiles) could break.

“It’ll call him mommy,” he told Toki, straight-faced. “And die, because he don’t got no tits to suck. Your baby sees this scrawny bugger? Insta-death.”

“If he’s saying he doesn’t like the fish thing,” Kraglin said, cheerful despite the screaming, because frankly he was in a good mood and was refusing to let it be rained on. Even though it was the rainy season. “I got some of that stuff with hooves. Hey buddy.” He offered one of the bowls to one of the other men, containing a selection of grains and fruit. “You’re not yellin at me, so you get these, cos they look real tasty.”

He had lower standards than most people might when it came to how people greeted him, sure. But he had learned to get on with that sort of thing.

Yondu sniggered at Toki’s put-upon expression when Kraglin offered his bowl to the next guy in line: some village sitter Yondu would never bother to learn the name of under normal circumstances, but who Toki must have been getting uncomfortably intimate with after spending the rainy Season crowded under the same roof.

“Too slow,” he mocked. But he dumped the meat he’d been wafting about through the window onto Toki’s head, so at least the guy couldn’t complain that they were starving him. “Won’t be long before the oven’s done. You got any name ideas, Toki? If not, I say we let Kraggles here decide.”

Honestly. Idiot’d probably call it after him, or something.

“Are you being mean to them?” Kraglin made sure to leave the container of water, going to the next guy along. He did his best to scowl at Yondu, but dast it all, his eyes were too fond. Plus, the last thing he wanted was to scare these… men, right? “If you’re mean to them and they don’t let me see their babies when they come out, I’m gonna be so mad. You’ll have ruined the whole thing.”
It was no wonder Pharaqa tended to refer to Kraglin as a Sitter in her mind. He would volunteer for babysitting duty even if he had to lose an arm for it.

“Don’t get what you like so much about the lil’ peepers anyway,” Yondu grumbled. “Barely enough on ‘em for a snack.” But it was a fond grumble, and a lie, and he suspected Kraglin knew it. As much as the thought of something actually, y’know physically burrowing into his pouch and feeding off his body for nine months grossed him out in all the most emphatic ways, the actual bundles of joy themselves weren’t half bad. Made his head go a little fizzy, and before he knew it he’d be smiling without quite realizing or knowing why, and squeezing their cheeks, and picking them up and cuddling them and imagining...

...On second thoughts, babies were awful and he could never be around them again.

“Take this,” he said, shunting the basket to Toki with his foot - who gleefully dived in and emerged with armfuls of dried vegetables and tough jerky. “And smile, so this dumbass doesn’t get it in his head that I’m being rude to ya.”

“They’re small and easy to carry.” Kraglin grinned a little when Toki gave a grudging grimace, apparently satisfied. He picked up the rest of his basket once everyone had taken their share, nodding to Yondu with a wicked little grin. “Y’know, just like you.”

Yondu sputtered, fists balling ready to shut Kraglin up the quick way. Then he remembered that Toki and co knew less Xandarian than Pharaqa. Their secret was safe.

...But he had to correct this silly misconception before Kraglin actually started to believe it.

“No way could you carry me!” he said, bounding out of the hut after Kraglin. Then bounded back in, as unless their village duties lined up with Toki-and-co’s snacktime, he might not see the guy until his bun was fully baked. “Oh, Toki? Remember what I said about names. Seriously pal, unless ya want a Yondu-junior you’d better get thinking up a list. Then bring it to me so I can choose.”

“Why would you choose? My season-partner and I -”

Yondu flapped him off.

“Son of the chief, yadayada. I feel like it’s part of my duty to contribute to the village, and name your child after taabshqa-dung. I’m sure he’ll take after you, after all..”

He darted out before the half-chewed wad of meat hit him in the face.

Back to business. Poking Kraglin in the back of the head, Yondu gestured to the entirety of his body, all six-and-a-bit lanky feet of it. Honestly, half his weight was probably made up of bodyhair.

“Look, Kraggles. Face it. No way can you pick me up.”

Yondu on the other hand? He was a hunter. If he could drag a baby yolopp back to the village solo, he could sure as hell put Kraglin over his shoulders. And he thought, smirking as he flicked the drizzle from his eyes, he’d be willing to demonstrate.

While they might have battled the Ignokai side-by-side, he and Kraglin had yet to go toe-to-toe in the hunters’ training ring. Maybe once the rain stopped, and the village was too busy fussing over who’d be partnering with whom to pay attention? He and Kraglin could slip away and wrestle in the long grass. And if that wrestling turned into something else…

Yondu most definitely did not get a little navy about the ears.
“I mean it,” he reiterated, hands on hips and scowl entirely feigned. “So quit talking like that. You’re a scrawny young whippersnapper, and you gotta show your elders respect.”

“I might not be able to pick you up and carry you very far,” Kraglin sort of felt the need to throw some qualifying statements in here, before Yondu started demanding piggybacks around the village. “But I could probably lift you. I mean, I used to lift rocks and boxes and shit for work, so I could probably lift you.”

And if he couldn’t, he absolutely wouldn’t say no to being manhandled by him instead.

“Which one are we going to next, oh old and respectable old person? Because you’re old,” He shot a grin in Yondu's direction. “This is never gonna get old. Unlike you. Because you already are.”

“Okay, you asked for this…” Yondu made a show of spitting on both hands and rubbing them, like a wrestler before a match. He wiped them off on his loincloth at Kraglin’s quiet ‘ew’. “Prepare yer bony ass, bitch.”

Lowering his head, he plowed forwards. His shoulder met Kraglin’s gut. There was a moment of resistance, a second when he thought Kraglin wouldn’t bend - and then the man folded neatly over it.

Yondu heard Kraglin’s air explode out of him. Laughing, he angled up, taking the lanky idiot’s feet off the floor.

So he thought he could mock him, huh? Old or not, Yondu was gonna take him to the creek and dip him in headfirst until he apologized. And, he thought gleefully as elbows gouged his back, mercifully not aiming for his crest, there was fuck-all Kraglin could do to stop him.

They were going to get into trouble when someone noticed the dropped baskets. At least, Kraglin figured in the petty part of his brain, Yondu had started this. All he’d been doing was innocently pointing out the fact that Yondu was old. Older then him. Honestly, how was Yondu allowed out without an escort, what with how old he was?

Granted, he couldn’t stop Yondu from hauling him about. His skills lay in closing with his opponent and breaking away before he could be pinned, and this had already bypassed that. And sure, he could play dirty and flail his feet at Yondus loincloth, but he didn’t want that thing too sore. He had plans for that later.

Anyway, he was distracted. That was a lot of blue muscle. He flopped over Yondus back, groaning against his skin.

“I never said you couldn’t pick me up,” he pointed out, though he was pretty sure Yondu wasn’t paying attention to him. “I believed you could. You need to put me down. Because uh. Your shoulders and chest are like. Really broad. Really, really broad, and if I stay here any longer I might start stroking them.”

‘Well,” said Yondu, turning in a slow circle. Then a faster one, well aware that it’d make Kraglin far dizzier than it made him. “We can’t have ya gettin’ distracted. From all yer super-important babysitting duties. Nope. I’d better start wearing a shirt-thing. Maybe you can lend me yours? I mean, it’d be super-tight and kinda long round the arms but…” He shrugged, shoulder nudging Kraglin’s belly. “I’m sure I could manage.”

“Well said, Kraglin groaned a little, resisting the urge to pinch Yondu’s crest, where it folded between them and batted at his face. He didn’t actually want to hurt the guy, especially since he wasn’t sure he’d survive being dropped face-first into the deep mud. This wasn’t his natural
environment, after all. The feel of Yondu’s skin against his own, where his shirt had ridden up, was
stupidly pleasant.

“We gotta finish doing the baskets, c’mon...” He tried to steer Yondu back to what they were
supposed to be doing. He didn’t have much faith in it working, but at least he could say he made an
effort, wiggling over his shoulder like an eel.

Yondu laughed, spinning one more time before patting Kraglin on the back like he was burping a
baby.

“You better not puke down my back,” he teased. “Or the loincloth’ll have to come off too.”

The baskets could wait. Teasing Kraglin was so much more fun. Who cared if they were in the
middle of the village where anyone could see? Who cared if Jaku and her posse had stopped to stare
and point and laugh? Who cared if Pharaqa and Uzuko themselves strolled by? This was nothing
other than it appeared to be - two guys being dudes, having fun, pissing about and…

Was it just him, or was Kraglin’s crotch, sat snug against Yondu’s pectoral, a little bit warmer than
usual?

Only one way to find out. Rather than putting him down, Yondu hauled Kraglin sideways across his
shoulders into a fireman’s carry, and reached for the nearest basket. Kraglin wasn’t *that* heavy. He
could totally lift him and their bundles.

...Or perhaps Yondu had overestimated himself, just a little. At least when he wobbled the basket
into his arms, overbalanced, and landed belly-down in the mud, he made a decent cushion for
Kraglin. The guy had zero excuse to complain.

Kraglin squawked as they went down, trying to do his best to flail to freedom, or at least not to a
mouthful of mud and water. The laughter from their audience only increased when he lifted his head,
his nose dripping mud, to make sure he wasn’t suffocating Yondu.

“Yondu?” He poked at him a moment before pushing, rolling him onto his back. He’d be fine. Or
side, at least, he hoped. Somehow, he didn’t think accidentally drowning the son of the chief was
going to do him any favours.

Yondu coughed. He shifted with Kraglin’s urging, squelching upright and taking care to smear a
nice handful of mud across his Starman’s face. Then groaned as shards of the basket poked him in
the belly.

“Dammit…” He totally would’ve been able to lift all that, if Kraglin had quit wriggling. And if
Kraglin hadn’t called his chest muscles *nice* and made him go all squirmly on the inside.

*Totally.*

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One night later and the clouds finally parted for long enough for the flamepit’s overseers to stoke a
fire into existence. Yondu basked in the rays as the wet logs smoked behind him, squinting up at
suns he hadn’t seen in over a month.

He could feel the village buzzing with excitement. While his crest didn’t work so well on higher life-
forms, he could still sense the other Zatoans’ anticipation - not just for feeling the warmth of the
communal fire lick their outstretched palms again, but for what this occasion marcted on the social
calendar.
Tonight was the night when a year’s worth of scouting for potential bedmates - of sizing up the strongest warriors, the stealthiest hunters, the best gatherers and weavers and fire-watchers - came into fruition. Over the next week as the climate rose and the swamp retreated, the Zatoan tribe would decide which among them would offer wombs and pouches to Anthos and ask that he bless them with a child.

All unions had to be appraised by the Chieftain before they could be consummated. Which Yondu was grateful for. At least then, if Kraglin was dumb enough to accept a bite from one of the many spoons that were suddenly jostling for space around his face, his father could still put his foot down. Pink-skinned babies were far too much of a potential camouflage-risk, never mind if they had Hraxian teeth.

But speaking of spoons, how was Kraglin so popular anyway? Yondu polished off his stew in a silence that was most definitely not sulky. The hunter girls who’d set their eyes on his Starman clustered around his far side, so their offerings couldn’t be mistakenly bestowed on the chieftain’s son.

Yondu wasn’t jealous exactly. He didn’t like any of these frails. Just because he wouldn’t say no to a lil’ mutual over-the-loincloth nudging with a huntress if they were napping on the same treebranch and both made a solemn, unspoken pact to never speak of it again, didn’t mean Yondu wanted to settle down and have two-point-five kids in a house with a white picket fence. Or twelve-point-three kids, six of whom would die-slash-be-eaten before they were initiated, three of which would be lost to the swamps, and one to rainy-season fever; and a hut with a nice carpet slung across the doorframe.

But y’know. He wasn’t wholly unattractive.

Kraglin said he had a nice back. And a nice ass. He’d commented on that at some length. And sure, his pasty, skinny, hairy status made him physically repulsive to most sane Xandarians - these girls were in it for the breeding potential, not the aesthetics - and thus his opinion on such matters was untrustworthy. But Yondu still liked to think at least one chick would’ve thrust a bite of stew at his face and offered to put a baby in him.

While he had to commend the way things were handled around here - food before sex was something Kraglin considered of vital importance in picking someone to get freaky with - he was starting to get a little weirded out.

There was something really unnerving about a group of women trying to subtly, or not-subtly, peer into his mouth when he tried to eat, and he’d even caught one of them trying to measure how tall he was. And he knew there was a language barrier there, but none of them had even bothered trying to get his attention to say hello.

On Hrax, he vaguely remembered from one hurried sex class, things were done differently. People fell in love, got married once the paperwork had all been tracked back and it was confirmed that they weren’t related, and then promptly got round to reproducing. Not with any real goal in mind, but with the vague notion that if you got pregnant, it was useful. The baby would be born, taken to the Pod system, and you could get on with your lives with little to no concern about anything that was going to happen to it. Knowing one’s parents was a very rare thing, usually only in the families of those in the highest ranks who could elect to keep their child from the pods.

Which was all above the fact that Kraglin had little to no desire to have children. He may adore the tiny blue beeping variety they had on this planet, due to the fact that they were bouncy, giggly and tended not to treat him like some hideous monster. But the best part of them was being able to give
“You’ve gotta tell me,” he said, leaning over to Yondu. “Is there like, something I can paint on my head to let them know I’m not interested? I don’t mean any disrespect and I don’t wanna be rude but unless this is mandatory, I’m really tempted to just go camp out in the woods until it all blows over.”

Which wasn’t too terrible an idea, now he thought on it. A month’s work on his ship could get things rolling, and he’d be out of their way here.

Yondu would like nothing more in the world than to retreat to the woods and let the Season blow over their heads. Emphasis on blow, because Kraglin had promised him a tutorial.

But if he dared slope off, his father would only send Pharaqa out to search for him. If being caught in bed with another man was a kickstart to Yondu’s pulse, having Pharaqa stumble across him and Kraglin while dicks were being sucked would risk heart attacks on all fronts.

“I dunno,” he muttered, turning a quarter-profile away. “Anyway, m’afraid to talk to ya. If yer groupies think I’m stealing yer attention they might slow-roast me and see if that’ll whet yer damn appetite.”

Yeah, he wasn’t being snippy. At . All.

Not Kraglin’s fault that half the girls in the hunt had decided he possessed some funky genetics that would bolster the Zatoans’ puny gene pool. But that didn’t mean Yondu couldn’t be pissed about it.

Kraglin blinked and leaned back, toying with his food. When he leaned in again, his voice was lower, careful to only use Xandarian.

“Stealin’ implies you don’t already have it,” he said simply, doing his best to keep his tone neutral and even. The last thing he wanted was for the girls to get over-excited. “And I’m askin’ you seriously, how the hell do I get em to go away without ending up bein’ made into a really ugly rug? Or do I just jizz in a cup and hand it over?”

Yondu hid his snigger at the ‘rug’ comment. But when Kraglin started talking about jizzing in cups (all while pointedly nodding to his bowl, making several girls open their mouths in hope) there wasn’t enough willpower in the world to clamp down on the snort.

Kraglin had given him far too much power. It was adorable, how he assumed Yondu would use it wisely.

“You gotta chew up some stew and spit it in their faces,” he said in Xandarian, while giving Jaku - chief among the would-be spoon-feeders - a saccharine smile.

For a moment, Kraglin almost believed him. A quick glance around the firepit made him swallow his mouthful hurriedly, because now that he thought about it, no one else had been gobbling bits of meat at each other. He scowled, kicking his foot against Yondus ankle with a grumble that sounded a little bit like ‘asshole’.

From across the firepit, someone smirked and got up.

“Yondu,” Pharaqa said in greeting, stepping past him. On Kraglin’s far side, the other girls shrank back, giving her room to sit beside him. Pharaqa gave Kraglin a broad, toothy smile and seemed entirely unswayed by the look of unbridled terror that flashed across his features as she raised her spoon for him.
The downside being that Kraglin wasn’t entirely sure he could wail for help without her shoving the spoon down to his tonsils, so he settled for a close-mouthed squeak.

There was nothing for it.

Yondu shoved Kraglin backwards off the log, out of the danger zone.

“Run!” he yelled over his shoulder, while Kraglin rolled leg-over-head, a bundle of gawky fabric-covered limbs and shocked white eyes. “I’ll fend ‘em off.”

Not really. No fending was required - the way to politely decline requests to indulge in the Season’s delights was to turn your back on the asker and walk away, thus showing your deference to them by leaving your crest, a Zatoan’s largest vulnerability, exposed while simultaneously indicating refusal. Kraglin didn’t have a crest, but the same rules would - Yondu prayed - apply.

But he didn’t want Kraglin to see what he was about to do to his own mother. If only because it would bump Kraglin back into top-place on her hitlist, and as cute (and well-justified) as Kraglin’s terror of her was, Yondu couldn’t protect him from her forever.

So as Pharaqa chuckled to herself, watching Kraglin’s scrambling rearwards passage with a sadistic smirk that Yondu might’ve recognized from the mirror if he owned one, Yondu calmly smeared the remains of his soup around his bowl and planted it in her face.

“Eat that, mom.”

Kraglin wisely bolted for the trees, even if the sound of a circle-wide ‘oooooooooooh’ made him look back in the vague notion that he was about to be chased. Nothing of the sort seemed to be happening, though reactions seemed to be ranging from shock and horror to hilarity, depending on how old the person reacting was. Why Yondu couldn’t have just taught him to say ‘no thank you’ was beyond him, but now was not the time to worry.

Instead he went up a tree. In retrospect, that was probably not the wisest move, given that the Zatoan people were expert climbers, but he would later claim the move was one born of panic and not critical thinking.

The bowl stayed on her face for a mere second before she dashed it to one side, sending it scattering into the fire. Underneath, Pharaqa no longer looked amused, just snarling. She put her face as close to Yondu as she could. Intimidation came difficult to those of their stature, she understood that, but they worked with what they had.

“Let him speak for himself,” she said, her voice low and livid. “And next time I wont have to rescue him from the girls, you idiot.”

Pharaqa outranked them - if she chose Kraglin, the others would have to wait for his response to her before they could try again.

“You, uh. Got a lil something.”

Yondu dragged his finger through the claggy goop stuck to Pharaqa’s cheek. Still lukewarm. He sucked it into his mouth, smacking his lips. Then spat it out again.

“Ew. Tastes of old lady. Why don’t ya go sit with Aja, Pharaqa? Ain’t you a lil’, uh, mature for all this?”

Sure, he was only being so rude - ruder than usual, as hard as that was - because she was right.
Pharaqa was smart enough to know this. She was also hotheaded enough not to care. Posturing right back, she smacked her sticky forehead off his - an old sign of warning, typically used by hunters when a disagreement threatened to turn into a fight. And while it would be fitting for Yondu to ruin tonight with a brawl - ruining things being what he was best at - the remains of his dinner sliding down Pharaqa’s chin gave him an excuse to cut dinner short.

Of course, Pharaqa had to get in another jab.

“If you want to call me an old lady, Yondu, how about you make me some grandkids already?”

Yondu sneered at her. And at Jaku, who Pharaqa was pointedly using as an armrest. Jaku looked equally disturbed - it was only respect for her pack leader that kept her from straining away. In fact, with Kraglin gone it had taken a fraction of a second for the girls’ faces to turn hostile. And while Yondu could take any one of ’em, he didn’t fancy his chances against all.

Yondu swung his legs over the back of the log and gave his mother an upraised middle finger to remember him by. She didn’t know what it meant - neither did Yondu, to be perfectly honest. But damn, did it feel good.

“I hope yer eggs dry up,” he shouted over his shoulder as he left, causing several fathers to gasp and cover their younglings’ ears. He had better things to do than indulge Pharaqa in her constant quest to annoy him.

Kraglin was struggling through the middle canopy of a tree, angular white form like a ghost among the branches. Yondu hoisted himself into the lower boughs after him. His blue skin blended into the dark. He was an extension of the night - like an expanse of the inky sky above, only without the star-spangled coating.

"Ain’t like you to climb a tree,” he hissed up the trunk. “Just don’t chu dare get stuck, cause I ain’t carryin’ ya back down. Back’s still smartin’ from where I was lugging you around the other day…”

Lie. The cause of the pain could be pinpointed to when Kraglin fell on top of him, and tenderized his kidney with an elbow that could’ve been mistaken for a shank. But if it got him more massages…

Yondu’d claim he’d developed sudden-onset scoliosis.

“If I get stuck, I intend to let go and fall to my death like a man.” Kraglin declared, both arms wrapped around a branch while his ankle was hooked on another. He gave up on going any higher and plonked himself down on the branch he’d been attempting to leave with a sigh. He tried to peer to where Yondu was, but while his night vision was pretty good, it wasn’t designed for picking out colours. Shapes, sure, but distinguishing Yondu from a shadow would have been hard even for him.

Kraglin sighed and let his head tip back against the trunk, shutting his eyes. He was mostly sure Yondu wouldn’t push him to his doom, so he tried to relax a little. When he opened his eyes again, it was to glimpses of the stars through the leaves, as relaxing a sight as they ever were.

“On Hrax,” he said, getting comfy - he was expecting Yondu to join him. “There’s a whole application process to have kids. You gotta make sure you’re not like, cousins or something, cos no one knows anyone. S’weird to me, sometimes; your village’s gene pool is more like a puddle, when you think about it.” Which could have sounded insulting, if he hadn’t sounded so thoughtful about it. “This family-thing... It’s something a lot of planets did at the start. S’just interestin’ to me, I guess.”

“You mean cousins ain’t allowed to mate?” Hoo boy, Jaku would be so relieved about that one.

Yondu crawled lightly between the branches, winding around and around the trunk, using them as
handholds and footholds and everything in between. It took him seconds to reach Kraglin’s side, perching on the branch beside him and cosying up close. He tipped his head onto a knobbly shoulder, crest-tip brushing Kraglin’s cheek, and peered through the branches at the busy picture of the firepit; flames leaping, hopeful mates chasing potential ones, the rejected sighing into their bowls and the successful gyrating through a series of not strictly-ordained dedication dances on the far side of the bonfire. It looked homely, warm, welcoming. Everything he’d ever known.

Yondu watched a few seconds longer. Then tilted his chin up, following the line of Kraglin’s gaze to the cold expanse of sky.

The leaves blotted out most of it - this tree wasn’t old or sturdy enough to support the weight of two fully grown men clambering about in its toppermost boughs. But if Kraglin and Yondu stayed scrunched close together in this particular spot, and Kraglin didn’t breathe too much and Yondu resisted the urge to fidget, they could watch the stars glitter side by side

Kraglin didn’t mind staying still - the breeze was pleasant up there, the heat just about carrying from the fire to cause a nice balance. The sound was muted, everything feeling further away than it was. It reminded Kraglin of one of the tunnels, the way you could hear everything in the passages above and below, through thick inches of stone that were cool and smooth to the touch. He smiled, feeling the brush of Yondu’s crest against his cheek.

He was watching the stars, yes. But something else caught his eye. He gave a soft hum and glanced to the branch at their side, pleased when he spied what he was after.

Kraglin reached out, pulling off a handful of small berries. He examined them a moment. By now, he could tell you that they were safe to eat, though they weren’t at their ripest.

He gnawed on his bottom lip a moment before he ate one, cupping the rest in his palm.

Swallowing was difficult past the lump in his throat. Up here, given the Zatoans’ poor night vision, he was sure no one would see him pluck a berry from his palm and offer it. He kept his movements slow, not wanting to spook Yondu any. But he brushed the soft skin of the fruit against Yondu’s lips before moving his hand back a little, waiting for him to accept or otherwise.

No kiddos would be produced. Nope, this was totally symbolic in their case - Kraglin understood that much. But if he could make a gesture, then he would.

On Hrax, if you liked someone - if the sight of them made the tunnels seem bigger and the air sweeter and they lit up your day even after the power failed and started pumping back-air through the pipes - you just told them. Fought off any others who were interested if they picked you, and just, got on with it. All of this making something else of it was odd, but he could adapt. Especially if it was for someone important.

Of course, if you really liked them, you went and got them a really nice rock. But Kraglin wasn’t sure they were at that stage yet, or where to get stones of suitable shininess on this planet.

The offering made Yondu blink. Then grin, assuming it was made in innocence. Then stop, reassess, and stare.

Did Kraglin know what he was doing? After the huntresses’ display around the fire, undoubtedly yes. And that meant…

Yondu ducked, slurping a berry straight from Kraglin’s palm.

“Y’know,” he said as he crunched, the sharp burst of the underripe fruit making his nose screw up.
“We prob’ly can’t procreate, if that’s what yer goin’ for. I mean, I ain’t against trying, but… Where would the dicks go? We ain’t got no extra holes.” He’d know - he’d spent enough time putting his hunterly stealth skills to use and peeking at Kraglin while they bathed.

“And if ya do knock me up, or vice versa, I’m gonna be hell to deal with while the brat’s in my pouch. Think Toki but a thousand times grumpier. So you better give me a shit-ton of backrubs, thas all I’m sayin’.”

He kept his tone teasing, trying to get a read on whether Kraglin could tell he was joking or not. The Zatoan didn’t do lifelong-bonds, except with hunt brothers and sisters. Sure, you might return to the same partner season after season, but there was no means of formalization for a couple who were exclusive.

So while Kraglin had just extended an offer for sex that was reproductive - or at the very least penetrative - it didn’t have any further repercussions.

Yondu held Kraglin’s hand in place, wrapping each of his fingers around a longer, thinner one and forcing his palm to uncurl so he could get at the last berry. Lowering his mouth to it, he rested a moment with lips flush to Kraglin’s lovelines, letting him feel his smile.

Zatoans might not have much of a concept of long-term relationships. But if Kraglin made this little display every year, Yondu could see himself as a convert.

“I know that.” Kraglin snorted. Even if his cheeks had flushed, Yondu probably wouldn’t be able to see it, but the warmth coming off his face was more than a giveaway. “I don’t want kids anyway. S’not the point. Means no-one else can gag you with a spoon, right? And I aint,” he hastened to add, in case Yondu started to worry. “Saying’ you gotta tell any of them that’s why yer sayin’ no. But - you’ll know. And I’ll know, and that's enough, right?”

He hesitated before he leaned forward, pressing his lips gently against Yondu's temple, resting back when the branch swayed under him. He couldn’t claim to understand everything the Zatoan people did, or even what half of their rules and traditions were. It was still something totally alien to him, and he realised it didn’t matter how long he stayed here, he’d never grasp all of it.

All he could really hope to do was try to introduce some of his ways to Yondu, see if they blended well, and make something of their own, just for the two of them.

This idea of Kraglin's was ludicrous. It was stupid, and foolhardy, and...

“Yeah,” Yondu murmured. His lashes quivered shut, savoring the contact. “Yeah, I like that.”

The sinuous shift off the branch in the wind gave him an excuse to pile closer, sharing Kraglin’s warmth. Then, grasping the same bushel of berries Kraglin had lightened - having to shuffle onto his knees and stretch to reach them; stupid elongated show-off had made it look so easy - he plucked a couple of his own. Sitting on the branch with one leg dangling off either side, he scooted in until his chest rested on the tense line of Kraglin’s arm, resting one elbow on his friend’s shoulder as he leant in close and wafted the berries under his nose.

“You’re turn.” Pause. “I don’t wanna be the only one with an upset tummy tomorrow. Thas all.”

The berries weren’t underripe enough, and hadn’t been devoured in enough quantity, for that to be a valid excuse. But Yondu comforted himself that Kraglin was still relatively new to the ways of the forest, and wouldn’t be able to tell.

Kraglin had been forced to grip the branch when it swayed again, trying not to let his alarm show on
his face. He was a subterranean species, and while trees looked pretty, that didn’t mean he was used
to their movements. He breathed out when Yondu stopped shuffling and the rustling blue-green
leaves calmed, giving him a rueful smile as if expecting to be teased.

The counter offering was something different though, and he tried very hard not to look as delighted
as he felt. He was an adult, he told himself sternly. A strong carrier of bloodfire, a fighter by Yondus
side. That didn’t mean he couldn’t feel a pleasured squirm in his stomach as he leaned forward, one
hand gently closing around Yondu’s as he nipped a few berries off his palm.

They were tart, and he knew they’d be green inside instead of the strong crimson colour they usually
went, but he swallowed them down anyway, nuzzling his lips against the curve of wrist, kissing the
pulse there gently.

Later, maybe he’d help dispel a few notions Yondu had about how compatible things were for sex.
Right now, Kraglin was thinking more of privacy to kiss him stupid, until he got that dumb, flustered
expression he tried to hide so much.

“All yours,” he murmured, more to himself then to Yondu.

Yondu returned his palm to his own mouth, licking the slight moisture left by Kraglin’s acceptance
of the berries. “Mine,” he agreed, gaze slipping to Kraglin’s lips.

The berries weren’t ripe enough to stain everything in red juice. But while the faint light was too dim
to show Kraglin’s blush, Yondu felt the warmth when he leant in, and imagined the rich crimson
coloring for himself. Trusting Kraglin to keep his balance - perhaps a little too trusting - Yondu
grabbed his face, bow-callouses catching in Kraglin’s beard, and pulled him close enough to kiss.

This was bringing back memories. Him and a more experienced hunter on the trail of an aku that had
been gobbling village children. Being woken by fingers skating his loincloth in the middle of the
night, surprising bursts of pleasure, almost giving up their position when he slipped off the branch,
and a tacit understanding that there would never be a repeat offence…

He closed that final distance, leaning into the kiss. One leg tucked up on the branch behind him, so
his body made a smooth swooping line, angled against Kraglin chest-to-waist. He dabbled his tongue
over the seam of Kraglin’s lips, shifting to wrap arms around his skinny neck, stabilizing himself on
the branch with a squeeze of his legs. Bark rubbed between his thighs.

“Want you.”

Kraglin was never one to push Yondu away when he demanded a kiss. He made a soft, startled
noise that dissolved into a quiet hum of happiness. His stomach lurched when the branch did though,
and he had to break away from Yondu with a gasp, his hands flapping to steady himself.

Perhaps attempting to make out halfway up a tree while it was his first real attempt climbing anything
other than cliff faces was a very poor idea. Paleness blotched through the red on Kraglin’s cheeks as
he fought the urge to panic.

“Me too, but-” He didn’t dare look down, just leaning in to kiss the corner of his partner’s lips,
hoping to persuade. “Maybe on uh, more solid ground-?”

Yondu scowled. It was hard to maintain it, with Kraglin so close and so warm, mouth almost petal-
like with the delicacy with which it roved across his. But he did his best.

“How’re ya meant to get better at bein’ in trees if ya don’t practice?” he complained.
But not even he could pretend jerking off while suspended in the bushy canopy was a good teaching method. Look how his first time had gone. Only difference here was, if either of them fell out of the tree it wouldn’t be into an aku’s nest but into the midst of the communal dinner.

Less deadly, perhaps, but infinitely more embarrassing. Even if Pharaqa didn’t guess the reason behind his rapid descent, she’d still tut and demand to take Yondu back into the woods for further training.

Yondu shuddered. The first three times had been more than enough.

“Okay, okay. Les’ go back to the hut, ya skinny wuss.” Trekking deeper into the forest wasn’t an option - not when the swamps were still high. Who knew what might be lurking in the undergrowth? While Yondu’d be the first to explore beyond the village boundary once the two suns were once again a permanent fixture in the sky, for the moment he was content to return to the banal familiarity of their home. After all, it wasn’t about the location. It was about who he was with. And, Yondu thought, clambering over Kraglin to reach the trunk - but not without dropping another quick, tooth-clonking peck on the Starman as he passed - he couldn’t think of anyone better.

Kraglin couldn’t help but grin when Yondu humoured him, pushing up to the kiss as he passed. Getting down, that he was good at - with longer legs, it was relatively easier to reach the branches below them. Or that was the theory, anyway. He fell down the last meter with a grunt and complaining curse, rubbing his side. His bad mood didn't last long though - he soon hauled himself to his feet and fell into step with Yondu.

Privacy, that was all he wanted. The walk to their hut was almost torture, his fingers curling into his palms to give himself something to hold onto that wasn’t the blue man beside him. As soon as the curtain swung shut behind them though, blocking some of the noise and the majority of the firelight, he couldn't stop the way his hands reached out, fingers skimming down Yondu’s back with a soft, hungry little noise.

If Yondu thought he was the only one who got something out of all those “pay-back” back rubs, then Kraglin had been better at hiding his flushes then he'd thought. Getting to smoothe that expanse of skin, feeling Yondu slowly relax and start to make low noises under him… It had been fun, to say the least.

Kraglin stepped around him, closer to the bed, pressing his lips to Yondu’s shoulder as he passed. His fingers trailed, following around the side to rest on his chest, palm warm and dragging on his skin. He closed the gap between them with a step, leaning down to kiss him again, a soft and liquid sound slipping from his lips.

Head tipping into the cup of Kraglin’s hand, Yondu let his mouth be molded to Kraglin’s shape. He wound his Starman’s hair into knots, not tugging but tangling, tethering himself to Kraglin with the growing greasy strands.

The kiss was long but shallow. Yondu constantly drew back to reassert the slant of his lips over Kraglin’s own, never letting Kraglin’s tongue pop between them for longer than a second. He loved teasing him - that much was evident from all of their interactions to date. Like this, urging Kraglin on and reigning him back, just translated that into a different setting.

He grinned when Kraglin chased him, tireless in his quest for more kisses even if he only ever took what Yondu gave. Rewarded him with a longer, messier crush of their mouths, flexing his fingers so the knots pulled taut against Kraglin’s scalp.
The hand on his chest cupped his left pectoral, like it was clasping his heart itself. Yondu wondered if Kraglin could feel the beat through the skin. He could certainly hear it; pulsing, pounding deafening, as overwhelming as the taste of bitter stew and sharp berries that clung to the inside of Kraglin’s cheeks.

They were nose to nose, sharing breath, mouths joined by a spitty string. Yondu used his handful of hair to guide Kraglin’s head to one side, and watched the slow blow of his pupils.

“Backrub,” he said quietly, nudging him rearwards so the backs of Kraglin’s knees clipped the nest edge. “Now.”

Kraglin had felt his breath coming shorter and reedier with every pass of Yondus lips against his, feeling his heart threaten to burst with the strain of it. He whined, low and needy when Yondu rewarded his patience with an untrained kiss that made his toes curl in his boots.

All of which was nothing compared to the grip on his hair. Kraglin felt the pull all the way down to his neck muscles, and he bit his noise down to a hungry little moan when Yondu manipulated his head to where he wanted it, a hard shudder in his shoulders.

“Sure,” he muttered, toeing off his boots by the side of the bed before he let himself clamber back onto it, moving to make room for Yondu to join him. Yondu could have asked him to eat a slug, and he might have agreed to it.

When he was able to get his hands on him, Kraglin had to swallow, bring himself into focus. He spanned the curve of Yondus shoulders, fingertips kneading in towards the base of his crest in slow, creeping sweeps.

Seemed Kraglin was just as eager for this as he was. Yondu wasn’t even lying down yet, and there were hands all over him: spidery fingers curling round his obliques, swooping in, gliding across the thick muscular overlay of trapezius and deltoid before coming to a rest on his lower back. The balls of Kraglin's thumbs pressed where crest met spine.

Yondu moaned. Unlike Kraglin, he was loud about it. The villagers were busy with Season-preparation and gossip; there was no way they would be disturbed. He’d been careful to exit the tree on the side facing away from the tribe - and while Pharaqa would’ve felt it in her crest if she was really paying attention, she’d be more busy trying to secure her girls appropriate matches than worrying about a son and a star-man who’d rejected all amorous advances in favor of tree-climbing.

In here, it was their own little Season. Kraglin’s firm touch and the grinding imprint of his knuckles worked Yondu’s muscles to putty. He sagged low on his knees. Then braced himself on all fours. Then gave in and sunk until his chest clipped the mattress, scooching his legs out behind him and kicking Kraglin lightly until he shuffled to one side, letting Yondu stretch out flat.

His loincloth strap bit in, just above the swell of his ass. Kraglin’s pinky fingers brushed it at the nadir of his longest strokes, nudging the taut flax rope. Yondu shimmied it a little lower, letting Kraglin get around to the cluster of nerves at the base of his tahlei, where it sunk into his tailbone. When Kraglin tweaked that tiny, delicate centimeter of crest - so gentle it could’ve been an accident; the guy was still so damn reticent about making the most of Yondu’s second most sensitive organ - Yondu’s entire body went tense and abruptly loose, shivers trailing the length of his spine.

Positive reinforcement… That was important right?

Yondu mumbled his words through a mouth that felt full of cotton, grasping the pelts above his head as he stretched to give Kraglin better access. “Krags… S’real nice, Krags.”
Yondu's back unfurled like a present, that fine crest swaying above the toned muscles of his shoulders. Kraglin couldn't resist leaning down to kiss the lopsided swell over Yondu's drawing-arm before his hands got to work, kneading and rubbing slow and easy.

“Yeah?” he murmured, sliding the flat of his tongue against the very top ridge of his crest while both thumbs pressed a slow circle at the base, where red bled into indigo over the swell of his ass. He did it again, controlling the shudder in his shoulders, and the betraying shift of his knees.

“A-Anthos alive…”

Yondu buried his face in the pelts, muffling the gasp as a molten-hot mouth descended on his crest. It moved up and down that primary bone, red skin stretched between it and the second tallest fin-strut like a bat's velvety wing. And Kraglin's hand, digging into that nerve-rich circlet at the bottom of his spine…

“Fuck.” There were few other words to describe it, even with two languages at his disposal.

Yondu whimpered, legs flexing apart. But that just made the back flap of his loincloth trail maddeningly between them, soft fabric settling over tingling flesh. His ass clenched as he ground his hips down, cock trapped between him and the bed. The front panel of his loincloth was like a cage, the thin-wefted cotton stretching around his hardening, lengthening prick.

He could already feel slickness smearing back along his length as he rocked, hands clutching the pelts above his head until his tendons bulged. Damn, that was gonna stain. Looked like he'd be tramping to the stream again when this was over.

But Yondu couldn't think about when this was over, not while it was happening all around him. Kraglin's touches, Kraglin's kisses, the brush of Kraglin's knees as he rearranged - must be gettin' a lil uncomfortable in them pants, Yondu thought, not without vindictive pleasure. They were all licks of flame, which spread beneath the surface of Yondu's skin like a wildfire through the dry-canopy.

If Kraglin enjoyed simply petting and getting to touch Yondu, the sounds Yondu made in return were treasures he savoured. He skimmed the whole way up his back, thumbs pressing against the base of his crest the entire way - and back down again, slowing to an inch-by-inch torturous crawl the closer he got to the root of the seam.

He leaned in, closer over him as his thumbs circled their mark, moaning ragged and low. He shifted his hips, grinding against bare blue thigh without realising, until it sent bolts of pleasure through his stomach. He flushed a little darker, doing it again with a shivering noise that sounded like Yondu's name.

“Still good?” he asked, trying to regain some form of control over himself. He was fighting a losing battle though and he knew it, giving another short noise as he moved against Yondu's leg.

Yondu felt him, every inch of him. From the skid of Kraglin's hands of the meat of his back to the stiff, curved cock that pushed against his thigh, knot just starting to fill.

Kraglin's lowering massage was punishingly slow, punishingly good, and Yondu pushed his hips up a couple of inches, an unspoken demand that Kraglin hurry up and touch where he damn well knew Yondu wanted him to. If doing so rubbed him back against Kraglin's crotch, Yondu wasn't to blame - he was too busy being driven mad by the firm circle of thumbs around the bottom of the crest, manipulating taut skin that was sensitive to the point of unbearable…

“What d’you think?” he panted, fucking down against the furs in spasmic jerks. “Idjit.”
“Think you should roll over.” Kraglin grinned a little, getting off Yondu's legs to let him do so. If he took advantage of the momentum to get his pants off, laying back a little to wrestle the material, well, that was fine too.

He sat back up once they'd vanished over the side of the nest, pushing a hand through his hair just to use up the nervous energy, grinning at Yondu.

Well, he had promised.

Kraglin scooted down the nest. He smiled, teeth dragging against the curve of Yondu's hips before he painted a slow, burning trail downwards, pushing loincloth out of the way to trail his tongue over a swirling tattoo on the other man's thigh.

Yondu's cock was - something else. Plated on the underside in thick folds, ridged on the top with little bobbles of thicker flesh around the head. It was going to be a challenge, he knew that much, but Kraglin Obfonteri hadn't travelled this far through the galaxy without learning how to work a complicated dick with his mouth. So he slid his tongue down the underside when he reached it, feeling out the lay of the land with a single, slow stripe of wetness.

“Nngh.”

Yondu wasn’t sure if he was saying words or just making sounds - low animal noises followed by a sudden yip as Kraglin mouthed him, soft and wet as a pup. He’d rolled as Kraglin said, frustrated and flustered in equal measure. Kraglin was reducing him from the proud Zatoan warrior with every pass of his tongue.

“Touch me… Keep touching me… You stop and you die…”

Had he spoken out loud, or just in his head? In Zatoan or Xandarian? Yondu had no way to tell; it was all he could to weave his fingers into Kraglin's hair again, groaning as Kraglin’s tongue reached the base of his cock and slid over smooth blue balls.

“I want… I want…”

What exactly, he couldn’t find words to describe. But Kraglin seemed to know anyway, so Yondu let his head fall back, hands not so much guiding Kraglin as clutching his scraggly hair for dear life.

Kraglin knew what he was doing, that much was evident. So, in a rare moment, Yondu allowed himself to lay back and enjoy the ride.

Kraglin was trying not to be too pleased with this - he curled his hands around Yondu's hips, fingers cupping and squeezing his ass in slow, easy movements. He sucked at one ball for a moment, letting it pop past the wet ring of his lips before he started to slide back up, one hand smoothing up a little to let his fingers play idly near the small of Yondu's back.

His lips caught on every single plate along the way. There was no real wait - as soon as he reached the head he took it in his mouth, licking a slow stripe over it. Kraglin only glanced up a little, his gaze heavy and heated before he shut his eyes, enjoying the feel of frenzied hands in his hair and the thick weight of the other man in his mouth.

It wasn't usually his favourite act, but the reactions were worth it.

Kraglin bobbed his head slowly, tongue investigating each little bobble before he'd permit himself to move past it. He flicked at them gently with his tongue, exploring as he moved. Not quite a snail's pace, but he'd draw back for each plate he advanced, enjoying the hot drag against his lips.
It was so different to a hand. Better-different. Plush and wet and sizzling-hot, Kraglin’s higher temperature making each plate feel as if it were being passed through the communal fire. It was so good. Too good.

When he felt Kraglin’s tongue twizzling around the spongey bumps on his cockhead, Yondu had to clamp his thighs and squeeze his abdominal muscles to prevent himself from coming there and then.

Telling Kraglin to slow down was useless - man was already moving like viscous lava, slurping Yondu’s cock for the back of his throat. But as much as he didn’t want to admit it, Yondu was still relatively inexperienced at all this. The last thing he wanted to do was blow his load before he’d internalized Kraglin’s technique so he could repeat it back to him next time they reversed. He hooked his legs over Kraglin’s shoulders, boxing him in with smooth blue muscle, scales just visible at proximity. Dug his heels into Kraglin’s back and enjoyed the way his mouth slid so easily over his next plate, Kraglin’s eyes on his a point-blank contact that made Yondu’s cock throb, and something tighten deep inside of him, pressure building like magma under a volcanic plug.

Seriously though, how did he control his gag reflex so well? Yondu cracked an eye, craning over his chest to watch his plates disappear. They slotted one after the other into Kraglin’s mouth, pulling on his underlip. And god, those teeth. So much potential for danger - but it only made Yondu hotter. He wondered if Kraglin’s second row would slide out if he pulled his hair hard enough…?

Kraglin had to tighten his grip when Yondu's hips threatened to move. His control over himself only lasted as long as he knew what was coming and could adjust himself accordingly, ready to meet most challenges head on - or mouth on, rather. He had to slip back a little to gasp wetly around Yondu’s cock, shutting his eyes to regather himself against the unplanned nudge, his heart thrumming in his chest at the sudden sensation.

This whole thing took concentration, a level of focus to wrap his tongue around him as he bobbed, treating the head to some attention. He suckled for a moment, tongue probing and toying with each fold of skin. He could feel Yondu's pulse through the thinner flesh, an encouraging thud against his tongue that made him squirm. Kraglin wasn’t sure which was more satisfying, the grind and pressure against his cock from the pelts, or the sounds Yondu made, sending a pleased and hazy bolt through his spine with each noise.

But Kraglin forced himself still, as best he could. He had a plan. Ugly and stupid he may be, but he was perceptive as well, and he had noticed something about Yondu the last time they’d fooled around.

Kraglin worked his way down again, having to pause a few time to gasp air in hungrily. When he swallowed hard it was with a low moan and compulsive little grind forward of his hips, lips forming a tight, wet circle around Yondu's lowest plate, tightening around him from the base up as Kraglin held his breath.

When Yondu felt that constriction, his mind shorted out. Everything honed in on that soft slick heat. By Anthos, did Kraglin know what he was doing to him? Yondu hoped so, because he had no clue. It felt so good when Kraglin applied suction that, had Yondu’s higher brain functions not currently been mashed like sweet potato, he might’ve suspected that Kraglin was a demonic familiar of Anthos sent to test him, who was sucking out his soul through his cock.

But while Yondu’s legs twitched and shook where they weighed on Kraglin’s shoulders, and he scratched his fingers down the pelts again and again before threading them through Kraglin’s hair for stability, Yondu didn’t die. He probably came close - his heart was throbbing so hard and fast and his cock felt so blood-bloated that Yondu got dizzy when he raised his head - but Anthos’s arms evaded him.
“Kraglin!” he gasped, when Kraglin’s nose nudged his groin, chin grinding on his balls and a bony finger rubbing the surprisingly tender stretch of skin that lay behind. “Kraglin, Kraglin, Kraglin…”

Any thought of keeping his noises battened for pride’s sake had long-since been dashed; Yondu all-out *wailed* when Kraglin swallowed around him, the head of his cock pulled towards the back of that long sinewy throat. The whirl of fire that’d been building inside him was pulsating, clenching, ready to explode. Yondu’s grabbing hands suddenly turned panicked, shoving at Kraglin’s stuffed cheeks.

“H-hey, I’m gonna, I’m gonna -”

If Yondu was lost, swimming in the sensations, Kraglin was buried deep under the surface. All his concentration, all his focus, was on the steadily growing burn in the back of his throat, the pressure in his temples, the strain in the side of his jaw. It was all a mark of endurance, something he could push through and through, over and over to keep Yondu happy and satisfied. He could feel the tautness of his lips as he held them tight and steady around Yondu, an ache in the root of his tongue as he squirmed it over him as best he could in the ever-narrowing circle of his mouth.

That nose may be huge, granted, but even it needed an open airway to let him breathe.

Yondu’s words filtered through to him as if he was underwater, the hands doing more to alert him that something was wrong. He moved his head back, fingers wrapping around the drenched cock as he gasped, a moan escaping as he drew in air gratefully.

“You don’t wanna?” he panted, keeping the head of Yondu's cock against his lips. His tongue playing over the slick wetness of it, eyes dark and a little confused as they sought out Yondu's own. He couldn't keep still, squeezing and rubbing idly at the plates nearest as he caught his breath, lips shiny and red against the darkness of Yondu's cock.

“I don’t know - I don’t fucking know…” Yondu dropped a forearm over his face, blocking out the light, trying to wrestle some semblance of control. His torso, sturdy with muscle, didn’t look nearly so impressive when it was sweaty and quivering, his hips tremulously trying to nudge his cockhead back into Kraglin’s mouth. “Don’t wanna choke ya or nothin’…. Idjit.”

His voice came in stops and starts. But while the oncoming orgasm hadn’t been banished - far from it; his prick stood upright under Kraglin’s attentions, those angular fingers stroking the seams between the plates and his spitty lips hovering a millimeter above the leaking tip - it had at least been put off a little while.

Yondu scrunched his nose, hearing his heart wobbling around his chest. His thighs were tense, pent-up need making them shake as if he was high on adrenaline. He clumsily reached between, cupping Kraglin’s chin and thumbing pre-cum and saliva from his stubble.

“I always want ya. Don’t fuckin’ doubt it. But… but…” And heck, this sounded way better in his head than it did out loud. “But look, m’kinda new at this. Know it ain’t as good for you as it is for me. And that ain’t fair. So if ya do this for me, I want ya to do somethin’ just you wanna do after, to get you off.” He shifted on the sweat-slippery skins, half-grumbling under his breath - “Jus’ don’ want you to feel left out or nothin’. So anything you want - so long as I’m involved.” That last addendum was added hurriedly, with a glare over one shoulder to the waxing, waning glow of the fire. “Goddit, Kraggles?”

Kraglin was momentarily distracted by the hand near his mouth, eyes sliding half shut as he turned his head to mouth at it gently. He caught the meat of the thumb in his teeth, pressing hard enough to leave little divots, kissing the skin as he released it with a warm, dreamy sort of sigh. He was easily kept occupied when it came to bits of Yondu floating near his teeth, and he dipped his head to gift
his lips across the head of his prick with a soft hum.

“I’m enjoyin’ this,” he murmured, doing his best not to go too red at the admission. “S’good. Feels good gettin’ to - t’please you.” Kraglin rolled a shoulder in what was probably the best shrug he could give with Yondu’s legs slung over them like that, clearing his throat. “But uh. I know some other stuff. If you want. Depends on whatchu wanna do, I know stuff we’ll both uh. Get off from.”

It felt kind of odd to be the one with more experience here, but if anything it sort of made him more determined to fill the gaps in Yondu's knowledge.

“What sort of -” Yondu cut himself off. He’d said anything, hadn’t he? “Jus’ do whatever it is you’re thinking about,” he said, dropping back onto the pelts with a little decisive huff. “So long as yer enjoyin’ it too.”

He bestowed an awkward pat on Kraglin’s tufty head. Having just blurted that he only wanted to cum if their satisfaction was mutual - or sentiments along those lines - Kraglin’s shameless confession of *Feels good gettin’ to please you* didn’t quite mesh with Yondu’s knowledge of sex so far. Wasn’t the whole purpose the orgasm? That blinding white flash that streaked over your vision and left similar, more lingering stripes on the inside of your loincloth?

Which, speaking of… Yondu plucked the golden band, which had ridden up his belly as he turned. Then unfastened the knot, letting it peel apart into a single long string, interspersed with the two flag-like panels that spread on either side of him like unfurled *aku* wings.

“There,” he murmured, cheeks heating as Kraglin kept up his steady toying with his cock, that thumb below his balls making its small firm rotation. “Now get to it, before I go make my parents happy and ask Jaku to join me instead.”

“Don’t talk about someone else when I got y’cock in my face,” Kraglin muttered, before he striped his tongue up over the head, just to drive his point home. He sucked just a moment, thumb dipping lower and giving a slow, circling rub around his asshole. He peeked up, smirking, cheeks darker than ever in the dim lighting.

Well, he knew some things. He’d experienced less than half of what he’d heard about, but given that he’d heard about more things he’d ever dreamed, he figured he had a wide menu to pick from.

“You said earlier you didn’t know how we could fuck.” Kraglin said, in between teasing his tongue over heated flesh. “I know how. If you wanna.”

Wow. That was… Surprisingly sensitive. Like when Kraglin had touched his crest-nub, only more focused, more *intense*...

The thumb had yet to push directly on his pucker. But it did stroke around its edge, teasing the bunched skin and buried nerve endings until Yondu felt like he was divided between two magnetic poles: the soft dab of Kraglin's tongue around his cockhead and that infuriating, tantalizing pressure, keeping him hovering on a precipice without any substantial relief.

Yondu squirmed back into it, cock lurching against Kraglin’s teeth. His eyebrows were scrunched in joint pleasure and confusion.

“W-woah. It don’t feel like that when I take a dump.”

“Well I mean, I kinda hope not.” Kraglin did his best not to laugh, looking up at Yondu with an amused little smile. He kissed the side of his cock, nudging the lip of his head, humming a little. “But yeah, thats - thats how.”
He lifted his head, trying not to blush too much as he stroked his entrance, over and over in slow strokes, keeping watch on Yondus reaction with some slight concern. He didn’t mind doing this the other way, sure, but if it was on offer…

Yondu shut his eyes, mouth hanging open in their stead. Drool collected under his tongue. It was such a small touch. Without Kraglin’s mouth on him, he could focus on it more than ever. Over and over it traced his crease, a gradually increasing pressure. It was rhythmic and firm, drawing a light, ticklish circle, encouraging the clenched muscle to relax.

Yondus’s head thumped the pelts. His back arched, legs spreading so wide they threatened to slip off Kraglin’s shoulders.

By Anthos, that was… Well, not better than having his dick played with. Not exactly. The two weren’t quite comparable. But, Yondu discovered as Kraglin tested the tight navy pinch for any hint of give, and found it, this was amazing in an entirely different way - a way that made his breath come in sharp stops and starts, his hips twist as he tried to push himself back against Kraglin’s slender digits, and his toes curl under the balls of his feet where they were flat on Kraglin’s back, holding him close.

He kept two fingers tangled in Kraglin’s hair, winding the shiny strands around and around. His hand shook as he tried to keep those light tugs as constant as Kraglin’s thumb against his softening hole. It was dabbling inside now, just the tip, agitating parts of him Yondu’d never been all that aware of, let alone considered incorporating into his rarely exercised (and strictly forbidden) masturbation repertoire.

“Feels real good… Why’s it feel so good?” His pelvis twitched as a segment of Kraglin’s thumb popped through, the digit almost buried to the first knuckle. “Kraglin, I don’t, uh, understand…”

But as his voice trailed into husky gasps, Yondu suspected he didn’t need to.

If Kraglin had been pleased beforehand, he was almost smirking now, trying to keep his smile friendly against Yondus cock. He knew that this sort of thing was delicate, had to be handled carefully. He genuinely, truly didn’t want to hurt him, because he knew that if he did - it was unlikely he’d get any of this again.

“But does,” He said, starting to kiss his way down Yondus cock, slow and easy in time with his careful turning of his finger, easing in and out gently. He licked a warm, hot trail over the delicate skin, lower and lower. He shut his eyes with a low, rumbling sort of noise as his tongue slid over the crease, following his finger along. It made it easier, he thought, licking and teasing pressing in alongside the dry digit.

He shut his eyes with a low, soft noise, pressing himself closer as he just enjoyed working him.

If Kraglin could really get off just from playing with him that was fucking excellent, because Yondu more than enjoyed being served.

Kraglin observed every unspoken order, whether consciously or on automatic. When Yondu curled his legs, calf muscles weighing on Kraglin’s shoulders, Kraglin shuffled further in, burying his face in the most private part of Yondu’s body with no hint of aversion. When Yondu winced, Kraglin retracted his finger. He drew away - keeping his thumb twirling around the pucker before Yondu could bitch - and sucked the digit before pushing it steadily back inside.

And when Yondu moaned and flexed his thigh muscles, hole twitching around the dabbles, Kraglin let the slick pad of his tongue lathe him while he wriggled his index deeper. Yondu willed himself to
let him. But the shock as his ass flowered open, taking Kraglin’s finger suddenly to the root, made him clench up again in surprise, hole a rippling vice that wrung Kraglin’s digit like it was trying to milk it.

Kraglin didn’t seem impatient, swirling it round the clamped textured channel and plying his muscles open again. He was preoccupied; licking in long drags that caught on the flexible ring, converting this part of him into a conduit made only for sex.

In that moment, Yondu was convinced it was magic. That Kraglin could lay his stupid spindly spider-hands on any part of his body, and wham, hey presto, new erogenous zone.

Kraglin delved his tongue into the loosening ring besides his finger in hot slippery plunges. Yondu felt like he was coated in his saliva, dripping with it - and imagining the sight made his cheeks tint even darker. But from the dry friction past where Kraglin’s mouth could reach, Yondu guessed more substantial lubricant was required, were Kraglin to take this the whole way.

Oh Anthos. *The whole way.* Kraglin impaling him on his cock, inflating inside him, filling him up, making him writhe…

Or better yet: Yondu taking everything Kraglin gave with a laugh and a yank of his hair. Trapping Kraglin’s knot in his body, grinding on it cruelly. Slapping him, urging him on, growling *fuck me, idjit* and smacking him upside the head if he didn’t follow through fast enough.

Kraglin’d already admitted his weakness: that he liked to please Yondu. That meant there was power in this. And Yondu loved power.

His jaw tightened, muscles and tendons standing out along the solid line of his neck. His legs no longer hung limply against Kraglin’s back, but instead thumped off it, demanding as ever. Little thrills snapped through his cock, precum a shiny veneer on its underside, and he was so close…

“Ya better not leave me high and dry,” he snarled, bucking down onto Kraglin’s finger so it pierced him all the way to the base. “C’mon boy. Harder.”

A lesser man - a more foolish man - might have pulled his mouth away from Yondus ass to inform him that going any faster or harder at this moment in time was going to end up being not too great for him. Kraglin flicked his eyes up to get as good a read on Yondu as he could, feeling the thrum of him around his finger.

Plans could be changed, he decided, if Yondu was enjoying this part so much. He could adapt, and anyway, they were both still young. He was sure something could be worked out.

Kraglin ducked his head a little, sucking and slurping on his middle finger. He dragged it out, and when he pressed both tips against the warm, wet pucker he waited - just a moment, just in case there were any major protests to be given. When all he got for his troubles was a kick in the back of his ribs and a growl he started his process again; teasing his fingers into Yondu inch by inch, tongue sliding and squirming alongside them over and over.

It was like a trance, like he’d been drugged or hypnotised into following each request. Yondu's verbal ones sharpened his focus, made it easier to read the pleas of his body. When Kraglin felt the pull on his fingers, he pressed deeper, seeking more of the warmth and silky slickness. When the pressure eased he waited, working with his tongue and hot breath to relax and soothe. It didn’t take a genius to realise this probably wasn’t something Yondu had tested out before, and Kraglin was determined not to ruin it.
The demands of his own dick were no longer a distraction - he could feel his want and used it, forcing down any and all motions that might pull his attention away. It pushed the ache in his arm away, took the fatigue in his jaw and in his tongue and turned it into a pleasant warmth and throb that made him growl, low and wet against Yondus sensitive skin. Introducing a third finger made him shudder, trying to keep the same pace, but-

“We’ll need something else,” His voice was hoarse, muffled between skin and muscle. He didn’t want to pull back, watching the push and pull of his fingers disappearing into the blue of Yondus body. He curled them, biting his lip with a tremble as he teased, fingers walking slow and stroking over the other man's inner walls. “Or another time we - yeah.”

He bowed to give Yondus entrance a filthy kiss, working his tongue inside him against the hollow of his fingers. He pressed closer, his other hand working under Yondu.

To help support him, clearly. Not to cup his hand against the base of his crest, fingers dragging a short few inches down to the flat of it. He held his breath for a moment, attention pinpointed on the clench and ripple around his fingers before his thumb pressed, a slow and dragging sweep against the muscle at the small of Yondu's back, tongue twisting inside him.

Kraglin’s fingers nudged something new. Yondu frowned when an electrical surge sparked under his perineum, a tingle that suffused outwards rather than concentrating on his cock. Not out of discomfort or pain - quite the opposite, actually.

As Kraglin revolved his spit-slicked trio of fingers, testing the limits of his hole without ever pushing him beyond a sting that enhanced the pleasure rather than detracting from it, he clipped that place inside him again, and Yondu’s heels bounced off Kraglin’s ribs as he moaned.

When Kraglin’s other hand snuck down into the warm space between ass and pelt to play with Yondu’s crest-nub and tailbone, Yondu arched until his back spasmed. He clenched dryly around him, blue balls drawing up tight.

“Fuck! Krags -”

This time, there was no further warning. Yondu came with a tense judder, every muscle in high definition. Cum splattered his pectorals, as well as the hair of the man currently plunging his tongue between spread fingers, into and out of the stretched-shiny hole.

Yondu managed a giggle - the sight of Kraglin’s greasy mop shampooed in jizz was kinda hilarious. Then he collapsed on the fuzzy furs, legs sliding from Kraglin’s shoulders, unable to do anything but pant and scrape the sweat from his eyes as that tongue continued its insatiable quest to weather him away.

Kraglin drew back a little when he felt a warm drip run down his temple - turns out, that's what all the noise and shaking about had been. He withdrew with a low noise, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand as he looked up Yondus body to him. By all rights, he was sure he was supposed to be annoyed, maybe even a little irritated at the fact that Yondu hadn’t seemed to be able to hold it all together.

In actuality, he was delighted.

“Feels good huh?” he asked, leaning in to lick another stripe over his hole, fingers staying snug and put for the moment. Kraglin let them linger before he removed them with a sigh, sitting back on his knees and wiping his clean hand back over his face, pushing sticky hair from it. He bit his lip as he looked Yondu over, trying to stifle a hungry noise, his cock twitching.
He had to be responsible, he reminded himself. And in all his time here, he wasn’t sure he’d spotted anything slick enough to use to ease the way.

“Y’alright?”

The hunger in Kraglin’s eyes would’ve made the Yondu of a month ago fear that those teeth were due a swift introduction to his neck. But after all they’d been through - trekking the forest (scary) battling the Ignokai (terrifying) and facing his parents (worse), as well as learning each other’s bodies in so many new ways? Yondu found, with a surprise that blurred to bliss in his satiated state, that he trusted Kraglin more than any other man he’d known.

“Rub on me,” he purred, grabbing under each knee to hold himself apart. He treated Kraglin to a sleazy grin, affection tinged with amusement when the firelight glinted off the cum still silvering Kraglin’s hair. Nodded to his softening cock, his cum-streaked pouch, his spit-seeping hole. “S’all yours, baby.”

Kraglin growled, low and rasping as he drank the view in. If he was entirely honest with himself, he should probably hold back a little, let himself get some space and some air, and keep himself entirely under more control. But his man was there, treating him to something like that, and he couldn’t resist. Kraglin crawled forward, over Yondu until he could lean down, lapping bitter gel from Yondus pouch, a low growl against his skin. He pressed his teeth against a nearby swirl as he shuddered, hips grinding forward against him, into the wet seam of his ass.

He knew better than to push to enter - some other time, he promised himself dazedly as he hitched and hunched, his teeth working sweet bites over his chest. If Yondu would wear shirts, he’d leave marks, but as it was he released the flesh before any threatened to appear. He reached down, grasping one thigh and Yondus hip to hold him still against him, groaning as he ground. The heat of his knot was almost overwhelming, and he dropped his forehead onto Yondus chest as he fucked against him.

Watching between the shadows of their bodies was what undid him, crying out hard as his head dropped, jaw locking hard to resist - biting the back of a partners neck was instinct to him, but he wasn’t even facing the right way. He shuddered hard, hips moving in slow grinds against Yondus ass until he felt soft and spent, panting against his skin, twin rows on display.

Kraglin went cross-eyed when he came. It was simultaneously the funniest and most adorable thing Yondu had ever seen. He laughed to let Kraglin know, husky and raw and crackling in the back of his throat.

Toned blue limbs lay lax. Yondu’s bones had been transmuted, turned to lead by the force of his orgasm. His arms flopped around Kraglin’s neck, bringing his bowed head down to rest on his collarbone with their weight rather than any cohesive attempt at persuasion. Their chests rose and fell against each other. Their bellies were sandwiched, uncaring of the stickiness as Kraglin’s (quite frankly ridiculous) overexcess of jizz splashed Yondu’s thighs, coating his ass in hot gushing white.

While the sex-part was over - or at least, Yondu supposed that was what Kraglin’s sagging body implied - he still felt immersed in the sensations. His ass was chief among them. Bereft of Kraglin’s fingers it had pinched closed again. But while those bony digits hadn’t been quite enough to make him gape, they had moulded him to their shape. Without them Yondu was intimately aware of the slick of spit and watery cum that drizzled between his buttocks. Kraglin’s softened cock, squashed at the point of breaching without any threat, contrasted with the heat of his puffing knot. When Yondu squeezed a hand between them to stroke it, touch it, weigh its girth in his hands and wonder how on earth that was going to fit, he relished the breathy moan.
His torso was dotted with the memory of Kraglin’s nips. Those barbed incisors dug against his shoulder now, right over a dark-inked tattoo. Letting Kraglin bite was undoubtedly a terrible idea. He couldn’t very well pretend it had been a rogue taabshqa now the village was aware of - and wanted to breed into their bloodline - Kraglin’s magnificent teeth. And while a part of Yondu wanted to bear that mark, he decided (as usual) that it’d be far more fun to tease.

“Don’tchu fucking dare,” he murmured, gravelly timbre of his voice belying the lack of any real threat. He carded through Kraglin’s sticky hair, again and again, gentling him down from his peak. “Thassa good boy.”

Kraglin preened at the praise before he could stop himself, teeth snapping emptily on air. He nuzzled his nose at Yondu’s shoulder, partly to hide his blush, but mostly to enjoy the feel of hands through his hair, guiding him to calmness. It felt good, shoulders slowly going lax as he rested over him a moment, just gathering his effort to move. Not that he wanted to - leaning over Yondu like this was a rush, one he savoured and filed away the view of. Yondu, spread out under him, navy in the gloom and slick when he nudged against him? Perfect.

“Not gonna,” he said, pulling back slow and carefully. He rolled to his side and groaned, stretching his back out. “Wanna - not gonna.” Because that was important. He didn’t want Yondu to feel like he didn’t care about him enough to sink his teeth into him, let him feel the strength of his grip and hold him still while - Kraglin relaxed a bit, glad that his cock was too tired to react to those mental images now.

“Should move closer the creek.” he teased gently, opening one eye as his teeth started to retract. “Just t’make things easier.”

“Mmm.” Yondu nodded along. But then again, he’d nod along if Kraglin suggested they extend an invite to Jaku. Or a yolopp. Or his mother...

Okay, so maybe not that last one. Ew.

The point was that right then, sleepy and sated with Kraglin’s bony body tucked along his side, he felt impossibly mellow, as if he would melt into the pelts if Kraglin weren’t there to hold him together. He’d loved every minute of it. Kraglin on top of him, thrusting fervently between his thighs. The noises he made, half-animal - and the noises he’d wrung from Yondu too. The promise of the knot where it rubbed his licked-loose pucker as if it was only Kraglin’s willpower that kept it from hammering in…

Yondu smiled to himself, goofy and genuine. Then rolled to face Kraglin, propping his chin on one hand. He dabbled at the goop coating his belly, pulling a face when he realized some had collected under the lip of his pouch. He was sure it’d get uncomfortable if he left it to dry. But for now, being splattered in his star-man’s seed felt right in a primal sort of way. If he couldn’t take it inside himself yet, this was the next best thing.

Because Yondu intended on taking. Yondu intended on taking everything he could, ass swallowing that long red cock until Kraglin was wrung out and sobbing for release. But maybe another night.

Here it was the two of them and the silence. Or near silence. Without chatter, the noises of the night wafted in; villagers disbanding from around the fire, returning to their huts, some elated and some disappointed but all looking forwards to the next round. The hum of firebugs and mosquitoes. The crackle of the bonfire as it was sheltered beneath the tarp in preparation for the last rains of the day.

Yondu snuggled closer, poking the line of Kraglin’s lips. Then, watching the brown eyes that were affixed to his, he leaned in further.
Their noses bumped, Kraglin inhale timed to Yondu’s ex. Then, lashes sliding shut, Yondu angled his head so their mouths slanted together naturally, a scaly blue jigsaw pieceaind a stubbly pink one.

A stubbly pink one that tasted of cock. Yondu scrunched his nose. Then figured *what the hell*. If the taste hadn’t beaten Kraglin, it wouldn’t defeat him either.

Kraglin had shifted when Yondu did, watching him with the hint of a small smile. The sting had faded, leaving him with the normal amount of one row of teeth per mouth. It was sometimes hard for him to get a read on Yondu - he tended to trust his gut. This was a good sort of moment, he decided, pleased when this proved right with the gift of a kiss.

He was absolutely never going to regret teaching Yondu this.
Chapter 6

With less than three days until the start of the season, everyone was preoccupied. Those who had yet to find a mate were still considering their options (or perfecting their aim in an attempt to lob food into their desire’s mouth from across the firepit).

It was understandable, given the busy thrum of the village, that certain chores got overlooked.

“Chief?” Not too unusual - someone come to talk about their match, to see if it would be approved. Three young hunters stood outside the hut, dithering in a way that would be terribly embarrassing if anyone saw. They knocked on the doorframe again, hissing worriedly between each other and looking over their shoulder anxiously.

Clearly a dispute that needed sorting over who got what girl.

Uzuko had dealt with such matters before, and it would be his misfortune to deal with them many more times in the future. Unless Pharaqa got truly angry and fed him to a yolopp, like she was always threatening.

He ran a hand over his crest, ensuring the piercings all jangled freely. Then lowered himself onto his chair, tensing in preparation for the introduction of cold hard stone to his backside. Not even a decade of experience could make him used to that.

“Enter!” he called.

They came in a cluster, their whispers growing more hushed the closer they got. It took a collective deep breath, and several nervous bows, before they exchanged looks - drawing imagined straws, perhaps? One was shoved forward, the designated spokesman. He shot a look back at his companions, almost desperate, before he turned to face forward and steadied himself.

“Chief, we’re sorry to disturb you~”

Uzuko resisted the urge to yawn. He’d eaten his meal solo, watching the village barrel giddily around the fire trying to stuff spoonfuls of stew into each other’s mouths. He remembered being that young. Remembered walking over to the strongest huntress and, before the awed eyes of their people, offering a bite from his bowl. He remembered her laughing in his face. Then the next day, storming into his hut uninvited, demanding why he’d extended the offer to her, with whom he argued with more regularity than the rains fell.

_Your fire_, he’d replied. _My ice. Together, we might_...

What, make a balanced person? He’d been mistaken on that front. But Uzuko remained proud of his tenure as chief; Yondu excepted, his good decisions far outweighed his bad.

“Speak,” he said, tapping his fingers on the boxy chairarm.
With no relief being offered by his friends, the man took in another deep breath. If he wanted to wring his hands, he was resisting it well enough, but…

“It's - Aja, Chief.”

Uzuko resisted the urge to rub his temples. A complaint about Aja was almost as bad as a complaint about Yondu - in both cases, he was left to cajole the victim while fully aware that those two monsters were not in any way repentant.

Unless… this wasn’t a complaint at all.

The color drained from Uzuko’s face.

“Aja? Anthos above, she is sixty years your senior. If you take her to nest this season, her heart may give out.”

“What?” The young hunter stared uncomprehendingly at his Chief, until it clicked. Honestly, no one had been seen to go that shade of sky-blue before outside of legend - especially not a steel-boned hunter, who was expected to be of stronger stuff.

“No! No, dear Anthos, please no! No, my Chief, she - she is missing.”

That was a relief. Uzuko exhaled.

“I imagine she’s down by the creek.” A shake of the hunter’s head. “Praying by the za’gah tree?”

Another indication of the negative. “Chasing jskveh in the fruit grove?” Still no.

Uzuko nodded. “Pestering Yondu then.” That was her second-favorite past-time after all, right after annoying him.

“Chief, no one has seen her.” The young hunter clearly didn’t enjoy having to disagree with Uzuko, but he had been sent here by Pharaqa. At least he felt bad about it, unlike her, who would have been likely to drag Uzuko out and ask him to point Aja out, if he doubted they’d searched. “Pharaqa sent us to inform you, and to let you know she has taken a small band to spread out and search beyond the treeline.”

No one? The young man’s name was Iriki, he thought; while he made it his mission to address every villager personally, there were always some who slipped through the net. Had he alone claimed that he couldn’t find her, Uzuko would’ve called his bluff and assumed he was exaggerating.

But Pharaqa… As often as they clashed, Uzuko still trusted her judgment. If she thought this warranted a search party, it warranted a search party.

“I will check her usual haunts again,” he said, pushing to stand. “Fetch my son and his… Krah-glyn friend, if they are not already assisting.”

It couldn’t have been an aku - someone would’ve seen it. Plus there’d have been screaming and flailing and most likely a lot of blood. And yolopps didn’t come this close to the village, not at the end of the rainy season (Uzuko remained half-convinced that they didn’t exist at all, and Yondu’d glued together a selection of other animals to create the one he’d lugged back as ‘proof’. That however, was besides the point.) But perhaps there were still Ignokai lurking among the trees?

Uzuko ground his jaw. He hesitated only a moment. Then snatched his bow from its little carved plinth. It was a ceremonial thing, a hand-me-down intended only for use in the za’gah. But now the za’gah were no longer commonplace, while it sung with the blood of a hundred chieftains past, it
was what it was: a weapon. And, had any Ignokai so much as dared breathe on Aja’s tahlei, he would use it as such.

Iriki nodded and frankly, scarpered out of the tent with his friends. He had more reason than the others to be nervous - it had been his duty this morning to go and wake Aja, make sure she had all she needed for the day. He’d just been distracted, gathering some flowers to possibly give to someone as a gift, if they said yes but-

“Yondu?” He knocked on the huts frame, chewing his lip a little as he hissed. “Yondu! Come on, please, your father-”

“Don’t mention that. He’ll ignore us on principle.”

“There’s an issue,” Iriki amended at his friends prompting, stepping back a bit. “Everyone’s being recruited, come on.”

“You might get to shoot something,” His friend said, leaning over Irikis shoulder. “It’ll be fun!”

Yondu’s head popped from under the carpet, wrapping his tahlei in the heavy wefts. “Who’s shootin’ what now?”

“You.” Iriki brightened, mostly because it looked like Yondu was interested in this mission. The details might put him off but, he thought as he soldiered on, at least he'd tried. “Aja has gone missing, and we’re being rounded up to go look for he-ARRRGH.”

“Rude.” Kraglin yawned, holding the carpet aside. He was shirtless but, while he was used to such reactions from the womenfolk and those he surprised in the dark, he usually expected a little more from the ones that carried bows. Kraglin scratched his ribs as he watched Iriki flap.

“Oh, Anthos, does it usually live in snowy climes?” Iriki shuddered, staring with no small amount of fascination. His friend shook his head.

“There’s a search party going on past the treeline,” he said, hauling Iriki back by the loincloth. “You’re cordially invited, bring your own teku.”

Finally! Some Centuarians who weren’t trying to spoonfeed Kraglin from their bowls. Not that Iriki and Kojo would, being male and thus permitted only to approach those of the tribe with corresponding reproductive bits - but still. Yondu grinned at Iriki, wiggling his fingers an inch away from Kraglin’s chest.

“S’like stroking a taabshqa, Iri. You wanna try?”

He wasn’t too bothered about the search party. Aja was a wanderer - she frequently escaped her minders and went dabbling in the stream like a huntress half her age. (Or a quarter. Maybe even a sixth.) They’d find her in no time. Especially with him and Kraglin on the case!

And sure, a smidgen of his enthusiasm was the result of a very, very lovely night and a very, very lovely morning, when Kraglin demonstrated that early-wood was nothing to be ashamed of. But what Iriki and Kojo didn’t know couldn’t hurt them, and Yondu’d been sure to give both Kraglin and himself a thorough rub-down with an old pelt before rolling out of their nest. There was no hiding the faint flush on his cheeks, or the light in his eyes - Yondu certainly felt like he was glowing, and with the bioluminescent properties of Centaurian crests that wasn’t altogether improbable.

Iriki warily backed away.
“Why’re you smiling? At me? You never smile at me, not unless there’s a muddy puddle around…”

Yondu looked pointedly at the earth, still clay-like and water-laden from the intensity of the rains. And let his grin tweak a lil’ wider.

“He’s not gonna dunk you.” Kojo made sure to keep a tight grip on his friend. Iriki had assumed Yondu meant no harm (which was foolish and naive of him, but also, Kojo hoped desperately, one of his charms) and had put up a blue hand to Kraglin’s chest.

“What is this?” Kraglin asked, not entirely awake after their extracurricular activities. He felt it was a fair question to ask, given that an unfamiliar blue hand had introduced itself to his bodyhair. “Yondu, I only got the words ‘Aja’ and ‘Woods’ so, I mean…”

“He would make a glorious cloak.” Iriki said solemnly, stepping away. “But we need to get going. Kojo, come on - with me.”

Yondu’s hackles had raised a little when Iriki actually took him up on the offer - the asshole was supposed to be too terrified of him for that! Yondu was gonna have to step up his game. But Iriki’s conclusion made him all-out cackle.

“He’s complimenting you on yer hair,” he said in Xandarian, moving back into the hut and lifting the shirt from the rim of the nest before balling it up and tossing it at Kraglin’s head. “Put this one before the girls see another trait they wanna breed into future generations.”

Because while Kraglin’s wiry, springy chest hair was a bugger to clean cum out of, it did look nice and toasty. Yondu supposed he needed the extra insulation, given he had less blubber than a stick insect and his species seemed to radiate more heat than both the Centaurian suns combined.

“I’m gonna be flattered.” Kraglin said as the other two moved off, towards the trees. “I mean, it’s not every day a guy gets told to cover up so no one else swoops in on him. So what are they up to?” He turned in the door to watch, pulling his shirt on lazily after a stretch. He could see Kojo and Iriki pause at the treeline, a faint whistle reaching the hut. It must have been a direction, as they scampered off another way, taking to the trees.

Come to think of it, Kraglin thought as he looked over the village, there did seem to be more bustle than usual.

“Is it, hunts? Starting up again?” he hazarded as a guess. “Like a race to bring in an animal first?”

Yondu stretched too, arms elongating over his head as he bent to either side. He hoisted his loincloth up a little higher - hadn’t redone the damn straps tight enough - and nodded out in the direction of the forest.

“Aja’s fucked off, Anthos knows where. I still say she’s in the jskveh coop, but Pharaqa’s overreacted and set the whole damn village on her trail.”

“So, what you’re saying is..” Kraglin let the relative quiet of the ridge and the shade of the carpet embolden him, and he gave Yondus ass a gentle pat as he passed it, stepping outside. “We get to just roam around for a bit?” Nothing wrong with that as far as he was concerned. Nice day for a bit of a walk, bit of privacy and some sun, weak as it currently was. “Do we check the coop first?”

Yondu busied himself in refastening the loincloth, pulling on the straps until they bit his sides. He smirked at the tap. The memory of those fingers sliding into his body, knuckles catching on his rim, was fresh as the smell of rain.
“Think ya can save it for tonight?” he teased bumping his hip off Kraglin’s. “Your lil’ star-man down there ain’t gonna get too excited if I’m crawlin’ through the jskveh pen in front of it? Wouldn’t wanna risk getting caught, what with all these hunters around…”

Heck, with her senses on high alert, Pharaqa’d probably sense it if they got down and dirty in the long grass. A shame. Yondu had already cum once today, but Kraglin’s presence was like an electric eel: winding around him and giving him a periodical zap. He could fuck forever, if only Kraglin said the word…

Only maybe not outside, in full view of everyone.

“Might as well start at the coop,” he said with a shrug. “After that, I’m up for ideas.”

The coop, as it happened, was empty. So was the creek, the fruit groves, the vegetable patches, the coop again (“Hey, she might have slipped round us!”) and even the food stores. The hot springs were briefly discussed, then checked, despite the slopes being slippery. No one liked to think about Aja trying to make her way up there, only to have fallen and been too hurt to get back up. But even those were empty.

“Chief,” Pharaqa said by way of greeting, slipping out of the tree next to him, landing on the ground easily. She’d been running all morning, a thin sheen of sweat and rainwater over her skin, making her gleam. “I’ve stationed people in her usual haunts in case she returns. We’ve run up and down the mountain thrice already, but…”

She didn’t like to admit that a woman in her late eighties had managed to evade her entire hunt pack. She was loathe to think about the idea of Aja hiding away, giggling merrily to herself as she watched them scuttle too and fro, but even more loathe to think about the poor biddy lying somewhere, hurt and alone and unable to call out. For all her hates - and Pharaqa had many - like most in the village, she had a soft spot for the woman that as far as they could tell, was going to outlast all of them.

Uzuko didn’t know what to do. That wasn’t a rare occurrence - although it might surprise any who thought they knew him if he admitted as such. Half of being a chief was playing life by ear, blundering your way through the overlapping spheres of hunter and villager and shaman and locating a common ground where people could listen to each other and solve their feuds with means other than arrows and whistling. He’d navigated far worse crises than this.

But he couldn’t banish the twinge of fear as Pharaqa finished her report.

“You have checked all the huts? Every one? Even those of the men who are ready to pouch-birth? She isn’t tending to them?” Aja had always adored children. Especially children whose parents were too busy with chieftainly duties to give them adequate attention. The offspring of Toki and his friends would suffer no such neglect - Uzuko was more worried about his next generation of warriors being pampered. But Aja may well have assigned herself basket-delivery duties, as the last Uzuko had heard Toki was screeching like an angry aku whenever Yondu and Kraglin tried to approach the hut.

“Every single one,” she confirmed, patting the last of the daily rainfall from her crest. “I can only think she’s wandered into the swamps for some ridiculous reason and can’t find her way out.” Aja had never been a hunter - a village sitter through and through. The idea of her meandering about out there made Pharaqa angry - if only because that was the only way she knew to react when it came to worry.

But sending her hunters to the swamps at the moment… It would be risky. To cover enough ground, they could only travel in pairs or trios, at most. Not enough to fend off a full-grown yolopp.
'Should I send them in?'

One old woman for countless potential hunter fatalities. The rainy season had ebbed, yes, but it was not yet confirmed that the Ignokai had return to their sunken settlement at the valley base. The choice should have been clear. Aja would return in her own sweet time, or she wouldn’t return at all.

The choice was clear, but Uzuko couldn’t make it.

“Take a small group,” he said quietly, leaning in so only Pharaqa would hear his words. “Experienced hunters only. If there’s no sign by nightfall, climb trees and wait out the darkness, and return to the village come morning. Understand?”

Pharaqa inclined her head before she was off, bounding from the hut and up the za’gah tree. She let out a series of piercing whistles - coded messages, calling her best in to her location. They would return to the village, and she would take them from there. Knowing what patches of swamp were dry enough to risk wandering in was something she entrusted them with. There were paths, hidden here and there, ones they’d learned through trial and error, but she doubted Aja knew of them. Their best bet was to take to the trees and follow them along, to try and spot her in the gloom.

There was little else for the village to do but wait. Kraglin joined them - while part of him was surprised that they didn’t want the extra help, he could recognise this was clearly a village issue. Besides, he told himself, watching them swing off, he could be useful. He recalled where one of the watchposts were and tucked himself up there come nightfall, keeping an eye out. An ear too - while the hunters were clearly roaming into the waterlogged areas, if you listened hard enough and the wind blew the right way, you could just about hear the faint whistles of communication.

One such whistle sounded late, while the moons were just starting to lower themselves in the sky again. Short blasts, used to summon backup. There was no way they were getting Aja up a tree, after all. The old woman was drenched in swamp-water past her waist, a curved stick clutched in her hand that she refused to hand over. But alive, Pharaqa was glad to see.

Come morning, the troop returned in drips and drabs. Most had heard the call in the night, some hadn’t, so it was with no small surprise that they greeted the larger group, Aja carefully supported between two hunters.

“Go,” Pharaqa instructed, taking her from them to lead her into the hut. “Fetch the Chief.”

The news of Aja’s return spread faster than wildfire. Or, as the forest was never dry enough to catch light, it spread faster than the percolation of monsoon rains through the canopy. Yondu, having returned to the ululating cry of the huntpack, caught Kraglin’s wrist and yanked him away from the brats he’d been pulling stupid faces at, eyes set on Aja’s hut.

“C’mon,” he growled. “You’ll only scare ‘em. You big scary furball, you.”

But it seemed the children of the tribe were braver than Iriki or Toki. Not put off by the teeth or the hair, they clung to Kraglin’s pantlegs, toddling after them. By the time the pair arrived at Aja’s hut, they’d amassed quite the little following.

“Ol’ git Aja?” asked Oola, frowning at the entrance. Her eyes were clever for a mite of her age. Yondu picked her up, sitting her on his hip, and sternly wagged a finger under her nose.

“Don’tchu call her that to her face. She’ll set her jskveh on you.”

“S’what you call her.”
Smart-mouthed lil’ brat. Yondu stuck his tongue out at her. Oola stuck hers out right back, and
wriggled it for good measure. They were occupied in this fashion until Pharaqa, glower increasing
steadily as she listened to them blowing raspberries at point-blank range, stomped to the doorway
and flung open the curtain.

“If you’re going to be so noisy, you can all leave!” she yelled.

Yondu, cross-eyed and grimacing with one of Oola’s fingers up each nostril, hastily rectified himself.
As in, he blew his nose hard enough to make Oola screech and kick away from him, landing on her
feet like all Centaurian children did and pointedly wiping her hand on his loincloth.

“You gross!”

“And you,” said Yondu to his mother, “are louder than the rest of us combined. C’mon, Pharaqa.
Tell us how she’s doin’, and we’ll leave the old git.”

Oola smacked his knee.

“-The lovely ol’ grandma in peace.”

“Leave now,” Pharaqa suggested, after a glance at the amount of children they had collected. Too
many who understood enough words for her to risk trying to explain what was going on to Yondu
alone. “Take them somewhere else. If you’re still interested when they’re busy, then come back and
see what the Chief has to say about it.”

She was sure in that time they’d be able to sort out what to tell the village. She watched Kraglin
scoop up one of the nearest kids and nuzzle at it playfully until it was squeaking happily and nodded
to him.

“He can’t even understand me and he’s quicker at following my commands than you are. Go, Yondu
- take the children away.”

“Suck-up,” hissed Yondu at Kraglin, grabbing Oola to sit on his shoulders and a couple of others to
haul under his arms. The remaining twin was nowhere to be seen. What that implied - either the other
children were old enough to absorb their parents’ prejudices, or the brat was dead - Yondu decided
not to contemplate. “C’mon. Let’s take ‘em to the river. Hopefully one of them’ll be eaten by a pike;
made our job easier.”

He wanted to barrel past Pharaqa and demand to see Aja anyway. The thought of her flat-out in her
little nest, old and wizened and small-looking without her personality to inflate her, was disturbing.
Usually it’d be her hollering at him to bugger off and care for her jskveh-hens if he wanted to be
useful - or, more likely, bypassing Pharaqa’s order and inviting him, Kraglin, and their assorted
medley of brats into her hut to have their cheeks squeezed and foreheads kissed. Old sap.

But there was something about Pharaqa’s tone… Yondu forced a grin, shrugging his shoulders so
Oola had to cling to his crest for balance, distracting her from the hut and its contents. Some things
kids weren’t meant to see.

“What did I do?” Kraglin tried not to huff too much as he followed along. He hauled a few more of
the little gecko babies up to cling onto his shirt and chirp roughly in mimicry of his voice. No doubt
there would be complaints about how he was affecting their speech patterns, but right now he was
just content to juggle them, consequences be damned. “I wanted to carry that one.”

Pharaqa watched them go until they were out of sight before she allowed herself to gnaw her lip. She
disappeared into the hut again, sinking down next to Aja nest to wait.
“Chief?” Found at last. Her little messenger skidded in the mud a bit, clutching the tree next to him. “We have her. Pharaqa took her to rest.”

By the time she heard him outside, Pharaqa had cajoled Aja into bed, tucking her in with a studied level of care.

“Pharaqa,” Aja groped for her wrist and she paused, letting her catch it. “Will you do something for me?”

“I can try.”

“Will you ask Atoola to make some of those, plum dumplings? She does them best.” Aja sighed happily as Pharaqa worked her hand free gently, folding both of Aja’s over the blankets. “I’ve had such a craving for them…”

“I’ll bring them as soon as she’s done with them.”

Uzuko allowed himself to be brusque, pushing the messenger aside with no more than a nod of acknowledgement as he hastened to Aja’s side.

’Honored elder. How are you faring?’

From the glazed expression, he’d be better off talking to Pharaqa. Uzuko span on her, knelt in the dirt like he was and clasping Aja’s other limp blue hand. ‘Where was she? What’s wrong?’

“Miles off course in the wetlands.” Pharaqa replied, keeping her gaze steady on Aja. “From the distance, at her usual speed, she must have been walking since before daybreak yesterday. She was almost up to her chest in the swamp waters when a hunter came across her, and she hit him in the face with her cane and called him by his father’s name.”

Which. Didn’t always mean something was wrong with Aja. But all points together…

“If this was a woman thirty, even twenty years her junior I would know if she would be alright. But I don’t.”

It wasn’t often you saw Pharaqa rattled. Much less afraid. Uzuko knew that she would snap if he drew attention to it through attempts to comfort. He didn’t circumvent Aja’s small, heavyset body as it lay flat-out in the nest, didn’t loop his arm across Pharaqa’s shoulders to remind her she wasn’t alone. But he did briefly compress his hand on top of hers, before it retook its place on Aja’s laboriously rising and falling chest.

“Then we wait,” he said, simply.

Waiting wasn’t something that came naturally to her - like their son, she burned too hot, too fast, and it wasn’t long before she was up, pacing soundlessly across the packed earth of the Elder’s tent. It was well designed, insuring it gave coolness in the summer as well as warmth in winter, accessible to all in case of emergencies. Taking care of their ailing ancestors was not supposed to be a chore, she seethed silently to herself, but a joy, a reprieve.

Iriki was going to get it, she decided.

“She was bitten,” she said suddenly - any report to break the silence of the hut. “Leeches. All over her back and her legs. We cleaned them as best we could, but the vermin went deep.”

Anthos above. Uzuko smoothed the creased skin over the old woman’s collarbones as if he could
mop away the years with a single wipe.

“Oh Aja,” he said sadly. Lowered his forehead, golden hoops tinkling brightly off one another, the sound minimized as he focused only on the suck and wheeze of Aja’s breath. “Why did you have to go walking? Don’t say you’ve caught my son’s star-madness. Chasing the horizon, you will find nothing but misery.”

Pharaqa didn’t sleep - she slipped out of the tent to stand guard outside the carpet instead, to ward off well-wishers as best she should. Granted, her patience wasn’t at its best, so some may have got a sharper request to leave than they deserved, but that was usually the way of things. It wasn’t until sometime after the evening meal that Aja stirred, opening her eyes a little to stare at the ceiling.

Then her gaze shifted, spotting Uzuko.

“Merlit,” An old advisor of Uzuko’s father. She chuckled, a creaking sort of sound that wheezed out at the end. “You dog. There’s still a few days till Season Start. Keep your hands to yourself.”

Uzuko decided to flush and stutter and be useless, so Pharaqa stalked back inside and took over, rolling her eyes at the chief who was by now just managing to protest that he would never attempt such a thing with a slumbering woman.

“Aja,” she said, curt with worry. “Do you know me?”

“Of course I do,” She sounded tired though, shifting a bit to get comfortable to sleep. “I know everyone in this village. Have done for years.”

“So who am I?”

“Well if you don’t know that, it’s hardly my problem, hmmm?”

“Aja!”

“Let an old woman sleep,” She complained, waving at her vaguely. “You’re - you’re Opine’s brat. The shouty one.” Pharaqa fell silent as Aja dozed off, her fingers going tight against her palms in clenched fists. Aja wasn’t wrong - Pharaqa was Opine’s brat, and yes, was usually referred to as the shouty one. She just hadn’t been called that in almost thirty years.

“She might have eaten something, slipped and hit her head,” Pharaqa suggested, her voice low. “Or something might have stung her. Pain from the leeches, fear, tiredness, I don’t know - what to suggest.” She sat down heavily beside her Chief, propping her chin in her hands and watching Aja for a few long moments. “I’m - I’m so, so sorry, my Chief. I know how much she must mean to you.”

If Yondu had been accused of the same, he would’ve denied it. But, as Uzuko liked to remind the village, the boy got his worst qualities from his mother.

While Pharaqa spoke with a good heart, Uzuko couldn’t help his awareness of how little her words changed. They didn’t make Aja’s eyes sharpen to their usual birdlike clearness. They didn’t make her address either of her nurses by name. Uzuko nodded, keeping his broad blue hands sandwiched around the wizened little monkey-paw that rested on Aja’s chest.

“Rest,” he told her, stooping in to kiss her brow. “We will be here when -” If. “-you wake. You must save your strength - Toki’s pouch is due to open any day, and the other men soon after. And then there will be more children for you to spoil rotten, Old Mother.”
Hours passed. The noise from the village outside ebbed and flowed, voices hushing when they passed the hut. Or worse, paused outside it as if to try and figure out what was going on within before they hurried onwards. Occasionally the footsteps stopped, and there was the sound of things being left by the door - little plates of food, or bowls of hot tea and broth made from herbs, little gestures to try and help.

Pharaqa brought in some of the teas, at least, settling them by her Chief. Some were for Aja, evidenced by the smell of them, but most were for her caretakers, to keep their strength up. Some were blends to clear Uzuko’s mind, to prepare him spiritually in case of-

She’d find out who made that one, she decided, and kick their ass so hard she’d be able to make them blink with her toes.

When the night started to bleed from stars into the vague, fuzzy paleness of pre-dawn, Pharaqa knew. Aja’s eyes had fluttered open maybe an hour before, half-lidded. She watching the shapes of the flames on the ceiling. Her breathing had slowed. Pharaqa stood.

“What will you have me do?” she murmured, eyes down. As terrible as the situation was, there was always time to train Yondu in the tasks he’d need to perform when it was his turn to rule.

Uzuko knew that look. It was the dazed and tranquil expression of one ready to pass into the arms of Anthos. And although every part of him rebelled - his head that Aja had supported when he was an infant fresh from the pouch, his feet that she had tickled until he squealed and fled, the arms with which he had taken Yondu from where he slept rocked against Aja’s heartbeat, after Uzuko had spent yet another day unravelling trivial village complaints rather than spending time with his son - he knew what was necessary.

“Fetch Yondu,” he decreed. It wasn’t with any especial happiness. While it was necessary that his son master the death-rites, Aja meant far too much to the both of them to be anything so simple as a learning tool. “He will want to say his goodbyes.”

In the trees at the forest’s edge, birdsong twittered as the first of the suns burst over the mountain. The cycle was completed. Night to day, death to life. As it always was, and as it would be forevermore. It would not be long now.

Kraglin woke with a soft snort, the usual sound of a man mid-snore when woken. He looked into the darkness, the pitch receding in moments. He couldn't spot what woke him - them, he realised, as the doorframe was rapped again soundly.

“Yondu,” He had never heard Pharaqa speak softly - she barely did now, just a roughness in the clicks that seemed foreign to him after so long listening to the fluid music of their speech. “Yondu, wake up. You father needs- Aja needs you. Come now.”

Of the words he could pick out, Kraglin could understand ‘Aja’ well enough. He groped for Yondus hand and squeezed it once, briefly. He couldn't imagine news brought in Deep-tunnel darkness was anything good.

The clutch of Kraglin’s hand around his, clammy with worry, was what roused Yondu. He rolled, eyelids heavy and crusted with sleep. Beneath the lowest fringe of his door-rug, he could see the muscular chest, stomach, and legs of a hunter short enough to make the relative privacy of the dropped curtain redundant. Luckily, Pharaqa was in a rare mood for observing protocol. Rather than barging in unannounced, she was lingering in the doorway almost tentatively - not a word regularly used in descriptions of his mother.
That was the first alarm bell.

“Yondu,” she said again, sharper. “Hurry. You lazy sod, if you don’t shake a leg I’ll come in and drag you out by your damn earrings...”

Ah. There was the Pharaqa he knew.

Yondu untangled himself from Kraglin. He relished the slide of the slim, furry thigh between his, even though it only lasted a second, and perched on the edge of the nest, winding his loincloth around his waist. Outside, the night sky was dark as the char that collected at the bottom of the firepit. Pharaqa was only visible as a silhouette, a black cut-out against the low-burning orange embers of the bonfire. Her impatience was mounting, judging by the rapid-paced tap of her foot.

“I’m comin’,” he whispered hoarsely. “Don’t get yer damn loincloth-thong in a twist.”

He hesitated before striding out to join her, however. A glance over his shoulder revealed Kraglin (or rather the pale slivers of his eyes - his only visible feature - hovering in the gloomy coracle of their nest).

Yondu opened his mouth. Then changed his mind, gaze skirting to Pharaqa. He suspected he knew why she’d come. He also suspected that she’d be supremely pissed off if he invited an outsider - even an outsider who’d helped them best the Ignokai, and who boasted a very nice triple-set of teeth - to accompany them.

The rites were closely guarded. They were shared only between the chief and the dying and Anthos. If not even Pharaqa would be allowed in the hut for the duration of the ritual, then a scrawny Starman had no chance. But while Yondu knew all this logically, he also wasn’t sure if he could face this alone.

Not that he’d ever say as such. Yondu tried for a smirk, confident that Kraglin would pick up on it with his nocturnally-adapted vision. “This dumbass caught a catch too big to haul to the cookpot on her lonesome,” he said in Xandarian. Thumbed over his shoulder, to where Pharaqa’s foot-tapping had escalated to all-out stomps. “I gotta go help. Don’t wait up - I’ll be back by mornin’.”

“Sure.” Kraglin nodded, sitting up with his arms balanced on his knees, watching as Yondu fussed around. He didn’t feel bitter over the white lie - there was every chance he could have been mistaken in the whistles and clicks, so he just nodded. He had the grace to wait until Yondu had gone before he lay back down with a sigh, arms crossed behind his head, to drift into a light and uneasy sleep.

Aja lasted well enough - plenty time for Yondu to be let into the hut beside Uzuko. She was murmuring something, an old climbing rhyme from when she was a child.

At least she recognised her Chief. And his son.

“Yondu,” she murmured, sounding more tired than she remembered being in over fifty years. “There you are.”

There were only his parents here. No one else to see, no one else to judge, no one else to think him weak. Yondu dropped to his knees besides Aja’s body, grasping the hand his father had yet to claim.

“Aja,” he said. If his voice cracked a little, he could blame it on a swallowed yawn. “How’re ya holdin’ up?”

“Like a lizard on an aku’s ass.” Aja gave a soft snort, looking from their hands to the ceiling. “Well, I must be ill if you’re here.” As if she hadn’t had hint enough. How often had she prepared the tea she
could smell beside the bed, for others whose grip had tightened on life and wasn’t strong enough to let go?

“Don’t be me, Yondu.” she murmured, after beckoning him in close enough to keep her voice low. “Don’t wait.”

Yondu bit down on his tongue until he was absolutely sure he wasn’t going to sniffle. Wiped the skin under his eyes, which was a little damp - must’ve gotten soot from the fire in ’em.

‘I dunno what you’re talking about, crazy-lady.”

“Of course you don’t.” She patted his hand gently to cement the lie before she sighed, settling back and closing her eyes. She was quiet for a few moments until she turned her head, opening her eyes to look at Uzuko. “I think I could do with a spot of tea.”

The clay pot was warm to the touch. The heat of the steaming broth-like concoction radiated through the dried red rivermud, making it feel vital and alive. Uzuko lifted it slowly, ceremonial without quite realizing it. He scented poppyseed and teku root and dogmilk diluted with clear crik-water and sap from the za’gah tree, as well as other ingredients, ingredients which had but one purpose.

“Pharaqa. It is time for you to leave.”

She didn’t nod. Just stood, and she came over to touch her forehead to Aja’s gently for a moment. Aja chuckled a little, patting Pharaqa’s wrist gently.

“Go on,” she said, trying to inject a tease into her voice, but falling short of it. The huntress gave her a solemn nod before she left, drawing the carpet across the door firmly. Aja watched the door until the footsteps receded, settling back with a sigh. “-- You too, Yondu. Go on now.”

“No.” Uzuko shook his head when Yondu rolled onto his feet. Yondu turned to him, blinking in the amber-lit gloom, and swallowed what felt like an entire whetstone as his father patted the space besides him, kneeling over Aja and tilting the cup to her wrinkled lips. “He stays.”

If Yondu had one regret, it was that he’d ever left his nest. Sure, Pharaqa would have dragged him out by the earrings - because many things Yondu’s mother was, but ann oathbreaker wasn’t one of them. But at least his father would’ve been too busy scolding him to embark on one of his (usually short-lived) ‘let’s teach Yondu how to be a proper chieftain’ ventures.

A Chief, Yondu had been disappointed to discover, was more than just a leader who got to lounge about on his ass all day and be fed grapes. They had many duties, including seeing each new soul into the village and each old soul out of it. A child wasn’t referred to by their name until the chief had gone through the rites - splashed water from the crik across its forehead, chest, and groin, and dedicated the brat’s physical form to the purpose of harmonic existence with Anthos’ creation.

Of course, the concept of an individual soul was foreign to the Zatoan - they saw every living thing as containing a spark of Anthos, of life itself. Babies didn’t require naming rituals to introduce them to Anthos; the ritual had a more secular purpose, like the later initiation to man or womanhood. It determined which children weren’t too feeble to survive their first years, and thus were safe to love.

But to refuse such a ritual was sacrilege. And to die without the blessing of your Chief bordered sinful.

Accidents happened, of course. The jungle was dark and full of dangers. On top of the yolopps and the taabshqa, there were hungry things of the air to contend with: things which liked to catch little Centaurians in their claws and swoop off to the high rocky nests around the volcano’s rumbling
mouth. But in cases where the dead were irretrievable, they were said to be taken by the forest. As they were subsumed into it - quite literally, depending on whether the culprit *aku* was hungry or just in a sour mood - there was no further dancing about (or face-painting and flapping of loincloths) necessary.

But a death in the village, on village grounds? Especially when that death was brought about with the aid of the sweet-smelling poison Uzuko had massaged down Aja’s feebly clicking throat?

Zatoan didn’t believe in vengeful spirits. Or at least, not officially. Transubstantiation was automatic after death; what was Anthos would return to him. Aja had melded back into the eternal oneness of energy that reverberated across their planet’s surface the moment her pulse had ceased and her last exhale had deflated her withered chest. What came after - the rhythmic plod of Uzuko’s feet, Yondu stumbling to mirror him; the swirling room and the spiralling shadows; the acrid smell of whatever his father had crumbled into the flames - was a failsafe, nothing more.

Yondu was still shivering though, as he ducked under the curtain and into the first pale glimmers of dawn. The smoke had filled him like a water gourd, tightening in his lungs and bloating his brain until his pulse rang louder than the beat of the drums. It took him a moment to differentiate it, shaking his head as if to dispel tinnitus. It was only when the noise failed to abate after Yondu had smacked himself on the temple and pinched his own crest that he realized it was coming from outside of his body.

Pharaqa must have told the early-risers. And now the entire village would awaken to the sounds of dedication. Not mourning. Not celebration. Just an acknowledgment of what Aja was, what they had come from, and what they all would one day be again.

Anthos.

The low humming had already begun. It was a sonorous drone; a single note repeated up at octave intervals, from bass all the way to soprano. Centaurian after Centaurian drew from their huts, pulled towards the communal fire as if by trance. Children had been pushed into the corner of their huts and warned to stay - this was a time for the initiated, and they would interfere at the peril of mucking out the compost toilets for the next month.

The fire-keepers had throwed on damp green logs. Smoke billowed up, choking and hot and oppressive as it had been in the hut, pervading the crispness of the dawntime air. The walking blue figures looked like ghosts in the mist; half-real, half-imagined. They blurred into one another, shrank to midgets and stretched to giants, a carnival of shapes that cavorted through Yondu’s aching stew of a mind, all walking to that same slow beat.

He lurched after them, almost on instinct. But his father’s hand on his shoulder pulled him to a halt. Yondu followed the hand along a wrist and up a forearm to a shoulder, settling his eyes on the out-of-focus haze of his father’s face.

Within the hut, Uzuko had become something more than a man. He’d been a Chief then, moving with the surety and confidence of every one of their ancestors. The soot he’d smeared across his cheeks deformed him, twisting his human body into that of one Anthos’s familiars: a face Yondu would expect to find peering at him from the carvings on the *za’gah* tree. He wouldn’t have been surprised if his father had metamorphosed entirely as he loped around Aja’s still corpse, low-legged and animal, speaking words so ancient they no longer had meaning.

Even now, the magic had yet to wear away. Looking into his eyes made him dizzy. Uzuko had to exert considerable strength to prevent Yondu slumping to his knees there and then.
His mouth was moving. Talking. He was saying something. But what was it? More of those strange, numinous sounds, in a language closer to Kraglin’s than theirs? No. He was using Zatoan, and telling Yondu… He was telling Yondu…

“Go fetch your pet before he makes an idiot of himself,” said Uzuko, giving Yondu a gentle shake. The boy - hard to think of him as a man when he was staring at Uzuko so vacantly, wide eyes registering only the painted stripes on his cheeks and chin - wobbled when he removed his grip, and for a moment Uzuko thought he’d fall.

He wouldn’t blame him. He recalled his first experience with the Death ceremony, and how he’d lain almost catatonic for an hour afterwards. But Yondu, as Pharaqa liked to claim in the rare moments when she was proud of their son, was made of sterner stuff.

Uzuko gave him a nudge in the direction of his hut, trusting that Yondu’d start walking if only given a little momentum. “He may join us around the fire - but only if he is still and silent.”

Pharaqa had been busy. While Uzuko’s realm of power was, well, the entire village, Pharaqa was more designed for action. She had waited, taking her time to quiet herself, until she spotted smoke creeping from under the hangings, out the cracks in the roof. As far as she was concerned, that was her signal to flit around the village. Quiet and careful, she made sure those who were already awake were made aware of the situation. The guard platforms were her next stop - while she was sure one or two would stay behind, excused from this for the village’s safety, their voices would be heard from there.

Children were not her sphere of influence, but she gave them as stony a look as possible, to drive home their parents’ threats. Explaining Aja’ future absence was a job for them, not her.

Pharaqa knew that every single adult filing past her had been carried around by Aja at least once in their life - fed little berries while parents’ backs were turned, tossed into the creek when they were squealing too loud, coddled and cosseted in bundles of fur when the rains fell hard.

The old woman had even tried to teach her how to handle Yondu. Unsuccessfully, of course, but at least she’d tried. The idea of a new generation growing up without the wizened little lady tottering around to torment and delight them in equal measure disturbed her.

Enough thoughts for now, she decided, giving another brief check around the area. She’d told all she could, the message was moving fast enough. She’d skipped one hut, one that contained precisely zero Zatoan. She could see a long, gangly figure leaning in the doorframe, no doubt roused by the noise and curious. But, she noted, he hadn’t come out. Just held the carpet aside and watched, pale bare shoulder against the wooden frame.

Curiosity wasn’t something that came easily to her. But she did wonder if he understood what was going on. He’d been out looking for Aja, before the hunt turned serious, and must have known she was back. But anything else? What did his people even do when someone died?

Ate them, she decided. Like savages.

From where he stood, Kraglin could see the smoke rising, the sound following it like so many large insects. It had woken him up, and for a moment, without Yondu’s familiar form beside him, he’d been disorientated and confused. But the shapes of the hut had come into sharp relief, and he just sat there for a while, listening to the music of it all. It didn’t sound anything like what he was used to from these people, and not for the first time, he wished he had paid more attention to the anthropological classes the Corps had offered to all their recruits. If he was only smarter, he might be able to guess or glean some meaning here.
At least he could recognise Yondu's form. He frowned and pushed himself off the door frame, the carpet falling shut behind him. He’d only pulled on his trousers when he rolled out of the nest, his feet and chest bare as he waited for Yondu to arrive. With bad news, he was sure of it, but at least he’d be back.

Yondu wasn’t sure how he kept his feet under him during the walk to his hut. But one thing was for certain: any attempt to scale the six-foot rock face to his front door was doomed to failure. Not that that’d usually stop Yondu, and he was nothing if not persistent, but…

Somehow, this wasn’t the time. And if even Yondu could sense that, things must be serious. He steadied himself on the base of the cliff instead, peering upwards, trying to force his vision to coalesce on a single point.

He tasted smoke. Teku, it turned out, was potent to the point of unpleasant when inhaled. His sense of up and down was rapidly evaporating. And there was that note - that constant somber hum. It wobbled through him, notes layered on top of notes, as if it had found the reverberant frequency of his bones.

Not a single waver was audible as the tribe took their breaths in tandem. Those who had entered the smoke were now invisible, swallowed by swirling fumes. Yet their voices continued. And perhaps it was the atmosphere, or the twilight-like mysticism of dawn, or the lingering sugar and bitterness of Aja’s poison from where his father had smeared a bead over Yondu’s underlip. But Yondu could’ve sworn that the jungle was absolutely silent, as if it too was waiting for the Zatoan to finish their song.

“Kraglin?” he called huskily. He reached in the vague direction of the figure that leant on the hut’s sturdy exoskeleton. “Issat you?”

Night vision did nothing against the billowing smoke that was slowly filling the village, like something one of the pest control crews would use to smoke out an infested tunnel. Kraglin hunkered down carefully, trying to stay under it as he squinted down at the shadowy figure below. Yondu, he decided, confirmed by the call and the raise of arms.

Cliffs were nothing new to him - aside from trundling up and down it whenever they went out or in, he had been born underground, in valleys carved by machines bigger than he could have imagined. He waved, to let Yondu know it was him, before he slid down it, fingers and toes finding by-now familiar grips. He landed in front of him, one hand on the rock to keep his bearings.

“It’s me. What's-?” Yondu looked - tired. Messed up, was another phrase that came to mind, and Kraglin felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up at the strangeness. Alien planet, he reminded himself sternly, trying to snap himself out of it.

It was Kraglin, not just some figment of a doped-up imagination. Thank Anthos. That meant that when Yondu slumped against him, letting Kraglin take all his weight for one brief second that lagged into several as he struggled to get his muscles functioning again, he didn’t fall straight through.

His cheek rested on Kraglin’s shoulder. His crest brushed the underside of a bearded chin.

“Aja,” he said, quiet and low. Dug his fingers into Kraglin’s ribs to convince himself they were solid, and they didn't plan on vanishing any time soon. “She rests now. And the village gathers to honor Anthos in her passing. I… I have to go.”

The drums were calling him. They beat as steady as the throb of life across Anthos’s vast body, from mountain top to shadowed valley and the bottom of the great sea. Their pace would only quicken and their volume begin to crescendo once all villagers were seated around the fire, outstretched arms
brushing the crests of their neighbors, connected to one another and life itself.

Kraglin couldn’t connect, not like they could. But he could watch, and he could learn. Yondu cupped his prickly jaw between his palms, pulling away to look at him head-on, serious and direct as one could be while their vision was turning dizzying loop-the-loops, and the shadows flowed like liquid around his peripherals.

“You can come. But Kraglin. No talking. You understand me?” His gaze trekked down to the lips Kraglin was nervously wetting, and he slid one hand across to hide them from view. “Not. A. Sound.”

Aja - the old woman had always been kind to him. She had been the first person to properly welcome him into the village, aside from Yondu. She had made sure he was fed, kept him company whenever he couldn’t accompany Yondu somewhere, sat with him and the children and told them stories, even if he couldn’t grasp their meaning. He’d hoped that with her home, maybe…

The Hraxlians had no concept of rites for the dead - not any that died outside of the Fight Castes, anyway. The old and the young were simply taken elsewhere, to be disposed of as needed. Kraglin had never really wondered where, or if anyone he knew had been fed to the machine that was Hrax. But he knew other planets did, through exposure to the galaxy as a whole, and the evidence presented to him here.

So he nodded, and reached up, drawing his finger across his mouth to show he’d be silent. His hand clasped gently over the back of Yondu’s, trying to communicate as best he could through eyes alone that he would follow whatever directions Yondu gave him. For both his and Aja’s sake, Kraglin wouldn’t ruin this.

Yondu led Kraglin to the fire. Or rather, the drums led him and Kraglin held onto his wrist, which amounted to much the same thing.

He found a space between Pharaqa and Jaku, and folded into it without complaint. Now was not the time for nursing grudges. Kraglin he pointed to the log, which had been heaved away from the fire at an angle to make room for the sheer number of Zatoan bathing their bodies in the smoke.

They sat on the floor, hunter and forager together, flattening scorched dry earth and fresh weeds. For an outsider, it must look odd: the entire village present (or at least the adult population of it), all with their eyes closed and arms interwoven behind one another's backs, creating a blue-and-red chain of hand on crest. As the smoke thickened, the edges of this great trellis blurred, faded, vanished entirely. The lines of Zatoan seemed to stretch away on every side into infinity.

And of course, there was the hum.

It bound them together. They rocked to it in union, as if they were no longer controlling the sound but were instead puppets to it, individual minds overflowing and merging trancelike into Anthos. Yondu found his note, shut his eyes, let himself drift until himself no longer had meaning.

Unseen by him, his crest began to emit a slow bright pulse, synchronizing to the flashes from those around him. The rich claret light soaked into the smoke, immersing them in a ruby cloud. It glossed the Zatoans’ peaceful faces like the plummy berries that were just starting to ripen in the trees, waxing and waning, ebbing and swelling, in time to the pound of the drums.

It was, to use an indelicate phrase, more than a little bit creepy. Kraglin sat himself on the log without complaint, letting go of Yondu when he seemed pulled in another direction. The smoke made his eyes water and his throat itch, so he forced himself to swallow as silently as he could, hunching his
shoulders to try and stay out of the worst of it. Somehow, he figured that when Yondu said ‘no sound’, that included raucous coughing.

Being blind was not a familiar sensation for Kraglin and he strained to see through the smoke. The flashing lights were disorientating more than helpful, illuminating faces for too short a time for him to pin a name to them. He gritted his teeth, shut his eyes for a few moments, and calmed himself. This was eerie. But it was their village and their people - he could ask questions later.

If nothing else, he was touched that he’d been allowed to come and sit.

It was hard to tell how long it went on for. Kraglin could feel a pressure building behind his eyes, smoke inhalation and the noise from the drums bringing on the start of a terrific headache. But the crashing sound stopped in a sharp, sudden blast of sound, the clearing seeming to hold its breath, noise and movement suspended. When the drum sounded again it was a gentle, calm thudding, slowly bringing it all back down. Was it over? Kraglin rubbed his arm over his eyes to get the soot and smoke from them, not daring to clear his throat yet.

The drums were falling. And Yondu fell with them, tumbling back into his body as if he’d taken a swandive from the top of the cliff.

He crashed with a gasp. His fingers ached as he forced them to unclench from round Jaku’s crest. Couldn’t let his mother think he was clinging onto her - he was just a little, but only for stability and he’d punch anyone who insinuated otherwise. Pharaqa might start trying to set them up again. The Season had only just begun, and there was more than enough time for her to work mischief.

Most couples had already visited Uzuko for his blessing. And there was Toki, sat with the other pregnant men on the opposite side of the fire, belly bulge just visible through the curling, dissipating smoke. Man looked damn near ready to pop.

Shame Aja wouldn’t be able to welcome the child with her customary cheek-pinches.

The thought still hurt, of course it did. Aja might be with Anthos, but that didn’t mean the village didn’t grieve. But in the wake of their tribute, to her and Him alike now both were one, Yondu could think about the future that slumbered in Toki’s stretched, heavy pouch, and smile. Last thing the old git would have wanted was for ‘em to lay about moping.

Yondu stretched, crikking his neck from side to side to relieve his crest of the imprint of Jaku’s grip.

‘Fuck girl,’ he said, using that harsh Xandarian cuss that hurt the others’ throats too much to repeat back at him. The note of the hum still lingered on the edge of audibility. When Yondu dug a finger in his ear it ceased, however, and the usual medley of forest noise was allowed to creep back in. ‘You usin’ me as a stresstoy or what?’

Kraglin watched them - people seemed to be moving, the humming stopped. Some were even getting up, slowly and carefully, shaking the aches and stings from their bodies. He breathed out, ducking his head to breathe in cleaner air as people started to filter past. He was sure they had their own things to get on with - explaining to children, sitting and thinking, relaxing, working.

Pharaqa stood, stretching her arms above her tahlei in a long, easy movement, grunting at the end of it. She looked around, keeping track of where people were going, who was where. She frowned when she saw Kraglin on his log, her expression uncertain before she glanced at Uzuko for confirmation. As he didn’t seem worried she let herself relax a little, rolling her shoulders as her arms came back down.
Time to move on with her day.

She patted Yondu's shoulder once, just an acknowledgement that he’d done well. Then she turned for the forest, heading in to wrestle a rock, or something, no one was really sure what she did back there. Kraglin stood uncertainly when he noticed everyone else leaving, waiting for Yondu.

Yondu dodged Jaku’s kick, laughing, and turned to collect his Star-man. Now the dedication was over, Aja’s property - including those much-adored jskveh hens - would be redistributed to those who could make use of it. That would be the true test, Yondu decided. If her essence was still lingering, laying hands on her precious fowls would surely reveal her vengeful spirit.

Yondu didn't have eyes on the hens though. His prize would be something much… slipperier.

“C’mon,” he said, catching Kraglin’s arm. The guy looked a little dazed - understandable, given what he’d witnessed. Yondu, fully recovered (if rather woozy from the smoke) tugged until he started to follow, chattering all the way. “Les go to her hut. I want first dibs on…”

“Why do you want the healing salve again?” Pharaqa tossed the first of the many pre-prepared terracotta jars from palm to palm. Bottling this stuff had been Aja’s favorite pastime, other than spoiling children and chasing jskveh thieves with her cane. There was plenty to go around.

Yondu donned a scowl. “Now the old bat ain’t around to patch me up, I gotta take things into my own hands. Ain’t so easy being a hunter without a pack in these here woods - not that you’d know.”

Kraglin had followed along, nodding a little. When Yondu had explained his goal he - alright, he didn’t go very red, but he did have to cough a little and look down to hide his grin. Maybe he was a little bit pleased that Yondu was so eager to try something like that, but, he wasn’t going to argue.

“Jus’ tell her I’m a really clumsy idiot.” Kraglin suggested, hands in his pockets so as not to be accused of taking anything at all. “You gotta keep an eye on me, right?”

He could play up being an idiot. Right now, he was regretting not pulling something on over the top - he’d had at least four Zatoans prod his hairy back with varying levels of disgust and curiosity.

“Plus my friend here can’t walk two steps without injuring something,” Yondu said smoothly, as if it had been his idea. “And if that something's me, i’m honor-bound to punch him. So if you won’t do it for me, at least think of poor Kraggles.” He gave poor Kraggles’ head it’s usual light cuff, smirking when the lanky git ducked benevolently to enable it.

Then turned his glare on the young huntress stroking Kraglin’s back.

“Yeah, he’s hairy there too. Get over it.”

“It’s so gross,” she replied, fascinated as she petted. Kraglin, with some good humour, just sighed and shrugged a little, waiting for her to get bored. If she was back there, he reasoned, she wasn’t able to shove food in his mouth. Win-win. Pharaqa grumbled and held out - two? Of the pots.

“One each,” she said, wagging them for Yondu to take. “Try not to fall down any cliffs.”

Yondu resisted the urge to fistpump. Fistpumping right now would be a very poor idea, as it would only make Pharaqa want to know why he was so elated about getting a jar of mulched up snails, or whatever else Aja had pounded into this stuff to make it the consistency of swampslime. He settled for smiling at her - rare enough in itself - and stealing Kraglin away from the girl, twisting to stick his tongue out at her as he passed. No more backscratches for his Star-man. Tonight, Kraglin was all Yondu’s.
Yondu briefly touched his forehead, a gesture of respect, and glanced to the ground Aja had returned to. They’d exposed her body to the forest, as was common for Centaurians, and within the week she’d have rotted or been stripped to the bone. Yet Yondu could swear that he felt her presence - not a divisible part of the lifeforce that bubbled eternally under his feet, more like a faint sense of amusement.

He muttered “Thanks, old bat,” to the mossy earth.

He’d never managed to give Aja a proper scare when he jumped out at her without his loincloth. But Anthos was omniscient and now, Aja was part of Anthos. Yeah, though Yondu once they’d escaped the huddle gathered around Aja’s shack. Seeing what intentions he had with her ointment would more than do the trick.

Kraglin had followed along with his usual sense of willingness, glad to be away from curious eyes and hands. Shirts, he reminded himself. Didn’t matter how they liked to do things here, shirts were mandatory for him. He grinned down at Yondu though, once they were a little way from the hut and the throngs of people milling to and from it.

“So,” Casual, Kraglin. “You seem - excited about things. I'm flattered, really.” A little bit amused that Yondu had been that easy to sway, but he certainly wasn’t going to complain. He shoved his hands in his pockets as he fell into step beside him, grinning a little as they walked. Or rather, Yondu walked and he followed.

Aja’s passing had made him realise how small the circle of people who wanted him here - or at least enjoyed his company - was. Not counting the children, whose voices didn’t count for much in the village, he was aware that he should really just enjoy this while he could. P He just had to get on with his ship, but… But some time spent having fun was alright.

“So where are we going?”

Yondu lifted a shoulder, striving to make it look casual.

“Was thinkin’ we could swing by the pools. Ain’t been there in a while and…” He lifted Kraglin’s arm. Sniffed. Recoiled. Which, giving Yondu’s usual relationship with bathtime, was more than a bit hypocritical. “You stink of that funky smoke. Don’t wanna be choking on that while we’re well. Uh. Y’know.”

The edge of the village, where the crude fence opened onto the cleared forest path that diverged in one direction up the mountain towards the springs and the lava fields and in the other towards the swamp, suddenly became of great interest.

“Yeah?” Kraglin nodded, falling into step beside Yondu. He hesitated before he cleared his throat, looking ahead at the path with a low noise. “Pools will be nice. Got uh, something to show you up there anyway.”

Which sounded weird and ominous, given that Yondu had seen pretty much all of him at that point.

“After a bath though. Then I’ll take you there.” Well, the cave was more secluded than the rest of the pools, come to think of it. Plenty of time and privacy to get up to whatever they wanted. He did his best not to flush at the Idea.

Kraglin had something to show him up by the pools.

Kraglin also never left the village without Yondu for a guide, given that Kraglin wasn’t an initiated hunter, he had yet to complain about babysitting duty, and Yondu was maybe, possibly, a teensy bit
overprotective. (He had yet to admit to Kraglin that he’d forbidden Iriki and Koji from taking him to see the fishing nets a week or so back. Who knew whether their favored cove was where a yolopp had curled to rest and been marooned, out beyond the retreating brink of the swamp? If he left Kraglin out of his sight for more than a few hours, he might never see him again.)

Meaning that this whole situation was very... Suspicious.

Yondu put two and two together and, as usual, came out with fifteen.

“Who showed you this ‘thing’? You went to the pools without me? Who with?” Horror burgeoned. “Don’t tell me it was one of the girls from the fire. Or at least, not Jaku.”

“No one showed me a thing.” Kraglin replied, a little mystified at the line the questioning had taken. “I can walk. I found it by myself.”

Which was not entirely true. He was sure though, that telling Yondu about his parents’ adventures with his spaceship would be violating the deal he'd come to. But just showing him the ship, letting him know he was working on it for ‘sentimental reasons’ well… That was agreeable.

Maybe he could even take Yondu on a night-flight around the planet, just to give him some view of the vastness of his world.

“It'll make sense when you see it, don't worry.”

Kraglin had gone alone? That was even worse. Didn’t he realize how uncamouflaged he was on the bare rocks, with his stupid white skin? It was like he wanted to be aku-chow.

Yondu huffed, crossing his arms. He stalked on ahead down the path, flashing middle fingers at the watchers on duty (they exchanged confused looks, put it down to their next chief’s long-rumoured insanity, and went about their days).

It wasn’t an especially hard task for Kraglin to catch him up. Stupid long legs. But Yondu satisfied himself with the sense of victory that came with not having initiated conversation until they reached the pools.

He would see Kraglin’s surprise, he decided. And then he’d make up his mind whether or not to forgive him.

Kraglin grinned wryly to himself as he followed along, though he relaxed considerably once he saw the steaming pools. The soot was starting to itch, and the thought of what was in his lungs was making him wary - his species could survive most toxins, sure, but surviving wasn't the same as being undamaged.

“Oh fuck me raw, that's so good.” Kraglin groaned as he sunk into the pool they picked out, sinking down until only the top of his by-now long mohawk poked from the waters. The fuzz along the sides was longer now too, and he rubbed soot from it all before he surfaced with a shudder.

Yondu waited until Kraglin had seated himself on a little outcrop. Droplets clung to his star-man’s eyelashes. Rivulets streamed down his bare chest. The grey residue peeled off his skin, leaving him as eerily white again, rather than motley grey. The ashes swirled around them, spiralling with the currents, infecting the pool’s opalescent luster. But it wouldn’t be long before the dirty water drained through the porous rock and the next surge bubbled up from below: a hot, clean, fresh, and mildly sulfurous baptism.

After assessing that Kraglin had reached this optimum state of tranquility, Yondu unfastened his
loincloth and bellyflopped in to join him.

Sploosh.

The wave overtopped the poolsides. The smack on his pouch and chest was well worth Kraglin’s gurgles. Yondu came up laughing so hard he snorted water out of his nose, forgetting that he was supposed to be grumpy.

“We oughta come here more often,” he said once he’d cleared his airways - and wondering whether the pools’ purported healing properties extended to sinus infections. “Just you and me. Y’know. Together.”

He stuck his head underwater before Kraglin could react, scraping soot from the folds of his ears. His crest was all that remained above the surface, like the fin of a prowling shark. And if he was drifting ever-closer… That was the currents. Totally. Just. The currents.

“Yeah,” Kraglin sounded weary but impossibly fond, wiping the scuzzy water from his face with a smile. If there was one thing he liked about Yondu it was his stupid amounts of energy. He relaxed back when it looked like Yondu was doing his best impression of a dead shark, trying to stay calm.

There aren’t much point in talking if Yondu was only going to be able to bubble in response. He watched the approach of the crimson slash with half-lidded eyes, wondering-

There was only one way to find out. But he’d been observing these people for some time now, and he had a theory.

Kraglin reached out with wet fingers, waiting for that beautiful crest to come close enough to touch, grazing his fingertips lightly over the edge of it. When he’d touched it before he’d been breathless, dizzy with want and lust, hungry for Yondu. Now he was calm, welcoming, his touch reverent and adoring.

Pressure. Four streaks of it, like the war-paint stripes on a hunter’s cheeks.

The capillaries in Yondu’s crest had expanded to their maximum, all close to the surface from the heat, making the tight red skin shimmer maroon. There was no way to clamp down on the sensations streaming along his crest, no way to deny them - not that Yondu would want to if he could. He tried to stand, forgetting that the drop-off point in this pool was so close to the edge. While Kraglin sat in shallows Yondu was over nothing but water and the fire that stewed far, far below in Anthos’s broiling guts. But it only took a short moment of flailing to right himself, and he only inhaled half of the pool, by his approximation. It was sheer luck that kept him from swallowing.

Kraglin’s hand broke contact for the duration. As always, his touch had been exploratory rather than demanding; he’d retreated immediately when Yondu found himself treading more water than expected, as if Kraglin were afraid he’d surprised him and didn’t want to overstep.

Which was cute and all. But sometimes, Yondu wished the guy would take a hint.

After coughing again - and feeling slightly jealous of the Ignokai, who (as every Zatoan knew) were inbred to the point of sprouting gills - he twisted about in the water and floated past Kraglin in the opposite direction. He wasn’t so much swimming as sculling, hands lazily sieving the water, constantly on the cusp of sinking. The offer was clear - the other side of Yondu’s crest, presented for a stroking. Yondu just hoped Kraglin would take him up on it, so he didn’t have to sit on the guy to make him keep touching him.

Kraglin had been a little dismayed with himself when it looked like he’d drowned his friend. That
tended to end relationships pretty permanently, after all. But it looked like Yondu had survived his dunking, and didn’t seem mad at him.

Kraglin worried his lip between his teeth for a moment, watching the lazy circle Yondu seemed to be making. His crest cut through the water, warm and inviting looking, and he hadn’t seemed angry…

Kraglin let the flat of his palm stroke over it again as it passed, a long, steady motion that followed the line of red for as long as Yondu’s movements would let him. He tried to focus, calming himself from his earlier drowning concerns, just trying to focus on all the good things Yondu made him feel, wondering if it passed through touch. He was mostly sure that was just something the Zatoans did, but it was worth a shot.

He’d seen them do it. Just now, at the ritual, and in more casual settings. Children seemed to be calmed with a touch from their parents, and he’d seen some pinches of what could only be anger or discipline between some others. So why not this? If it felt good when every inch of him screamed for contact with Yondu’s body, why couldn’t he indulge it?

Technically hand-on-crest contact (or worse yet: crest-on-crest contact) was reserved for special circumstances, chiding being the most common. Yondu recalled how his mother had grabbed him after he lugged the baby yolopp past the village boundary. He’d thought she was going to give him his first chieftainly piercing right there and then with her nails.

But hey. Everything about this… this whatever-they-had was forbidden. Yondu had long accepted that he wouldn’t be joining Anthos after he died (or if he did, Anthos was going to be very disappointed). What difference would a few more touches make?

If it was hedonistic to float closer, to turn his back on Kraglin and tread water in front of him with only his head breaching the surface so Kraglin’s hands were alternately engulfed in the toasty water and bared to the steamy air, then Yondu was a hedonist through and through. It just felt so… relaxing. Kinda like being a child again, sat yawning on Aja’s lap as he waited for father to finish Important Adult Discussions with the elders and come fetch him before bed.

Most nights, Aja conceded defeat. She’d taken him to his father’s cold nest herself, Yondu fighting all the way and insisting he could stay up five minutes longer, just five minutes, and put him to sleep with touches similar to those he was currently receiving: flat-palmed brushes, her outstretched fingers easily spanning the crest from its upper ridge to his spine at its tallest point.

But Yondu was bigger now. And Kraglin was no Aja (although he was about as conventionally attractive). While the smooth strokes were comforting, Yondu wasn’t anywhere close to nodding off. Instead, he was hyperaware of the body behind him: the faint ripples that stirred the water as Kraglin drew circles across every inch of his crest, the shadow of those slim arms on the trembling pool surface.

He’d sunk chin-deep in the water, his legs barely kicking as the comfort of Kraglin’s touches sunk into his bones. If he let this keep up any longer, he’d melt entirely - which would be fine if they were on land, but became a more dangerous prospect when you were floating above a fathomless firepit.

Yondu jolted when his nose crested the waterline. He swam backwards until the narrow rock strip that Kraglin had seated himself on nudged his ass. Then he heaved himself onto it, crushing his wet slippery body into the available space - and coincidentally, into Kraglin too, who was squashed back against the poolside.

It was cramped and cosy. And with Yondu boxing him in, a wall of glistening blue muscle, there was no way Kraglin was escaping.
'There,' he grunted, readjusting his weight by gripping the knobbly rock that protruded between his thighs. Water slopped around their chests. Yondu shook his head lightly, earrings jingling, making his crest swish back and forth an inch from Kraglin’s nose. ‘Now uh. You was in the middle of somethin’.’

Kraglin had been starting to get a little hazy himself - there was something about the slide of slick, red tahlei between one’s fingers that could do that to a man. He hummed when he noticed Yondu coming closer, welcoming the ripples of water against his chest. Then flushed, when he realized how much blue and red skin was pressed against him, all jostling for his attention.

‘Yeah.’ There wasn’t much point in arguing, even if he’d wanted to. Kraglin sighed a moment though and shut his eyes, leaning forward to let his forehead rest on Yondu’s shoulder, drinking in the smell of him - water, mostly, gases and oils from the rocks, the lingering smoke that hadn’t rubbed away entirely yet. He pressed his lips to slick, wet crest for a moment, almost without realising it, and he hummed low in his throat.

It would be so, so easy to ramp up the heat. He could turn his head, lick Yondu's neck and follow it back to his crest, trading kisses and presses of his teeth against the skin.

But he didn’t want that - or, he didn’t want that right now. Rather, he wanted to pamper him, to make him feel lavished and adored, so he only allowed himself a few soft, gentle kisses on his shoulder before his hand rose again.

It was much, much easier at this distance to get a good angle on his crest. He let his thumb move in slow, easy waves against the red skin as he stroked his hand up and down slowly, keeping his cheek against Yondu's back to watch. The water was murky and clouded, masking his hand from view when it vanished underwater, emerging again, stark and pale against the crest.

‘Does it,’ he murmured, not wanting to stop the slow, easy motions. ‘I mean, does it feel any different?’

‘Different to what?’ answered Yondu without opening his eyes. His head drooped low between his shoulders, stretching the crest around the curve of his neck. ‘From when Pharaqa pinches it? Hell yeah. This is way nicer.’ A pause. ‘Not that, y’know. I’d ever do this with her.’

The Zatoan gene pool wasn’t the largest - certainly no bigger than the natural hottub they’d claimed for their own, comparatively speaking. But for Anthos’s sake, they weren’t Ignokai.

The prickly pressure of Kraglin’s cheek on his back was constant and calming. Between that, the whuffs of Kraglin’s breath over heat-tenderized skin, and the plunge of his hands beneath the water to knuckle at Yondu's lower tahlei, Yondu was kept on the very brink of arousal without ever quite tipping over.

It should’ve been frustrating. Perhaps, in another context, it would have been. Yondu certainly wasn’t above being demanding, and if he desired more he’d proclaim it to the clouds above. But for the moment he was happy to float. Not literally - the rock gouging at his knees prevented the need for that. Yondu could concentrate on the delicate glide of Kraglin’s fingers over soaked flesh, trailing up and down the bone struts of his crest before massaging at the skin between, which was stretched tight as hides on a hunter’s drying rack.

‘Yell when you start to go pruney,’ Yondu mumbled, voice already sunk like a stone in a barrel, vibrating from low in his throat. ‘Cause I ain’t never gonna tell you to stop.’

‘I dunno. Just different I guess. I don’t know all of how your stuff works yet.’ Which was a fair
trade-off. All they had about each other was guesses about their anatomy - Yondu couldn’t possibly understand all the things that happened with his teeth. What triggered them, the notches and their meanings, how the third row signified a fight to the death, how colour bled out in the dark and turned to hyper-shades of grey once his eyes adjusted. There hadn’t been time or need for Kraglin to sit down and explain how fight brothers would clean and sharpen each other's teeth, grating metal over enamel until they were both trembling with it.

It wasn’t that there weren’t words in their ever growing shared dictionary to explain it, but that there was an awkward emotional block there. They were completely different species, and not for the first time that day, Kraglin had to acknowledge that.

“I don’t wanna stop. It makes you feel good, right?” He smiled a little, kissing the back of Yondu's ear playfully. “I like making you feel good.”

There it was again. That confession - *I like making you feel good*. Kraglin said it so flippantly too, like he thought it was no big deal to sit tucked close behind him in a hotpool, to touch him more intimately than he’d ever let anyone else, to rest his lips on the gentled pulse in his neck and whisper secrets like that into his pointed ear.

Okay, so that was a bit harsh. Kraglin respected the importance of what Yondu was sharing with him - his tentativeness when touching his crest, while frustrating, was evidence of that. But those words were what truly broke Yondu’s heart open. Because Kraglin was doing this, entirely unselfishly, for him. And Yondu, greedy a-hole that he was, was gonna take everything he gave and make him promise more while he was at it.

He stretched up assertively, flexing his shoulders and looking up until bright blue sky broke through the steam clouding his vision. Releasing the rock, he reached behind him to grab Kraglin’s sinewy flanks, scraping his nails through the wet matted hair. He was starting to realize, albeit slowly, that Kraglin didn’t necessarily want reciprocation.

This wasn’t a simple trade-off, a mercurial exchange of pleasure. Oh, he’d enjoy it if Yondu span around and started petting the fuzz on his arms and chest with similar intensity. But that wasn’t the point in this game. Kraglin was doing this for him, because, as he said, he *liked to make him feel good*. And Yondu was more than happy to show his appreciation.

“Yer doin’ okay,” he said, controlled and assured even as the meat of his back twitched to angle his crest more firmly against Kraglin’s fingertips. Then smirked, thinking of how he cooed at the village dogs when they mastered a new trick. “Real good, actually. Yer a real good boy, and I ain’t no poet so that’s the highest praise yer gettin’.”

Kraglin flushed, fingers stilling against the crest. That - that shouldn’t have felt so good to hear.

He burrowed his nose against the meat of Yondu's shoulder, his own going tense. Part of him wondered if this was what the Fighters felt like when their Pod Head soothed and calmed them after a bout. He knew he’d felt happier than he could remember being when his troop commander praised him for a training routine done well, but he’d squished that down. There were some things he wasn’t willing to do, and that was fuck a Nova Officer.

He’d do a lot of things, but not that.

“Yeah?” He cringed inside, sounding so needy and - hungry, for wont for a word; nosing his way up Yonder neck to be closer to the vibration of his voice. But he ran his hand up the crest attentively, his other spanning Yondu's hip, holding to keep him steady and still.
How much did he trust Yondu, exactly?

“I wanna be good for ya,” he mumbled, barely above the sound of moving water and the slide of stroking skin. “I dunno. S’that weird?”

“Totally,” said Yondu brightly, twisting to affix Kraglin with an over-the-shoulder grin. “You’re lucky you give okay back-rubs, or I’d’ve left ya in the swamp where I found ya, star-man.”

He nuzzled against Kraglin to show he was joking, tipping his head further back so Kraglin’s nose dug under his jaw and his beard grated the soft skin where his crest joined his nape. Kraglin’s shoulders were bony, but when he wasn’t slouching they didn’t slump so much that Yondu couldn’t use one as a pillow. He was squashing his crest and Kraglin’s hands between them - not enough to hurt, but enough to restrict Kraglin’s movement. Yet the guy was still stroking, up and down, dogged in his determination not to disobey the unspoken order: continue.

A chieftain’s son he may be, but Yondu had rarely been pampered before. And, as he was discovering, he liked it.

“Lemme tell ya what’s gonna happen,” he said to Kraglin, water slopping between his back and the hollow of Kraglin’s stomach. “We’re gonna relax here until the next rains. Then you’re gonna show me your dumb surprise-thing, and then we’re gonna go back to the village and I…” He caught the hand that rested on his hip, tangling slim white fingers with blunt blue. “I’m gonna sit on your cock, star-man.”

The little hitch in Kraglin’s breathing eclipsed the thrill that zinged through Yondu just from saying those taboo words. He continued, pleased when Kraglin’s stroking never lost its rhythm and their interlaced grip tightened.

“And you’re gonna control yerself real damn well, because I know you got it in you. You’re gonna do what I say, ain’t you Krags? Because you wanna be a real good boy.”

Kraglin hummed a little, a low and pleased sound that rumbled against Yondu's back. Privately, he wasn’t sure if that was still going to be the plan when Yondu actually saw his surprise. But he found it easier to simply defer that decision over to Yondu. Let him decide if he wanted plans to change. He nodded, rubbing his nose against Yondu’s cheek.

“Sure,” he murmured. His hands roamed steadily, never pausing. If Yondu wanted pettings, Kraglin would gladly supply them. “Sure do. Sounds good. Let’s do it.”

The drizzle made focusing easier - the coolness kept his head clear and easy, a low and easy hum in his chest as his hands slid over stretched red skin. He was kept in line easily, with murmurs or nudges of Yondu's body to guide him to better spots.

The rain fell all around, a curtain drawn between them and the world.

“Ready?” he murmured, when the suns filtered back through. They dried off, pulled on clothes for some form of dignity, and although his head still felt cottony, Kraglin turned to lead on. He’d found the path to the cave when he’d landed the poor girl, picking his way through tiny, narrow cliff paths. He was glad he didn’t have his boots, fingers gripping tight to the rockwall as he lead them down.
“It’s not far,” he promised as he picked over the stones, following the pull down to the earth. It might not be his planet, sure - but underground was underground. He was confident here. He paused by the mouth of the cave before hopping down the rest of the ledge, moving to his Girl.

She’d been drained and rubbed clean, and he’d attached wires and devices to her main ports - she wouldn’t get too far on just solar power, no matter how much this planet gave off, but it’d be enough to launch her towards the sun and activate the fuel scoops. Then it was just a matter of time, spending a few days being toasty warm while it gathered what it needed. Then - Then -

When Yondu first saw the glint, he thought Kraglin had stumbled across a diamond seam. Then he looked closer. And felt the stomach drop out of his world.

“Your star. Ship. Your starship.”

That much was self-evident. But what was concerning was how bright it looked, dredged from the swamp and swabbed free of pondweed. Effort had obviously been expended on its upkeep. As for whose, the answer stood before him. All gangly six feet of it, peeking at him nervously to check on his reaction.

Yondu couldn’t look at Kraglin right now. Instead, he concentrated on the ship. It was so freaking shiny. It tossed back the odd ray that refracted through the cave entrance as the clouds peeled back overhead, and seeing it for the first time since the night of the crash, Yondu understood how he’d mistaken it for a star.

He stepped into the cave. The change in atmosphere was almost immediate: bright airy cliff-face to cooler, deader air, not stirred by a breath of breeze. The cave entrance was protected on four sides - above, below, and with a boulder to both the left and the right of the entrance. Unless the wind blew against the mountainside face-on, the air would be left to stagnate like water in a quagmire.

This was fitting, as right now, a similar process was occurring in Yondu’s lungs. Only his breaths were heaving faster not from a want of fresh oxygen but fear, fear overlaid with fury.

How long had Kraglin been hiding this from him? Had he been working here in secret whenever Yondu was off doing tasks about the village or slogging through the swamp in search of food that wouldn’t try to eat him? Why had he salvaged his ship, if it wasn’t to leave?

He didn’t trust himself not to touch the star without punching it. But some small satisfaction was to be taken from the empty bubble of the cockpit, a few shreds of glass still clinging to the top from where he’d shattered it with his arrow.

“Looks like that’s still broken,” he said, not bothering to hide his hope. “You ain’t going nowhere with that in such a state.”

“I don’t wanna be goin’ anywhere anyway.” Which wasn’t a lie - he absolutely didn’t want to leave, least of all leave Yondu. So he didn’t feel too bad about phrasing it like that. While he didn’t have any doubt of what Pharaqa and Uzuko would do to him if he didn’t uphold his end of the bargain - it would involve arrows and blood, and apologising to their Anthos directly afterwards - he still wanted to tell Yondu.

And to get that worrying look off Yondu’s face. He itched to pull him closer, to calm him again. It had been so great less than half an hour ago, and now he’d ruined anything. Time to think of
something to say. None of it, he reminded himself, would necessarily be a lie. It was all true, just…

massaged, a little.

“It’s not about goin’ anywhere, Yondu. She’s important to me. She’s like - it’s important to keep an eye on her. To keep her in good condition. I dunno what you guys have the same, like,” He pushed a hand through his hair, casting about to try and think of something similar. “Like your arrows? Maybe? I would feel really, really bad if I just left her in there, all broken and stuff. S’all it is. Sides, if she’s working again I can show you all sorts of other stuff, you know? I thought, you’d be interested in how it all works....”

Like an arrow? Well, that made sense. If your arrow snapped, you took it to the blacksmith and suffered every clash of hammer on hot yaka as if it were hitting your own flesh. If Kraglin had a similarly close connection with his ship, Yondu could understand why he had fixed her. Not to leave. But out of respect.

The thought of Kraglin being able to hop in and fly away to his stars whenever he wanted was still unpalatable, a niggle that burrowed under Yondu’s skin like a parasitic swampworm. So long as Kraglin was on Anthos’ body, Yondu would be able to find him. But if he shot away into the night sky, it would be as if he’d never existed.

Yondu couldn’t have that.

He took a deep breath, and controlled the exhale until he was certain the stupid desperate flood of expressions were no longer running rampant across his face.

How could you keep this from me and don’t you dare leave me were clashing for dominance inside him like aku in a rut. But Yondu refused to let them break the surface.

“Why’d you call it a ‘she’?” he asked quietly, glancing at Kraglin sidelong. “I thought it weren’t alive.”

“S’not alive. The fear was still there, still hovering over him as he tried to read Yondu and came up with a few blanks. He moved over to the ship though, patting one of the shining struts fondly. “But all ships are girls. I dunno why, cos they’re pretty or somethin’. Some guys call their warships guy names, but they’re usually assholes.” He grinned, letting his hand drop from the metal.

It was an odd trend, he supposed, looking at it as an outsider might. Even the AIs were usually females of the species, a soothing voice probably designed to cool tempers out in space. Granted, this ship didn’t have an AI but he was confident if she had one, she’d probably sound gentle and sweet. Optimistic about things, just like she was.

“I thought, if we were super careful, or we tell people we were going out on a camping trek or something... We could take her and see some other parts of your planet. Maybe.”

Yondu goggled at him. Then the starship, then back to him again.

“My parents would kill me!” he blurted. Then grinned, smile spreading slow as swamprot. “All the more reason not to get caught. No one else knows about this right? Just you and me.”

He didn’t wait for an answer, running to the ship and springing off the wall onto her tallest spike, where he’d smashed flint on metal so many moons ago. He supposed he could see where Kraglin was coming from. The ship - she - was kinda pretty. Didn’t have nothing on him though.

He swung to perch on the bulbous top of the cockpit, one leg kicked to either side, bare toes scuffling at the shiny metal. His loincloth clung to him, still damp. When he bent down to peer into
the cockpit through the frame of his thighs, he saw the dark interior, the chair he’d scrambled on top of, and that forbidden button, as cherry-red and tantalizing as ever.

He hooked his thumbs in his loincloth’s waiststrap so he wouldn’t be tempted. “You stopped me touching that before,” he said, inclining his crest at the chip he’d put in the button’s protective casing. “Why?”

“Because if you press it, you launch through the ceiling.” Kraglin watched with amusement as Yondu monkeyed about the ship, folding his arms. “It’s an emergency ejection button, but it’s a one time use. So don’t push it. Here,” he said, moving around the side of the ship.

“It would shoot me through the roof?” That sounded amazing. But not, Yondu supposed, while they were in a cave.

Kraglin hit a button. The ship hummed for a moment, thrumming with energy and potential before it clicked, her now-fixed door swinging open. Inside, the lights flickered on, illuminating the bridge and the small room behind it all. She was a small ship, not built for anything more than short missions or battles, but there were adequate supplies for the three-man team that could work her.

“Come round here, I’ll let you in properly. Show you around.” Test the bunks, he supplied to himself, rubbing his cheek to stop the giddy smile. The crisis seemed to be averted for now - something he could put off for the time being until it became more pressing a matter. The idea of going on cruises wasn’t a bad one, since it would let him test her capabilities without scaring the natives. Giving Yondu the chance to see more of his own world was just a plus point.

He waited for Yondu to join him before he led them in, the walkway leading them up into a small, metal room. The airlock was already open, showing the view of the bridge from the opposite side. It was cramped, two bunks recessed into opposite walls with storage built in above them. There was more below the floor, using removable panels to get to them - from the looks of it, Kraglin had already scavenged through them for his repair supplies, and some were piled onto one bunk for easy reach. He toed the cover back across the floor storage with a secure sounding click, just to give them something to walk over.

He trotted behind Kraglin, brisk walk slowing to a dawdle as he dragged reverent fingers across the interior walls. So smooth. Smooth like the blade of a hunting knife or the shaft of a yaka arrow. But far larger, curling around them and swooping overhead like they were entering a massive metallic garlic clove.

When the panel clicked down, locking into place, Yondu jumped. He span to face it, knife whipped out. Then relaxed. Not a venomous tree-lizard that had stowed away on the flight over. Just… a mechanism. Yet another marvellous thing that he’d never seen before.

Everything caught his attention; everything fascinated him. He touched the pustule-like solar lights that were set into the wall around the odd, seat-like benches. Then ran his hands along the bench itself, eyes widening as his fingertips sunk in.

The cushioning was like nothing he’d felt. It was perhaps comparable to the fungi that grew in the deepswamps: spongey orange loaves that fed on the roots of the trees that weren’t submerged. Only, y’know, it didn’t stink, and it wasn’t slimed over with algae. Yondu dug his thumbs in. He laughed quietly to himself when their impressions remained after he’d removed them, foam puffing slowly up to retake its original shape. Then pressed his entire hand against it, staring at the print it left behind.

“Kraglin! Look at this!”
Of all the things he had expected to grab Yondus attention, it hadn’t been the mattress. He glanced
over before he came to join Yondu, giving him a grin.

“The bed?” he said, reaching out and poking it gently. He’d had to haul it out and beat it over the
side of the cliff to get it into presentable shape - the other one still had a slightly musty smell to it,
which was why it was currently being a shelf instead. There was nothing wrong with it though,
when he pulled his hand back, until he realised it was probably the softest sort of thing Yondu had
ever poked to begin with.

Which, given the thing was Army issue, was pretty sad. Leaning over the bed, he pulled a slot on the
wall, opening the covers of the long, hidden window set into the ship’s side. Granted, right now it
only showed rock wall.

“There,” he said, leaning out of the cubby hole and straightening back up. “It’s so you can, y’know.
Watch the stars while you’re going to sleep. There’s a cover for the open side of the bunk too, so you
can get it all nice and dark, private-like.” As he spoke he stepped back, pulling down the cover on
the opposite bunk to demonstrate, and make the place look a little tidier by shutting away the mess.

Yondu stared at the cover, mouth slightly ajar. Then, hoarsely:

“Do it again!”

The damn thing had slid right out of the wall! Yondu had an internal picture of the ship’s dimensions
from walking around the outside, and he was convinced that there simply wasn’t enough space
to fit a sheet of metal. And yet, against all odds, there it was: curving down over the bunk like the smooth
outer shell of a conch.

Star-man magic, Yondu decided, nestling into Kraglin’s side and not bothering to hide his grin.
There was no other explanation.

Kraglin blinked but did it again, opening and closing the metal sheet like a mouth. He left it down on
the final wiggle of it, curling his arm around Yondu with a soft hum. He was - delighted by the
others reaction, if he was honest with himself, leaning down to kiss the top of his head a bit.

“You like it?” he asked, as if he didn’t already know the answer. “Cos I gotta tell ya, it's great now
but it gets a little cramped livin’ in it for 6 months on end.” Not that it had ever put him off, though.
He’d still always thrown himself into the mission that got him the most space-time, the most
experience living in the stars under his belt.

It was always risky, taking a planet-bound species and putting them in the stars. There was always
the risk of them turning into Screamers; poor, hollow-eyed souls who couldn’t bear any more of the
abyss that pressed in on them from all sides, something in the endless darkness breaking their minds
and leaving them helpless. It was a gamble, some people either having the fortitude to stick it out, or
not.

Kraglin was used to the darkness, having battled through his first months of panic by shutting his
eyes and picturing the ship as a tunnel system, the void outside just the darkness of a chasm. It had
worked, and he’d been addicted to the open stars ever since.

“Plus there’s usually two other guys living with you. It’s why,” Kraglin raised a finger, educating.
“The bed covers are also known as Spunk Shields. It’s to stop your crewmates splashin’ you by
accident if you gotta make a sudden turn.”

“Wow,” said Yondu, fighting to keep a straight face. It lasted a valiant five seconds. Then he
dissolved, sputtering a laugh. “Spunk shields. Anthos above.” His elbow dug teasingly into Kraglin’s ribs. “Wait, does that mean the rest of the star-men - uh, *aliens* - make as much as you do? Fuck, your poor ship. Kinda impressed the floor ain’t stickier.”

Jokes aside, he couldn’t imagine sharing close quarters with others for any extended duration. In the village, even hunt-brothers got pissed off with one another occasionally and stormed off into the forest in opposite directions until they’d cooled their heads.

“So how do you not kill each other? And what do ya do if one of you farts? And, and…” He broke away from Kraglin, bouncing to the cover and ramming it back a little too fast, the clang making the flooring vibrate. Then, after only a second’s hesitation, poured himself onto the supple fabric, squirming as it adjusted to his weight. “Shut me in, shut me in! I wanna see how dark it gets.”

“Alright, alright, hold on.” Kraglin snorted a little, leaning over him. The close quarters was too much for him to resist, and he popped a kiss on Yondus nose after he pulled the side-window shut. No point trying to make it dark with some sunlight filtering in. He straightened up, gave him a glance to be sure, then slid the cover down carefully.

He wasn’t an idiot. He kept his hand on the handle just in case Yondu started having an epic freakout in the little box.

When the hatch clicked closed behind him, Yondu realized just how small the space he’d volunteered to be piled into was. His crest brushed the wall, metal cold as icy spruces from the creek. His hands splayed over the convex bulge of the cover from the inside. It wasn’t pitch black - nowhere near; not that Yondu would know this as he’d never experienced anything darker than the deepswamps, where the brackish stagnant bog glistened with bioluminescent algae. But it was dark, and given his poor night vision, the darkness might as well have been infinite.

“Anthos,” he breathed. His voice seemed too loud, bouncing off the underside of his steel coffin’s lid. He curled up, making himself smaller to try and maximize the space between him and the walls, but only succeeding in banging his knees. “When we go flying, I ain’t gonna use this. I don’t care how much jizz falls on me.”

Yondu wasn’t claustrophobic. He’d spent enough time cramming himself in burrows to avoid swampmonsters to quash any fear of being trapped. But this hole wasn’t lined with dirt and roots and *Anthos*. It was cold and dead, and Yondu would be lying if he claimed to like it.

He had to get used to it, if he wanted Kraglin to take him on that promised journey through the Centaurian sky, double-suns breaking over the reflective plates on his starship’s back. But Yondu’s connection to the living world ran deep. Perhaps he’d feel more comfortable if he could drape ivy around the edges of the mattress, dry earth on the pillow, and leave the hatch a chink open to let the air circulate? Or better yet: if Kraglin were in here with him.

Sure, it was already a tight fit. But Kraglin was skinny and Yondu wasn’t exactly the tallest bloke around. They’d make it work. And something told Yondu he’d enjoy being shut away from the world in this tiny little capsule far more, if he didn’t have to do it alone.

He knocked on the cover. Waited until Kraglin obediently reeled it up, and pressed his face to the gap, smirking up at him. “Wanna snuggle?”

Kraglin resisted the urge to point out that all past performances suggested that Yondu didn’t care about how much jizz fell on him on a daily basis. Doing so would have been tasteless, so he just sniggered to himself a little, waiting for the other to get bored.
“Sure.” If he melted a little on the inside, that was for him and him alone. He waited for Yondu to scooch over before he slipped onto the mattress, giving a pleased groan - he’d missed foam. He rolled the cover down, leaving them just a sliver to let the air in.

If he shut his eyes and hugged Yondu close, maybe he could pretend they were in space already, zipping around from one planet to another doing oddjobs. Just them, the stars, their own little ship. It would hurt even more when he realised it wasn’t real and never would be, because when he left he was expected to do so alone. But it was good for now, and that was what mattered.

“Better?” he asked, nudging his nose against Yondu’s temple playfully.

They were chest-to-chest, belly-to-belly, leg-to-leg. If there was a millimeter of space between them Yondu closed it when he wriggled forwards, pretending his crest was cramped from being bowed against the wall. He nudged Kraglin right back, then rubbed his face against his. Just a head-butt in slow motion, that was all. Not a nuzzle. Totally not. One arm was tucked up, cheek pillowed on his bicep, while the other draped lazily over Kraglin’s waist.

“Much,” he said, toothy grin all that could be seen of his face in the dark. “So uh, Kraglin. Come here often?”

If he went pink at the tease, it was fine. Yondus night vision wasn’t good enough to pick out the colour. Kraglin had no vain illusions about his looks - he knew he wasn’t exactly one of the most striking men in the galaxy (except for when people asked him how often he’d been struck to look like that) so his experience with being flirted with was low. Usually the only women who approached him in bars had been seduced by the uniform, rather than the gawky, nervous face above it.

“Uh,” He almost ducked his head a little, stopped himself in time and just was glad to be tucked close as he fumbled his words. “Sometimes. Maybe, yeah.”

Yondu’s grin shrunk, but only out of necessity so that it didn’t fall off the sides of his face. He smirked instead, one side of his mouth hooking up, and tipped his head so his words broke against Kraglin’s lips:

“Yeah, I bet you cum here aall the time.” He paused for the meaning to sink in. Then added, just in case: “Regular lil spunk-o-matic, you are.”

It was his first pun in Xandarian, and he was inordinately proud of himself.

“Oh, for dasts-” Kraglin groaned and tipped his head back, away from the blue demon he’d nestled into bed with. There was no escaping him though, not with the bed cover pressed against his back, so he just shook his head, trying to avoid looking at him. The man was dreadful and mean and- And the best way to shut him up, Kraglin decided, kiss him lightly, pulling back after a moment.

“That was dreadful,” he informed him, smile giving him away. “Awful. Never again.”

“Stop quoting yer last girlfriend and kiss me again, idiot.”

“So you admit you think I’m boyfriend material, huh?”

“This ain’t kissing.” Yondu slanted his mouth grumpily over Kraglin’s, letting him feel the shape of his scowl. “This is kissing.”
Sure, it had been Kraglin to teach him about this weird, sloppy, and oddly intimate form of contact. That didn’t mean Yondu couldn’t drag his hand up the length of Kraglin’s back, feeling ribs through the fabric of his t-shirt, and thread his fingers through Kraglin’s hair so he could hold him steady while he pushed his tongue into his mouth.

Hey, he was a quick learner.

Kraglin would have resisted, really he would have. The urge to get the last word in was a strong one, but when he was faced with that sort of thing… He leant into Yondu to kiss him back, his fingers curling on the ties of his loincloth, palms anchored on his hips. He made a low noise of agreement, teeth nipping and catching very, very gently against Yondu’s lips before he dotted kisses over them, soothing as best he could.

The lack of space made everything feel better, from the smoothness of Yondu’s skin under his hand to the thud of his pulse through his ribs. Call him a hopeless romantic, but this was almost ideal for him, pressed in close and kissing Yondu as warmly as he could, welcoming anything the other man wanted to give and returning it with adoration.

Yondu grunted at the bites, jutting his chin to clonk off Kraglin’s in wordless encouragement. How long had he been dreaming about having those teeth on him? And knowing how much effort it took for Kraglin not to chomp down, take advantage, break the delicate blue skin that, when pursed in a whistle, became Yondu’s greatest weapon… Fuck, he wouldn’t be more turned on if Kraglin had dived straight for his dick.

The darkness was pervasive, clinging to the bony angles of Kraglin’s form. Yondu could just about make out how his shoulders twitched as ragged nails crimped his loincloth rope, Kraglin clinging to him like he was a root in the bog. It was easy to forget how young Kraglin was - especially given that he’d only found out about their age difference last week. But Yondu’d wager Kraglin was just as desperate, just as hungry and fumbling as he was.

“You,” he whispered, punctuating each word with a wet tack of their lips. “Are gonna take me flying one day. An’ I’m gonna do this. Over. And. Over. Don’t think I’m gonna be able to stop myself.”

Kraglin flushed at the promise, returning each kiss with avid attention. While some part of him, the part in a grey and teal pressed uniform that panicked about altitudes and fuel specs, pointed out that full attention was needed while flying a ship, most other parts of him agreed that kissing Yondu into a hungry, heated mess on his lap while stars streaked past them in yellow and white blurs was something he needed in his life. He found himself nodding along, shifting his body in a nonsensical push to try and get closer, as if there was any spare room between them to begin with.

“Sure,” he said, tilting to kiss Yondu’s jaw, nicking his skin gently with the points of his teeth. “Anything you want, s’fine. Never want ya t’stop yourself anyway, s’fine.” He let his fingers pluck gently at the ties, slipping his fingers underneath it to relish the touch of skin; pointless, no sense to it, given how much of Yondu was usually on offer and display. That thin line under the cord was barely thicker than his own finger, but it was covered, and Kraglin wanted to touch it.

“Anything?” Kraglin had this terrible habit of giving him way too much power. “What if I wanted to fuck in the middle of the village? Or in my father’s hut? Or if I wanted to fuck a yolopp? Or if I wanted to fuck you?”

He gave Kraglin’s ass a cheeky squeeze. There wasn’t much of it - scarcely a good handful - but it was worth it for the sharp inhale. And for the fingers darting under the thong that held the halves of his loincloth together, brushing tender flesh. It stoked the heat between his legs. Yondu wound one over Kraglin’s, hooking behind his knees with his calf, and gave Kraglin full access to his jawline.
and the tendon in his neck.

“All of those except your father’s hut are fine.” he responded, once he had his mouth under control again. He followed the slight pull that was offered, sliding his leg up to press his thigh between Yondu’s, fabric bunching around them.

Anything to distract him.

“I really wanna bite you,” he confessed, his voice low as he pressed kiss after kiss over his neck instead, fingertips trembling a little as he smoothed his palm up and down Yondu’s side, dragging it slow over his hip. “I know I can’t. S’a dumb thing, Hrax thing. Can’t, but I wanna, y’know? I want y’to know that I would if I could.”

Yondu shivered.

Yondu shouldn’t shiver, Yondu should reach for his bow and arrows and get as far away from those teeth as he could. But he didn’t, because a) this was Kraglin, and Kraglin had just admitted that he wouldn’t chomp down on his jugular even if every instinct was screaming for him to taste Yondu’s blood, and b) this was actually, kinda, totally hot. Both the threat of the bite, and the knowledge that Kraglin was controlling himself.

Why not make things a bit harder for him?

“Mm,” Yondu agreed, tipping his head back fully. The long line of his throat flexed as he swallowed. “Thassa real shame, Krags. Because you ain’t allowed to chomp into any part of me until yer cock’s up my ass. An’ I don’t know about you, but…” He motioned to his scanty loincloth. Those things didn’t come with extra pouches. “I forgot the slick.”

Kraglin’s jaw flexed when Yondu’s throat bobbed in front of him like that, tempting with the throb of his pulse and the heat of his skin against his lips - the urge to bite wasn’t one with intent to damage Yondu, not exactly. But he’d be lying if the idea of Yondu with a perfect, imprinted scar of his teeth on his nape didn’t get him hot and shifting on the mattress, hands gripping him tighter.

He then had to bite back a laugh. Undeveloped species, he thought to himself ruefully, leaning back to get to his trousers. If they didn’t have one thing, they sure as hell didn’t have anything else you needed. Thankfully, he came from a more advanced stock - in his eyes at least, He had slung the little pot into his pocket when they headed up to the springs. He pressed the it against Yondu’s palm, smirking.

“Fantastic invention we got in space,” he said, crowding back in close. He ran his teeth along the edge of a pointed ear before heading back down again, seeking the heated skin under his jaw. “Called pockets.”

“Don’t need ‘em when you got a pouch.” Not that it was ever used for storing anything other than babies, but hey. Fact of the matter was, Zatoans came with built-in pockets while Kraglin had to have his made custom. That meant Yondu won.

Yondu smirked superiorly at him as he rolled the pot between his palms. It was too dark to see it, even with his crest glowing. But he could feel the etchings Aja had scratched into the clay, smell the faint sweetness of crushed flowers.

Kraglin was plastered close, settled over him like a rocky lahar. Ribs grated his bare chest through the Nova-issue shirt - not that the tatty garment would be passing inspections any time soon, what with how it’d been dragged backwards through swamp, bush, and hungry taabsha. Where their
skin brushed the heat was almost scalding. There was no room to pull away - not that Yondu would want to.

“Someone’s been plannin’ this,” he teased, gripping Kraglin’s ear to haul him into a quick bite of a kiss. “You been thinking about fuckin’ me this whole time? Havin’ to stop yerself touching me whenever i’m close?”

“Like you weren’t?” Kraglin countered with a grin, nipping back gently - not as gently as before, his want pushing him to a harder gnaw, still careful not to break skin. He wasn’t permitted to let blood, and he wouldn’t, not until Yondu gave the say.

Kraglin nuzzled against the hand happily, turning his head to close his mouth around the other’s wrist playfully. There was zero threat in the bite, but it let Yondu feel the dull press of both rows, let him know how much he needed him. As if the heat from his body, nudging in close between Yondu’s thighs, wasn't enough of a clue.

“Always thinkin’ about touchin’ you. S’what happens when you ain’t allowed to.”

Yondu purred, knees smacking the wall and the corrugated underside of the hatch. He wriggled himself further beneath Kraglin’s weight. There wasn’t much to that weight, admittedly, but what was there was composed entirely of bone. The impression of Kraglin’s hips on his left a sharp, perfect little pain.

“What d’ya think of doing to me,” he whispered, tugging on his wrist. It wasn’t enough to break the lock of Kraglin’s jaws, but it did make his serrated incisors drag over the tendon, a thrill of danger joining the thrumming heat in his belly. “Tell me and I might letcha. If yer good, of course.”

Kraglin grinned, shutting his eyes. There wasn't much he didn't think of, if he was honest. He tried not to, given the amount of time they were around other people and he needed to be discreet - but any time they were alone they were allowed to be all over each other like spider monkeys anyway.

“Think about gettin’ to lick you open again,” he murmured, releasing Yondu's wrist to lean down and pepper kisses over his neck. “Get you all whining and panting again, fuckin’ y’self onto my fingers-”

Because that had been an image that lingered - blue skin parting greedily around him, Yondu shoving his hips back to meet each careful push with his own reckless abandon. The thought of him doing the same, grinding his hole shamelessly against his knot-

“Or plugging you up proper.” He let his teeth rest against Yondu’s hip bone, spine curled against the roof of the bed cubby. “Still makin’ you moan while I fill you up over and over- Getting t’bite-”

If that last one sounded a little guilty, it's because it was. They'd just gone over that, but he’d been asked what he thought of, so...

Yondu wanted it all, and Yondu wanted it now. However, they only had a limited number of holes, or cocks/fingers/tongues to insert into them. While he was vibrating with eagerness, having Kraglin lick him, finger him, and knot him all at once was strategically impossible.

...Unless the star people had cloning equipment. Because while he might still be about as inexperienced in carnal matters as a newly initiated hunter navigating the deepswamp, Yondu knew one thing, and that was that right now, in this moment, he didn’t want anyone but Kraglin inside him.

He ground upwards. Kraglin’s head wound up squashed between the low hatch roof and the warm solidity of Yondu’s cock. The loincloth had wound to one side with their writhing, and a sticky trail
smeared the stubble on Kraglin’s cheek. Yondu gripped his hair. He pinned him there, cramped with his spine in a steep curve to fit in the small space while Yondu arched luxuriantly beneath him.

“I wanna feel you here,” he breathed. He reached under himself, biting his lip as he rubbed that dark, exciting place between his asscheeks. He knew what he was doing, knew he was teasing Kraglin with what he couldn’t yet have as he twizzled his fingertip over the dry pucker, making sure Kraglin heard his growl. “Don’t care what part of ya. But for now, ya can only choose one.” A short pause. “Though if ya pick yer elbow or yer toe or somethin’, I can and will kick you through this thing.”

He rapped the cover, laying back down flat so Kraglin would have room to execute his choice. Whatever he picked - tongue or fingers; Yondu trusted Kraglin not to thrust in raw - it’d be difficult to use this cramped setting to his advantage. But Yondu liked to watch him struggle. “You do me good enough and i’ll let ya come back for seconds with that pretty pink cock of yours.”

“Gonna need to move then.” Kraglin grinned in warning, shifting back a little to get some room. He had to lift Yondu by the hips though, pushing himself back against the other end of the bed. While he had to admit the lack of space was going to get frustrating sooner than later, he adored the privacy the little cubby hole gave them. There was something secretive about it, made it a little easier to get on with what he wanted.

And what he wanted, was to suck kisses into the meat of Yondu’s thigh, parting them with nudges of his cheeks. His back was bowed, keeping Yondu in as comfortable as curve as possible even if it meant his own shoulders suffered, scraping the top of the bed. All of that faded away though, when he sealed his lips around the other man’s hole, wasting no time in rubbing his tongue cross it in a single, lewd squirm of flesh against skin.

He could, as he intended to demonstrate, work like this for as long as Yondu could bear it. Ignoring the sweeps and growing stabs of pain in his shoulders and back, shutting his eyes to block it out, Kraglin focused on kissing his body open, tongue aching at the root as he worked it in and out of him in slow sweeps and curls, hands cupping Yondu’s ass to keep him steady.

Yondu let himself be moved with an amused little huff. It was evident what Kraglin had planned, and Yondu could barely contain himself, legs falling open at a press of Kraglin’s stubbled face.

He gnawed on the inside of his cheek when he felt hot breath across his crease. When that air was followed by the sweep of a silky tongue, he lost that internal war, tongues twitching in Kraglin’s hands. He didn’t know if he was more turned on by the feel of wet heat pulsing over him, regular and steady; or the nasal whine he made when Kraglin wriggled it in, piercing the pucker on his tonguetip.

Kraglin shuffled on his knees as he worked, unable to stop from kneading and groping that plump blue behind - all in the effort of keeping him still, of course. He’d opened his eyes again, looking up to keep read on Yondu, swirling his tongue to get more of those fantastic noises.

He had some reservations about calling Yondu beautiful, chief among them being that he was sure he might get a smack in his head for his troubles. But he could think it smugly in the privacy of his own mind. Wrapped around his tongue and panting with every lewd, wet noise he made working it in and out of him, Kraglin couldn’t think of a better view.

Well, he could, but that was coming in time.

He tilted his head, letting his nose nudge and press against the underside of Yondu’s balls, thrusting his tongue in and curling it there again as he nuzzled. Yondu had said he could only use one body-part on his hole, but hadn’t said anything about the rest of his face. Kraglin shut his eyes as he
moaned low against him, licking and teasing along the slowly relaxing muscle, working it open over and over. There was going to come a point, he knew, where he’d have to switch to his hands. But he could wait until Yondu was demanding that himself.

Yondu wanted to cry out to Anthos, but he wasn’t sure he could remember how. He clutched Kraglin’s head instead, pulling him in like he was trying to smother him, grinding helplessly on his face while his dripping cock rutted the air.

But where Anthos’ name evaded him, Kraglin’s didn’t. It took a little while for it to sink in that they were far from any sort of civilization and the worst their noises could bring down on them was angry _aku_. Which wasn’t exactly reassuring - but Yondu’d face ten of those monsters before he would his parents.

“Kraglin!” he hissed as nails bit the meat of his ass. His toes, braced against the cubby walls, curled under the balls of his feet. Yondu’s thighs bumped the slim shoulders that worked away between them, knees knocking on the bunk hatch and the porthole. He hung onto Kraglin’s hair as much as he used it to guide him, trembling from the force of the onslaught.

A tidal wave of _sensation_ ripples through him, in time with each sopping hot plunge. He was yearning for more, almost feral with how he bucked back into Kraglin’s sloppy tonguing, scarcely noticing the restraining grip. If Kraglin squeezed his ass any harder, Yondu’d have nice parallel lines of bruising to show off when his loincloth slipped from side to side as he walked. But in that moment, Yondu wanted nothing more.

“Deeper,” he demanded, writhing over the foam. “Wanna feel ya all the way in…”

“Gonna need t’use something else for that,” Kraglin replied. He was panting slightly, leaning back with a final scorching stripe of his tongue over Yondu’s skin. His voice was hoarse, from forcing himself to breathe at an even pace and the rawness of his mouth. He shot Yondu a grin up the length of his body, nuzzling his cheek against a sleek blue thigh with a low, pleased noise. “Can’t get my tongue any deeper. Could use my fingers, if you really want.”

But that would mean going back on his order… That sly bastard. He’d known Yondu wouldn’t ever be satisfied with _just_ his tongue. He’d planned this. Yondu was convinced of it.

Even in conceding defeat Yondu endeavored to keep the upper hand. He shuffled until his crest nudged the wall at the bunk’s head, crunching up into a half-seated lounge. Then he opened himself, one hand on each thigh, crest pulsing just bright enough that Kraglin could see his regal nod. Yondu was a sort-of prince, regardless of how rarely he acted like one. Being worshipped was second nature.

“Put ‘em in me, then.”

Kraglin would be lying to everyone and himself if he dared try to say he didn’t like Yondu like this. It was obvious that he liked him, sure, but this? Naked and imperious even when telling a guy to finger his ass? That took panache. Kraglin grinned a little as he crawled up and forwards, letting Yondu see the glint of teeth in his mouth in the rosy glow, tilting his head to press a kiss to one hand. Then the other, then his chest as Kraglin snugged himself up a little more, holding himself up between Yondus legs.

He didn’t want to say anything. Just distracted them with kissing little lines over Yondus collarbones, finding the pot they’d stowed in the sheets and pulling out the stopper-like plug. When his fingers delved against Yondu next, they were slippery and warm, and he breathed out against Yondus neck with a low, shuddering sort of noise as two pressed in slowly.
If he was trying hard not to think about how that would feel elsewhere, he didn’t show it. Just slowly worked his fingers back and forth until he had them in to the root, grinding his palm against Yondu carefully.

The keens became rhythmic - inhale when Kraglin tugged his fingers back a short way, never far enough to pop out; exhale when they delved another centimeter into the opening chasm of his body. That rhythm stuttered when Kraglin had no further to go.

Yondu was being peeled apart. He couldn’t believe that he’d taken two entire fingers without pain. And yet there was the proof, buried in his clenching hole. The knuckles of Kraglin’s remaining digits nudged his taint. Their blunt pressure only enhanced the feedback siphoning through his nerves: the firework-pops of pleasure as Kraglin rotated his hand, letting Yondu feel his bony knuckles swivelling inside him, stretching him painstakingly slow.

Yondu, remembering how Kraglin had touched a spot that made those sparkles turn to supernovae, leant back on his elbows so Kraglin’s fingertips grazed his frontal wall.

It felt like it should be incredibly vulnerable, to have another man pry him open and penetrate him. Like it should make the primal warrior in him rebel. But Yondu felt nothing but in control. He issued a wordless order, bearing down hard on the slim digits so their makeshift lubricant squelched out around their base, and grinned when he saw how intently Kraglin’s eyes were fixed between his legs, devouring the sight of his hand half-buried in blue.

Kraglin almost regretted using the salve so early - he didn’t know what was in it, but he didn’t feel like sticking some in his mouth to find out. Which meant he had to keep his mouth occupied elsewhere, kissing and mouthing over Yondus shoulder as he worked, watching between their bodies at the progress. He could feel how slack he was now, deliciously warm and slick and too tempting for him to try and keep resisting for too long.

He could resist. And he would, until Yondu decided he’d earned it enough.

Kraglin nudged his thumb at some of the excess, gathering it to slick the thicker digit. He pressed and rubbed it in the cradle of his fingers, not pushing to penetrate with it - just stretch and rub him open wider, crooking his fingers and scissoring them in slow, easy motions. He bit his own lip in lieu of Yondu’s, resting his forehead on the other man’s shoulder to keep his balance and his view, a low and hungry noise slipping from behind clenched teeth. If Yondu was warm inside, Kraglin felt like he was burning up, roiling under his skin. Everything felt like it was connected in a burning, sensitised line from his fingers to his cock, each lazy clench of Yondu’s body around him making him pant out a low moan, hips twitching.

“I want y’so dast much,” he murmured, turning his head to press lips and teeth to Yondu’s neck, his thumb smearing a circle around his splayed hole, dipping in for a moment. “S’nuts. S’all I can think about.”

Sweat trickled down Yondu’s throat, following the line of his collarbones. He wondered if Kraglin could taste the salt of it, and used his handhold in his raggedy mop to find out.

Their kiss was quick and searing. It became messy as Yondu panted, hips fucking back onto Kraglin’s offered fingers and thumb. Everything was exquisitely tangible, from the damp meet of his and Kraglin’s tongues, to the faint bitterness hotpool water from where that tongue had been lapping into Yondu’s body.

Yondu sucked on it, chasing the taste. Hopefully they weren’t digesting enough to poison them.
His ass rippled around Kraglin’s buried digits, feeling the promise of that third. It was a wicked tease: brushing the edge of his hole as Kraglin wet it, playing with the gathered fold where his rim pinched snug around Kraglin’s knuckles. His chest rumbled as Kraglin stretched apart, prying him wide. Fuck, he’d never imagined this part of him could feel so sensitized, so good. He could see himself becoming addicted to this. Walking around the village with Kraglin by his side, dragging him into quiet corners and demanding his fingers be presented to sit on. There’s no way Kraglin would even consider leaving then.

Kraglin, from his eager return to leaving nips and kisses and almost-love-bites wound across Yondu’s shoulders, overlaying the blue spiral tattoos, was enjoying this just as much Yondu ran his hands down his back, fingers crooked so his nails caught on the wiry hair.

He couldn’t say ‘Don’t you ever leave me.’ But he could think it, and growl for Kraglin to quit treating him like the shattered glass in his cockpit window and add another finger already, else he wouldn’t get round to sticking his dick in him before nightfall.

As much as Kraglin would love to spend hours and hours making Yondu writhe around each finger as he added it, he had to admit the man had a point. He still thrilled to hear him say it, every sign that Yondu was as eager for this as he was a balm to his nerves. He held his mouth against Yondus neck in an open press, moaning low against his skin as he tipped the pot a little against his hand.

With Yondu so relaxed that, it wasn’t too difficult to start working a third finger into him. Kraglin was trying hard not to concentrate too much on the hot clench and slide of muscles around his fingers, his other hand tightening on the foam beneath them. His cock ached, and it was only through sheer force of will and thinking some truly frightening thoughts - Pharaqa finding them and, instead of being angry, demanding to join in - that had kept his knot from starting to puff. If he wanted to get the chance to let Yondu enjoy that final, formidable stretch, he had to keep himself considerably calmer.

Not that the idea of grinding a fully-inflated knot into him wasn’t also a thrill, but he had the vague notion he should wait until Yondu was a little more used to this first.

“What’d’ya think?” he asked, when he was able to curl his fingers in and out of him with regularity, wet sound accompanying each deep, slow stroke inwards and the spreading retreat, holding him open for a few moments before his fingers closed again to thrust in. Kraglin tilted his head, nudging under Yondu’s jaw. “Y’want me?”

More than anything. Heck, if Pharaqa gave up control of the huntpack, if his father renounced his chieftancy, Yondu’d turn it all down, if only for another minute of this. The burn as Kraglin’s ring finger slid home inside him, knobbly joints felt in sharp relief, had Yondu’s back arching. His stomach contracted in his eagerness to pull those digits deep, muscle standing out against the soft skin of his pouch.

He wanted to eke this out. But he also needed Kraglin's cock yesterday. And as always, greed won.

“Go on then,” he said, over the quiet squelches. He pulled Kraglin’s head up again - not to kiss this time, but to meet his gaze head-on. There wasn’t enough light for Yondu to see his partner’s huge pupils, his bitten lips, his desperate stupid face. But that was okay, because it meant - hopefully - that Kraglin couldn't tell he was making much the same expression. Yondu pressed his ass down into the cup of Kraglin’s palm, lurching as nails dragged against his prostate. “Give it to me. I want it all.”

Kraglin pressed his forehead against Yondu’s, using it as an anchor for himself, something to keep himself from losing it there and then. It felt ridiculous, considering he wasn’t the one being fucked, to feel like he was falling apart so soon, but… well, hell, he was seventeen. He gave a light squeeze of
Yondus ass with a grin, nose bumping his gently before he shifted back enough to see what he was doing.

In retrospect, getting his trousers off might have been easier if the bed wasn’t closed, and his hands weren’t slippery. He won the war with minimal frustrated cursing, shoving the fabric back behind him and fumbling the pot out from the sheets. Any other time, he might have been embarrassed about being so damned eager - and his ears had warmed up a little - but he was fine with Yondu seeing how much he wanted him. If it made his hands clumsy and his limbs heavy, that was fine.

Slicking himself made him shudder, gritting his teeth hard for a moment as his hand worked. The last thing he wanted, barring being kicked through the bed cover, was to accidentally hurt Yondu. Mostly because he was sure the stubborn ass wouldn’t let on that he was hurt, and end up making things worse for himself. When he came back, pressing over Yondu and kissing the side of his neck, he kept one hand on his prick to help nudge himself into place.

Wisely, he ground his teeth together instead of sinking them into tempting blue flesh as he pressed inwards, hands moving back to the foam to keep his balance. Not for the first time in his life, he was glad his tip tapered thinner than most species, easing in as slow as he could bear it. He stopped when he felt resistance from his knot, hips giving a slow twitch and grind of the hardened flesh against his entrance.

When the head popped inside, every muscle in Yondu’s body seemed to simultaneously cramp and relax. After that it was inescapable: a long, slow, achingly perfect slide of cock. The realization that what he could feel bumping his rim was the plumlike bulge of Kraglin’s knot hit Yondu like a shot of intravenously injected teku.

‘Fuck,’ he breathed. Rested a moment, squeezing Kraglin’s hips between his thighs to hold him in place, refusing to allow an inch of retreat.

Then, once he’d adjusted to the stretch, the rounded fullness that only widened for each of Kraglin’s inches that sat inside him, he bucked backwards. He couldn't get onto the knot, not without assistance. But he’d be damned if that stopped him. Gathering a tight handful of hair and ear, he hauled Kraglin down to hiss:

‘That was an order, by the way.’

Kraglin had to laugh a little raggedly, tilting his head to kiss him for a moment, breathless and reedy. He nodded a bit, didn’t try to break Yondus grip on his head and just rolled his hips. He’d fucked in less comfortable places than this, and now that he was leaning over, crowding over Yondu with his hands planted firmly on the mattress, he had just enough leverage.

“Sir yes Sir,” he teased, hips bucking in harder on the next push inwards. He ground the top of his knot against him on each push, feeling the muscle clench and relax against it. It was still soft enough to slip in a little, a wider tease that made Kraglin moan at the tension of it before it slipped back out, Kraglin striving forward a little on the next thrust to tease in a little again. Each time it was a little bit harder, the constant sensation making him swell, but he’d enjoy it for as long as he could.

At least he had the common sense to go slow - harder, sure, increasing the pressure a little bit at a bit with each roll of his hips, but he had hope that Yondu would slow him down if he needed it. He bared his teeth against Yondu's jaw with a low, feral-edged growl as he ground in hard for a moment, the harder lump of his knot popping in fully before back out again, making him shudder and clutch the bedsheets.

‘W-what does ‘sir’ mean?’ Yondu liked the sound of it.
Each plunge of Kraglin’s cock blazed into him. It hurt more on the outdraw, oddly: as if Yondu's body was clinging to him, clutching him, yearning to keep him inside. But even then it wasn’t a bad hurt. Just intense. Impossibly intense; they’d only just begun but Yondu was already overwhelmed, lost to the slick slap of Kraglin’s knot beating his rim.

When that knot squeezed in, just for a moment, Yondu’s legs fell from where they were bracketing Kraglin’s waist. it was big. So big.

But he’d fit it, and while it burned, the power trip burned brighter. He could do this. Take it - take him.

Kraglin’s hips never stopped grinding. Their slow drag and pull wasn’t a relentless barrage though. Rather, Kraglin’s steady thrusts were underpinned with trembling desperation. He was restraining himself, elevated above Yondu on shaking forearms, visible expression contorted with the effort of not fucking down.

The knot tugged free once more, bulging his rim before popping out. His loosened entrance rippled, resettling around the shaft. Yondu grabbed Kraglin’s head where it rested on his shoulder, the star-man’s bared teeth brushing his collarbone with each slam of their bodies without ever latching on.

‘Again!’ he demanded, jerking his pelvis futilely into the intrusion. ‘Do that again! Now!’

“Can’t.” Kraglin gasped, pushing against him with a low whine. He could, but that wasn’t the point. “Keep doin’ that and I wont be able t’get it out till it goes down and I don’t think y’want that.”

Not that he didn’t want that - Kraglin couldn’t stop the low growl as his hips shifted, hitching harder against Yondu for a moment, smearing slick against the top of his knot with a shudder and clench of his jaw, fingers mirroring the twitch in the foam. But he felt a responsibility to let Yondu know that was a very real risk before attempting to just get on with it, panting against his shoulder.

‘I don’t care!’ Yondu wrung tight around him, panting heavily, breath juddering from his chest as the knot squashed against his entrance. The spongey ring was growing every time Kraglin ground it over his hole, swelling and filling, stiff with blood. Yondu was furious that Kraglin could contemplate keeping it from him. His cock slipped in and out of him beautifully now, Yondu’s channel a tight slick glove. But he’d been given a taste of more. And Yondu being Yondu, he wanted it.

He twisted the fist buried in Kraglin’s hair. Reached between them, parting the sweaty seam of their bodies to snatch a handful of knot.

This he squeezed, glowering up at Kraglin the whole while. The knot filled his palm, surging with heat and Kraglin’s pulse. ‘I wannit, Krags. I want all of it.’

Any resolve Kraglin might had had at trying to keep things vaguely sensible - a notion that had escaped them entirely ever since Yondu had first crawled onto his lap to be taught what kisses were - didn’t so much as crumble when Yondu groped him as it was thrown out the window and into a creek. He all but snarled as he fucked hard against the hand holding him, teeth making a few sharp points against Yondus shoulder as he moved his head, restless and wanting.

By rights, his body argued, Yondu should be flipped over. Held apart with his hands and fucked into hard, blood welling against his gums as he sank his fangs into the meat of his shoulder.

Kraglin shook that off as best he could and just concentrated on fishing Yondu’s hand out from between them. He pressed it to his mouth then to the bed as he shifted. Just a subtle movement, a placement of the knee, and he started moving again, faster than before.
“I will,” he promised, voice jagged at the edges as he moved, pushing himself a little harder. “Happens at the end, alright? I promise.”

Which wasn’t to say Yondu had long to wait. Kraglins thrusts took on a ragged edge, seeking depth over speed, one hand finding his hip and digging his fingers into it to hold him steady. The last thing he wanted - he figured both wanted - was for their aim to throw off. He could feel the ache of it between his legs, and it was only a smart move that turned his head to the side, sinking his teeth into the pillow with a poorly-stifled growl as he gave a hard push and grind, working his knot in. The ‘pop’ he felt made him moan around his mouthful of fabric, hips rocking slow but harder against Yondu as he started to fill him in slow, almost-scalding pulses of liquid.

Each clenching throb of his cock was punctuated with a rise in the volume of his growl, tapering back out before the next started. Each rush of pleasure was a little weaker then before, levelling out to a pleasant buzz. Each shallow, barely-there rock of his hips confirmed that he was locked in tight, grinding slow against the flesh just past the ring of Yondus entrance.

Yondu froze when the pressure on his ass increased. He’d known it’d stretch, known it’d test his limits and be a damn tight fit. But this?

For the first time since grabbing Kraglin’s dick, Yondu was forced to consider the possibility that he’d bitten off more than he could chew.

Kraglin gave him no reprieve in which to indulge those thoughts. The strain on his hole grew until Yondu was jerking where he lay, jaw tight to keep the cry inside. But there was no stifling the yelp when Kraglin’s knot finally forced him open, puncturing the tight entrance.

Pain blared for a long instant before Yondu clamped around the narrower root of the knot. He struggled in a half feral bid for escape - because yeah, he’d asked for this (a less generous person might say demanded). But between the concept of wedging a half-filled knot where the sun don’t shine and the actuality, there was a chasm of difference.

He wasn’t going anywhere though. Not while his hole pinched Kraglin’s cockbase, legs pushed so wide his shins thumped the walls and ass flush to Kraglin’s groin. And dammit, but Yondu swore he could feel that knot swelling impossibly larger, like a body in the swamp on a humid day. It was too much. Too much pleasure, too much intermingled and conflicting pain...

Then Kraglin’s cock throbbed and Yondu discovered what it felt like to be filled with another man’s seed.

...A lot of seed.

Where the hell had Kraglin been storing all this? Yondu’d been impressed at the sheer quantity every time he’d watched Kraglin cum, but taking it inside… It was scalding, sizzling, each squirt venturing deeper into him.

All in all, the experience should have made him conclude that he never wanted Kraglin to fuck him again.

But it didn’t.

Because as seconds reeled past, the hot spurts had yet to cease, and Kraglin’s pillow-biting snarl began to slacken into bliss. And Yondu, to his own amazement, adapted. The pain dampened to pleasure. The softening stirs of Kraglin’s cock agitated that place on the top side of his channel. The throbbing knot kept him plugged, forcing him to relish the sensation of an ever-increasing bellyful of
cum. And, as Yondu found, there was very little convincing required.

This was emphasized by his flagging cock. It began to inflate once more as Yondu squirmed down on the knot, making Kraglin choke on his quieting growls.

Yondu cracked an eye. He grinned, lascivious and filthy, concentrating on squeezing Kraglin’s dick like he was milking it. ‘My turn,’ he said.

Kraglin had done his best not to rock himself, enjoying the way the feeling ebbed and receded slowly. He was glad that Yondu hadn’t seen fit to smack at him, or bite him, or worse - aside from that initial wiggle, he hadn’t tried to pull away which would have really, really hurt both of them. He tightened his grip on Yondu in a covetous squeeze around his hips, releasing the pillow with a wet gasp and shudder as he sucked in air.

The request, though…

“Mmmhm,” he agreed, hazy pleasure evident in his voice. He pushed himself up a little, angling his mouth against Yondus in a slow, slick kiss as he reached down, curling fingers around Yondus cock. He grinned against his lips as he started to stroke him, thumb running over the plates over and over. Kraglin shifted with the motions, rocking his hips upwards, seeking to please him again.

If he growled a little in his grin, the pressure a welcome extra zing in his spine, he wasn’t going to complain.

“Y’like it?” He ducked his head, nuzzling and placing slow, empty bites against Yondus jaw with a shiver. “D’you?”

“Fuck yeah I like it, fuck…”

Whenever Yondu rocked up into Kraglin’s fist his ass contracted around his knot, and that same knot rubbed up, crushing into his prostate. The pressure sent him barrelling towards that edge. He would be concerned that he was clenching too hard, wringing Kraglin’s knot like he wanted to snap it off at the root. But from Kraglin’s gentle mouthing of his jaw, and the shaky grind inside him, he didn’t mind.

Yondu wasn’t exactly a pro at this whole worrying about others shtick anyway. Not when he had his man inside him, pleasing him with dick and hand and the threat of a bite, which would only be made at Yondu’s explicit order…

Yondu ground out Kraglin’s name, stubbornly keeping his eyes open until the last possible moment. They shut of their own accord as he came, panels on the underside of his cock tightening in synchrony with his hole, as he painted a sticky string from his lower belly to his pouch-line.

Kraglin groaned against him, shoulders going tight for a moment as everything seemed to clench around him. He let his fingers play over the moving plates, teasing the rims of them slower and slower, easing his hand to a slow stop around the base of his cock. He nuzzled at Yondus neck with a soft whine, shifting on his knees a little to a comfortable place, the mattress bearing little divots of his knees.

They had a bit of a wait ahead of them, but the least he could do was make sure they were both comfortable.

He pressed a few more kisses to Yondus neck before he let his cheek rest against his shoulder, eyes shutting and heaving out a deep breath.
“Mmn.” Intelligent conversation was going to take a moment or two to reboot.

“Mm-hm.” Yondu agreed.

With the ebb of the orgasm came bonelessness - but also happiness. It was a sleepy and languid sort of elation, markedly different from his usual run-and-punch-the-air style. Yondu didn’t want to climb a tree and belt to the entirety of Anthos’s creation that he’d just been fucked and loved it. (He would, but not until after the knot deflated). For now, all he desired was for Kraglin to stay like this: draped over him in a lanky, scraggily blanket.

His fingers were almost irretrievably tangled in his hair. Yondu huffed at them, as the tingles began to seep from his limbs. He set to unwinding himself, and then wrapped his arms over Kraglin’s back, savoring the zing of internal muscles as the knot reached peak girth, and how Kraglin lay on his cum-smeared chest without any reservations, heart beating against his.

“So,” Because there was no better time to have a sleepy conversation then when you were locked via a fleshy lump in a tight hole, and unable to flee it. Kraglin arranged himself a little once Yondu had, nuzzling his cheek against the others smooth shoulder with a soft noise. “‘Sir’ is a. S’like a title, I guess. Officers use it, guess others do too. S’one of respect.”

Because he’d been distracted during that, not deaf.

Yondu scoffed. “You respect me?”

Like he’d believe that. Pack leaders, serious hunters, chieftains, mature adults… they were worthy of respect. Yondu was awesome - and he never let anyone forget it - but he wasn’t dumb enough to consider himself a respectable member of Zatoan society.

It was very, very difficult to scowl. Kraglin was simply too close, too warm, too comfortable (inexplicable, given the number of bones Yondu could feel digging into any one part of him). He managed a faint frown, but even that dissolved into a dopy smile when Kraglin’s slight movements ground his knot in place. The most he could do was make his tone a little terser than usual:

“You messin’ with me, kid?”

“‘Course I do, old man.” Kraglin snorted softly, nosing briefly at under Yondu's neck, his tone (and smile) affectionate. “‘Sides. With officers, they, y’know.” It occurred to him that no, Yondu probably didn’t know. Kraglin wasn’t really sure what to compare it to, and he huffed a bit as he tried to think.

“Its - they’re in charge. In command, I guess, Officers, I mean. I dunno how to explain the concept.”

_In command._ Yeah, that sounded about right. Yondu tipped his chin back, giving Kraglin optimal space to nuzzle. “You do this a lot with your orf-fisers then?”

Out of curiosity. Not jealousy. Definitely not. Anthos alive, he hadn’t even thought to ask if Kraglin had someone waiting for him in the stars. Who’s to say it wouldn’t be one of these strange orf-fisers, who bossed him around and pulled his hair just the way Kraglin liked? Yondu grumpily clenched around him, just in case Kraglin had forgotten who he was with.

“Bet none of ‘em are as good as me.” He even managed not to sound hopeful about it.

“Oh, hell no.” Kraglin laughed a little, a noise that cut off as a whine when it jostled him about a little. “Sleep with a Nova Officer? I’d rather cut my cock off and live on a rock. No,” He grinned, nuzzling at the offered skin with a delighted little noise. “No, no officers have had the dubious pleasure of my company in bed. So you’re automatically better than them.”
“Hell yeah I am,” said Yondu, as if there’d been any doubt. He purred in his throat, stretching his back as much as he could while trapped between Kraglin, the bunk, and the close-hugging walls. His shape’d be imprinted into this mattress when they stood to leave. He imagined it now: belly-up, legs spread, like vulnerable prey. It was the dichotomy of it he loved, Yondu realized. Kraglin did things to him that looked on the surface like domination while actually obeying his every order. He really would make a perfect dog.

Just thinking about that contrast excited him. But while Yondu’d be more than up for another round, everything was a little too sensitive - from the rubbing plates on his cock to the tart sting of his well-stretched entrance. He settled for drawing Kraglin back down until his nose bumped Yondu’s pulsepoint.

“Told ya you could bite when you stuck yer cock in me,” he whispered, stroking circles over Kraglin’s scalp - and giving a warning tug when he heard the spitty click of Kraglin’s opening jaws. “But it’s a no-no, m’fraid. Until I next go huntin’ - then ya can gnaw on me all you want, an’ I’ll blame it on a yolopp.”

“I know,” Kraglin flushed a little, just enjoying the press of his - now single row - teeth over skin. “It’d -- It’d be wrong f’m me to do that to you anyway. Y’dunno what it means t’me so it's not fair t’make you stick with that.”

Or him, he added silently. There were precious few people who’d want to.

“Yeah I dunno,” Yondu agreed, snuggling down into the soft plush bunk. “Too comfortable to care right now either. Now…” He tugged plaintively on Kraglin’s neck. “Come down here and do yer weird kissy-thing already.”

Kraglin had to laugh a little but followed the command happily - it meant he got to nuzzle at Yondu and kiss his way back up to his lips, enjoying them entirely. He shivered a little after a moment or two, drawing back a bit. Not far, but enough to glance down between them with almost a wince.

“You uh,” He reached down, fingers testing where they were joined and shuddering again. “Yeah. You’ll be free in just a second, no worries.”

Yondu was, if anything, a bit disappointed. Being like this with Kraglin on top of him, inside him, was a steadfast reminder that for now at least, his star-man was stuck with him. Quite literally, actually.

He tensed at the tug, Kraglin’s probing fingers skating around the watertight seal of his rim, testing the turgidity of the knot. If he concentrated, he could tell that it had already shrunk. Deflated might be more apt; the loose skin bunched inside him, and he huffed a laugh at the weird sensation.

The cum that began to slip out around it wasn’t nearly as funny though.

Yondu scrunched his nose when he felt dampness seeping over his perineum. Clenching didn’t help; a little spurt shot out, the noise making his ears tint. They only got more navy when he realized it must’ve splashed Kraglin too.

Stupid, stupid. Yondu didn’t do embarrassment. If anything this was Kraglin’s fault for pumping so much watery jizz into his belly in the first place. Lanky idjit only had himself to blame.

Not that that stopped Yondu peeping sidelong at his face to gauge his reaction.

‘Uh…’
Kraglin, for what it was worth, didn't seem too phased. He kept his fingers down by Yondus hole, helping to ease his slick cock out.

“Clench slowly,” he advised, giving Yondu a glance, his expression understanding. “We’ll go bit by bit, shouldn't be too bad.” Or at least no worse than usual. There was a reason there were so many Hraxlians on Hrax, after all. Bit by bit, Kraglin waited for the muscle to stay clenched without conscious effort on Yondus part, working carefully.

Minimal spillage, and he wiped his fingers on the sheets with barely any notice or care. And maybe Kraglin smirked a little, giving one asscheek a tap to get him to tighten up proper.

“There ya go. Barely a drop.”

‘M-hmm.’ Yondu didn’t dare talk. With both feet planted in the mattress, knees pinched together and face contorted with the effort it took to coax his well-stretched muscles into cooperation, his dignity was somewhat precarious.

Kraglin, crushed back against the rear wall of their pod, must be suffering some severe backpain right now. Yondu couldn't bring himself to be sympathetic. He’d gotten the short end of the stick - or the messy end, so to speak.

Kraglin’s light spank made him suck air. He pressed a hand between his legs, feeling out the soft slippery margins of his hole, hissing as liquid shifted.

‘Anthos'd love ya,’ he managed, pressing on his ass to keep the cum inside. ‘You could knock up a chick five times over with that load.’

“Well, never let it be said I didn't give joining the Season a champions go.” He laughed a little, leaning down and kissing Yondus knee. “Though maybe don't say that so loud. I don't wanna tempt fate for anyone previous.”

Hey, Hraxlians were prolific.

“Why, you worried I knocked you up just through sheer force of numbers?”

‘Har-de-fuckin’-har-har.’

Yondu held himself resolutely still, arms crossed. Then gave into the need to squirm, toes curling as he felt another dribble work its way free. ‘Any idea of how i’m supposed to uh. Y’know. Get to the creek without leavin’ a trail?’

This was a damn comfy mattress, after all. It’d be a shame to ruin it - especially as Yondu planned on using it again.

“I guess we hurry?” Kraglin suggested leaning over to open the bed cover a crack with a low noise - while there was something exciting about the smell of sex and sweat, it could get a little overwhelming in such a small space. The cooler air rushing in was a sweet relief, and he relished it for a moment before he looked back to Yondu with a grin. “At least we're near the hot springs. Not that far to go.”

Up a windy, winding path, sure, but still close.

“Might be some shorts we can stick you in to get there.”

Yondu showed off what he’d learnt from Kraglin - namely, two emphatic middle fingers. But he
refastened his loincloth, pushing himself gingerly to sit. “S’your fuckin’ fault if I get your ship messy. That’s all I’m sayin’.”

Kraglin had to laugh at that, pushing the cover open the rest of the way. At least the race back would be fun, and he only taunted Yondu about having a ‘healthy glow’ about him for a couple of days. Until he was pushed out of a tree for his troubles anyway.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Chapter warnings for Serious Gore / Body Horror, Cultural Sex-Shaming/Homophobia

The Season being underway was surprisingly liberating. Everyone was busy with - other things on their mind, so not participating seemed to give them a certain amount of freedom. Enough for them to roam on a longer leash, Yondu teaching him about which fruits were good, which fruits gave you an upset stomach if you ate too many of them, which fruits could be pressed, wet and pulpy and rich, against each others lips in the broad daylight away from the village, or savoured when licked off palms and fingertips.

Kraglin had gone to the stars to seek his freedom. While he loved the village for its people and respected it for what it had given him, it offered him none of that. It offered him Yondu though, and he thought, in the wildly optimistic way of a teenager barreling his way headlong from 'crush' via 'infatuation' and right into ‘the stars brought us together and nothing smaller than the cosmos will rip us apart’, that this would be enough.

He’d told Yondu about Hrax. More about why he’d left - why he’d really left. About blood in his mouth and mud in his chest and spending hours just coughing it all out after a long day of work. He’d gotten angry when he talked about it, pacing their clearing a few miles away from the village, wringing his hand in his hair. Before he’d left for space, Kraglin had never even really thought about Hrax in the broader sense. Once he was out there, he hadn’t been able not to think about it, and his heart had soured against it.

“By your age...” He’d pointed out, throwing himself under the tree and watching their drying clothes sway in the branches above. “I would have had six, maybe seven years left. If a cave-in didn’t get me or I didn’t get the Dusts. And I know, I know you’re gonna say ‘all life is like that’ but its not, that’s my point; there are places and planets out there where we don’t have to die before we live! That’s what’s out there!“

Kraglin did his best to sleep at night, and not to think about when he’d have to leave. Pharaqa had left him alone, for the most part, when they sloped back to the village to check on things. But Uzuko had caught his eye now and then, his gaze too significant to ignore. Kraglin grit his teeth and tightened his grip on Yondu wherever they settled down to sleep, and forced the feeling away.

The Eclector was fixed, as much as she could be. Enough to get him off the mudball and out of their crests. All he had to do was wait for the solars to finish charging. It would still be a bumpy journey, and when he left the atmosphere he’d have to stop and start to fuel scoop, but it was possible.

He just didn’t want to.

But those were thoughts for another week. They brought back baskets of berries for the village now and then, as strange as the place was at the moment despite the Season slowly starting to wind down. They’d laughed about it to themselves, elbows jabbing each other in the ribs as they crowed, carrying their basket back to the hut. It took some arguing, and some berry tossing, to get it up the cliff-face, but they eventually hauled it in, trying their best not to snigger too loudly.
Perhaps they’d been away too long. Maybe they’d gotten used to being the only two people for miles around. Whatever it was, they’d clearly forgotten themselves out in the green wilds, in idyllic tangles of soft grasses.

In any case, they’d been distracted. Kraglin shifted a little, his spine a liquid curve as he held himself over Yondu, arms bracketing his hips and fingers curled into the pelts. He had his head dipped, placing worshipful little kisses over his collarbones, chest brushing Yondus abdomen in slow, easy sweeps as he traced his mouth back and forth. He leaned back only enough to snag a berry from the pile, holding it between his lips and leaning down, slow and easy and relishing the little shiver in Yondu’s shoulders as he pressed the fruit to him in a kiss, feeling fingers tangle tighter in his hair—

“Um.”

There was a cracking sound, like something made of clay had been dropped. A wet splosh. Not water - some fermented berry juice, by the smell of it, now trickling away down the cliff. A noise like a high-pitched ringing bell, which he was pretty sure was just in his head, and Kraglin scrambled backwards as quickly as he could, scraping his palms on the floor and coughing as he hurriedly swallowed the fruit, as if he could hide the evidence that easily. At least, he thought wildly to himself, they were still dressed.

For everything else the village offered, it did not offer privacy.

Kojo took a step back from the door, his arm still holding the curtain up as he looked between them and the village, his mouth open in uncertainty. He had just wanted to bring a small taste of the wine he and Iriki had been brewing to the Chief’s son, to thank him for bringing fruit in for these past weeks. This was - not what he’d anticipated.

Just when Yondu thought the day literally could not get any better…

After weeding out the initial panic - he saw us, shit, he knows - Yondu reminded himself that ‘kissing’ wasn’t a familiar custom to Zatoan. Kojo would be just as confused as he had been when Kraglin first tried it out on him, back before the rains. And that meant that this was nothing more than the perfect opportunity to embarrass his partner.

He wriggled from under Kraglin - not completely, the man’s angular ribcage squashing his hips rather than his pouch - and plucked Kojo’s offering from his lax fingers with a smirk.

“S’how star-people feed each other, apparently,” he said, washing the berry-stain from his lips with sour plum wine and untangling his other hand from Kraglin’s knotty hair so he could prop it on the ground behind him, fist curling against rough hides. He could salvage this. He was sure of it. A natural born liar, everyone had always said so. But that didn’t slow the drumming of his heart. “Like momma aku and their babies. S’kinda messy, but hey. What’m I supposed to do; tell the poor guy no?”

“Feeding.” Koji replied, looking between them uncertainly. Kraglin, who had little idea of what had been said, sat up and scrubbed his hair back anxiously, trying to will away his flush. “I-- Yondu, with my respects, I-Wait.”

He froze a little; sensing the tension in the room rocket up from Kojis posture, Kraglin did his very best not to scowl and simply remain looking harmless. Kojo was looking at Kraglin with the expression of someone piecing things together, and a healthy amount of distrust.

“You don’t know,” he said, his voice pitching louder, carrying further. “Yondu, forgive me; forgive us for not protecting you-“
“Why is he yelling?” Kraglin asked, trying to keep low panic from his voice.

“You've never taken part in the Season, you don't know about- about Len’ai-”


He ignored Kraglin’s question for now, placing the clay wine flagon on the pelts, uncaring if it slopped. Rubbing the nearest forearm (Kraglin’s sleeves having been pushed up as the midday heat neared its scorching, sweaty peak) Yondu tried to convey just how fine everything was going to be by pushing Kraglin behind him, and glowering at Koji until his browbone ached from the force of it.

“Look, if yer just here to make noise, ya can fuck right off again. Don’t need no protectin’.”

Kraglin’s hair was treated to its usual rough rumpling. “’Specially not from him. Look at them big creepy white-eyes. You want him to think he’s starvin’ me? He might cry, an’ then you’d have to deal with him.”

“Your father needs to hear about this.” Kojo’s tone was more careful now, apologetic and hopeful instead of accusatory. “As you say, his customs are different and you were ignorant of Len’ai—” Kojo looked behind him and then ducked into Yondu’s hut, the carpet swinging shut behind him as he looked at them both anxiously.

“Whats—” Kraglin was cut off by Kojo’s hand raising, to silence him.

“I'll explain it as you did,” Kojo said, earnest. “You didn't know. He is not Us, and didn't know. Your father is merciful, he will excuse this lapse—”

Yondu dug knuckles into his temple, resisting the urge to drag Koji over and noogie the truth out of him when they were younger.

“Simple words, Kojo. Just tell us what the fuck’s goin’ on. I know we’re s’posed to wait for the communal dinner before eating, but heck, it’s the last day of the Season. Everyone’s last chance to get down and dirty. Half the mating couples’ll be too busy banging to hear the gong anyway - not that we’re a mated couple, of course!” he added hastily, gesturing between him and Kraglin. “Just a couple of hunt-brothers. Doing hunt-brother things. Like, y’know. Feeding each other. Yeah.”

Not his most convincing lie, perhaps. But Yondu’s glare, daring Koji to comment, more than sold it.

“It’s - I shouldn't be telling you. You're supposed to learn at your first Season.” Kojo didn't whine, but it was obvious he felt on the spot and wary of overstepping boundaries here. The finer details of the Season, and what was and was not permitted during it, were taught to you by the Chief as a final, instructive pep talk before you and your partner entered the hut. Things like Len’ai, the sacred passing of voice between a couple, as they shared their voice and breath in an effort to strengthen their bond. To focus on their better qualities, to help Anthos hear their wishes for the child and its future.

And it felt good. But Kojo hadn't come in here to give his future chief a sex ed talk, and he felt very unprepared.

“Len’ai is when. When you're with your Season partner, in the middle of,” He made a hand motion that only got a confused look from Kraglin. “And you're enjoying it, and wish to - to share that with them. It pairs your voices and your breath, to greater please Anthos. It’s for couples trying to conceive, not hunt brothers.”

Kraglin didn't like any of this. There were too many unfamiliar words here, too many hand gestures.
And Kojo, stepped back towards the door, making a little bow of goodbye. He glanced at Yondu, trying to read him, find an order to follow to - to keep Kojo there? He couldn't very well attack him.

“You will need to be Cleansed. And Anthos must be spoken to; your father will instruct you on what to tell Him, I'm sure.” Chief Things, he had no doubt.

Oh heck. Yondu hated Chief Things.

“Y’mean… this,” he said, flapping his hand between his mouth and Kraglin’s, “is a Season ritual? You ain’t messing?”

He didn’t mean to sound so bewildered. It made sense, he supposed. Kraglin would regularly initiate kisses when they were secluded away from the villagers’ eyes, whether in a leafy forest bower or the privacy of Yondu’s hut. Or rather, he’d dither and bite his lips and look longingly at Yondu’s until Yondu lost patience and crawled onto his lap.

But he’d never thought it meant anything other than sensation.

Queasiness lurched to life: the same feeling that’d bubbled up when he’d cum in his loincloth from grinding on Kraglin's thigh, and booted Kraglin out of his hut for having the audacity to seduce him. Perfect. Just what he needed - the reminder that what he and Kraglin did together was forbidden in the eyes of Anthos. And now they were gonna be hauled before the Chief…

Koji believed they’d enacted (committed, whatever) this len’air shit innocently. But Yondu’s father was not so easy to fool.

As the curtain dropped down after Kojo’s stooping crest, Yondu rolled onto his back and dropped a hand over his eyes.

“Flark.” That seemed to sum things up nicely.

“Shit.” Kraglin was not reassured by the cursing. He looked between Yondu and the lightly swinging carpet with what could only be called growing fear, gnawing his lip.

Fear, trepidation, and steel determination, coiling in his stomach. He'd been thinking about this but not given the idea voice yet. But now..

“Come with me.” He blurted. “We'll run. On the ship, we'll get outta here-” While he may not have understood everything here, he heard ‘Anthos’ and ‘Chief’ and Yondu swearing. None of these were good things.

“What?”

Yondu removed his hand for the length of time it took to ascertain that Kraglin wasn't joking. Then he laughed - out of shock more than anything. Because sure, Yondu’d imagined trawling the starways with him. But they both knew it was only a dream. Yondu was the next Chief, heir to his father’s title. Even if he’d rather be galloping through the swamp or climbing the za’gah tree to see the stars at night than listening to the villagers’ droning grievances, there were some fates that you couldn’t escape, no matter how far you ran.

It was all very well for Aja’s brother to swan off exploring beyond the hills. He was a hunter. He didn’t have duties tying him down.

And while Yondu usually made shirking duties into an artform, there was still a vague awareness somewhere deep inside that one day his father wouldn't be around to shake his head at his
shenanigans and remind Yondu for the fiftieth time that he was an initiated adult who should act like one. On that day, Yondu would be expected to dance for his people, bow his head, and receive his first ceremonial crest piercing. He’d be expected to shed all past boisterousness, learn to school his temper, and take a strong huntress to bed in the Season to make an heir.

So it had been, for a thousand cycles. And so it would be for a thousand more. Kraglin could stay, if permitted. But even if the offer was extended, Yondu couldn't leave.

"It'll be okay," he said, moving to crouch besides Kraglin. He squeezed his bony knee, feigning optimism. “Dad ain’t an absolute monster. He did stop the za’gah after all. Worst I’ll get is a slap on the wrist, you’ll see. And yer insane, by his reckoning, so it ain’t like you’re responsible for yer actions.” He took stock of Kraglin’s gaunt face, haggard with fear. Shuffling closer, he cupped a bearded cheek in each hand, dragging Kraglin in until their foreheads bumped, Yondu’s crest brushing Kraglin’s fringe.

“We'll be okay,” he reiterated. And this time he made it sound like a promise.

"You don't understand." Kraglin glanced at the door to the hut as best he could without moving his head, as if he expected Pharaqa or Uzuko to storm through it any moment, bows in hand, and end his life there and then. This was the forbidden thing, the one thing he wasn't supposed to mention, but he knew he had to. He wasn't going to pretend it hadn't hurt like hell when Yondu laughed though. Of all his ideas, he'd really thought that he'd want to...

"Your. Your parents know about the ship. They ordered me to repair her and, leave. Forever. I was going to tell you, I - I wanted to ask you to join me but I can't stay here. They were very, very clear about that but I don't want to go anywhere without you. Please..." If he was begging, he wasn't ashamed of it. "Please come with me. We can go anywhere you want. Just don't - don't make me go back out there without you."

Yondu jerked back. “What, ya really thought we were gonna just run away?” Then the rest of Kraglin’s confession sunk in. The hand clasped around Kraglin’s nape, holding them together, fell loosely to his side. “Wait, you organized this? With my parents? Behind my back? Fuck, Krags.”

Even saying that clipped syllable of a nickname hurt. Yondu should’ve known. What was it Pharaqa had impressed on him as a child, during his initiation-training? Sentiment kills. Out in the swamp, if you went back for the screaming pack member whose leg had been devoured by carnivorous vines, all you achieved was two deaths rather than one. (Pharaqa knew this better than most. Yondu didn’t remember much of his mother’s hunt-sister, but he couldn’t forget the night she’d died - Pharaqa staggering back to camp alone, saying “she’s with the swamps” when questioned).

And now he’d gone and gotten attached to a stupid star-man who was sent here by Anthos to test him - a test he’d resolutely failed.

Yondu shuffled back, not to curl in the corner of the nest and pretend none of this was happening (although that was mighty tempting) but just far enough so Kraglin could receive his glare head-on without either of them going cross-eyed. “An’ when were ya plannin’ on telling me about our big plans in the stars, huh?”

“When I could. I didn't plan it!” Kraglin sounded wounded, more hurt than if Yondu had chosen to strike him. “You think I wanted them to decide that for me? C'mon Yondu, don't be an ass about this, I never wanted to go anywhere away from you. If they hadn't told me about me leaving I wouldn't have! I woulda stayed as long as you let me but I ain't allowed and I thought you'd want to - want to come with me.” He felt bitterness curl in his tongue, and preferred it to the pain. “My fuckin’ mistake. Didn't realise you wanted me to fuck off too.”

“Yeah,” growled Yondu, snarl pulling his lips up his gum. “Well, per’aps I didn’t realize neither. Til
now. If yer so desperate to head back to yer stars -’’ If you don’t fucking trust me enough to protect you from my own damn parents, ‘’Then perhaps you’d better go solo.’’

And he turned around, crest sweeping the blankets, and sat facing the wall. His stony silence intimated that Kraglin was more than welcome to leave. Or better yet, burst into tears and cling to Yondu while begging for his forgiveness. That would be by far the preferable option. Yondu gritted his teeth and waited.

Kraglin stared at the line of red - usually so inviting, so tempting to press his lips to and pet with his fingertips until Yondu was a mushy, purring pile of blue that headbutted his hand demandingly with each slow stroke of his palm. It hurt to look at him. Kraglin stared down at his hands instead, curled tight and white-knuckled against the pelts.

Not how he’d intended that to happen today.

“I’d rather die.” He muttered, standing with such haste he almost tripped, his face blotching red and white. “But since that’s the likely fuckin option I won’t give you the satisfaction of watchin’ me get shot full of arrows. Hell, maybe I should stay,” he continued, scooping up the holopad with his jacket, gathering his knick-knacks hurriedly. “Maybe they’ll pardon you if ya shoot me y’self.”

The worst moment was when he considered that as a viable option. Kraglin shook his head and headed for the door.

He paused though. One hand on the frame, though he couldn’t stomach turning back around to check if Yondu was watching him, or even listening.

“I.” A swallow, pained. “I’ll wait. For a bit. At the ship.”

“You do that.”

Yondu waited for the swoosh of the closing doordrapes, then glared at the carpet-hung wall in front of him until the patterns began to blur. Hopscotch-squares and zigzags and ancient auspicious symbols, the meaning of which had been lost to the millennia; melded with stick figure depictions of villagers, jskveh, aku and dogs. All blending like mud and water in a puddle.

It was still daylight outside, an hour after the penultimate rain of the day. But inside the hut it was shadowed and cool as the little coves that formed around the babbling brooks on the mountainside, cut into solid rock over hundreds of years. There was no one to watch Yondu snatch up a pelt, bury his face in it, and muffle his furious yell as best he could.

Idiot! That dumb idiot star-man! How could he spring something like this on him and not expect him to react badly? And now Yondu saw, in hindsight, how the events of the past month had all been building to this moment. Learning Kraglin’s language and his customs. Memorizing the maps of his stars. Visiting his ship…

Had it all been planned, Yondu wanted to know? Had Kraglin meant any of it - the kisses, the gentle strokes of his crest, the slow brutal pump of his cock into his body?

*Of course he did,* muttered a traitorous thought. *He wants you to run away with him, idjit. You don’t extend offers like that unless you really… y’know. Like-like someone.*

Yondu quashed it viciously. Nails bit into the hairy hide as he pinned it over his head, crushing his crest to one side. This would be so much easier to accept if he could convince himself that Kraglin was the asshole here, that it was Kraglin’s fault the angular indent he’d left in Yondu’s nest was slowly going cold. And Yondu was an excellent liar, even - especially, some might say - to himself.
Whatever Yondu might have been expecting to happen, it probably wasn’t his mother being thrust into his hut less than an hour later. She looked livid, three seconds from erupting and like she might have been involved in some ignoble tussle with at least four other hunters (which was the generally agreed minimum amount of Zatoans required to force Pharaqa to submit to something she didn’t want to endure). She whirled on her heels, drawing herself up to her maximum height, crest splaying and flaring outwards behind her in a swoop that made her look as big as possible.

She was pissed.

“You pervert.” She spat, actually spat at his feet, snarling. “After all I said in your defence, you throw us all at his mercy, put all of us in question-”

Yondu, still curled in the nest, lowered the hide so he couldn’t be accused of hiding behind it. He was tired all of a sudden. He wanted to be left alone. His usual course of action after having been wronged - to stomp into the forest and vent his frustration on any of Anthos’s creatures that had the misfortune to cross his path - wasn’t viable here. Yondu just wanted to lay down in the imprint Kraglin had left, the negative shape of his body, and savor his smell while it lasted.

But he couldn’t do that with Pharaqa there, and Pharaqa wasn’t the sort of problem that went away if you left it. She was less like a zit and more like a thorny barb from the swamp-vines, which would fester and stink if you didn’t dig it out. Yondu stood, so at least he could flaunt his few inches of a height advantage (not much, but Pharaqa was one of the few Zatoan shorter than him, and Yondu milked it for all it was worth). He readied his metaphorical tweezers.

“The fuck you talkin’ about, woman?”

“Hunt Brothers, I called you.” She pointed at him accusingly, imperious in her rage and her justified hatred. “I told your father, you had a bond with that thing that was as Hunt Brothers. I spoke to him at length, over and over, trying to turn his head to allowing your kinship. I told him you had always been strange and unusual, and we should be glad that you had found someone to temper you a little. And now, he doubts us all because of you! ‘Hunt brothers,’” She mimicked his tone, folding her arms and tilting her head from side to side in a good-enough impression of Uzuko.

“‘You call them hunt brothers. Do all your type do this? Should I investigate all your pack with hunt brothers and sisters?’” Pharaqa didn’t do anything to control her rage, reaching up and pinching between her eyes. When she spoke again she was louder, a little less angry, but full of disappointment.

“I was so wrong about you - so wrong. And it has ruined us all.”

Yondu frowned. ‘I didn’t fuckin’ ask you to defend me. I handle myself - you taught me that.” He hardly listened to the words, hearing only the tone behind them. Pharaqa had done something for him, of her own volition, and now she expected him to be grateful? Well, she was out of luck. Years upon years of strained civilities between them simmered just below the surface. Yondu reached into that well and fished out an overflowing bucketful of rage.

“Look, you ain’t never stuck up for me! Not to him! It’s always, oh he’s your son, he takes after you, you deal with him. Both of you are as bad as each other! So don’t come bitchin’ about this blowing up in your face. I don’t want yer damn protection! I ain’t done nothin’ wrong.” Lie. In the eyes of Anthos, Yondu had sinned in all the worst ways, repeatedly, and without shame. “-An neither’s Kraglin. We didn’t know nothin’ about this Len’air shit!”

“Ignorance is never protection from the law. Anthos is innate and inside you.” She sneered, tilting her head back to be able to look down her nose at him. “Or so I thought. There will be no loss for
you tomorrow, my boy - you probably won't even notice when the Chief’s blade cuts your crest, you're so far from His grace already. And where is your pet?”

For the first time, Pharaqa glanced around the hut. It had become so normal to see Kraglin skulking in Yondus shadow that she hadn't seen fit to try and spot him. She frowned when he didn't reveal himself to her, and even glanced up to the rafters, just in case.

“Gone?”

Yondu’s hands shot automatically to his crest. Was she seriously talking about making him an outcast over this?

“It was one kiss!” he argued. “The Chief wouldn’t. Not over that!”

But maybe he would. If this omnishambles of a day had taught him anything, it was that Yondu no longer knew who to trust. Pharaqa and Uzuko had been working together to scare Kraglin away - and Kraglin had fallen for it, which Yondu still hadn’t forgiven him for. But even in the midst of his anger and the vomit-sour taste of betrayal, he knew who the true perpetrators were.

“He wouldn’t,” he repeated again, quieter. “Would he?”

“Why do you think I’m in here with you, you fool? To reassure you?” Pharaqa scowled as she paced away from him, sitting down on a pile of pelts with an aggravated sigh. “Tomorrow morning you and I both get to stand before the za’gah tree and make our choice. Keeping us in here is just Uzukos way of keeping track of us.”

Uzuko. Not Chief.

Yondu laughed. It sounded fake, even to his own ears.

“Yer joking. This all some prank - some big fuckin’ prank at my expense. I see how it is. You, Kraglin, dad… Yer all in on it. Tryin’ to make me look stupid. Well you ain’t gonna succeed. I’m not scared. I know I can walk out those doors right now, and…”

He pushed aside the curtain to demonstrate, and found himself neck to tip with Jaku’s arrow.

“I’m sorry, Pharaqa,” she said over his shoulder, ignoring him entirely. “But we can’t let you leave.”

Yondu dropped the rug-hanging. It swished between him and the arrowtip, the criss-cross patterns of woven red and gold consolidating across his vision like the bars of a portcullis.

“Holy shit,” he said hoarsely.

“I understand, Jaku,” Pharaqa called before the carpet fell. “Do your duty. I commend you.” There was little else she could expect the huntress to do, and she sighed as the door swung shut. She put her chin in her hands, crossing her legs on the floor and shutting her eyes.

“So it penetrates your thick skull,” she said dully. “Yes, he is serious. Yes, tomorrow we choose. Get some sleep - they do not spare dinner on the dying and dead.”

Yondu swallowed, not without difficulty. He backed away from the doorway. The walls of his hut, which had seemed so close and cosy when it was only him and Kraglin, now pressed in uncomfortably tight.

“No chance of you distractin’ her while I run for it?”
“No, Yondu.” Pharaqa didn’t even open her eyes. “For once, you deserve everything coming to you.”

She ignored, as best she could, the sound of arguing. Bargaining. Quiet, hushed weeping. And did her best not to picture brothers and sisters bartering for each other.

Morning rose, and Yondu and Pharaqa rose with it. Or rather, they were hauled upright, whether they wanted to be or not. Yondu had rolled into his nest and feigned sleep to avoid having to look at his mother, who sat in uncharacteristically quiet meditation, but try as he might, sleep evaded him. The za’gah. The fucking za’gah - how had it come to this? A part of him remained convinced it couldn’t be real. This was all a joke, surely. A big cosmic jab at his expense. Maybe Anthos getting his own back for all those times Yondu had taken his name in vain - occasionally while being fucked by another man, which would give any deity cause for grief. But while his God was many things, Yondu had never thought of him as unjust.

His eyes were prickly with tiredness, and he fought Jaku as she grabbed him under the arms, dragging him when he kicked and refused to set his feet under him. Pharaqa, striding with stately dignity into the light between an apologetic-looking pair of hunters, didn’t spare him a glare. But her scoff grated on Yondu’s ears long after the curtain had swung to behind her.

“C’mon,” snarled Jaku in his ear. “Walk, damn you. You want us to lug you to the tree along the ground? Like a trussed catch for the firepit?”

No. But neither was he going to submit. Yondu gnashed her hand when it tried to plaster itself over his mouth, kicking behind him. Remembering how Kraglin had fought the Ignokai, when his jaws clamped on flesh he hung on, as Jaku shrieked and thrashed her arm from side to side, blood smearing his mouth like berry-juice.

Kraglin. Was he back at his ship? Waiting? Clambering slowly into the pilot’s seat, one hand held up against the glare from the dual-sunned sky as he watched the treeline for a blue shape that would never meld out of the forest? Or had he already blasted off, halfway to his stupid stars and gunning his engines every time his mind strayed back to the grubby blue moon he’d left behind?

Jaku extracted him with the help of two other hunters. When prising Yondu’s mouth apart with brute force failed, they simply squeezed his nostrils shut until he had no choice but to gasp for air. He swung at them the moment he was free, clumsy half-feral strikes that glanced off taut muscle. If he had space to draw his bow, he would be in with a chance… But Jaku saw his eyes skipping to it. She marched over, leaking blue from her clenched fist, and stomped on the slim, lovingly-carved sapling branch until it snapped.

“You try that again,” she said, toeing the quiver from where it lay half-swamped by pelts, “and I break your arrows too. And then your legs, so you really won’t be able to walk.”

Whatever else could - would - be said of Pharaqa, she would never let it be that she had faced her death with indignity. She murmured, low and hushed to her escorts, that she was proud of them. It had been an honour to serve with pride by their side. She offered courage, as best she could, to the guard whose eyes kept skipping to the group waiting by the tree, lashed wrist to wrist to prevent them from fleeing.

As if any of hers would flee, she scoffed to herself. Yondu had got that impulse all from his father. But another part of her, some part she kept silent, was glad Uzuko had seen fit to herd them into the shade.

Small mercies.
“Do not waste your words on me, my Chief,” she called out when her guards were clear, her back against the rough trunk. “You said enough of them yesterday. I choose death, and you had best pray I whisper words of mercy for you to Anthos’ ear when he gathers me in.”

Uzuko’s face was a mask of paint: dark stripes highlighted the prow of his nose, his sharp cheekbones, the severe jut of his chin. He inclined his head to the hunters on either side of Pharaqa - those he hadn’t named as suspect in the eyes of their god.

“Take her to the others,” he intoned, voice resonating with the creak of the trees, the howl of the wind around the mountain peak, the faint rumbling from deep within the earth as Anthos rolled in his eternal slumber. This situation troubled the great god. Uzuko felt it - the pang in his chest, the betrayal. Not of him, but of Anthos.

How could Pharaqa do this to their people? She had suggested that he and her simply create another heir, as if their failings with Yondu could be erased so easily. Whatever was wrong with the boy, it came from within - a cancerous blemish that ate him from the inside out. First his idolatrous worship of the stars; then his… relationship with that gaunt white creature, whose very existence was a blasphemy.

Ugh. Just imagining the two of them performing the Len’air (and Anthos-knew what other such atrocities) made Uzuko grimace.

But he hadn’t inherited his deviances from Uzuko. Pharaqa’s approach of him the night after the Season had officially wound to a close, more than confirmed what Uzuko had always claimed - that the boy got all of his worst traits from his mother.

* 

Under the springs, Kraglin triple-checked his lead lines and had to finally admit to himself he was stalling. He hadn't slept the whole night, but he'd flown with less sleep before. And it wasn't as though he was known for being the safest or most regulated flier, so he could no longer pretend that he was putting off leaving for safety reasons.

He didn't want to go. He'd never wanted to go; how could Yondu have ever thought otherwise? He thumped his fist on the dashboard with an expletive from another planet, another system, unfathomable miles from here.

Not for the first time since landing, Kraglin cursed the way he was built. The way his species worked, the way his body rebelled against all common sense. Leaving Yondu behind was as impossible to him as not blinking at a slap to the cheek, or not gasping for air when surfacing from a lake. He couldn’t leave. Not without checking one more time.

“Fine,” he muttered, turning the ship on and raising her, enough to steer her gently from the cavern. He was ill-treated and under provisioned, but that was fine; he could find some other part of this mudball to land on and get water, and hunt the way Yondu had taught him...

He turned his craft to face the village, activating the cloaking device. If nothing else, he didn't want to cause any more distress to the village and it's people. Gritting his teeth, he headed up, enough to mask the sound and shimmer of the Eclector, and cruised onwards to the village.

* 

How many times had he climbed this tree? Yondu stood in the dappled shade, one wrist lashed to his mother’s and the other to the next accused hunt-brother in line. Pharaqa would go first, as she went
first in all things - whether it was leaping into the fray of battle or the maw of a yolopp, starting an argument or a punch-up while off her head on teku. But for once, she didn’t look eager about it. She stood tall and haughty, waiting on the chief’s decree, and staunchly looked everywhere but Yondu, as if determined not to impress his shape into her eyes.

Of course. Who would want the last thing they saw to be their failure of a son?

Yondu stared at the faces carved into the tree. Anthos’s familiars. Aja had taken him here often as a child, to run his hands over curling, knotty horns and sanded-smooth fangs. The familiars were tricksters, she’d told him. Like the first of the Ignokai, who’d been flicked to the valley’s far end. They were twisted man-beasts, neither and both, who defied every boundary that ordinary nature adhered to and spent their days scampering up and down the za’gah tree, tattling on those who’d misbehaved. Sometimes they whispered lies into the Great God’s ear - such was their nature. But he never believed them. Anthos was all-knowing, and none could hide from his gaze.

“If none can hide from his gaze, why does he need familiars?” Yondu whispered to himself, repeating words last spoken fifteen years ago. Aja was no longer here to answer, but Yondu filled in in her stead: “They’re just stories. Just. Stories.”

It should’ve been a revelation. And yet Yondu felt nothing but numbness. It was creeping and unstoppable as the thermal heat death Kraglin had told him about: the final extinguishing point of all his precious stars. It gnawed away in his chest as Jaku placed a gentle palm on his mother’s shoulder, indicating she should kneel. Her movement dragged Yondu down with her, and he the next warrior; all twenty of them in a chain, the fronds of their loincloths brushing the dirt.

Overhead, birds peeped merrily, flitting between the boughs and heralding the morning. It was a good thing Yondu had decided Anthos was nothing more than a story, else he would’ve been pissed off that their so-called Great God couldn’t be bothered with Pathetic Fallacy.

Uzuko was in full chief regalia. He looked tall, fierce, resplendent - like a manbeast of Anthos himself. But Yondu knew that under the paint there lurked only a man. A scared old man, threatened by what he didn’t understand, who would kill them all if it would allow him to remain secure in his beliefs.

For an instant, the space between heartbeats, Uzuko’s eyes met his. Yondu hoisted his chin, meeting them square. He wasn’t going to beg.

Pharaqa lifted her gaze after she settled on her knees, the movement fluid, careful and easy. If she had thought it possible - if she had thought that even one word of hers could have moved Uzukos heart from destroying their warriors, she would have sung all the ones she knew, and even made up a few for their sake. But neither words nor silence would change his mind, and so she stuck with silence, clenching her fingers hard behind her.

Strength, she willed to them, as if they could hear. Be strong for me.

Overheard, Kraglin peered at the view on his screen. He didn’t understand - Yondus mother, Yondu, and - so many others? What had happened? He’d only been gone a night. Uneasily, he wondered if Yondu had tried to mount some sort of rebellion. One that had been quashed, and quickly.

“Pharaqa of the Zatoan,” said Uzuko. The loud boom of his voice was the drummers’ cue; they began to beat a fast compound song, in a rhythm that had been forgotten since the decade previous, when the last za’gah had washed the tree in blood. “You have attempted to break Anthos’s law with my own person, and conspired with the star-man to usurp our way of life. The only question that remains is whether you will die or eke out a pitiful existence, crestless, friendless, and unloved-by-
Anthos. Now, huntress.”

He raised his bow. It was heavier than hunter-fare, ornately carved with the same spirals as those which wound serpentine around his torso, and the torso of his son before him. The tip rested on Pharaqa’s bare left breast, over her heart.

Uzuko looked at her, his red eyes almost lost in the smear of paint that surrounded them. Then he took three measured steps to the rear; enough space to draw and loose.

“Choose.”

Pharaqa laughed. The sound bubbled out of her mouth before she could stop it, and her expression changed from something carved in stone to a smile, a smirk, a sneer. She straightened her back, thrusting her chest outwards in offering, and staying still. Anthos knew, her expression seemed to say, she didn’t want this poor village sitter to miss a moving target.

“Death, oh Chief.” She taunted, another laugh falling from her mouth. “My only mistake was going to you for a second heir. You didn’t have much on offer the first time, after all.” She glanced up and down, just once, before she met his eyes, her own alight with mirth. “All that height and nothing to show for it. Watch out ladies, he’s going to want another egg - I’d suggest you hang a nice carpet on the wall that you may study its story while he mounts you.”

Overhead, Kraglin had to sit back in his seat, confused. Pharaqa - why was Uzuko aiming at her? Was it some mistake? Why would she have sided with Yondu? Or was it something stranger, some Zatoan ritual he couldn’t fathom - threaten the mother then kill the child?

His stomach flopped unpleasantly at that and he hauled the screen closer, stare intense.

Pharaqa’s words washed over of Uzuko, not lingering long enough to leave their imprint. He was above anger. He was above hatred. He was at one with Anthos.

The Great God’s will flowed through him, tightening the rarely-used muscle of his bow arm. Pharaqa had been too obsessed with her pack. Her love for them had obscured her view of what was truly important in this life - the worship of Anthos. But she was not beyond saving. This was the only way to bring her back into Anthos’s arms. And as chief, guide, and spiritual protector of the Zatoan people, Uzuko had a duty even to sinners.

Uzuko shut his eyes. He had smeared dark pigment over the lids, and when the red iris was hidden, they blended into the rest of the paint as if his face was a blank black slab. This part of the ritual was vital. The chief let his body be moved to Anthos’s breath, Anthos’s beat. He was no longer in control - because if it was a sin to take a partner to bed outside of the season, or to copulate for pleasure rather than procreation, it was more of a sin to murder.

But this was anything but that. This was a mortal acting as a tool, divining Anthos’s will and enacting it as if it were his own. The teku Uzuko had drunk certainly helped matters, as did the rattle of talismans that he’d braided around his bow and the powerful throb of the drums. Uzuko was dissolving, as he had dissolved when he ushered Aja into Anthos’s embrace. If he was above anger and hatred, he was also above blame.

He flexed his senses. A thousand electrical impulses rushed from his crest and into the surrounding biotic matter. It took him mere moments to place Pharaqa, despite being so unpracticed. Her complex jumble of a biosignature was too advanced for Uzuko to discern anything more than faint smatterings of emotion (he couldn’t put his finger on exactly what those emotions were - either that or he was reading her falsely, because not even Pharaqa was mad enough to find this situation amusing). She
stood out against the za’gah tree’s flaky bark like the bright plumes of an aku on the mountainside.

*Beautiful,* Uzuko thought. Then, abruptly - *see how she has corrupted you.*

It was high time he got this over with.

“By the glory of our Great God…” With his eyes closed, he couldn’t see Pharaqa draw herself up, but the impression of her body on his senses was so stiff that it might as well have been hewn from the cliff-face. Here was a warrior, not afraid to die. Uzuko could respect her for that, at least.

He respected Yondu significantly less. Their failed experiment of a son tugged on the rope that bound his wrist to his mother’s, rough fibers biting his wrists raw, coming back doggedly even after she kicked him away. What was he trying to do? Encourage her to duck away from the threat, shame herself like a coward? He must know it was futile. And yet there was something desperate growing behind the denial in his eyes, something Uzuko had never seen.

Had he known the threat of the za’gah would bring out Yondu’s empathetic side, he would never have given into Aja’s badgering and banned the ritual in the first place.

Pharaqa certainly wasn’t enamoured with Yondu’s attempt to hold her back.

“You would embarrass me again, monster?” Her voice carried through the silent gathered village. Even the children, left in their huts and ordered not to peek under any circumstances, didn’t whimper. Toki’s baby, nursing in the arms of its mother, provided the only backing track: a soft wet suck, constant as the grate of cicadas in the forest. “If I have one regret, it is that I didn’t drown you in the creek when you were small enough to hold under.” Turning back to her chief, she lifted her chin in defiance. “Ignore our brat. I am ready.”

And so was Uzuko.

He had performed the dedication dance while the prisoners were dragged to the tree. All that remained to complete the ritual was blood. And blood was provided, as Uzuko released the tension across his chest with a snap of a bowstring through air. A sharp whistle guided the arrowtip through Pharaqa’s ribcage, and into the tree behind.

“Rest with him always,” Uzuko finished as she crumpled to the ground. He didn’t open his eyes, forcing himself to feel the drain of her life, weakening with every spurt.

Loose sand soaked up the blue. But it saturated in seconds; puddles forming and streams trickling between the grains as Pharaqa’s eyes dulled, smile freezing on her face. By the time Uzuko worked his way through her precious huntpack, the ground would be as boggy as the swamps.

If that was the price it took to cleanse his village, Uzuko would happily bear it. He strode forwards to pry his arrow from the blood-splattered bark. He trod over Pharaqa’s body without looking at her or their kneeling son, whose twitching cheek had been caught in the spray, wrenching the arrow free with a heave and a grunt as the village looked on in silence.

The ground might turn swampy, but that mattered little. It wasn’t as if *yolopps* existed, anyway.

Yondu stared along his wrist, across the tether, to his mother’s limp form. Her hand brushed his. It was so warm. Even the gnarly bow-calluses on the underside. Warm as the blood on his face. Yondu had seen death so many times - but now, faced with Pharaqa’s, he couldn’t quite believe it. She was smiling. The fuck did she have to smile about?

“Yondu. It is your turn to choose.”
Fuck smiling. Yondu wasn’t ready to die yet. Anthos was dead, Anthos was fake, Anthos had never existed in the first place. Life was all he had left.

“My crest,” he said. “Fucking take it. I don’t want it no more.”

As Jaku sliced the flax from his wrists and guided him to stand facing the tree, loincloth rope drawn down to his tailbone, Yondu stared blankly into the mocking grin of Anthos’s familiar, and thanked the stars that Kraglin wasn’t there to hear him scream.

Kraglin felt frozen in place, his fingers locked around the screen he’d pulled into his lap. There was something dark happening here, something he’d only read about uncontacted peoples doing. While there were still occasionally wars and such through contacted planets, most had the common sense to stop murdering each other once they realised they weren’t alone in the universe, and the only real allies they could trust were the ones from their own planet.

Of course, he realised sickly, as Uzuko raised his bow and drew back, that all relied on the people believing they’d been contacted to begin with. Some part of him hoped this was all for show, some sort of ritual, a fake-out. Would the arrow hit the tree instead? Split the bark and then they’d all leap up with a whoop, read it as a sign that no one had to die today-?

He’d heard the wet, thick sound of an arrow piercing flesh more times than he cared to. There was no chance his scanners would pick it from here, not at this height, but as he watched the whip-quick strike against Pharaqas heart, his memory helpfully supplied it for him. Kraglin flinched as she fell.

And Yondu was directly next in line. Kraglin cursed, throwing the holopad away and diving for the controls. Without the screen, he could only watch through the bridge glass as Uzuko strode forward, Yondu standing for some reason. Was this something else? Had he been redeemed by the death of his mother? Was-

For years, for decades later, Kraglin would blame himself for not gunning the engine fast enough. For being shocked into stillness as a sharp knife sliced effortlessly through soft, yielding flesh in almost one practised motion. There had been a hitch, lower down on the spine, where it either caught on a bone or the momentum had been lost. In his more charitable moments, Kraglin told himself he’d been waiting to see if maybe, maybe, all was not lost, and Uzu had simply been placing more scars on his son, elaborate ones that meant something. Anything but this.

But Uzuko stepped back, the red slab of flesh in his grip and Kraglin felt a matching red wash over him. If that was the length this man would go to to keep the secret of alien contact, then let him know the futility of it all. Kraglin grit his teeth around a snarl and pointed his ship downwards.

He stopped her with a roar of the engines. The cloaking slammed off. Even in his rage, he was careful to position the Eclector so as not to burn any of the spectators - as tempting as it was. This wasn’t about pain.

His ship gleamed in the sunlight, a golden spectre suddenly thrust into view, close enough to touch, if they so wished. Kraglin hurled himself from the controls and down to the forward-opening hatch, opening it to the village as all the outer lights flared, dimming the suns in comparison.

"Hey, a-hole!” he yelled, fumbling for words and coming up with something he felt in his bones that Yondu would know, would respond to, would appreciate. He directed two middle-fingers to the Chief, who was just starting to make shocked sounds as the golden tip of the Eclector’s lowest spike dipped, almost brushing the earth. Kraglin held onto one support strut, leaning out with a hand extended, the ship’s engines buffeting the branches of the bloody tree.
"Yondu! I got bored of waiting. Are ya coming or not?"

Fire.

That was all Yondu could think of. Great red licks of it, tongues of flame that beat the skin from his back again and again, like Anthos was blowing lava from the crater of the volcano. It had only taken one swipe of the machete to cleave his crest from his spine. But the pain blared on, and on, and on, like the thunder after a lightning flash.

He slumped against the tree, nails gouging the hollowed eye-pit of the nearest familiar. Was that blood slicking his back, or shreds of skin? Had the knife only slashed once, or was it still burrowing into him, shearing the splintered remnants closer and closer to the quick?

And… and why the fuck was Kraglin here?

Yondu would’ve blamed it on a hallucination, if he’d touched teku over the past week. He’d heard pain could turn you mad though. That seemed like the more viable option. Kraglin was gone, Kraglin wasn’t coming back, Kraglin was safe.

So if he was the only one seeing this - his Star-man’s hand outstretched towards him, and his magnificent ship glistening like a ruptured gold-seam under the twin suns - why were the other villagers shrieking like Anthos had come to wag his finger at them in person?

Yondu heaved himself around like a man three times his age. He slumped on the za’gah tree, back shrieking every time his ribs contracted. Thinking hurt. Moving hurt. Standing definitely hurt; his knees trembled inwards and his ankles threatened to give way, deposit him on the ground besides his mother. But Yondu stood anyway.

Uzuko stared at Kraglin’s ship. His eyes formed perfect circles in his charcoaled face. A clump of red flesh hung from his right hand, blood plipping from its underside. Each drop left a neat circle of blue, bright against the matte grey rock. Bones stuck out too. Their slender fronds reminded Yondu of river fish, whose bristly skeletons you had to suck on extra hard to extract the meat from, and which tickled your throat if you swallowed them whole.

Yondu felt no particular connection to his crest anymore, like he felt no particular connection to the rabbit braces that were brought in swinging on the backs of the hunters before the communal meal, or the mouldering body of the last dead twin, or the limp pile that had once been Pharaqa.

Stories. That was all Anthos was. Stories. There might be a smidgen of extra-sensory biology there - but the spiritual side of it? That was empty.

Yondu took a staggering step towards the ship. The mirage didn’t waver. The villagers were a petrified tableau, trembling and pointing and praying to Anthos. Yondu didn’t feel connected to them either. Or the grasses beneath his feet, the weeds that had sprung up around the za’gah tree over the years since it was last watered in blood. Not even the birds, who erupted from the overhead branches in a squawking melody similar to that which had accompanied Kraglin when he first arrived.

Yondu felt… nothing. It was oddly liberating.

He fixed his spinning vision on Kragin’s hand. It shrunk away from him, distance all the more acute as agony lanced along the line of his back. It increased with every step. The breeze carried smuts from the fire, salt rubbed into the wound, and Yondu’s ailing balance meant that he had to fight to stay upright, muscles shrieking as they shifted under raw blue meat. He didn’t slow down though. Not for the crying villagers, not for the roots of the za’gah that burst through the bedrock and turned
his path into a winding chicane… Not even for his father.

Uzuko dropped the crest. Clutched his knife all the tighter, and leveled it at the bloodsoaked man walking dead-eyed towards him.

“Not another step, Yondu! Do you hear me? As your chief, I order you - not another step!”

“Not my chief anymore,” said Yondu simply. He didn’t look away from the welcoming curl of pale fingers. The low wub of the starship’s engines made everything vibrate, from the canopy to the huts, to the moldering thatch on the chieftain’s roof and the rings in his crest. It was like an earthquake whose epicenter was suspended midair. Impossible. Powerful. Greater than anything his people had ever known - Anthos included.

Yondu stopped walking only when Uzuko placed himself directly in his path, a barricade of self-righteous fury.

“You brought this monster upon us! You bring doubt to my village! How could you do this to your father?”

The blade bit his collarbone. Uzuko’s hands shook too much to steady it, and from the undiluted rage in his eyes he didn’t care to try. Yondu ignored the sting. It was nothing, compared to his back. All of it was nothing.

“No my father either,” he said.

"C‘mon," Kraglin murmured, barely audible over the pulse of his Ship. He let go of the support strut, confident enough in his space feet to move down the ramp, boots clinking on the ridged metal walkway. If Uzuko wanted to be in the way, wanted to make himself more of a nuisance, he could. It was easy enough to simply step around him, pointedly ignore him as if he was of something of so little consequence.

“You know,” he said louder, hand reaching for Yondus again once he cleared the taller man - while he knew Yondu would probably hate the idea of being helped, this wasn’t to help him. This was to make a point, to drive it home. To hurry them out of range before Uzuko got any fancy ideas about arrows or using that knife a little more confidently. “If all it takes to bring doubt t’the place is someone new, there probably wasn’t much for faith t’build on in the first place. Jussayin.”

He tugged, very careful, on Yondus hand and gave him a nod. Uzuko was pushed from his mind entirely now, the only thing he could consider worth focusing on the too-cold touch of Yondus fingers.

He needed to get him to sit, to lie on his front - already he was making a plan, something to keep them going until they could figure out the next step. The edge of the ramp hovered a few inches off the village floor and he stepped back up onto it, navigating it easily.

All Yondu had to do was step up, and then he could rest. Kraglin would shut the hatch, push them away from the village and find somewhere safe to stop and tend to that ugly, ugly wound. Kraglin waited until Yondus feet were on the metal, and gave Uzuko a final look.

“Remember I coulda burned this place to the ground,” he advised, hitting the button to start closing the hatch, lifting them into the ship. “I coulda burned you all.”

Before Pharaqa was thrown into his tent, and what had been a simple kiss spiralled out of control, Yondu had assumed that Kraglin would come snivelling back to him, begging for his forgiveness. Then Yondu could inform him that he was a fucking idiot for lying to him, before pulling him close
and hissing that if Kraglin ever left for real Yondu would hunt him down and drag him back squealing. Sure, he didn’t have no fancy starship. But he was sure he’d find a way.

This - helped into Kraglin’s ship like an invalid, collapsing onto his knees the moment the hatch blotted out the view of the village behind him? It wasn’t nearly so satisfying.

Yondu swallowed hard, one fist bunched against the metal slatted floor of the cargo bay. The pattern of the interlocking plates would be branded into his shins when he stood - if he ever stood again. At the moment, that didn’t feel like a likely prospect. He reached behind him, hissing when fingers carded where a crest ought to sit and found only air.

“It’s gone,” was all he could think to say.

Kraglin didn’t know how to reply to that. Yondu’s back looked like raw meat, something ready to be pared up and portioned. He swallowed thickly, forcing his eyes away from the navy fillets presented to him and reached down to put his hands around Yondu’s arms.

“Don’t hate me for haulin you,” he said, gently pulling on him to get him up a little, enough to steer him to a bunk. “I need you t’lie down before they decide to start firin’ arrows at the bridge again.” He waited until Yondu was face down before he rushed to the panels, pulling them up.

They rose until they cleared the trees and emerged from blue canopies into bluer sky. He dragged his fingers over the screen, selecting a spot and let the Eclector take them there herself. He waited until they were cruising before he returned to the bunkside, crouching down.

“You still with me?”

This was the same pallet Yondu and Kraglin had shared, weeks ago now. It fit the shape of his body, cupping him chest to ankles in warm plush fabric. Just thinking of how simple things had been back then, when Kraglin kissed him and fucked him and reassured him that he wasn’t going anywhere, and Yondu believed him, made something ache. But Yondu was aching so much, as if his crest had been replaced with a phantom made entirely of pain, caustic and sharp and unrelenting...

“You came back,” he muttered. Not accusingly, but equally not in any way that sounded the least bit grateful. Just... a statement. He twisted his face to look at the wall rather than having to suffer the pity in Kraglin’s expression. Rotating his neck made the entire line of the wound protest, and Yondu’s breath hitched high in his chest, face scrunching to prevent himself from making a noise. “Y-you came back for me. Idiot.”

"Of course I came back for you." Kraglin sounded astounded for a moment, quietly incredulous that he’d thought him capable of abandoning him. "You thought I was gonna just swan off without even coming back to check- Look,” This sounded dangerously close to what had gone on last night, Yondu accusing him of thinking that he wouldn’t try to protect him from his parents. While Kraglin was inwardly pointing out that he’d been right in keeping it from Yondu, because now people were dead and mutilated, it wasn’t the time to bring that up.

Maybe in a few years, when the evidence of what Uzuko had done wasn’t leaking into the sheets.

“I’m flying us somewhere safer. You need to tell me if you know any, I dunno, herbs or something we can put in your back, help the wound start healing. Got some spare blankets we can use as covering, we’ll wait it out until you heal. And we ain’t got a choice about that,” he said, just in case. “Can’t frame-shift with you wounded. Bits’ll fall out.”

Yondu snorted. He was tired. The adrenaline of the past quarter hour crashed over him, almost
debilitating in its magnitude. There was nothing he wanted to do more than press his face into the pillow and sleep.

“You got any more slick-pots in your magic pockets?” he said, the hand closest to Kraglin shifting to tug on his pantleg. “Seem to remember ya wanted to screw me on my belly.” Then, when snickering hurt his back too much and the laugh transitioned to ragged gasps - “Maybe not for a coupla days though. But seriously, Aja’s gunk ain’t just good for lube. I’ll be up again by the mornin’ if ya slap some of that on me.”

He was being blase about the extent of the wound, and he knew it. Not even Aja herself could nurse a new crest from his skin. He was forever banished, outcast, unloved-by-Anthos - but that was okay, because Anthos didn’t exist. What did it matter if Yondu could no longer feel the lifeforce of the planet around him? His senses were stunted anyway in Kraglin’s metal box of a ship. But Yondu knew with a certainty that bordered instincual that were he to set his bare foot on the vegetation of the forest, he would feel nothing but leaves mulching between his toes. No life. No light. No connection.

The hand on Kraglin’s leg clenched tight. Yondu forced it to release before he cut off the lanky dolt’s blood circulation. Heavens knew they didn’t need the both of them crippled. Somewhere safe, Kraglin had said. But in Yondu’s limited knowledge of his homeplanet, the Zatoan village was the only sanctuary around. There was no way they could return there - they might as well be flying blind.

It felt stupid to ask. Embarrassing, shameful, like he was a brat begging to be coddled. But right now, abandoned by his village and bleeding from his hewn back, Yondu figured he deserved a little spoiling.

“Stay here, wouldya? With me, right here. Just for a bit.” He was only asking because being cut off from Anthos’s creation felt slightly less devastating when there was another warm body nearby. That was totally the reason. Not because Kraglin’s presence registered as comfortable and home, and all those other things that Yondu had left behind.

“He knew he’d hidden a pot of that stuff here - he liked to keep some here, seeing as it was one of their usual haunts, Yondu kicking things around and making noises and being annoying while he worked on his ship until he was able to distract Kraglin away from her. It was sensible to keep some of it stashed under the mattress, just in case. If he’d been keeping it there for sentimental value, a reminder of this place once he left, well… There was always that too.

But applying it could wait until Yondu was ready for it. Kraglin nodded, sitting himself cross-legged on the floor by the bunk, settling his chin on the foam with a sigh. One of his arms rested on the mattress, a hand tentatively finding and curling around Yondu with a thick swallow. His chest ached in sympathy, even if he knew it was more token than anything else. The concept of ‘family’ was unfamiliar to him, never something he’d personally experienced. But that didn’t mean he didn’t understand how Yondu must have been feeling, pain aside.

“I got some of the stuff,” he murmured, just waiting. The sounds of the ship moving were a comfort to him, background noise that calmed his nerves. “You just tell me when you want it on there.”

Yondu didn’t look at him, letting his eyes drift closed while facing the wall. But when he felt the squeeze of a palm around his, he didn’t wrench away. Just breathed out, steady and slow, trying to get a handle on the pain.

It was gonna sting like a little bitch - there was no way around it. But in Alpha Centauri’s muggy, waterlogged atmosphere, infection festered as easily as mosquito larvae in the swamp. He’d let
Kraglin rubbed the stinging salve in only once he was absolutely, one hundred percent certain that he could take it without hollering.

“Y’know that dumb resort-planet place you were talkin’ about,” he said hoarsely, squeezing Kraglin’s hand. “Les’ go there. When we can y’know. Phase-shift, or whatever.”

“Sure.” Kraglin chuckled a little bit, resting his cheek on the mattress. He twined his fingers with Yondu’s gently, thumb rubbing a small, brief pattern on his skin. “We’ll earn up some money, head there and have a hell of a spin. Get you to try every kinda drink they stock there, see what sticks. I’ll make sure you don’t get any liver damage - uh, if you even got livers.”

Well hell, he hadn’t checked.

“I’ll show you how the Eclector flies too. We’ll get out into open space, you can give it a shot if you want. Nothin’ for you to hit her off out there.”

All of this was stalling for the inevitable - he fished the pot out from under the bed, doing his best to keep his hands steady. He didn’t look forward to getting his fingers in there, but at least he could say they were as clean as they were going to get. Kraglin settled one hand on the back of Yondu’s shoulder once he got the nod, and started to slick the gel into the gash. He had to breath deeply, forcing himself past the impulse to stop causing Yondu pain. He knew it was needed, but that didn’t make it easy.

“Rest up.” he said, once it was done, and his fingertips stained navy. It was hardly any comfort, and he knew it, but he tried. He reached behind him to the other bunk, wiping his hands on some scrap he found there, sighing. “I mean it. Try and stay still or sleep or something. I’m gonna go fly us.”

Sleep. Yondu could do that. The pain was exhausting, surmounting his senses. It had long passed the point where it would have kept him awake; now he felt like he’d be damn lucky if he didn’t go into shock. Unconsciousness had been creeping up on him ever since Kraglin introduced the first wadge of goo to his raw crest-base. It felt like he was rubbing it with a handful of razor blades, but Yondu tried not to hold it against him. Now, assured that Kraglin hadn’t caused him damage on top of that wrought by his father, despite what his nerves were telling him, Yondu tried to calm his high-pitched strangulated pants and nodded weakly, forehead tight to the mattress.

“Go do yer thing,” he croaked, words half-spoken, half-clicked. “I’ll stay here. Ain’t like I got anywhere else to be.”

As if plodding after Kraglin into the cockpit was even an option right now. Still, it never hurt to pretend. Yondu had got this far through life by bluffing that he was tougher than he was, so why break that habit now? Anyway, thought Yondu as he snuggled into the bed, trying to find a position where his back didn’t cain. He’d have plenty of time to watch Kraglin inputting lift-off sequences and navigation coordinates and the like, once they’d left the planet. Despite everything that had happened, a familiar flare of hope lit Yondu’s chest - the same flare he’d felt as a boy when he climbed the za’gah tree for the first time, popping through the canopy and finding himself in a lapis lazuli dome studded with glittering stars.

He was finally going to reach them. Fuck everyone who’d told him he couldn’t, fuck everyone who’d held him back. Yondu didn’t know where he was going, not exactly - but he was sure as hell on his way.

Kraglin sighed as he sat himself in the pilot’s seat, taking a moment to press the heels of his palms to his eyes and count to ten. The landscape of the planet flashed past, just trees and swamps as far as the eye could see. The scanners were working non-stop, a constant soft whirring that updated the map as
it was built in real-time. On the screens, a river was being drawn in, depth of the swamps scanned and recorded, hills and mountains carved from malleable holopixels. He watched it with the sort of idle half-thought that came from doing something rote, adjusting their path.

Over there, he noted, there was a wide expanse of open water, and sand besides. He thought it might be interesting to look at something that wasn’t bogland for a change. The Eclector turned effortlessly to follow the new path, curving gracefully over the trees and scaring a small flock of birds with her glow.

Kraglin sunk in his seat, shutting his eyes. With everything - the tense wait through the night, and the horrific discovery of the morning - he had forgotten how tired he was. He could feel it starting to creep up on him now, but with Yondu in this state, and the planet still an undiscovered mystery, he didn’t want to sleep. It could wait.

They touched down silently, Kraglin not wanting to wake his companion. Just after midday, by his reckoning, and he opened the back hatch to let in the air. With the other bunk still covered in clutter, and sealed up to serve as a make-shift hold, he didn’t have much choice on where to catch fifty winks. So he settled himself down to sit on the floor by Yondu’s bunk, one limp blue hand flopped by his knee.

He’d slept in worse, he reasoned to himself. And at least he’d be nearby, should Yondu need anything. With that, Kraglin let his head nod forwards to sleep.
“What is it?”

Their seaside town had seen the golden gull soar overhead. Its wings hadn’t flapped - indeed, it didn’t seem to have wings at all - and any attempts to attract its attention with sound or smoke had proven unsuccessful. Then someone had spoken in their gathering.

Hadn’t it only been three seasons ago, they said, that a fire had appeared in the sky, far, far into the distance? Perhaps the bird had been wounded then, and landed elsewhere. Now that it was well, it may be travelling the globe, seeking a place to live. A small scout party had been agreed on, and here they were.

For reasons pertaining to speed, and the pleasant weather of the day, they had opted to leave their cloaks at home. Lerlia’s loincloth was a deep, verdant green, the one he casually referred to as his ‘lady killer’ cloth. Its potency in that area had yet to be tested, but he was adamant it would work, if given the chance.

Seeing the gull up close, Lerlia wasn’t sure what to think. He crouched as he came closer. His brother - half by blood, but a full brother in all the ways that mattered - ran close on his heels. Lerlia grinned. He was going to be the first to-

“I touched it!” he whispered triumphantly, as his palm smacked a golden leg. He laughed at the ringing noise it made, tapping his nails over it again and again. “It’s like a shell - maybe it’s a big, flying crab?” The thought of all that rich, buttery crab meat made his mouth water. No more lobsterpots for him and his brother. A crab this big? They could feed the village for a month!

“Not a crab, you dolt. It’s made of metal - like the windmills.” A pause. “Anyway, crabs can’t fly. Everyone knows that.”

“Just because you haven’t seen one!”

Lerlia scampered around it, his fishing spear forgotten in its back-harness. The younger of the two, with a broader crest (that he boasted about incessantly) he was well used to slipping his brother’s care and exploring. He peered around the legs, up towards the belly of the crab, seeking more answers. He paused when he saw -

A ramp? An opening!

Hissing, Lerlia crouched low to the floor, flattening his crest against his back. He made a hand motion behind him - flapping for attention, then pointing forwards.

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It had been ridiculous to hope for peace.

He woke maybe four hours later, the feeling of chill and damp in the air suggesting one of the afternoon rains had passed. But it wasn’t the new silence that woke him, but hushed voices.

Centaurian, he could tell that much, and he felt a thrill of fear and fury up his spine. As if they hadn’t done enough damage, now they’d been chased? This far? It hardly made any sense, unless they had means of transport Yondu had never seen fit to reveal to him.
Kraglin reached back, feeling Yondu's hand and following it back to his wrist. He pushed up onto his knees, despite their complaints, and squeezed to wake him.

“Yondu,” he hissed, hearing the pad of feet on the ground. Another thought occurred to him; the Ignokai. Hadn’t Yondu said they lived in the flatlands? But that was still so many miles away, by the swamps. No, this was something else. “We’ve got company.”

Yondu woke to - surprise, surprise - more pain. And Kraglin, tugging on his hand like he wanted to yank it off and wear it round his neck as a souvenir. Yondu, he heard, and company. Everything else was drowned by the flare from his back.

It wasn’t the bright-hot burn of yesterday. It tunneled deeper, through his spine and into his chest cavity, making his lungs gum closed around his breaths.

“Tell ’em to fuck off,” he mumbled, rubbing his nose on the warm pillow. He liked this bed. He liked that it was soft and protected by the overarching wall, and that it smelled of Kraglin. “M’going back to sleep.”

He wasn’t sure if he’d spoken in Xandarian or otherwise - but hey. Kraglin was a clever kid. He’d figure it out.

Kraglin did his best not to curse too loudly. Yondu clearly wasn’t at his best right now. But he’d said to tell them to leave, no matter who it was, and that at least, Kraglin could obey.

“Alright.” He pressed his lips to the back of Yondu’s hand, trying not to let himself feel too doubtful about his chances. Maybe there would only be a few of them, he thought, approaching the back ramp. Maybe it was just an animal, with curious noises instead of speech. He had been tired, and could have misheard...

No. Those were blue people alright, goggling at him from just beyond the loading ramp, which had been lowered to let in the brisk sea air. As Kraglin watched, they raised their spears. Not as swiftly as the Zatoan bows he remembered, but more as a cautionary measure, glancing between themselves.

“Go,” He knew the whistle for that, pointing away. They glanced behind themselves, following his point, then back at him with rapt attention. “Go on. Get.”

“What?” Lerlia whispered, more to himself then his brother. The crab had something? Someone? Inside it, and it whistled in a dialect that was almost as incomprehensible as it was fascinating. “Did you understand that?”

“How many times do I have to tell you not to thump every new thing you see?” Rashiki elbowed his brother behind him, trying to simultaneously shield him with his body while not losing his grip on his fish-spear. He wouldn’t attack, not unless prompted - his people had outgrown such savagery, or so they liked to think. And the odd pale thing’s upheld hands indicated that it meant them no harm.

Rashiki had never seen a creature like this one, with its unnaturally bleached skin and unusual sproutings of hair. Its peaceful gestures could well be lulling them into a false sense of security. He couldn’t understand the noises coming from its mouth, although it sounded as if they had meaning.

It had come from the direction of the mountains, hadn’t it? There were plenty of uncontacted tribes up there, and had the pale man arrived with less fanfare - on foot, say, rather than in a feat of engineering that surpassed even the genius of the harvesters who farmed the sea and the wind and the suns for energy - Rashiki might have assumed the pale man was one of them.
Perhaps from a subterranean dwelling people, who sapped heat from the forbidden volcano and whose rich blue skintone had wasted after centuries spent burrowing away from the light?

The pale man made his gesture again, pointing beyond them, over the heads. Again Rashiki turned to look; again he saw nothing but the dunes, the windmills, the slope of the quarryside and the sprawling agricultural fields beyond.

“I don’t understand you,” he said. He took a step forwards, and lowered his weapon to half-mast after five terse seconds, once it became clear that the pale man wasn’t about to turn rabid and take a chomp out of his throat. He looked up at the arched entrance, taking in how metal blended to other materials, strange materials that his gut told him couldn’t be found on Anthos’s surface. “What is this… This miraculous thing?”

“Oh great, you’re coming over and hooting.” Kraglin folded his arms as the other one stood as well.

Lerlia peeked from behind his brothers crest, trying to peer into the darkness beyond the pale man. Not full darkness. He could see the sky through the glass roof, and there were little lights inset into the walls, like the rudimentary bulbs they were just fitting in the houses of the chief engineers. He swung to the other side, absorbing everything. Interesting. There were personal effects scattered across narrow shelves, and the floor was well scuffed, giving the hollow a homely feel.

“I’m going in!” he declared, skipping around Rashiki, because there was nothing like taking advice on board and then doubling down to ignore it.

The swiftness seemed to surprise the pale one. He yelped and put his hands up as if expecting…

Lerlia paused, feet on the ramp. He had rarely walked on metal before - Naquia got grumpy when he used her windmills as climbing posts, although in Lerlia’s opinion, that was an obvious and worthy secondary function. The chill of the steel infected his toes and his crest stood upright behind him, rapt with attention.

But he raised his hands, trying hard not to look crestfallen when the hairy man flinched. Either he had been in battles before - not unlikely, given the scarring over his bare chest and shoulders - or he was used to people attacking him and asking questions later. Lerlia’s crest twitched, emitting a light flash that he hoped would reassure, trying to read-

“We’re not going to hurt you,” he said, keeping his palms up as he approached. Kraglin shifted, trying to block the entrance, but Lerlia simply ducked down. The man was tall, he’d noted, and there was space enough between his legs to wiggle on board. He even tucked his crest so it didn't smack him in the crotch.

Once inside, he hurried along, turning as he walked to take it all in. There was something strange on board, niggling in the back of his mind - some sort of quiet spot, cold and dead-feeling even in among the metal.

Kraglin snarled and stalked after him.

“Get out!” he yelled, at exactly the same time Lerlia's eyes fell on the bed.

For a moment, there was silence. Horrible, horrible silence. Then two sounds at once; Kraglin's hand clapping on Lerlia’s shoulder at the same time Lerlia opened his mouth in an agonized, dismayed howl.

“Get a healer! Bring one as fast as you can!” he roared, loud enough to be heard down the ramp, even as he rushed to the bunk. He skidded on his knees, the metal cutting in. But the sting of it was
nothing compared to the ache in the air.

Lerlia groped at the bed, finding a blue hand and grasping it. It was hard to look at the man but he forced himself to, so that he knew he was here. “My Brother. Who did this to you. Explain this.”

For not the first time today, Kraglin felt entirely helpless. Helpless, and confused because he was thought he recognized the word ‘healer’ and now this blue one looked like he might start crying. And he had yet to attack either of them, so this was not the usual interaction with rogue Zatoans that Kraglin was used to.

“You’re not gonna-”

“Peace,” Lerlia turned a tearful gaze to Kraglin, grief warring with suspicion. “Did you do this to him?” Perhaps this furry creature was more dangerous than he’d thought. But if that was the case, why was this poor, mutilated man not dead? And treated, if poorly, by the smell of his back.

Yondu groaned when noise and shapes assailed him. He wriggled his palm out of the new man’s hold. Whoever he was, their skin was too hot to be Kraglin’s. And, he saw as his hazy wet vision focused on a singular form, far too blue. His hand was sweaty enough to slide free, and Yondu instead tucked it into his opposite armpit, curling as best he could to conserve warmth while he shivered.

*Shouldn’t be this cold,* he thought, through the spreading fuzz that had contaminated his brain, like parasitic fungi on the root of a waterlogged swamp tree. *Shouldn’t be this dopy. Shouldn’t be this tired.*

How long a shelf-life did Aja’s gunk have, anyway? Sure, the old biddy had always ensured that she had an oversupply, filling new pots in her spare time. But when the hunt came back, those little clay vials vanished as quickly as her helpers could pat them out of river-mud. It never got the chance to just… sit around and fester. Yondu hoped it wasn’t the sort of thing to go off, else slapping it on an open wound may have been a poor idea.

There was something wrong in this place. Something dark and brutal, that ought to have been left in the distant past. Rashiki sensed it too.

When his brother yelled for a healer, rather than sprinting back to the settlement he lunged up the gangway ramp and into the little room, crowding the already tight space. If the pale man had hurt Lerlia… Oh, there would be hell to pay.

But it wasn’t the sight of Lerlia that made his air stop in his throat.

There was a man. A Centaurian man, as blue as the pale-man sallow. Only he was missing… It had been… His crest…

Rashliki fought the urge to throw up.


“I’ll wait here.” There was a silent vow to his brother in that, one that said he would be well when Rashiki returned. Lerlia waited until he heard his companion run, then turned back to Yondu. He hadn’t had a good grip on him, but what he’d felt was wrong. That left only the pale one as someone he could work with, and from the sound of things, they didn’t understand each other well.

Lerlia realised he was somewhat out of his depth.
“Alright.” He stood, touching the pale man’s shoulder to calm him. Kraglin bared his teeth and he stepped back, but didn’t snap, although he watched the space between Lerlia and Yondu in warning. “I don’t think you’ll go anywhere, but wait here.”

With that, he left - only to return a short while later, a waterskin bulging in his hands. He elbowed his way past Kraglin, who seemed to have understood that there was some urgency now.

“Healer?” Lerlia squinted at Kraglin, trying to understand that toot. Kraglin repeated it, then another. “Water?” The man’s language wasn’t all that comprehensive, but Lerlia supposed he ought to reassure him.

“Yes,” Lerlia nodded to the skin, opening it. “Water. He is sick - that gel smells older than sin. If it’s anything like the stuff used in the Old Sea Scrolls, it used to be made of dead insects too, so it’s probably rotting. Hey.” His voice gentled as he spoke to the cut-up man on the bed. “This is going to hurt. Forgive me, brother, but there is still time.”

With that, he started to pour water into the crack in Yondus back, tilting it to let the gunk flow free. If it was cleaned well enough, and the healer had a ready supply of honeyed gel, they could still save him.

“Aaaaaaargh!”

This blue demon, this monster! It was hurting him! Was it his father, back to finish the job?

Yondu thrashed, but his limbs were packed with wool and each blow made about as much impact as a leaf falling from the canopy. He was easily restrained, and the sluice of… whatever it was (water, liquid plasma, rubbing alcohol; he had no way to tell) scoured him nape to tailbone. He’d turned as he struggled, and fixed Kraglin with aggrieved eyes. How could he just stand there, while this madman was murdering him?

“Hey,” Kraglin swooped down, wincing as Lerlia continued, apparently unconcerned by Yondu's thrashing - or if he was concerned, he kept it bottled inside. Kraglin found one of Yondu's hands and clasped it, kissing his fingers. “I think they're fetching help. You gotta stay still and let him clean this out, alright?”

Mostly because that navy looked off somehow. It was weird.

Yondu found a clump of pillow to bite. He rolled it between his teeth, working his jaw in slow revolutions, panting and twitching as he tried to soothe himself. The ache was sharper again now, not as if he were feeling his flesh dying through numbed skin. Gradually, he let his deathgrip on Kraglin’s hand loosen - but didn’t slip away entirely.

“Water’d be good,” he muttered to Kraglin. There was a significantly-sized proportion of him rallying against the fact that he was being tended to, like he a goddam village elder on his deathbed. Yondu oughta be up, fending for himself, protecting other people rather than having Kraglin make worried moon-eyes at him. He crawled to the edge of the bed, slow as a lahar, and let his head drop to rest on Kraglin’s thigh.

The newcomer’s presence didn’t phase him. Yondu wasn’t exactly in a state to be aware of much more than him, his screeching back, and his star-man. Anyway, they’d already taken his crest. What else could they do?

His cheek squished slackly over Kraglin’s leg. Not the comfiest pillow - even the man’s goddam thighs were bony. But Yondu made do, nuzzling against Kraglin’s inseam, their fingers a tangle of
Kraglin made a low noise, almost wounded sounding. He didn’t like Yondu like this, all floppy and tired and wrong for himself. He tugged on the other blue person until he had his attention, then cupped his hand, miming drinking.

“Here,” Lerlia handed the waterskin over, forcing himself to assess the gape of Yondu's spine. Little juts stuck up, like the knucklebones children played with around the pasturelands. They hadn't been sawn cleanly. Each was a different height, twisted and ragged, the joins where they met the vertebrae still intact. The sheedded remnants of a crest. The wound was at least clean, though Lerlia still wanted the healer to have a look at it.

Kraglin took the bottle and pressed it against Yondu's lips, letting him know it was there. Standing, Lerlia went to the ramp and leaned out. Inside, he couldn’t feel much of anything, so he jumped down to bury his toes in the grass and sent out a pulse.

Get here now! he yelled inwardly, crest raising up high enough to brush the base of the ship. Fever, rotting blood, poor medication, blood loss, some immunity response. Now!

Words were impossible over the link, granted. But he could count on urgency being carried along.

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The flurry of movement as the healers arrived was almost enough to jolt Yondu from his dopey haze. Not quite. But almost.

When they tried to tug Kraglin out the way though, Yondu found a new lease on life.

“No!” he snarled, hauling Kraglin in by the waist and locking his arms around him, tight as he could. “Don’t you take him, you a-holes… He ain’t done nothin’ wrong… It were just a fucking kiss, calm the fuck down, nobody needs to die…”

“Leave him there,” Lerlia gently nudged Kraglin around to the side, to give them room. “Peace, brother. He may stay.” He wasn’t even sure if this Centaurian understood what he was saying, given that Yondu’s toots and whistles had an accent on them that no amount of concentration could decipher. He sounded like an old man, or one of the scholars - so ornate, so elaborate and flowery.

Who even said len’air anymore anyway?

“Please try to work around him,” Lerlia said to the healers, moving aside. He put his hand on Kraglin’s arm, partly out of fascination with the hair, but mostly to keep him calm. Kraglin had hunched protectively over Yondu, not prying the arms from his waist, but keeping him steady and on his front, to let the others examine him.

Lerlia could feel his nerve starting to crumble. He wanted to stay, wanted to help, but he wanted air more. He ducked down the ramp, running to Rashiki, clinging on tight to him and gulping in lungfuls of brine-tasting breeze.

Rashiki dropped his hand onto his brother’s shoulder. Then figured what the hell and drew him into a snug embrace.

“This is why we don’t knock on strange things,” he said, and smiled internally when Lerlia’s laughter quaked against his ribs. He reached out his senses, almost shyly, letting his fear for the patient, his lingering curiosity about the metal not-crab, and his relief that Lerlia hadn’t bounded straight into a trap flow between them.
He needed that connection. After what they’d seen in there - that poor man, crestless and broken, alone even when surrounded by people; and his odd pallid protector - they could both use a little comfort.

Lerlia snuggled him for a moment, breathing out against his shoulder. He pushed back, letting the feel of his terror when he had to clean the wound, the nausea and lack of understanding, confusion and frustration at trying to communicate simple things to their guests dip over, to fill Rashiki in on what had happened. But there was wonder there - the crab’s insides were strange and magnificent, gleaming silver with lights and buttons and all sorts of other curios packed onto each compact surface.

Inside the ship, Yondu grumbled as a healer made another agonizing cartography of his wound. There was far too much poking. Why were they poking? Couldn’t they satisfy themselves with staring?

He knew wounds of this nature registered as nothing less than grotesque to his people. But that didn’t mean he appreciated being inspected by a sea of foreign hands. Were it not for Kraglin, he told himself, rubbing his cheek on the outstretched white palm, he’d’ve gutted the lot of them for daring to lay their hands on him, son of the chief…

No. Not that. Not anymore.

Yondu chomped the pillow again as the clinical, impersonal pressure walked up and down the edges of the wound, measuring, studying. The strangers clucked among themselves.

‘Don’t you got anything for the pain?’ he gasped, having to work to get his jaw to unclench. They must, he decided. What sort of godless heathens didn’t grow teku?

Kraglin was clearly growing just as impatient with the inspection, finding it lacking in any real purpose. So he reached over the next time fingers tried to walk Yondu's spine and slapped them away with a growl. Enough of that.

“You can see it's cut, you idjit.” He bared his teeth when they stared at him in confusion. “Quit it.”

“Well,” One healer started pulling tubs from his satchel, unscrewing them and giving each a sniff. When he found the right mix - ground teku and honey, to numb and drive out infection - he dabbled some on his fingers. Wisely, he paused to display them to Kraglin before he started applying it, in gentle, slow strokes. “We will wait for it to numb. Then take you on a stretcher back to the village. Do you understand me?” he asked Yondu, tone curious.

Yondu heard a few words that rang familiar, understand among them. It sounded as if these Centaurians spoke in a clipped and too-fast version of his own language; many words abbreviated and others substituted completely.

‘Not really,’ he replied. It devolved into a happy moan as the weird, sweet-smelling gloop sunk through the shredded tissue of his back, soothing the burning nerves. ‘Oh man. Gimme more of that.’

Kraglin seemed pleased that Yondu's noises no longer threatened immediate expiration. He settled down on the mattress, blinking at the other Centaurians’ toots. He rubbed Yondu's head in slow, easy strokes, avoiding the start of the wound. The healer nodded at Yondu's response, patting his shoulder - one of the scholars would be able to help, he was sure.

“Much better, huh?” Kraglin teased, no malice in his tone. Only fondness as the others tidied things away and studiously avoided touching anything that wasn't theirs. “Should I be jealous of that stuff?”
Rashiki looked up at the sky, to where the suns were beginning their descent and the last of the rains was building over the far-off slopes of the forbidden mountainside. He and his brother would be expected back soon. But Rashiki was sure Naquia would understand their tardiness - with the medics’ story to back them up. It wouldn’t be the first time his brother would be accused of making up stories for attention, but Rashiki had a reputation to keep.

‘We should find food for them,’ he decided. ‘And a place to stay.’

“Hey!” One of the other healers leaned down the ramp, squinting at the brothers. “Go fetch us two branches to use as supports for a stretcher, while you’re there.” Lerlia snapped a lazy salute and grinned, looking to Rashiki.

“Do you want to hunt, or find a room for them?”

Rashiki wasn’t usually the decision maker - or rather, while he made plenty of decisions, he had to be constantly vigilant and ready for Lerlia to veer in the opposite direction.

“I’ll take the room, you take the branches,” he said, peering at his brother out of the corner of his eye in the hope that he wouldn’t announce that it would, in fact, be the other way around.

Not that he was making an excuse to go see Naquia, but… Okay, he was totally making an excuse to go see Naquia. As one of the up-and-coming wind wardens of the settlement’s energy-harvesting farms, Naquia’s house was somewhat roomier than Rashiki and Lerlia’s own.

And she’d love having guests round, right? All women loved unannounced visitors. Rashiki had been assured of this by an elder. As he’d accidentally ruined that elder’s game of chai-po when he burst into his quarters, flushed-faced and desperate for advice on how to woo the clever young engineer he’d seen adjusting the windmill sail she was perched on with a spanner in each hand and a screwdriver clenched between her teeth, perhaps he should have taken that advice with a pinch of salt.

“Brilliant!” Lerlia punched the air with a whoop. “I’ll get us some fish while I’m out - If he’s lost that much blood,” He seemed chilled for a second by the idea, shaking it off as quickly as it came. “He’ll crave protein. Maybe some eggs too. Oooh, and do you think someone will spare some seaweed brack?” He sprang towards the just-visible dunes, almost jogging on the spot in his impatience.

“Alright! I’ll meet you back at town then! Find somewhere nice!”

And then he was off, a blue and red streak flitting across the sands with his spear bouncing on his back.

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Naquia, for her part, was busy. This was usually the case, true, but she’d been distracted by the great golden thing soaring overhead and now needed to catch up. Her diagrams were being etched out with care, following each line of the sails. She’d had an idea a few days ago - a lightweight sail that could fold in and out of itself, to adjust to wind speeds. It could be trialled on Rashiki’s fishing boat, and with any luck, this time it wouldn't sink.

So when she heard knocking, she grunted around her ruler, clenched between her teeth. When there was a second knock, she threw the ruler at the door from habit, then cursed. She needed that.

And being over there, she might as well open the door. Naquia rubbed her face with the back of her hand, holding the ruler and shutting her eyes.

“‘Yes?’"
Rashiki tried not to smile. This was not the sort of situation that a smile suited. A poor brother of theirs had been abused in the most awful of ways - Rashiki couldn’t think of a soberer topic.

But he couldn’t help it. As soon as he saw Naquia’s face - baggy around the eyes from where she’d spent half the night jotting down plans as they occurred in her dreams - his heart gave a massive, dizzying pump and he felt his goofy grin growing heedless of all demands to the contrary.

‘Hey Niqnaq.’ A nickname that was never to be spoken in public (or around his little brother) as Rashiki had sworn on solemn oath. He tried to lean saucily on the doorframe, succeeding only in making Naquia laugh when he missed the doorframe entirely, waving wildly to catch his balance. Rashiki would be embarrassed - an emotion that came as naturally as breathing. But when he let his senses brush delicately against hers, not only projecting, but sharing (a greeting only reserved for intimate family, lovers, or the closest friends) the bright sparkles of amusement she projected back at him were more than worth it. ‘Uh. I may have a favor to ask. A fun favor! You’ll love it, I'm sure.’

“A fun favour,” she repeated with a smile and a hum, folding her arms under her chest. Rashiki was - well he never failed to make her laugh. There weren't many she could say had that talent, given that he was usually the one to take her attention from work. And she was rarely mad at him for it too! She relished the tingling in her crest, empathy unfurling, welcoming the feel of his mind against hers for a moment.

There was something - Naquia frowned when she felt it, creeping at the edge of his usual mind-feel: the velvety, peaceful darkness of a restful sleep. That was how Rashiki usually felt to her, like waking up in the middle of the night, rain thrumming on the roof and silence in the gloom, like the world was holding its breath. The sharp edge was unfamiliar. She hesitated, before asking, “Is everything alright?”

The favour could wait, if he wasn't well.

‘Fine, fine, yes…’ Rashiki hesitated. ‘Well, fine with me, at least. Can I come in?’

Centaurians as a species weren’t inclined to luxury. Their buildings were simple, usually consisting only of a room for greeting and entertaining guests, and a smaller sleeping vestibule. Baths and latrines remained communal in the case of the former, and centrally organized for the latter. The engineers had even invented a rudimentary flushing system down-river - but despite his brother’s enthusiastic extolling of his virtues, and Naq’s reassurance that the mechanism wasn’t designed to activate while you were seated, Rashiki remained personally unconvinced.

Being an engineer, Naquia had been guaranteed quarters larger than the fishermen, like Rashiki himself. Her abode - single-story and round-topped, crafted from reeds, seaweed, and bent flotsam, all coated in rudimentary plaster - was spacious and airy inside, in a dim kind of way. Her single complaint was the lack of windows.

Rashiki had, in a fit of romance-fuelled madness, promised to build her one without having the first clue about construction. But that was a problem for another day.

‘You,’ he said, taking both of Naq’s hands in his, smile yet to wane, ‘are going to have visitors.’

“Rashiki.” She flushed a little, resisting the urge to pull her hands from his. It was flattering, but babies were a bit more than ‘visitors’. While she would admit - to him, and only him - that she longed for children, there had to be the right conditions met.

They had to be his, to start with. He had to have made it official between them, with a public
declaration and swapping of earrings before the village elders - because while Naquia was a modern girl, there were some traditions she was allowed to insist on, and that was one of them. He absolutely had to have moved in, and for the bulk of her work on the mill sails to be completed, so that she could focus more time on those first precious years.

And since one of those conditions depended on Lerlia proving himself a capable adult, and another on her sorting out the wind issue coming off the not-too distant coast, they were a little way off that stage yet. Not that practising wasn’t fun, but if playful threatening to impregnate her was his idea of flirting, she was going to need to have some gentle words.

“I’ve told you, I don’t want children until after I’ve sorted the east fields mill fin issue… Or until we know Lerlia has someone to mind him.”

But at least she was always still thinking on it, her small smile implied. And looked forward to it.

Rashiki’s mouth dropped open.

“I-I…” He stumbled over words for a full minute, hand intermittently tightening and slackening around Naq’s. “That’s not quite what I meant,” he managed, once the heat in his face wasn’t threatening to melt his brain. “Not that I don’t want to!” Because dammit, hearing Naquia say that, with that precious little smile, made him want to say screw it all, let’s conceive right here and now.

“Oh-!” She flushed a little, embarrassed that her first thought had been- She was getting as bad as some lovesick scribe at this rate, and she resisted the urge to bat at him for leading her on with the question. As if it had been his fault to begin with.

Children were a blessing. While couples that couldn't or wouldn't have them did exist (and were afforded the same rights as those who had huge swarms of pouchlings, scampering up and down the walls of their houses like animated blue carpet-hangings) it was of the utmost importance to be both settled and suitably mature in mind before bringing a baby into this world.

Rashiki and Naq were. Lerlia… wasn’t. And as where Rashiki went, Lerlia tended to tag along, it was for the best sakes of all of them that Rashiki stomp down on his instinct to take Naq in his arms and shyly suggest that they hop to the babymaking before another sail on her windmill broke.

Plus, right now there was a more immediate problem to deal with.

“So,” he began, peeking at her to gauge her reaction. “There’s a stranger. A pair of strangers. And by strange, I mean. Um. Strange. You saw the golden gull, didn’t you?” He waited for Naq’s nod.

“Well, the town gathering suggested someone scout it, and someone had to volunteer. I went to make sure he didn’t get, oh I don’t know. Turned into a yolopp or something.”

Naq laughed. Everyone knew that yolopp didn’t exist.

“So inside the gull, there was this weird guy… I mean, you’d have to see him for yourself. White skin - can you imagine it? And hair, like the older men grow on their chin!” He shuddered, rubbing his hands up and down his smooth blue biceps. “It was everywhere.”

But he was getting off-topic again. Whereas Lerlia could amble away on tangents and segues until even the person he was talking to had forgotten his initial point, Rashiki liked to think he was of a more logical mindset.

“But it’s not him I’m worried about. He was traveling with someone. A companion. A lover, perhaps - they spoke of Len’air, as if they were from a distant time. He is one of ours, but… But…” Words failed at describing the horrors enacted on that man. Rashiki gulped and shook his head. “Like I said.
You’ll see for yourself when they arrive.”

“You can’t be serious, Rashiki. I’ve got so much work to do, they won’t be comfortable here. Wait, arrive-- Did you already say yes?”

“Well, yeah. I figured you wouldn't mind…” Rashiki’s face turned pastel periwinkle. ‘Oh Anthos. You mind. You totally mind. Of course you do - it’s your goddam house. I screwed up, damn, I messed it all up, I just assumed…”

He was almost jigging from foot to foot, clutching Naq’s hands in apologetic determination. ‘But I’ll make it right! I promise! I’ll - I’ll build you that window! And get rid of Lerlia so we can have a day to ourselves, like I’m always promising! And… and… I’ll get them to let you study their flying crab!”

He was sure the hairy pale man wouldn't mind - not if they sheltered him and his partner while he recuperated.

“A flying crab.” She sounded dubious, but her curiosity had been piqued. “Is it alive? Do they ride it? Does it pull a cart for them? Was it on fire, like a comet?”

More than three questions usually was enough to prove she was interested, along with the wrinkle between her eyes as she thought. A crab, flying? Surely Rashiki was mistaken.

“Crabs don’t have wings. What do - they can stay if they explain this. They speak our tongue, yes? Even if it's old fashioned… A scholar should be able to translate for us, I’m sure.” Naquia detached his grip and returned to her pad, chewing the end of her charcoal pen before she started scribbling something, the shape of the flaming shape in the sky with arrows coming from it, potential wing sites.

“I’m sure its beautiful.”

And there she went. Rashiki’s smile blossomed, breaking over his face in a wave.

“I love you,” he couldn’t help but happily blurt.

Naq, hunched over her pad and scrawling furiously, nodded.

“I love you too, Ras,” Rashiki filled in. He heard the words loud and clear - Naq couldn’t have been more obvious if she’d belted them. For her to acknowledge any outside influence while she was in the throes of her genius was practically a sonnet’s worth of declarations.

Rashiki swooped in and pressed a light peck to the side of her forehead. Anything else would be a distraction, and he’d learnt early on that those were difficult for Naq to forgive anyone, even him.

“Love you,” he reiterated. Then, fingertips lingering against her crest until the last possible moment, he pulled away and jogged to the door. The healers would’ve located stretchers by now, and moved the poor kr’z’a’za and his hairy friend to the central hut, where cases of extreme urgency were dealt
with in isolation. Rashiki wondered how the pale man was taking being told he had no choice but to wait outside, while the healers washed and bound the wound and dressed it in honey, and those who still kept the old faith whispered their prayers to the Great God.

His brother was probably consoling him - which didn’t bode well. Lerlia would struggle to console an infant from his own pouch, let alone a full-grown adult.

The sea air hit him as soon as he left Naq’s house. The engineers’ quarter was well-designed - that went without saying. You could see the sea from the clearing between the broad domed dwellings, and the glittering wet teeth of the waterwheels, shining in the light of the suns as they turned in their never-ending revolutions.

Yes, thought Rashiki, one hand thrown up to shield his eyes. It truly was beautiful. No matter what traumas their visitors had suffered, here they would find peace. He was sure of it.

When Rashiki arrived at the hut, it was not to a welcoming scene. Lerlia stood outside the door with dogged determination, watching the strange man pace the hardened earth outside. He had navy blood dripping from his shoulder from a circle of wounds, but his expression bore no anger - only the occasional twinge of pain when he had to raise his hands to ward Kraglin back down from the door whenever he attempted a rush.

When his saw his brother though, his expression changed to one of panic. Not for himself, at least.

“Rashiki!” he called. Kraglin's head swung around to locate the other. He snarled, showing teeth and curling down as if preparing to lunge. “Rashiki, don’t, don’t hurt him! Its just a misunderstanding - it's fine, we’re all fine, he’s just scared and he doesn’t understand. I think - I think they don’t like being apart, it's fine, please don’t be mad at him- Hey, come back!” Lerlia yelped when Kraglin started to stalk towards Rashiki, eyes glittering with menace and malice.

Lerlia was no stranger to being bitten; while he lacked the experience to call himself anything close to a hunter, beyond his own fishing exploits, the town also kept a pack of hunting hounds. They were a rowdy group of dogs, always baying and yipping about on a chase, but in the kennels, there were strict rules to be observed. He knew how the trainers moved, low to the ground and slowly, advertising their movements to keep the excitable dogs calm.

And when there was a new one, you had to expect being bitten. Any animal, in an unfamiliar environment and having to endure things it was not used to, would lunge at even a trusted handler if provoked enough. And Lerlia could see the same traits and fear-responses here, the drive to get back to a familiar face. Especially since he was sure that their speech was as incomprehensible to this man as his would be to a dog.

Whatever had happened to them, Lerlia decided, it had its roots in being separated, if this terror was anything to judge by.

Not that he thought the other man would admit to it being fear. But there was a tick in his jaw and a quickness to his eyes that betrayed him, showed how alert and high-keyed he was. Lerlia grimaced, trying to keep his attention on him and finding it useless as Kraglin honed in on his new target.

He was being denied his duty, Kraglin felt unfairly, his throat dry with rage and thirst and worry, fists curled tight. Yondu was hurt, and there was no reason he could see that he had to wait outside. The annoying blue one darted around him to block his path, smiling in what was meant to be an appeasing manner and waving his hands about. Kraglin sneered a little; as if he hadn’t got past those hands before.
But his plan had worked. With Lerlia before him, it was easy to kick at his ankle and spin on his heel, making a break for the now unguarded door. Whatever else they taught the blue ones in this village, it wasn’t how to avoid a sneak attack.

“Stop him!” Lerlia shouted as he pushed himself up. “Just don’t hurt him!”

“How’m I supposed to do that?” Rashiki powered himself forwards at a sprint, using the rock-strewn sands as a launchpad. That was the bonus of growing up on the beach. Most newcomers found it hard to get their grip in the shingle. Rashiki had been running over this stuff since he first popped the pouch. However, while it slowed the pale man down, he had still gotten a headstart. He was about to burst through the door, interrupting Anthos-knew what vital procedure…

Desperate measures were required.

Rashiki clenched his jaw and lunged. He took Kraglin down by the knees, barreling his shoulder into the back of the joint so the taller man tumbled like chopped timber. His outstretched grasping white fingers crested the doorjamb. Then gravity took over and he landed face-first in the loose white sand.

“Gotcha,” proclaimed Rashiki, somewhat unnecessarily. He clung like an septopus through Kraglin’s kicks, riding them out until the man lay still. Then bestowed a calming pat on his flank, through the weird sleeve-things he wore on his legs. “It’s going to be okay, buddy. We just can’t let you go in there. Not until you see a blubber-candle.” He pointed to a window above them, the ledge bobbed with smooth drumlins of dried wax. “If it’s lit, your friend’s gonna be fine. If not…”

Well. Best not to think about what this crazy hairy creature might do then.

To say Kraglin squawked like a wounded, offended bird as he went down was an insult to the noise (and possibly birds). He did his best to thrash but the weight of the blue man pinned him there without any trouble. Not for the first time, Kraglin wished he could identify and fix whatever issue it was he had that prevented him from gaining any weight. He growled as he let his head flop forward into the sand, admitting defeat - if only temporarily.

He grunted when the shorter one came over and tentatively parked on his back, besides his friend. Fine. He was a bench now. He had no idea why he’d been told to watch the window, but he twisted his neck to rest his cheek on the sand so he could stare up at it.

“You okay?” Lerlia asked, his hand covering the bleeding bite marks as he looked Rashiki over. “He’s wily, huh?”

Rashiki shuffled a bit, making sure that the bones of his pelvis dug into Kraglin’s back. Serves him right for biting his brother. He tutted when he saw the bitemarks, flicking at Lerlia’s hand until he submitted to have them studied.

“Like one of the taabshqa from the forest,” he agreed, studying the double-row of imprints with equal fascination and repulsion. “Ugh. Perhaps we should get you into the healers when they’re done with our poor brother. He might have rabies.”

A blue hand emerged from the shadows of the hut, bearing a wick wrapped in a stumpy block of tallow. It stood this on the sill - not without difficulty, as its underside was misshapen and irregular from melting and solidifying over the windowsill’s lumpy grain.

Rashiki held his breath when it retreated. He tensed his legs, ready to spin and lock a forearm over the pale man’s throat if he started to buck. Surely the metaphor couldn’t escape even his strange mind…
But then the hand returned. It held a striking stone and a match made from a twig dipped in the flammable secretions of the algae that grew upriver, towards where rolling sand-dunes and floodplains turned to dense and deadly jungle.

The two were scraped together over the wick until a delicate amber flame sputtered into life. It was tiny and fragile, as if it could be extinguished at a breath of wind. The hand, which smelt strongly of honey and garlic salve, sheltered it from the buffets as best it could, until the wick had simmered low and the tallow begun to drip, adding thick white rivulets to those already caking the sill.

Thank Anthos. Rashiki tapped his brother’s arm, below the first ring of bites.

“He’s alive! Now, uh. Do we try and tell him before we get off him? We can’t have him slamming in there and eating the medics.”

He’d promised Naq interesting conversations regarding flying crabs. That’d be hard to pull off if the newcomers were tossed in the dugout bunker with the rest of the brawlers and vandals and drunkards who got high on teku-milk and broke the peace.

But they’d work something out, Rashiki was sure. This was one promise he intended to keep.

“Might be a good idea. Hey buddy,” Lerlia leaned down until his blue, smiling face shone into Kraglins cheerfully. For his part, Kraglin had been staring at the flame in rapt attention, and scowled when Lerlia broke his line of sight. “Turn that frown upside down, my peculiar friend. That’s good news! You wanna see Yondu?”

“Yondu?” Kraglin squirmed, Lerlia laughing as it made almost no effect to their balance. “Gerroff me you two blue devils-”

“That’s his friends name. Well. ‘Special Friend’-” Lerlia had a way of pronouncing emphasis marks, mostly by waggling his head to make his point. “I found it out when he started yelling it and trying to bite my ear off. I don’t know his name-”

“Boys.” A healer was scowling at the pile of men outside, eying the two Centaurians with no small reproach. “Get off our guest at once. What sort of welcome is this?”

Rashiki scrambled upright. Then, when Lerlia made no attempt to relinquish his seat, hauled him after him, letting Kraglin’s bony ribs expand to their full capacity.

“Sir,” he said, using the old Centaurian term for respected professionals in their field - the one that’d earned him his first date with Naq. Not that he said it with quite the same tone here and now… But still, the reverence was comparable. He added in a bow, crest top almost parallel to the floor. “May we enter? Our, uh. Guest. Wants to see his.”

Rashiki wasn’t the best with words - his tongue tied itself in knots all too easily. In those situations, as now, he was left to flounder or select the closest phrase that sprung to mind.

“Special friend,” he finished weakly, and kicked Lerlia’s shin when he laughed.

“Special friend.” The healer watched Kraglin unfold from the ground like a particularly ugly weed in sunlight. Lerlia grinned, helping to brush him off until he was batted away, Kraglin pointedly dusting his pant legs with a sniff. He folded his arms when he was done, studying the healer with furrowed brows, the angle of his face and nose making him look like a particularly surly bird.

Lerlia bit his lip, trying not to giggle.
“If I’d known I was gonna get sat on by a bunch of men in skirts, I never woulda left Hrax.” He didn’t bother using anything other than Xandarian for now, and only found it mildly endearing with Lerlia chirped ‘Hrax’ after him. Kraglin came closer to the door, drawing himself up a little bit.

The healer seemed unimpressed.

“Lemme in.”

“Does anyone know how to tell him that his ---- special friend, might be tired and woozy?”

“Nope!” Lerlia said cheerfully. “As long as Yondu can speak, I’m sure they’ll be right as the rains!”

Woozy only covered half of it. On seeing Kraglin, Yondu rolled to face him - ignoring the tutting clucks of the healers, who tried in vain to resettle him on his stomach. He slurred a happy slurry of clicks that made sense to precisely no-one.

The skylight, which kept the room as bright as possible for purposes of medical operation, had now been closed, enabling rest. The dim interior was lit only by candlelight, the amber glow soft and kind to the eyes.

Yondu’s back glistened like it was coated in snailtrails. But on stepping closer, Rashiki saw the granulated honey around the edge of the wound, and smelt the raw sea-garlic the medics had pounded to paste to keep it antiseptic.

He winced again, grimacing in spite of himself. It wasn’t fair to flinch from Yondu when he’d evidently suffered abuse of a kind so severe Rashiki’s people hardly remembered the name for it. But Rashiki couldn’t help it. The pale one had no crest either, but he was so alien in appearance that Rashiki could believe he’d never had one in the first place. Maybe tunnel-dwelling, white-bleached Centuarians had evolved hair instead, so their crests didn’t keep catching on the roof of their mine-holes?

Yondu though… Just looking at him sunk a fishhook into Rashiki’s viscera. Shuddering, he twisted his face to one side, focusing on the nearest medic.

“How long until we can move him? Does he need to stay here for the night?” Not that Rashiki would stay up besides him, if it were necessary, ready to call for a medic should Yondu’s breaths falter. But the thought of sitting for hours on end with only that ragged crestless back for company was disquieting.

“We have somewhere he can sleep, once he’s well enough to move. It’s plenty quiet.” Naq would toss things at anyone who interrupted her thought process, regardless of whether said projectiles were blunt or knife-edged. Rashiki just prayed that for his own sake, Yondu didn’t snore.

Kraglin ambled past the medics, not sparing them a glance. He flopped onto the floor beside the bed, resting his chin on the bedding to watch Yondu. Call it separation anxiety, call it a mild twinge of post-traumatic stress, whatever - he didn’t like Yondu out of his sight at the moment. He nudged his nose against Yondus hand, nuzzling it under the palm as if to let him know exactly where he was, and so that he could feel if Yondu’s twitched, even if he himself was asleep.

“Let his nerve recover for a few hours,” the healer responded, another trying to corner Lerlia to let them look at his shoulder. “We’ll try and give him some broth, get a little strength back. Then if he’s up to it, I’m sure he can be stretchered somewhere to sleep.” Lerlia yelped in the background, stinging seaweed poultice being rubbed into his bites. “But he really must rest. We insist on it. We managed to communicate to him that he should sleep. And we think he understands, and that we can
give him something to help.”

The medic paused when Lerlia was released to scamper around to Rashiki’s other side, hiding behind him to peer at their guests with wide, curious eyes. While Yondu's injury terrified him, making his own crest wilt in sympathy, he was still interested in the newcomers. He patted his brother's arm, as reassuring as he could be, and crept over to the side of the crude wooden pallet.

He expected Kraglin to be alert, and wasn’t disappointed. The odd man's eyes opened at once, even if the rest of him didn’t move, determined not to disturb Yondu. Lerlia folded to sit next to him, pillowing his cheek on his arms.

“Hey,” Lerlia whispered, nodding to Yondu “See? He’s fine. He just needs to rest.”

Kraglin frowned, having picked up maybe -- fine? Rest?

“Fine?” he tried, watching Lerlia furrow his brow, ears twitching. “Quit lookin at me like that. I know I aint got the voice for yer lingo.”

“As summer's sun?” Lerlia repeated, mystified. “What?”

“Fine.”

“I - What?” Kraglin scowled at the other man’s apparent foolish game of repeating things and shut his eyes. Lerlia gaped for a moment, twisting himself to look at Rashiki in confusion. He’d said fine, Kraglin had - made a comment about summer? And now seemed determined to sleep.

It took hours for Yondu’s higher brain functions to swim back to him - hours interspersed with patchy doze, hours he couldn’t enumerate as his sense of time was just as loco as all his others. And so, it was only once the stretcher was parked over Rashiki and Lerlia’s shoulders that he realized he no longer had his loincloth.

Now, Yondu weren’t no prude. But some lines had to be drawn - one of them being that when you came to a new place, you didn’t leave the first impression of yourself on the natives as a bright blue butt bobbling around in the air. There was such a thing as dignity, after all.

Rashiki’s head was nearest. Given the height difference between the brothers, it’d been decided Lerlia carry the feet-end of the stretcher - to his dismay, as Yondu hadn’t exactly had time for a spongebath in between being caught by Koji, having his crest hacked off, and escaping to the open sky. As a result, he lay on an incline, a diagonal gradient that kept his head elevated and (conveniently) left Rashiki’s ears in tweaking distance.

Moving tugged tendons and muscles throughout his back, and somewhere at the base of his mind, Yondu was aware that he ought to be in a fair amount of pain. But he felt only numbness. The lack of connection to Anthos was as if his entire body had been immersed in an icy pool and left to go crinkly. But this numbness was different - a localized lack of feeling whose tendrils crept out from his spine.

It meant he could pinch Rashiki’s earlobe without distorting into a curled up ball of agony. Yondu made the most of it. Then gestured grumpily down at himself, in all his bare blue healing-jelly-smeared glory.

“Uh, you mind?”

Lerlia was trying his best not to sway the stretcher too much, gnawing his lip in his concentration. Kraglin was flitting by his side, and while he understood it would probably be easier for him to take
the poles, height-wise, Lerlia doubted the thin man's ability to bear the weight.

"No can do, buddy. You just stick by him and make sure he's comfy." Rashiki's yelp startled him. It took only a moment of watching the mime before he had to snort, burying the impulse to giggle.

He was face-forward to the blue moon, after all.

"Tell him it's the right week for it." Lerlia said innocently, even as a healer tutted and moved to find a sheet to drape over him, tucking it carefully under his hips. At least it covered his ass, kept as far from the base of the wound as possible. "Aw."

Kraglin grumbled a little but moved next to the stretcher, his back tense and his concern evident. With how these ones had reacted to Yondu's injury, he didn't feel like parading him through the streets for people to gape at was the best option. The best he could do, he figured, was try to be a Hraxlian shield and block him as best he could.

"Here goes." Kraglin muttered to him as they started out, pushing the curtain aside. There were less children outside now, and Kraglin had no doubt they had been gently ushered away to avoid having to see - this. He bristled whenever an adult stared too long, a chirp from Lerlia or Rashiki seeming to send them on their way.

For Kraglin, who had spent some months in one style of Centurian village, this was a bizarre trip. Some aspects were familiar - the roundness of the huts, and the door curtains (though they were of a brighter, more elaborate variety, with colours he hadn't seen at Yondus home village) and drapes across a few glassless windows. He could pick out some things that were familiar to him, but in this setting they seemed strange, such as the sail-like little fins on some roofs, whirring merrily in the wind. A power system, that much was obvious, but for what?

Notably, he saw, they had wells. Made of stone and wood, but working. He filed that away with narrowed eyes, working on his mental checklist. Plaster didn't seem widespread, probably reserved for buildings that were more important, but he saw it. Access to fresh water, medication, some sort of rudimentary understanding of power, better construction methods than he'd seen at the village…

It made him uneasy, shoving his hands in his pockets and drawing his shoulders up to his ears. Not because he thought the Centaurians weren't capable of this, because they clearly were. But if they were then what was wrong with Yondu's home? How was it so far removed from this?

The village seemed to be arranged in a cluster of overlapping circles, with communal buildings in the middle of the overlaps. Although he couldn't see it, Kraglin guessed from the angle of the paths and the general design that it was a ring of venn-diagram circles, with something of greatest importance in the middle.

Frankly, if it was a za’gah tree, he could do without seeing it.

Naquia had been busy since Rashiki left. Although the temptation to sink into her work had been a strong one, she had forced herself to remember she was going to have guests - and strange ones at that. So she’d sectioned off part of her main room with drapes, to give them privacy and somewhere to sleep, and a quick run next door had procured spare bedding - while she was uncertain of Rashikis assessment of their relationship, if he was wrong it was an easy fix. If he was correct, and she imposed two beds on them, it could give off the wrong message, an unwelcoming one.

So she’d boiled water for the pot, throwing in leaves for a calming, sweet sort of tea, and left it to brew. Again, she wished for her window, a sill for her to place flowers on, or to open in welcome. Instead she made do, tying the door hanging open and settling herself at her desk to look over her
sketches again, tracing the lines with a careful finger.

A flying crab, huh?

“You got her to agree?” Lerlia squinted around the stretcher to the house ahead, doing his best to keep the laugh from his voice. “Rashiki! You sly dog.”

Rashiki would flap his hands at Lerlia, if he weren’t carrying the stretcher.

“Shut up! Idiot!”

Yondu, startled by the loud hiss, jerked.

“Whazzat?” The stretcher was made of a hammock-like piece of cloth strung between two slim but flexible branches; he was unlikely to fall out unless he really tried. But Lerlia, from his squawk, didn’t appreciate being kicked in the chin.

Rashiki smirked to himself. Karma was sweet.

It was a short trek to Naq’s house, for which Rashiki’s arms were grateful. He rotated them around their sockets once they’d laid Yondu down inside, Naq having thoughtfully cordoned off a fragment of her space that wasn’t filled with loose parts of inventions for the guests.

Rashiki gave her a quick kiss as he passed - she turned to meet it with a distracted half-smile, nodding a greeting to the guests before immersing herself once more in her work. Rashiki didn’t begrudge her it. On days where the muse gave bounteously, Naq’s socialization levels made aku look friendly. He was grateful she’d made time to outfit part of her room for hospitality - even if only a small corner.

Pulling back, lips tingling from the pressure of hers, Rashiki noticed Kraglin giving him a weird look. Cheeks heating, he crossed his arms.

“What?”

Sure, some of the elders got a bit iffy about public displays of affection, and there were always traditionalists. But Rashiki hadn’t expected this weird, blanched stick-figure of a man to be a Puritan.

If he was looking at them strangely, it only because he didn't know how to contort his face to express fear and worry and concern all at once. While he was grateful to these people for sheltering them, it wasn't going to be any good to them if they all ended up dying.

Lerlia watched Kraglin dart to the door to peer out, as if checking they were alone. He nodded doubtfully to himself before he retreated back to Yondus side, pointedly not fussing on him. Instead he flopped to the ground by the bed, keeping his side against it to keep an eye on Yondu and their hosts, though he was doing his best to look polite and harmless, at least. Lerlia grinned, delighted.

Naquia was not delighted.

She finished the last bit of notes she’d been working on and turned properly to greet her guests and had to stop, a chill spiking her heart. She groped, reaching to her side for Rashikis arm, her eyes growing wide and her mouth opening - then shutting with a snap, as if embarrassed that she'd been so rude as to gape. Now she understood why he hadn't told her anything more about her new
The lack of the usual crest made something inside her shudder, and she had to fight the urge to turn her face away. Whatever other indignities this man had suffered, she would not allow shame to be one of them in her house. So she set her jaw instead, and sought out her heart with her fingertips, relaxing a little when she made contact with Rashiki’s skin.

“Welcome,” she managed, clearing her voice from the dryness in her mouth. Naquia closed her fingers around Rashiki’s wrist, needing the connection to steady herself. “I -- Please, be comfortable.”

“I dunno about these ones.” Kraglin said to Yondu quietly. He nodded to whatever had been said - he got please and little else. And while he was no expert on Centurian culture - clearly, since this place seemed so different as to be another planet altogether - he was understandably a little surprised by the blatant affection being tossed around. Perhaps it was a test? “Seem about as mad as us.”

“Mm,” agreed Yondu dozily. Now the rolling side-to-side yaw of the stretcher had ceased, he wasn’t feeling nearly as seasick and could sense the urge to snooze creeping in around the corners of his conscience. He lay on his front, as he was becoming accustomed to, but kept his head twisted so as not to let Kraglin out of sight. One hand twitched, where it dragged on the crumpled stretcher-hammock.

Not that he wanted Kraglin to hold it. Just. Y’know. If he did, Yondu wouldn’t mind.

He too had seen the kiss. The Len’air. The same stupid crap that’d gotten them into this mess in the first place…

Of the cogs shaken loose by agony and fever and whatever noxious drug the doctor-like people had poured into his system, few had returned to their pivots. But Yondu made do with what he had and pieced together the scene. The man and woman - they were unloved-by-Anthos, like him (even if they still had their crests). The younger man too, presumably. Had Kraglin taken him to a colony of fellow freaks?

Yondu appreciated the thought, but if he believed this was enough to keep them safe, Kraglin evidently didn’t know his father as well as he thought.

“If dad comes after me,” he managed, nosing the crinkle in the sheet that was blocking half his vision of his mate. “Yer more than welcome to kill… t’kill him, yeah? Before he… uh… burns this place. To the ground.”

His words came in stops and starts, and his eyelashes were sinking low by the last few. But Yondu meant every one.

“Sure.” Kraglin found his hand and gave it a wary squeeze. Whatever these people seemed to be okay with among themselves, he didn’t want to push his luck. At least the extent of Yondu’s injuries seemed to be keeping them back a respectful distance for now. He stroked his palm with his thumb, at least until it seemed yondu was nodding off, and did his best to relax.

“You never mentioned this,” Naquia said when she pulled Rashiki to one side, to help her pour tea into little mugs. Minus one for Yondu, since it looked like he was asleep, or close to it. She kept her voice low, and while her expression wasn’t angry, it was concerned. “What happened? Do you know? Have they said anything to you at all?”

“They don’t sound like they speak too great.” Lerlia popped his head over her shoulder, grinning at
the jump, splash, and exasperated sigh. “You gotta be patient with em. Listen with your heart, not to their hoots.”

“Oh good. I’ll have you translating then.”

Luckily, there wasn’t much in the way of translation for Lerlia to mangle that night. Rashiki quietly suggested to Naq that he ought to stay here, just in case - he didn’t specify what, but then again, he didn’t really need to.

*In case Yondu takes a turn for the worse. In case the long one gets violent.*

Yet right now, the long one wasn’t the problem. It was Lerlia who overheard Rashiki’s whisper and immediately proclaimed he’d stay too, to chaperone. The little prick.

Kraglin, meanwhile, was the model guest. He was quiet. He was unobtrusive. Were it not for his alien coloring, he would blend into the shadowed edges of Naq’s hut. While Naq completed her sketches for the night and Rashiki prepared some food on the stone slab that was her designated cooking/explosives testing zone, seasoning briney sea-lettuce and fish cut into slim sashimi-slices with a handful of dried herbs, Kraglin seemed content to slouch at Yondu’s side. He didn’t poke him, or try to keep him talking, or even curl down to sleep. Just held his hand as his eyes drooped and his head nodded and his chin sunk lower and lower - until it hit his chest, at which point he jolted upright, gaze snapping to Yondu for the duration of time it took to ascertain whether or not he was breathing. Only then did Kraglin allow himself to exhale and relax once more.

Rashiki had watched this process occur several times. After each he’d nudged Kraglin’s shoulder and pointed to the space besides Yondu. Why he had yet to be taken up on the offer, he had no clue - perhaps the long one was just that stubborn. But if he fell asleep and flopped onto Yondu’s outstretched back, it’d cause hell for the both of them.

He couldn’t exactly tie the guy to the bed though. Rashiki might not be a staunch believer in Anthos - at least, not by the standards of some. But there were certain ingrained cultural paradigms regarding *hospitality*, and trussing your guests up in straitjackets didn’t feature.

It was curious, thought Rashiki, cocking his head at the swooping bands of muscle that lashed Yondu’s broad shoulders to his spine. That shape didn’t look like it came from spear-hurling. More like Yondu relied on a bow and arrow full-time.

If he came from the jungle, as Rashiki suspected, then wasn’t that a bit redundant? Surely all the branches and foliage would get in the way. You couldn’t shoot around corners, after all.

Kraglin was exhausted, in all truth. He had maybe 4 hours of sleep under his belt in the last 48, and he didn’t know what to do with himself. Sleeping seemed out of the question while they were outnumbered. Vastly outnumbered, since Yondu wasn’t going to be much use in a fight unless Kraglin picked him up and flailed him around to hit them away. So he dozed, fitful and broken each time, just to make sure.

Lerlia - the annoying one, he dubbed - spent most of his time around Naquia, doodling things. At one point, Kraglin could just about see a sketch of his ship, both of them poring over it with intense expressions as Lerlia adjusted things.

Made sense. The *Eclector* was a pretty golden babe. Kraglin shrugged it off and continued his vigil.

In the end, Rashiki shunted one plate over to Kraglin with a sigh, and let him get on with it.

“I’ll save some for when your friend wakes,” he told Kraglin. He scraped the rest of the raw fish into
the coolstone box, where it would safely linger until morning. And if the night was warm enough to make it go off - well, there was an entire ocean just a short walk from the town. Rashiki would be more than happy to take Yondu’s stretcher along so his poor crestless brother could watch them toss their fish-spears. It’d be a long time before he healed enough to throw one without reopening that ugly wound.

The plate started Kraglin out of his daze, and he blinked down at it uncomprehendingly. At least he took it at the prompting, nodding back to Rashiki - the taller one. The girl-one was being hauled over to eat as well, by the time he’d got round to poking at the fish curiously, and he understood.

Mealtime. Seemed it was communal on a smaller scale here. Interesting. He looked around at them, before very, very gently detaching from Yondu and scooting over a little bit. Not far enough that he wouldn’t be able to lunge back to him if the worst should happen, but enough that he would be able to talk quietly if need be, without waking him.

Lerlia, of course, took this as an opportunity to chatter. At the warning look, he amended his plan to ‘chatter quietly’.

“So that thing,” he said, while Kraglin nibbled the edges of the fish slices, tongue questing out the tiny bones. ‘The gold thing. Your,” He mimed flapping, pausing when Kraglins attention focused on his hands. “Yeah? Your metal bird-crab.” He pointed at Kraglin, then flapped his fingers again.

It seemed Kraglin was having a very intense staring contest with Lerlia’s hands, then his face, watching with obedient attention. Lerlia gasped, reaching over to poke or prod his brother.

“I think I worked it out!” He whispered excitedly. “This one can read hands.”

‘Hmm.’ made sense. Kraglin didn't speak any language they knew. Why shouldn't he communicate in through means that made equally as little sense to them?

Rashiki knew those who could not hear or talk designed their own languages. As Kraglin responded to sound, and he seemed capable of making noise (even if his clicks were on par with those of dying dolphins) he wasn’t one of them. But if this was how he understood, Rashiki would endeavour to meet him on his own level.

“Sleep,” he said, miming with two hands pressed together under one cheek. “You need rest too. You don’t have to worry. You’re safe here.”

Kraglin looked doubtful at that declaration. He fiddled with the now empty board on his lap, gnawing his bottom lip. Gaunt and exhausted-looking at the best of times, he knew that right now he probably bordered on corpse-like. It was a wonder they hadn’t started dissecting him.

But they were right. He couldn’t protect Yondu if he was falling asleep on his feet.

He nodded, setting the board down. He hesitated before levering himself carefully up.

“Thank you,” he said, though it came out closer to ‘my undying, Anthos-sworn gratitude’ and earned him a giggle from Lerlia. Kraglin sloped behind the partition, tugging it shut gently. He slipped onto the bed carefully, having shed his trousers and tucked up to Yondus side, nuzzling his shoulder briefly in sleepy greeting.

Lerlia gave a disappointed huff. “I wanted to ask him ‘bout his crab.”

He got a sigh and a kick from Naquia, who busied herself tidying the little room before trying to get on with work.
But those were questions for the morning. Rashiki inclined his head politely to Kraglin, through the
chink in the drapes, and went to pry the stylus from Naq’s hands before she collapsed onto her
drawing pad and started drooling.

And if Naquia clung tighter to Rashiki than usual that night, nuzzling under his jaw with her fingers
wound tight into his back, she was fine with that. Yondu had shaken her, and she needed the
reassurance that they were both there, whole and adoring.

Waking up with Kraglin nestled against his side was so familiar that Yondu, for the few seconds it
took for pain to seep through his sleep-dulled synapses, he forgot just how they came to be in this
situation. Kraglin was here. Kraglin was… well, not warm, because Kraglin had a cooler internal
thermostat, so he was never warm, not exactly. But he was solid and unmistakable.

Even if Yondu couldn’t see him in the shadowed, blanket-mounded lair they’d been piled into, he
knew the gouge of those bony ribs. He knew the scratch of bristles along those wiry biceps.

But then, as all good things had to, his sleepy, lazy morning came to an end.

Yondu’s back hurt.

Why did his back hurt?

Oh yeah.

laughter, the piercing whistle that echoed around and around Yondu’s skull like a toll caught in a bell
jar…

The rending slice of a machete. And the light of his star from above.

Yondu bolted upright. Or he gave it a good attempt. He slammed his palms flat like he was doing a
pushup, rolling Kraglin off. He didn’t get half way before his arms gave out, depositing him face-first
on the pillows.

It hurt. It hurt.

But, he discovered when the bright flashes and spitting tongues of flame had ebbed, and he reached a
shaking hand around to feel the damage, it was also covered in slime, like he’d been licked nape to
tailbone by a yolopp. And - oh ick. It stank of honey and garlic. Two things that should never be
mixed. How could Kraglin even bear to be snuggled up against him like that?

Groaning, Yondu scooped a sloppy palmful and made sure to smear it over as much as Kraglin as he
could.

“Wake up,” he croaked, voice cracking from disuse. “M’ thirsty.”

Kraglin did his best not to yelp when the world he was sleeping on rocked about so unwelcomingly.
For a moment he wondered why his ship's alert systems hadn’t gone off, no sirens blaring nor lights
flashing to wake him. If he’d hit something, he was gonna be pissed once he stopped choking.

Then, when there was no airloss and no chill, he realised it was just Yondu being -- Yondu.

“Hi Thirsty,” he said, trying to rub the stuff off his shoulder to hide his delight that he seemed to be
in more Yondu-ish form. “I’m Kraglin. Lemme get you some water.” He kissed Yondus shoulder,
because he could - pulling a face at the garlic taste - before he slipped out of bed to pull trousers on.
Some rules had to be followed.

He opened the curtain and almost trod on Lerlia, who had neglected his own curtained nest in favor of curling up outside. He stepped over him carefully, hunting for the waterskin. Once that had been located, he crept back to avoid waking the entire hut, offering it to him once the curtain was closed.

“Here. I think you've got a fan out there.”

Yondu snatched the water gratefully. He sucked the skin until it ran dry, then squeezed it to eke out the last few drops. Fuck, he was parched. And his fin was gone, and his mother and his father and Anthos, and everything else he’d known.

Was every morning gonna be like this, Yondu wondered as he rolled painfully onto his side, hissing and clutching his oblique when the stitches in his back pulled taut? Was he gonna have those few brief seconds where the entire world seemed perfect, before memories gushed in and ruined it?

Well, so long as Kraglin was besides him, Yondu could deal with a few dodgy wake-up calls.

He shook the empty skin, only now considering that his partner might have wanted some. Yondu didn’t do apologetic - especially not when he’d recently had a fairly vital appendage amputated against his will. He figured he deserved to act a little spoiled. But his tone was still sheepish when he pushed the bottle back to Kraglin.

“Uh. That was the last of it, I think. Can my fan fetch more?”

He ought to be more wary. His memory was misfiring - he still had no idea who this ‘fan’ might be, or how they’d gotten here. But Kraglin seemed to trust that they weren’t about to be strung up and quartered. And Yondu was simply too worn out to be suspicious.

“Honestly I have no idea.” Kraglin took it though, letting it drop on the blankets, folding limply on musky wool. He sighed as he levered back down, curled on his side with sleepy eyes watching Yondu. Maybe he'd woken up now and then, on high alert and wanting to watch their backs despite himself. Wasn't like he was going to point it out at all.

He did shuffle a little closer though, nose bumping Yondu's jaw - not demanding, but asking silently, tired and bone weary. If thatt was how he felt, he could only imagine how Yondu was faring.

If Kraglin really wanted to taste how stale his breath was after fuck-knew how long spent unconscious, he was more than welcome. Yondu leaned in, chasing his mouth in a clumsy, tired kiss that saw their teeth clacking and chins clonking. He let his eyes waver shut, vision wobbling in and out until the last possible moment.

There was so little light. All he could see of Kraglin was his silhouette, slim and sharp and fuzzing with hair at the edges. But while Yondu couldn’t make out the bags around his eyes, something in Kraglin’s posture gave him away.

“How long’ve I been out?” he murmured.

Kraglin told him. Yondu swore. Then, disbelievingly -

“Tell me ya ain’t been awake all that time.”

“Not the whole time.” Truth - while he liked to pretend he was the toughest rockbiter to have ever left Hrax, he knew he wasn't and that Yondu wouldn't buy that. He shrugged a little, the hint of a dopy grin curling after the kiss.
“Had a nap before these guys found us. And I slept a bit just now too. I'll catch up, s’fine.”

And he probably would too, given that Yondu was more alert now. It made him worry less.

“Hmmph.” Yondu shuffled towards the side of the blanket pile, realizing he’d taken the lion’s share - and the taabshqa’s, and the aku’s and probably the yolopp’s too. He moved slow as an elder, every flex of his back muscles driving pain into his spine. But he settled eventually, stomach-down again so as to conserve the stinky salve, which threatened to rub off on the pillows.

Once contorted in such a way that he’d only notice the grinding ache if he moved - and the much worse sense of absence that accompanied it - Yondu buried his face in the pillow, inhaling the smell of a stranger.

It was odd, for sure. But not entirely off-putting. And it would take on his and Kraglin’s scents soon enough, with prolonged use.

That thought in mind, he patted the space next to him.

“Let’s start on that catchin’ up right now. We’re safe, right? Among friends?”

The provision of water and bedclothes said yes. The ‘fan’ - or guard - outside their little partitioned area could insinuate otherwise.

Yondu hated being out-of-touch, hated not knowing where he was or who he was with. He was a hunter, dammit - being aware of his surroundings was practically the job-description. It’d been years since he had found himself somewhere he hadn’t been before. Heck, he could recite paths through the deepswamps by heart.

Now, in this new strange house in this new strange place, he felt off-balance. Disorientated. Not by fever - or at least, not anymore - but by a succinct and crippling lack of knowledge.

Yondu couldn’t bear it. He wanted to be up and exploring. Poking new buttons, finding new bones to pick. He wanted to make this place - wherever it was - truly his.

A thought struck him, sharp as a blowdart to the neck. Yondu twisted to stare at Kraglin, moving too fast and crunching in on himself in a full-body wince as his back twanged. The pain didn’t put him off though. Nothing would - not the memory of his father or mother, or Anthos himself.

“Are we on a different planet?” he breathed.

"'Fraid not.” Kraglin had shuffled to make himself more comfortable against Yondu, so he bit back a grumpy huff when he moved again. How was Yondu expecting him to sleep if he wasn’t tucked up and comfortable and able to guard him when his charge kept wiggling away from him? He stifled a yawn, and a smile. "Aint provisioned right for it. And if we tried to warp shift, bits of you might have fallen out. We’re… Uh, a hundred miles or something from your volcano. Maybe more. I nodded off when we were flying the Eclector out, but I think we can maybe see it from here.”

He wasn't sure if Yondu would enjoy the reminder of home, or detest it. Either way, there was ample distance between them.

“There’s different, like. Ground makeup here though,” he said, running his nails across the backs of Yondu’s hands. “It’s not boggy and swampy.” There was something in his old Nova training that nagged at him, scrawling red marks over his report for not using the correct terminology. It wasn’t as if Yondu would understand the Galactic Habitat Differentiation Index anyway, so he waved a hand and simplified. “Dry’n sandy. Drained. These guys got wells too, and bricks. You ain’t got bricks.”
Oh yeah. Yondu’d forgotten about the whole ‘bits falling out thing’. He shuddered. Still, while it might not be ‘the stars’, a hundred miles from home was still further than any Centaurian had gotten before him. He was almost disappointed that he was never going back. It’d be nice to rub this in dad’s face.

But Kraglin’d just spouted a whole load of nonsense at him, and for a moment Yondu flashed back to when they were first getting to grips with one another’s languages, clicking and pointing and repeating in Xandarian until word and meaning stuck. Yawning, he resettled on the pillow, snagging Kraglin’s hand so he could play with his fingers, folding the bony digits in and out of a closed fist.

He wasn’t quite ready to go to sleep again. It was coming, he was sure of it, but… While he’d spent the majority of the time they’d been here unconscious, Yondu still felt as if it had been days since he last saw his star-man, and the need he felt for his touch was almost embarrassing.

Honestly. He was like a child fresh from the pouch, clinging to his carrier after five minutes of being left alone. But despite the internal chiding, Yondu couldn’t quite bring himself to fling Kraglin’s hand away.

“Whassa brick?” he asked to distract himself, furling Kraglin’s fingers one by one.

“S’like a hard, block of mudstone.” Kraglin replied, shutting his eyes and just aching with the gentle touch. It wasn’t that Yondu wasn’t kind to him, because he was - or, Kraglin could recognise he was kind to him in the way Yondu interpreted kind, and that was good enough. Part of it was his own fucked up biology, which was a problem he could begin to tackle with time and his own work, but for now he was tired enough to wallow in the feeling of being examined and manipulated, sinking into the feeling with more hazy pleasure then he would be comfortable admitting.

“S’used to make strong buildings, real sturdy like. This one isn’t, its - plaster, I think. Kinda like yours, maybe one or two steps up the galactic scale. Bricks are like, seven steps up, might be this is an older hut or whoever owns it aint updated it. And a well is a hole in the ground. You can pull fresh water outta it. Irrigation, s’one of - there’s like these markers, see,” He sounded drowsy, repeating from hurried orientation classes. “Like, stages of civilisation and stuff. On how people are supposed to, to approach if there’s a space emergency. S’hard to explain.”

“I understood 'bout twenty percent of what ya just said,” Yondu admitted, following the whorls on Kraglin’s fingertips. He stroked the lovelines that curled in towards the base of Kraglin’s thumb, where hand joined wrist, and lingered there, tracing the pulse.

“How’s about ya tell me in the mornin’, when we’re both awake?”

His stomach chose this moment to issue its complaints. Honestly, Yondu was surprised it hadn’t done so sooner. Grimacing, he wriggled lower in the blankets, trying to crush the emptiness out with his own bodyweight. “An’ I got some food in me. That’d be good. M’a growing boy.”

Hunger could wait though. Yondu yawned again, shivering when breeze scuffed the back of his neck, where he’d never had air touch before. Everything could wait, until he’d had some more sleep - acknowledging his missing crest too.

Trust didn’t come naturally to Yondu though. While Kraglin claimed to have rested, Yondu was disinclined to believe him. “You tucker down,” he ordered, squeezing his wrist. “With me, right now. And we’ll deal with all this bullshit in the mornin’. Deal?”

“They have food set aside for your breakfast.” Kraglin could feel himself start to drift, turning his face to yawn into the pillow. He nodded, as if to make sure he’d done that, let Yondu know he
agreed with him. When he breathed out again, it was with a heaviness in his shoulders and ribs, seeming to sink into the bed.

He’d try to sleep sounder this time. The amount of people in the hut was going to make that hard, sure, but he could try if Yondu had asked him to. And hey, he couldn’t bite if he was yawning. It was far too easy to slip into sleep, and after only a moment's hesitation, he let himself.
Naquia shifted, nuzzling her nose against Rashikis jaw. For all they complained about Lerlia, he did have the sense to do his chaperoning outside of their little curtained boudoir. Which was why she was wound around her partner like blue moss, possessive and proactive even in her sleep.

But there was a stranger puttering around. His presence registered strangely in her crest, like he was a beat out of sync with the natural world. She’d woken with a jerk, and once she remembered he wasn't a threat, she remembered the other one too. The one who had been ripped apart.

Naquia hadn’t studied much history. She’d learned it by rote, as all of them had, but she had never had much fascination for the past, not when her eyes were turned to their future. So while she knew of a rite from the ancient past, one which seemed hauntingly similar to what this ‘Yondu’ had gone through, she couldn’t reconcile it in her mind with the world of today. She wondered if they were all jumping to conclusions - perhaps he had been injured, and amputation was the only option to save his life? There were times such things could happen. Working the windmills was a dangerous job - mistakes were made and most engineers lost a finger or five over the course of their lives. Plus, worse things still happened at sea. There were big creatures in their ocean, ones which could bite off an entire torso, let alone a crest. She was glad her boys tended to farm the rich, teeming waters around the reef and close to shore.

But for this man to be so wounded, and then to be found wandering the wilds, in a golden crab, accompanied by another whose biosignature almost felt not-of-this-world?

It felt like a fairytale. And not one she was enjoying. The hut felt stifling with so many people in it, and she felt a sudden urge to wander the pre-dawn greyness. Maybe she could check the sails along the coast?

“Rashiki,” she murmured, tilting her head to kiss on him, stroking fingers gently behind his ear, round to the back of his head where crest met skull. “Rashiki~ Wake up.”

Rashiki grumbled, flapping a weak plea. But he could never say no to Naq for long, whether she was requesting new windows or for him to wake from their nest at some ungodly hour in the morning. Not that it was that ungodly - especially not for a fisherman. Rashiki was used to rising at the dawn to catch the boats out to the reef, where the shoals swam thick and fast, and fat eels practically jumped onto your spears. But he had permitted himself a rare off-day, as their guests required tending. And that meant he’d expected a lie-in.

“What,” he mumbled. His tone wasn’t grouchy (he could never be grouchy, not with Naq, whose presence more than made up for the lack of sun in the sky). It might have been though, had Lerlia been the one to rouse him.

Rashiki yawned and rolled to face her, gathering her to his chest with a good-natured huff. “Is something on fire? Do I need to sweep you into my arms and run?”

Naquia smiled as she was cuddled in closer. She trailed her fingers over his shoulders, mapping the cut of his muscle by touch alone. She could, if she’d wanted, light her crest to see him better - their town of engineers, miners and fishermen was used to making excursions in the middle of the night, when windmills broke or tunnels collapsed or storms frothed across the sea. Every child was taught to control their bioluminesce in case they were lost in a dark place and needed to be found.

But the emergency sirens hadn’t gone off. No one was in danger. There was only peace, and
“I want to go out,” she said. “To the sea. Will you come with me, or do you want to sleep some more?”

Naquia didn’t have anything grand in mind - just a swim, maybe. Some relaxing, getting some cool air. Maybe find a private spot to watch the boats going out, or a more private one to spend some time with him, minus their guests. It wasn’t rare that she wanted him in that way, but they often either had Lerlia to contend with, or she had to batten that desire in favor of her work.

Right now though, she didn’t want to dismiss it. Their guest, and the nightmarish nature of his wound, made her crave connection.

Rashiki nosed under her chin, whuffling to make her giggle.

“Can I do both?” he whispered. “How’s about we go to that cosy cove - you know the one, with the rainbow-stones.” The stones weren’t actually rainbow-colored. Precious minerals were quickly snatched up by enterprising beach-sifters around these parts, to be made into necklaces or loincloth-fasteners or carved adornments for spears. But in this cave, the shingle was kept shiny by a constant rush of seawater, cooled pleasantly by the absence of sun. The sea-polished white rock reflected those umbers and ambers and bright cherry-reds, as they were rolled and tossed by the waves. It wasn’t the most beautiful spot on their beach, but it was private. Rashiki liked to think of it as theirs.

Many a date-night threatened by Naq’s work had been salvaged with the aid of a bottle of fermented fruit-juice and a quick trip to that cove. It would always hold a special place in Rashiki’s heart.

“We go there, you take some scribble-pads or something to tinker with, and I get to keep you company with my snores.” Sounded like a fair deal to him. Rashiki was a salt-rat, after all. The quiet thunder of the shoreline, crashing waves and squawking seabirds, was all the lullaby he’d ever need.

“And then I can wake you up properly.” Naquia cuddled him, fingers tracing the lines of his arms. “That sounds fine to me. We’ll have to be careful not to wake Lerlia.” Because that was the last thing they needed. Naquia gave Rashiki a final kiss before slipping out of his arms and through the curtains, moving to pull something on.

Something easy to remove, maybe. Tied loose and not pinned, and she stretched a little with a sigh, waiting for him after she gathered her things.

Rashiki was tired - but not nearly tired enough to stumble over the metallic detritus littering Naquia’s floorspace and wake his brother. Naq was very forgiving of a lot of things. However, that might be pushing it..

“What about our guests?” he asked quietly, looping on his loincloth - and turning navy from cheekbones to ears as he took stock of Naq’s outfit for the day. Once upon a time, he’d loved the way seashell and gold jewellery looked when it spangled against blue skin. But such things weren’t practical for the town’s resident turbine-expert. Nowadays, seeing Naq in a flowing, skirt-like garment rather than her usual work clothes, which were never allowed to drape in case they got mangled by gears or turning rotors, made his pulse skid almost as much as the beautiful curve of her crest where it stood out from her back, a little lopsided after sleep.

Stepping up behind her, he gently manipulated the fin until it was standing out perpendicular once more. His fingers lingered against the tallest bone.

“Leaving Lerlia to manage them alone might tempt disaster. We’d better be back before midday -
that’s only seven or so hours in which he can cause havoc.”

“Seven hours is more than enough time.” She smiled at the attention to her crest, twisting over her shoulder to show him. “At least, I’m sure it will be. Come on, let’s go.” She found his hand and took it, her other scooping up drawing pads and writing implements, and keeping them close to her chest.

It wasn’t a long walk, but a pleasant one. She kept hold of him, only feeling a little guilty that she was pushed to such things by that unnamable fear. It wasn’t anything he would complain about, but still – Naquia waited until they were relaxing in their little cove before she could let those worries slip from her shoulders, laying back in the stones.

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Meanwhile, Yondu having forced himself out of his doze at the first sounds of their hosts/captors’ movement, nudged Kraglin’s knobbly ribcage with his elbow.

“If we wanna escape, now’s our chance.” Not that he felt capable of sprinting for freedom just yet. But hey, he hadn’t eaten in a coupla days. Who knew - scrawny idjit might actually be able to carry him.

“Why d’we wanna escape?” Kraglin rolled onto his stomach, slurring into the pillow, before finally falling still with his face buried in it. If he went any limper, he could be assumed dead. Maybe Yondu would let him be at peace for a few hours before trying to eat his corpse. He managed to speak though, his voice floating through the sealskin pillowcase he was trying to hide in. “S’warm here. Soft. Can’t we just wait until y’healed?”

He was right. The thought of standing - or even moving - wasn’t appealing. Yondu managed to swivel his head, looking to where the foot of their snoring guard-slash-helper lay, just visible through the chink in the drapes and twitching like he was chasing rabbits in his sleep.

Thanks to the Zatoan’s isolationist politics, Yondu’d been taught from an early age that other Centaurians were Not For Trusting. Anthos demanded all guests be treated with hospitality, but there was a reason the Zatoan received so few of them, given their tendency to cull the lower-valley heathens whenever they climbed the mountain in search of drier pastures during the rains.

If Yondu trusted the Ignokai only as far as he could toss their brawniest warriors, he trusted these new beings even less. But Kraglin seemed to like them. And although Yondu’s inbuilt suspicion wouldn’t be so easily soothed, Kraglin had been socializing with these strangers while he was busy being unconscious, and thus had more of a read on them.

It was the first time Kraglin had known more about their surroundings than Yondu. He didn’t like it.

“Don’t wanna feel shut in,” he mumbled, eyes latched onto the splinter of morning light brightening through the door. “Wanna be out there. With the grass an’ the trees…”

Sure, his crest had been removed. He could no longer sense Anthos’s embrace, curling all around him, the deep-seated awareness of life that he’d taken for granted ever since he left the pouch. But a part of Yondu insisted it couldn’t be gone forever.

If he could just go outside… If he could sit under a tree, curl his toes into the bracken, inhale the warm swampland air…

Yondu pulled himself laboriously towards the edge of the bed, eyes pinned on that light like it was a diamond shining from the lavabeds at the volcano’s peak.
“It’ll come back,” he breathed. His back burned, like oil had been painted in a stripe down his spine and touched to a lit wick. Gritting his teeth, he pushed through the pain. “It’s gotta come back. I know it.”

While Kraglin was no medical expert, he was under the impression that Yondu’s inchworm game wasn’t going to be doing him any favours. So he rolled onto his side, clasping his shoulder as carefully as he could.

“Hey, c’mon.” His back was stiff, both from the brothers’ use of him as a bench and his catnaps on the floor by Yondu’s bedside in the ship beforehand. He doubted it hurt anywhere near as much as his partner’s, but it was enough to make him sigh and settle more comfortably, reinserting his face into the pillow. “Wait until I’m up and awake before you run off, yeah?”

Which wasn’t entirely what was going on here. He wasn’t stupid enough to wrap his arms around Yondu, because if there was one thing he didn’t want to do, it was hurt him any more.

“If you wanna get up, we’ll get up. But if your back goes then it’s just gonna take longer to heal. You wanna get off this place, right? I can go move the drapes, let some air in.”

“Don’t need your help,” Yondu grunted. But he relented - just a little - when his attempt to crawl to the curtains resulted only in spasms, pain, and noises no Zatoan warrior would ever admit to.

Yondu wasn’t one of those. Not anymore. But he retained his pride, and dammit, but he was absolutely not whimpering as he curled on the blankets.

“Okay,” he said, fisting the nearest skin - odd and hairless, more supple than the coarse hides with which he’d lined his own nest. He clenched until his knuckles stood out, tendons aching, pain taking his attention from his spine. “You win. Hope yer flarking happy. Jus’... Go get me a leaf or something. From outside. Anything that’s alive - don’t care what.”

“A leaf.” Kraglin yawned as he sat, wide-mouthed and ugly. “Gotcha Boss. One lettuce, coming right up.”

Thankfully, he dragged his trousers on before he slumped outside, wondering how Yondu thought he was supposed to be catching up on his sleep if he also had to go gardening for him.

No matter.

As he hunted about, rummaging around the doorway in search of a potplant or a weed, anything that sprouted from the sand, a blue face poked through the drapes. It beamed down at Yondu, facedown and bare and less than happy about it.

“Good morning sunshine~” Lerlia cooed. “The world says hello!”

Yondu hissed. He tried to scrabble backwards, and hissed again, incapacitated by the pain. Lightning blared through his back, like someone had sunk a javelin into it and twisted.

His lips peeled from his teeth. He might be lacking Kraglin’s multiple sharp rows, but Yondu was still more than capable of landing a good bite. As he’d demonstrate, if this fish-smelling weirdo got any closer.

“Kraglin!” he said, louder than usual. He didn't want to be accused of hollering for help - but dammit, if Kraglin had left him alone with this guy, couldn't he at least have given him a kick to check if he was awake as he went past? “Kraglin, dammit! Get back here! This nutter’s grinnin’ like he’s gonna eat me!”
“What?” Kraglin had wandered further afield than he’d intended, entranced by the charming, dumpy little domiciles. He hadn’t had the chance to look around properly when they were ferrying Yondu through the town. Now, as then, his exploration was interrupted.

He hurried back, leaning in the front door to look. There didn’t seem to be any attacking going on - just the smaller of the brothers making happy chirpy noises at his new friends. The larger - and his girlfriend - were nowhere to be found.

Kraglin frowned.

“What’s eating who?”

“Yondu!” Lerlia exclaimed, the bright smile still on his face. He didn’t know where Naquia and Rashiki were - terrible chaperone-skills on his part - but that was fine. He was more than capable of being a good host in their absence. “Be at peace my wordy friend! I am Lerlia, and I am at your service.”

A pause.

“You and your friend ‘Hrax’, bitey though he is. I will help you both.”

It sounded like the weirdo was talking a horrible amalgamated slang of pouchling-squeaks and actual civilized speech. It grated on Yondu’s ears like Xandarian across his vocal cords. But he couldn’t help but recognize his name - pronounced with more accuracy than Kraglin could manage - and what might have been an attempt at saying ‘Hrax’.

Kraglin’s homeplanet. That meant Kraglin had been talking. He’d told them who he was, he’d told them who they was. He’d told them where he’d come from…

Oh, Yondu could throttle him right now. And he would, if that dumb twiggy neck was within reach. No wonder Kraglin hunched up so much when he fought; that thing was like a goddam flowerstalk, just enticing an enemy to pluck.

Yondu was no enemy. But he was more than a little pissed.

“Anthos alive, Obfonteri! You go round tellin’ everyone our life-story?”

“What?” Kraglin stalked in, hands on hips and sans leaf - but Yondu hadn’t exactly given him chance to conduct a thorough search. “I didn’t tell em anything about you except your name, cos I thought they might need it when they were fixin’ you up.”

“Anthos!” Oh good, Lerlia was still involved in the conversation. He dithered, clearly anxious with the mood in the room, but the little flashes of goodwill from his crest didn’t seem to be affecting his guests any. Oh dear. Instead, he turned his face to the other blue man in the room, and nodded encouragingly, palms up to the sky in an offering pose. “Anthos, exactly. Oh good, you do know some things.”

“You’re both tooting about Anthos, aren’t you?”

“Does he know Anthos too?” Lerlia looked between them, hopeful. “Maybe we’re getting somewhere. Yondu, slow down-?”

Oh hell no. Not again.

Yondu was in no shape for fighting, and his pride rarely let him retreat. But this was about self
defence - and more than that. It wasn’t just himself he was protecting.

Really, it was all very simple. He and Kraglin had been sleeping curled around each other like pillbugs, skin-to-skin, breath-to-breath. But this was against the will of their host. They’d been stupid, they’d been careless - and now they were going to pay.

This unfamiliar Centaurian had sussed them. He was invoking Anthos, summoning down the wrath of the Great God so that he might take their punishment into his own hands, just as Yondu’s fa - Uzuko, had done.

There was only one thing left to do. Yondu bolted.

It wasn’t a very fast bolt, but it was a bolt nonetheless. Snatching a blanket for a makeshift loincloth - the debate over whether he held it over his front or his behind could wait until they were outside - Yondu scrambled upright. It was far from his finest moment. His knees quaked inwards and he nearly pitched through the rickety construct of his and Kraglin’s chamber, which didn’t look designed for long-term wear and tear, let alone the weight of an adult Centaurian crashing into it sideways.

But that was okay. He and Kraglin were leaving; they wouldn’t miss it. They were getting as far away from Anthos and arrows and machetes and furious, fire-spitting fathers as they could.

Yondu lurched across the floor, dodging the strange arrayment of sketches and tools - tools that looked almost as alien to him as Kraglin’s starship. His face was aquamarine and paling rapidly. Blood seemed to drain into his back, piling more torture onto already overstressed nerves. He fell on Kraglin, legs uncooperative.

The lanky git somehow remained standing. Yondu made the most of the opportunity; using him as a crutch, he levered himself to his feet once more, and glowered at their host as he elbowed Kraglin towards the door.

“No need,” he spat at their boggling captor, in Zatoan. He gestured at his shorn-off crest, slimy and stinky with poultice. “I’m already goddam Krz-qa-sza. And if ya touch this hairy dimwit, I don’t care how beat up I look. I’m fryin’ yer goddam ass for supper, boy.”

“Please, please wait-” Lerlia yelped, jumping to his feet. At least he seemed to realise that lunging at the two of them would probably be a bad idea, and he fought the urge to pull on his own crest in consternation. Clearly something had gone wrong in the translation. Not for the first time, he wished he had paid more attention in his old Seascroll Scripture classes. Or any class. Or, any conversation, ever.

Kraglin, for his part, seemed to be grappling with keeping Yondu upright and not sticking his hand on the man's raw spine. Mostly because he didn’t want to hurt him, and also because the idea of feeling Yondu’s vertebrae moving around in there made him want to vomit. He hauled his partner to his feet when he sagged, and resisted the urge to shake him.

“What are you doing?” he asked, looking between the two blue people with some panic and mostly concern. “I don’t get it, what’s-”

“You’re fine, you’re fine,” Lerlia flapped pleadingly for them to sit. “You’re fine!” He touched his crest. Concentrated. Gasped. “Oh, why are you so scared? It’s fine, my brother-”

“What the smokes-” Naquia hated it when Rashiki was right. She hated it. Because it meant they came back from a pleasant hour or so of her riding him into the shingles (she’d apologise for not
bringing a thicker towel later) to this.

“Tell them they’re safe!” Lerlia did his best not to knock any of her equipment as he flustered, looking utterly distraught. “They - They’re scared and I don’t know how to fix this- What does Krz-qa-sza mean?!”

This was a pain in Rashiki’s ass. Quite literally. May Anthos curse shingle pebbles and sea-urchin shells forever more.

But right now, the immediate situation was more pressing than pain. Rashiki, unlike his brother, wasn’t a complainer. He saw the situation, he assessed it, and he realized something was very, very wrong.

“Sit down, idiot!” he hissed at Lerlia. Tugged Naq down besides him as he folded to the ground, making himself small so the shape of his crest didn’t rear high over their guests’ disturbing heads, brown-and-hairy and blue-and-bald tucked close side-by-side like cuckoo eggs in the wrong nest. The wounded one looked an instant from collapse, using his companion for a support.

Rashiki folded cross-legged. He raised his hands in appeasement, glad he’d left his spear in his and Lerlia’s fishing hut. He wouldn’t condescend to these men and speak to them like they were spooked children - but he did slow his voice, keeping his empty palms towards them.

“We mean you no harm.”

“Krz-qa-sza,” the shortest of their captors had said, before he’d copied the order of this new one - the leader, Yondu assumed - and parked his tush on the floor. He knew that word, like he knew Anthos. And that meant he knew that what he and Kraglin did - what he and Kraglin were. Outcast. Unloved. Forbidden.

Yondu’s jaws grated, ears popping from the intensity. He snarled at the pair in the doorway who blocked their escape. It was an empty threat display. He was dangling off Kraglin’s side, feet perpetually sliding from under him. Whatever fever had laid him low after they left the village, it had sapped the strength from him faster than a venomous vash’ryk bite. Hell, he’d walked to Kraglin’s ship after his father had cut off his fin, hadn’t he? Now look at him. His back was ablaze. He was famished and frail and still fucking tired. But all he had to do was sell this. It was like facing down an aku. You just had to make enough noise to make them think you were bigger than they were.

“You better get the fuck outta my way! We’re leavin’, ain’t we, Krags!”

“We are?” He hadn’t meant for that to sound so bewildered, but it came out that way. Kraglin did his best to juggle Yondu up a little more, his expression a cross between pleading and confused, and coming out somewhere in the middle. “Why-?”

“What happened?” Naquia hissed to Lerlia, doing her very best not to try and glower the poor boy into submission. While she had no doubt that it was his actions that had caused this, she doubted it had been intentional. While Lerlia was many things - vain, impulsive, fickle and scatterbrained to name a few - he was not a malicious soul. He would sooner hurt himself than two newcomers who were badly wounded.

“They got up, and saw me, and then Yondu started being strange and weird, and I don’t know what I said to make it worse.” He scrubbed a palm over his cheek, doing his best not to panic as he watched the two fearfully. “I -- I heard Yondu say Anthos. So I figured he might feel better knowing
we know Him too.”

Naquia frowned, giving Rashiki a brief glance. Some of this was starting to fall into place - Kraglins reaction to their affection last night, the horrific injury, the flinching and apparent terror at being separated… Something was off, still, in her gut. It was as if these two had escaped through some terrible portal from the past. She fought down a sigh and turned her attention back to the two strangers.

“I gave you one bed,” she said, keeping her voice slow and calm, trying to keep her words clear so that some meaning might supersede the dialect issues. She hoped Yondu would listen. If the fever had driven him mad, there was no telling whether he was capable of rational thought. “Think, Yondu. Please - sit and talk. We will try to understand.”

Yondu did sit - not out of any desire to, but because his legs chose that moment to fold. While Kraglin was a fair bit tougher than he looked, he still wasn’t built for hauling bulky blue men about by their armpits. As a result, he got dragged down too. Yondu landed, panting slightly, spine stinging something brutal and hating that, with Lerlia behind them, he could only have one set of foes in his sightline at any one time. The two in front outnumbered the one at their backs though. Yondu focused on them, raising up a little on his knees in an effort to make himself look taller.

“These bastards wanna perform the fuckin’ za’gah on us all over again,” he said to Kraglin, sneering at the woman. If he was calmer, more inspired to listen, rather than overflowing with fight/flight adrenaline, he might have noticed a few odd things about her speech - things that didn’t quite collaborate with his interpretation of them as Anthos’s vengeful cronies. One bed, she’d said - or what sounded similar in her strange economic speech, every click-consonant muted rather than drawn out to its full extent. And she’d nodded over their shoulder to where their little chamber lay in disarray. I gave you one bed.

Which would intimate… Well, only that she’d assumed they were hunt brothers. But perhaps there was more to it?

Yondu balled his fists, forcing his tired mind into hostility once more. Hope was useless. Hope was stupid. Hope had kept him from running away with Kraglin the moment Koji opened that blasted curtain hanging. Hope insisted that he was overreacting, that his father would never really hurt him.

And look where hope had gotten him.

“Za’gah?” Well, that confirmed their worst theories. Naquia shuddered, a motion that came from right under her lungs and made her grope back for Rashiki’s hand, squeezing it tight for a moment.

She was allowed to feel horrified at that, she felt. It was disgusting. Now the only question was how and who had done this. While some of the elders here were very religious, it didn't mean they went around taking matters into their own hands. Some of the villages up to coast, perhaps?

Part of her doubted that. They might squabble over fishing territories, but there hadn't been all-out warfare for years. They were all united under Anthos’ laws, and she couldn't think of anyone who would do this in the council of Chiefs. Perhaps the underground people, from where Kraglin came?

“No za’gah,” she said, her voice sharp but firm. “Not now. Not ever. Never. We do not commit such horrors on people, not anymore. Not for hundreds of years.”

Not even Yondu could misinterpret that. He sagged against Kraglin’s shoulder, exhaling like he’d forgotten how. He was still glaring, and far from comfortable - but he wasn’t actively searching for an escape route.
“You ain’t gonna hurt us,” he said hoarsely. Then, remembering the divide between their languages - and after a moment of doubt, where he wondered if his next move would be what tipped the balance and had him and Kraglin strung up against the za’gah tree after all - grabbed Kraglin’s hand and held it demonstratively aloft. “You ain’t angry? About this?”

It was a gamble - and a big one. But Yondu had to be sure.

While Naquia found his choice of partner questionable on a purely aesthetic level, she shrugged. Instead she leaned against Rashiki’s side, and nuzzled her cheek against his chest. Then turned her face back to Yondu with a questioning look.

Kraglin being an odd shade of red at Yondu’s little display just made him look stranger. But she didn’t judge. Everyone had different tastes.

“Such thing - such rules, are issues of the past. What year do you even think it is - are you going to take us to a za’gah too?” She shook her head, injecting a little amusement into her voice. “Such things - they’re so old, Lerlia does not even understand the words for them!”

“Lerlia doesn’t understand very much at all,” Rashiki muttered. He met Kraglin’s eye over Naq’s head though, half his view blocked by her crest. He felt an odd blaze of empathy - here they were, both being used as tools by their partners to facilitate the other’s understanding. But he didn’t mind, and despite his flush, he doubted Kraglin did either.

He wrapped his arm around Naquia, secure and tight for a single squeeze, making it clear she was his. And saw Yondu tentatively emulate him, scowling the whole while - although Rashiki was starting to suspect there was no malice behind it. Yondu reminded him of the puffer fish by the reef. Small and flighty, blowing up to twice his size when he felt threatened. It was Rashiki’s job to deflate him again.

Standing (slowly, slowly, and pressing himself to the wall of the house, plaster at his back, in an attempt to make the pair feel less crowded) he padded past them, crossing to their cool box. The shadows inside the hut meant the stones were almost icy to the touch, condensation gathered on their exposed sides.

Rashiki reached in, not looking at Yondu, knowing that eye contact could well be perceived as a threat. As he’d hoped, the night hadn’t been long or mild enough for the fish to go rancid. It was still fresh, if a little rubbery, and it glistened most appetizingly when he held out the thin-patted clay plate.

“Here,” he said gruffly, eyes trained on Yondu’s bare knees. Then relocated them to the floor, in case Kraglin was as prone to protectiveness as Naquia. He might not appreciate Rashiki squinting at the blanket, which Yondu had apparently stolen from his and Naq’s bed to keep his dignity. “You’re hungry, yes? Eat.”

“It’s pretty good.” Kraglin murmured, letting his nose bump Yondu’s temple. And the guy did need to eat, even if he was sure he’d rather have roasted meats and fruit to dine on. Maybe later they could figure something out, but for now - well, it had been tasty enough.

Naquia seemed to be settled with this. Though she still felt sick over the idea of what had been done, she was also busy thinking of how and who. Were these men spectres, here to remind them of a distant past? An omen from Anthos that something was going wrong? Perhaps they had been plucked from their own time and put here as a mercy, a time they could be free.

If that was the case, Naquia wondered why Anthos hadn't done so sooner, before Yondu had been so brutally mutilated.
“Forgive me for asking,” she said, her tone quiet but steeled. “Who did this to you? We, the village I mean - we will find them. And we will offer you your vengeance, if you wish to have it. They have committed a terrible crime, and you deserve justice.”

Yondu bristled when the woman isolated his crest - or lack thereof - with a quick, discomforted flick of her eyes. It hurt her to look at it, huh? Well, it’d hurt him a hell of a lot more when the actual fucking machete was sawing through stretched skin and cartilage. He swivelled, one hand clamped to Kraglin’s shoulder for support, giving the woman an eyeful of his wound in all its ugly brutality. She wanted to gawp? She could be his guest. He only hoped there was a puke-receptacle in grabbing distance.

“Yeah,” he said, faking cheer. Thumbed over his shoulder to the crease where skull met neck, where the jagged, excavated line looked most fresh. “Goodbye present from my daddy. Get the screamin’ over with, already,”

Naquia blinked a little, though a twitch of her shoulders betrayed her want to recoil. She had thought she’d asked a simple question, though she reminded herself that there was a language barrier there. Something might have gone wrong, she thought to herself, as she took a deep breath.

“And where is he?” she asked, curling her fingers on her knee. “You’re not from around the area, that much is obvious. Where are you from?” Naquia tried to keep her words simpler, to minimise the confusion. “We want to help you get justice, if we can.”

“Should I go get one of the scholars? They might be able to translate-”

“Yes.” Naquia said after a moment, letting the Lerlia slip out and set off to the main area. To Yondu, she sighed and shook her head. “We’ll try again when he returns. Ras - let's move in a little more.”

She sighed as she stood, stretching the crick from her back as she came in to sit. Absently, she moved some papers and parts aside - if one of the scholars was coming, the last thing she wanted to leave was an impression of one of their past students as a slob.

There was time for Yondu to eat, and Kraglin to be given a cup of hot tea. He sniffed, testing it on the tip of his little finger before he settled to drink it, hands tight around the warm clay cup. He wasn’t foolish enough to try and start conversation - not until the light taps of Lerlia’s tread were heard outside, followed by heavier ones.

“Here,” Lerlia chirped as he ducked in, holding the door open for their guest. The woman came through, crest curled close to her spine to accommodate the wrap-around cloak she had on. She smiled a little at the villagers, then paused when her gaze settled on the two newcomers.

“I’d heard they were strange looking, but Lerlia didn’t tell me how strange…”

Great. Now they were bringing more people to stare at him. Yondu, not to be defeated, crossed his arms and greeted the newcomer with his nastiest sneer.

“Well, why don’tchu come on in, hon. Just make yerself right at fucking home…”

Kraglin’s hand rested on his thigh. Its weight wasn’t restraining - if only because Yondu wasn’t in a fit state to be flinging himself into brawls with cloaked mysterious Centaurian ladies, who ducked under the held back curtain and took in the view in a single sweep of their shrewd red eyes. However, it was comforting, even if Yondu wouldn’t admit it. He sunk back on his heels as the woman stepped into the low, spacious house. Sitting on his ass was impossible, given the slice that cleaved from his forehead to his tailbone. The healers of this place had obviously gone to some effort to keep it sterile; Yondu appreciated it, even if he could do without the pervasive reek of garlic. Last
thing he wanted was to make their stinky poultice redundant by grinding dirt into it.

He compromised by kneeling besides Kraglin and distributing a portion of his weight onto his side. His instinctive defensiveness ebbed at his Star-Man’s proximity, lulled away by the heat of his skin, the quiet rasp of his breath, the constant, ever present reminder that no matter what they’d suffered, he and Kraglin had survived.

Despite Yondu’s fears that he was about to be made the village freakshow, only a second of staring elapsed before the new lady bowed, deep and respectful. Yondu hesitated, torn between glaring and responding in kind. He shuffled the blanket that was keeping this meeting vaguely civil, rearranging it from where it had sagged.

“What d’you want from us,” he muttered - but not before dipping his own head by an inch, and smacking the back of Kraglin’s to encourage him to copy.

“I have been brought here because it seems our languages are at odds.” She sat, watching Kraglin’s little dip and grumble, rubbing the back of his head. “Lerlia mentioned that your companion, especially, speaks an entirely different dialect.”

“You’re using words that are too long, miss.” Lerlia passed out tea, but otherwise watched with rapt attention.

“I’m going to try a variety of known dialects.” She spoke to the room as a whole, curling her hands around the cup and holding it on her lap. “Through various stages of our language’s evolution. There have always been branches from the common tongue, and I’m sure we’ll find theirs. Now,” Her tone took on a different lilt, more instructional. Part of this was habit, and so was the way Lerlia and Naquia’s backs straightened, the voice bringing back classroom habit and memory.

“We know he is not of the coast, so we can disregard those languages. Forest, perhaps, or field. I would suggest Ignokai, if none of the others work. But -” She cleared her throat. Her next words were spoken in a smoother dialect, drawn out, musical. “Yondu, tell me when you hear one you can understand.”

It was the variety found in some of their sacred texts, then the type the field peoples used. She knew enough languages to keep them occupied for a while, roaming her mental map of the area, trying to narrow it down based on Yondu’s reactions: confused squints, frowns, and the occasional flash of teeth when he recognized a word. Linguistically she crossed towards the wetlands, the northern areas that were ill-explored and dangerous to document. She was moving further back in time, to something that sounded to Lerlia like the start of a song or a dance.

Each time, she asked him the same - ‘Tell me if this is clear to you.’

Yondu blinked.

“Well duh. Course it’s clear to me. S’the first time ya ain’t been gabblin’ nonsense, woman.”

“Marvelous!” She grinned, doing her best to resist giving a clap of delight. Finally, she could begin to pinpoint something. “Could you, perhaps, explain to me where you learned a version of our language that hasn’t been used for over five hundred years?”

“Uh…” Her accent was all fucked up, and it took a moment for Yondu to parse sense from the jumble of clicks and whistles. Then he scowled, snorting and tossing his head like an uppity horse. “Per’aps you oughta tell me why yer people are so Anthos-blasted weird. I mean…” Did he really want to ask this? Yes, he really wanted to ask this. Better to ascertain it now, rather than be caught
ou later. Yondu steeled himself, glaring into this odd woman’s eyes without waver. “Why ain’t me an’ him -” An elbow, pronging sharply between Kraglin’s ribs, “been hauled up against a za’gah tree yet? Y’all know we’re fucking, right?”

Sure, the Zatoan didn’t have a compatible word for ‘fucking’. Nothing quite got across that nuance of casual vulgarity. Yondu substituted the Xandarian term instead, expecting that the lady could work it out from context.

“I think as long as you’re not about to do this ‘fucking’ in front of us or children, none of us really care what you get up to.” She raised an eyebrow - as much as any hairless species could - and cleared her throat a little. “As for a za’gah tree… Such things were left in the forest. This village doesn’t even have one, though I know of one or two up on the sea cliffs that keep theirs maintained for the occasional fish sacrifice. But more to the point, why should we bother with something like that for the simple act of sex?”

“What?” Lerlia would obviously only be able to pick out the word for ‘sex’ there. Naquia resisted the urge to shove a sandal in his mouth.

“Shut up. Please, continue.”

“Could you tell me why you think we would?”

What, was she stupid or something? Yondu was beginning to get uncomfortable with this line of questioning. Gave him a bad feeling, was all. But being the brave, manly warrior he was, he battled through it.

“Cause it’s wrong, duh,” he said, rolling his eyes. “S’like… Oh, I dunno. Whacking one out by yourself. Only worse, because it’s two people yer corruptin’ rather than one. C’mon, y’all know Anthos, so ya gotta know that there’s only one sorta nookie-nookie he approves of, and that…” He let his eyes wander to her beltline, not without a leer. “Well, it kinda demands some equipment me and ol’ Kraggles here’re lackin’.”

“Interesting.” She really did seem fascinated, rubbing her cheek a little - she addressed the others, to keep them in the loop. “He seems to be under the impression we adhere to the religious rulings of an Anthos some centuries past. From before Reason. Yondu,” She switched back to his dialect, her tone curious.

“I’m sure you think I’m trying to trap you, but I’m not. Here and now, we do not punish… acts of love, or lust, which do not result in reproduction. And we do not believe Anthos does either. None of this invites death or mutilation, and hasn’t for over five hundred years. If Anthos was so quick to anger, everyone in this hut would have been smited already. Which begs the question, who did this and where may we find them, to bring justice to what happened to you? Oh,” She lit up a little, switching again.

“Five hundred years - there was, the ah, the scism - groups and whole tribes, during that time, would often wander off into the wilderness to live in a way that better suited them and their worship of Anthos. Oh, my we - we could be speaking to a direct descendant of one of those very tribes! An untouched line of history, right here!”

The talky-lady was very talky. She also seemed to be excited, and gesticulating, and narrating animatedly to their listeners. Yondu highly doubted it was a direct translation of his speech. He edged away, mistrustful of her loudness, the inundation of words he didn’t understand grating against his ear canal like taabshqa-screeches.
He didn’t like this new place, he didn’t like this new language, and he didn’t like the way his back ached whenever he breathed. Discomfort rarely made Yondu friendly, and this situation was no exception.

“The fuck you blatherin’ about, woman?”

“Oh! Well, it’s, interesting. You’re talking about things that haven’t—”

Kraglin sighed, arm curling around Yondu as carefully as he could. He didn’t follow much of the conversation, but if there was one thing his itching jaw let him know about, it was the need to protect Yondu. Not that Yondu needed protecting, most of the time - but right here and now, he was vulnerable. Kraglin pressed a soft kiss to the curve of Yondu’s head, before making what he could tentatively call an Executive Decision.

“If everyone is done,” he said, in what pidgin Centurian he knew. “I’m tired. Gonna explode if I don’t sleep. Yondu woke me up for a lettuce and then all this happened, and I’m still needin’ my naptime. And he needs to come with me,” he added. “In case I do something stupid. Right?”

Yondu snapped his teeth at the talky-lady, just to make it extra clear that he didn’t like her. Then snootily turned on the other woman, who he assumed was the owner of this massive living space, from the way she ran her hands lovingly over the metal formations scattered across the floor: all swooping curves and sharp angles, forged and hammered with far greater finesse than the yaka-ore that was fired into Zatoan arrows.

“You heard him,” he said. He held himself as straight as he could - both because having his spine sag was agonizing, and because moving right now would make Kraglin’s arm crimp the wound. Then Yondu’d jerk and swear, and Kraglin’d flinch away. The scrawny dolt would apologize a thousand times in a thousand different ways, from watery eyes to too-gentle touches, and he’d never hug him like that again.

And right now… Well, Yondu didn’t need a hug. Yondu didn’t need anything, or anyone (as he liked to remind people who insinuated to the contrary). But in spite of this, the careful compress of a forearm across the uninjured meat of his shoulder meant more than he could put into words.

He reciprocated, tucking his arm snug around Kraglin’s waist. One thumb made a possessive circle over his hip. It was a gesture he’d never have allowed himself, were they seated side-by-side at the firepit back home (no, not home; never home again). Performing affection openly didn’t come naturally to him. But - eh, fuck it. He was tired. If he was gonna berate himself over this little snippet of sentiment, he could wait til morning.

“All of y’all had better shaddup long enough for this idiot to get some shut-eye, else there’ll be hell to pay.”

“I see.” The scholar nodded as Naquia got up, rearranging the drapes back into place around their visitors’ bed. The last thing she was going to do was let them sleep somewhere so messed and open to everyone - they were clearly tired and over-socialised, and now that she thought about it, probably felt like they were being interrogated. Not the best experience for a guest. She resolved to work on her hospitality skills in the morning. “When you’re both feeling better, I’ll show you around. There’s so much here to see, to do. And, you must meet the chief, of course! And there’s the matter of the golden—”

“It ain’t a star.” Kraglin said tiredly, standing up and reaching down with both hands to help Yondu to his feet, to complete the stroll back to the welcoming bed. While he had less of an issue with their hosts than Yondu seemed to do, he could recognise that Yondu probably needed a rest. The choice
was either dealing with the pain in his back, or people, and he could only escape one of those.

"-Gull-crab thing."

"Whassa crab?" Yondu shook his head. He was still ruminating over the first part of the talky-lady’s speech. “And fuck off. I ain’t seen’ no chief. Didn’t exactly get along with the last one I ran with, and that was my own Anthos-damned father…”

There he went, saying too much again. Yondu yawned, stuffing the words back into his mouth with the flat of his palm. There was a certain level of need-to-know information surrounding his and Kraglin’s mission - namely, to get the hell off this planet and not look back. And these weirdos didn’t need to know.

“C’mon,” he murmured, once the curtain had fallen and he and Kraglin were alone. He knelt - slowly, painfully, holding his hand up to stop Kraglin from helping him. Then collapsed forwards onto his belly, punching a pillow to help clamp on the pain. “Yer standin’ all funny. That sorta posture ain’t good for you. What’m I supposed to do with ya if you get arthritis before we’re sixty?’’

“I dunno. Probably take me out back and put me outta my misery.” Kraglin sunk onto the sealskins, a hand finding Yondu’s and delivering a squeeze. It was all he could do, not wanting to agitate his back. He only hoped it was enough to communicate all the things he wasn’t saying: the concern, the affection, the little pleased twinge that had wriggled around his belly when Yondu tried to protect him, even crippled and panting in pain. “Look. I get you don’t like em, but we can’t do nothin’ till you get healed up. Rule One of Space - don’t bash the natives who wanna feed you.”

Rules he’d abided by when he first crash-landed. And look where it had got him.

“We just gotta let them think we can’t do any damage for em to help us a bit, then we can split.” He smiled, painting his fingers in a slow, adoring circle over Yondu’s palm. “We can do that, right?”

“Act all pathetic, ya mean?” Yondu tried to posture, but doing so was impossible when you were lying belly-down.

Instead, he squirmed his hand from Kraglin’s grip. He raised it, wincing the entire way, so that its palm might cup the curve of Kraglin’s skull. Hair clung to his fingers, chunky with grease, tangling all-too-easily. They needed a full hosedown, the both of them. But as bathing was out for Yondu until the gunge had been scraped off his back, he appreciated Kraglin joining him in stinky squalor.

“We can sure try.”

“Think of it like, I dunno.” His body went lax under Yondus touch, his eyes shutting. It wasn’t an automatic shut down, but it was something close to it, his brain fuzzing pleasantly at the clumsy petting. “S’just a ruse. A trick. S’good practise for out in space.”

“Hmm.” Now tricking people, Yondu could get behind. “But you ain’t gonna be foolin’ nobody unless ya get some shut-eye. So quit yer blathering - an’ that’s an order!”

“Yessir.” Kraglin’s smile was still quirking his lips, even as he drifted to sleep.

For their hosts’ part, they were quiet and respectful of their space, which he could appreciate. The youngest seemed most attuned to the idea that their guests were - afraid. Suspicious, and not without reason. While Lerlia longed to be able to spend time with these curious people, he felt pain when he went near them.

With his upbringing, he’d never had someone flinch when he approached without warning,
chattering about food. He didn’t like the feeling.

Days bled by. Naquia, as per her guests wishes, staunchly put her foot down about the Chief visiting, going so far as to stand in her doorway with the curtains held shut behind her. She passed on his well-wishes when the pair were next awake, her tone apologetic and kind. He meant well, she tried to explain. But he also understood their reluctance, and said that as long as they didn’t cause any harm to the village, he would hold their hosts responsible for their well-being.

The healers though, were permitted entry. Once a day, to check the condition of the wound, and to reapply paste if needed. Kraglin was there each time, a low rumble in his chest throughout all the examinations. At any wince or noise from Yondu that didn’t seem like it was voluntary, the rumble spiked to a warning snarl, until Yondu hissed for him to stand down.

A week, two weeks, and the healers seemed more positive. Lerlia learned to move carefully, by now accustomed to Kraglin’s hovering presence, and made sure his movements were well advertised. There were fewer flinches, nowadays.

“You’re knitting,” he said, in the dialect the scholar had told him to use. She had been giving him lessons, reawakening his old schooling, and while Lerlia was far from fluent, he was better than Rashiki, and that was what mattered. “The flesh, I mean. With proper bindings, I think you could stand to start moving around a little more, provided you’re careful and don’t over exert yourself. We’d be happy to show you the village.”

Yondu gave him a look. He hoped this look articulated everything he needed to - that he’d be shown around by no man, and no woman neither, because he was going to explore this strange new place as he damn well pleased, with his starman besides him. But just in case, he added a few words, spoken far slower than was necessary, as if he was addressing a particularly stupid child.

“Nuh-uh. We -” He gestured to himself and Kraglin. “Can handle ourselves. Don’t need none of your help.”

...Which was patently a lie. Yondu was flat out, being tended to with a salve whose sterile properties far exceeded the leaves pummelled under Aja’s pestle, and sheltered from the elements by the overarching roof of a hut larger than any five of his village’s combined. He needed all the help he could get. But Lerlia was used to that by now, and he knew when not to argue.

“Mhm.” The healer, witness to their conversation, turned an appealing look to Kraglin. As Kraglin was jaw-deep in one of the large, juicy seaweed balls Naquia had presented for snacking, he was little to no help. He lifted his head, still chewing, and blinked at her gormlessly. Swallowing the mouthful of rubbery fiber, he wiped his mouth on the back of his arm and looked to Yondu.

“Is she sayin’ we can go bathe now?” Sponge baths were getting really, really old. “Can we bribe her into it?”

“Just, stay still so I can bandage you up,” the healer said, warily lifting the bandages. “It’ll be over soon.”

Yondu, who’d tried to wriggle free as soon as Kraglin said the word ‘bathe’, grudgingly re-draped himself over the pillow he’d grabbed. To cushion his torso against the floor, obviously. Not to hug whenever her fingertips passed over the granulating edges of the wound.

“C’mon already,” he grumbled, resting his forehead on the floor. And they had like, actual flooring rather than just bare dirt - wood sliced into impossibly thin planks, cut with a dexterity Yondu might’ve marvelled at if he were in any way inclined to crafts. As it was he decided that it was
different to what he knew, and that therefore he didn’t like it - and banged his head off the nearest board in frustration as the healer painstakingly bound him up. He had to raise onto his knees so she could reach around his torso, passing the reel back and forth between her and her assistant. They went from the bottom up. Yondu lifted his arms to let them wrap under them, figuring they could deal with a bit of BO. the last bandages went around his throat: securely covering the sticky wound on the back of his neck, the one which ached throughout the night and reopened whenever he tipped his head.

Yondu didn’t thank them when they were done. But then again, they’d been dealing with his ornery ass for the past couple of days. They knew better than to expect it.

Kraglin rose, stretching with a groan. Sitting for too long always resulted in aches. Too many bones and not enough padding, that was his problem. Naquia had been trying to fatten him up, a little - that was why there were so much scrumptious seaweed on offer, but it just didn’t stick to him. The healers had poked him a little when Yondu was drowsing, but there was no real cause that they could find.

Or at least, nothing he understood. They had seemed real interested in his ass though, and said something about worms, and he wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

He grinned when Yondu was freed, shoving his hands in his pockets to resist the urge to grab onto him. This place was safe, he knew that. Aside from the spoken reassurances, there had been that fantastic morning where they’d overheard Rashiki and Naquia going at it. Yondu and he had been simply delighted, and exercised at least four types of smirk each at them over breakfast.

And told Lerlia. Because they could.

But that didn’t mean he was going to take liberties with it. Not without Yondus say so.

“Cmon,” He said, rocking on his heels a bit, waiting for them to help Yondu up. “I wanna show you these wells.”

Yondu shook off the healers as soon as he was standing. Like he needed to be hauled to his feet like an old man! Except perhaps, just maybe, it was better to accept help than to spend an approximate hour wobbling about in his efforts to stand solo. He couldn’t bend his spine, what with the bandages (and the pain, but that went without saying). Walking besides Kraglin out of the hut, he felt like a mannkin: one of Anthos’s familiars, which had been carved from dead bark and animated with a breath, who walked and talked and slowly petrified until they were wood once more.

Rashiki grabbed the nearest dangling carpet to stop it brushing the still-exposed wound on Yondu’s head. As soon as Yondu ducked beneath it, sunlight was all he knew. It soaked through his pores, luxuriously warm. And for a long while, Yondu stood and basked.

An earsplitting squawk made him open his eyes. He’d heard that sound often while he languished in Naquia’s hut, but he’d never been able to place it to a creature. Lerlia the ever-helpful had informed him that it was a gull-call - and Yondu had nodded sagely along and pretended he knew exactly what he was talking about, rather than admitting ignorance. Now, he cupped a hand over his browbone to shield from the sun - so much of it, more than there was in even the brightest and airiest forest clearings - and squinted at the sky until the wheeling shapes above became discernible against the endless blue.

The endless blue of the sky, that was. Because when Yondu followed the path of the gulls, tracking them with a hunter’s eyes, the keenness of which hadn’t diminished during his stint on bedrest, he saw blue of a different shade. A darker blue. A deeper blue.
“Holy fuck,” he breathed. His hand found Kraglin’s of its own accord, squeezing the thin fingers tight enough to grind the bones together in his sweaty palm. “Kraglin. That’s…”

“Water.” Kraglin nodded, giving Yondu an encouraging grin. He stepped back a little bit, keeping hold of him to guide him out of the hut and more into the open. The breeze that carried in off the sea was cool and inviting, and he could see why these people had decided to make their homes here. Aside from the safety and abundance of resources, it was beautiful. The ocean was easily visible from most parts of the village, leading down the sloping hills to where loose dirt and sand gave way to pure, golden dust by the shore.

Granted, Kraglin hadn’t gone down there. He hadn’t strayed far from the hut, but Lerlia was a pest and on occasion, when Yondu was securely sleeping off the effects of healing potions, Kraglin had submitted to being dragged outside. “Well, an ocean, really. I’ve read about em, but I’ve never seen one up close. Lerlia said you can’t drink it though.” In fact, he’d been very, very stern about that. “You wanna go see?”

Did he ever? Yondu nodded eagerly. Then - just in case Kraglin thought his infirm status meant he was no longer in charge - he grabbed Kraglin’s hand more assertively and led the way.
Chapter 11

Waves. Endless, crashing, eternal. Yondu was hypnotized. Everything about them fascinated him. Their repetitiveness. The small-scale turmoil, as water swirled across rock pools and between stones, and the waves dragged the shingle out in the suckback with a roar louder than the monsoon. Each spray of surf folded over itself a fraction before or after his mind told him it ought to. It was unpredictable and powerful, and were he still hoodwinked by the old stories, he might describe it as the beating of Anthos’s heart.

But it wasn’t that. Yondu knew this because he stood with his toes dug deep into wet sand, sunlight beating off his cheeks and life swirling all around him, from the spiny crustaceans in the pools to the barnacles who coated the rocks like solidified oil-slicks, and the worms that left their spiralized deposits in the mud and the wheeling gulls high above. And he felt nothing.

No, that wasn’t quite true. He felt Kraglin’s hand.

Yondu cracked an eye, checking on his starman from the corner of it. He looked mighty pink. Yondu’d only seen him go that color when he was horny or embarrassed. However, as fun as it was to bring out those reactions in Kraglin, Yondu liked to be in control of them - and while it was, he’d admit, a little sappy for his tastes, standing in the shallows and holding hands like a pair in their first Season wasn’t really worth of such a hue.

If he looked, Yondu could tell that the redness concentrated on Kraglin’s bare chest, as well as his upper back and shoulders, cheekbones, the tops of his ears, and of course, the bridge of that magnificent nose. All places where the midday sun had struck. He used the captive hand to winch him close enough to elbow.

“Hey. Y’know when we used to joke about putting ya in the stewpot? Don’t mean you gotta cook yourself, idjit.”

“I aint used to the sun.” Kraglin resisted the urge to stoop and splash Yondu with the water. Mostly because watching Yondu struggle to retaliate would just be sad, and probably end up with the stubborn bastard hurting himself out of spite. He hadn’t waited this long on this flark-forsaken mudball just for Yondu to die when he was getting on the mend. “Lived underground, remember? Course I crisp up. Ain’t got any proper, whatsits.” He waved a hand. “Defences.”

At least the sea was nice. He wiggled his toes in the wet sand, enjoying the chill that came to mid-shin.

“I wish I’d brought a holopad from the ship,” He said, looking out to the horizon. “I’d love to see how far the scanner could map this thing.”

“Hmm-hm.” Yondu kicked at the next wave, letting it wash itchy sand from under his toenails. If Kraglin wasn’t gonna drop his hand - well. Yondu could never be first to admit defeat. “Tasty as yer startin’ to smell, pink really ain’t your color.” He looked up and down the long beach, to where the sand faded into smooth, sea-rounded rock, weathered flat by the roll of storms long past. “Course there ain’t much shade… Not a flarkin’ tree in sight.”

There were trees somewhere. Of this, Yondu was certain. Despite Kraglin’s claims that such places existed - that he’d been born in one, in fact - Yondu still struggled to contemplate that worlds could exist without a hint of vegetation. This strange land at least had bubblewrack: ugly, plastic-looking pustules that turned brittle as they dried and made the best crunching sounds when you stomped on
them. As Yondu did now, shuffling slowly away from the shore with Kraglin trotting after, his eyes on those far-off rocks.

“Bet there’s caves an’ shit over there. C’mon, let’s get you outta the sun before you go all peely and gross.”

Rashiki had mentioned something about tides, and the dangers of the inexperienced exploring around the seashore. But Yondu made a habit of listening to less than a quarter of anything their hosts said. And anyway, while he might no longer be a hunter or a Zatoan warrior, or the son of the village chief, he was still Yondu fucking Udonta, and he could handle whatever the sea threw at him.

Kraglin happily trailed him, careful on the rocks. If there was one thing he knew well, it was rocks, and tunnels, and caves. So when they reached the outcrops, he peered down them until he spotted a pocket of shadow, making a rasping noise of recognition.

“This looks like a good one,” he said, leading the way. He traced the walls. Battered smooth by the waves, he couldn’t get a great read on what they might be made of, but they were sturdy. It was bright enough outside, and dim enough inside, that his eyes adjusted automatically; he winced when he glanced at Yondu, having to cover his eyes and turn back, flushing. “Let’s go see what’s in it.”

Kraglin had turned even pinker. This wasn’t good. Yondu had to get him under shade before the poor thing’s brain melted.

“After you,” he grunted, ushering Kraglin into the dark.

It smelt of salt and shingle. Wet rocks ground together, stirred by the waves. Briney water was forced back and forth through a small breach, foaming to white as it surged against that gap. Yondu was used to tramping the forests barefoot, but the sharp crunching medley of shells and flint bit at his callus-toughened soles.

And his back hurt. But he was kinda used to that.

He leaned on Kraglin for balance, picking his way to where loose shale, shiny and salt-crusted, turned to dark damp bedrock. Everything was claggy with algae and seaweed. It reminded Yondu of the natural grottos that formed in the deepswamps, mulchy-soft wood indistinguishable from the bog muck.

But move back in the cave, and the wave scouring on the walls became less marked. There was a line, encircling the cave like the rings in the trunk of a giant hollowed tree. Yondu climbed past it, and parked his ass on the first dry patch he saw.

He’d only just got the bloodstains out of his loincloth, dammit. He wasn’t about to sit in a froth of dirty seawater.

“C’mon,” he said, patting the space besides him. ‘We’re gonna stay here until you don’t look like one of them lobster-things they catch in the pots by the shore.’

“Those lobster things are delicious.” Kraglin replied, clambering up with ease. Far too much ease, all things considered: his time spent in the swampy jungle had given a terrible impression of himself. This was his habitat, caves and rock walls, and he barely had to concentrate. Compared to the cliffs of his youth and his name, these were child’s play.

He leaned back against the wall with a pleased sigh and groan, shutting his eyes. It was cooler in here, he’d give Yondu that. The thunderous sound of the waves was soothing too, in a repetitive, hypnotic way. He'd never seen an ocean beyond moving pictures on a holo screen, and though he
wasn't sure Yondu shared his view of it, it was fairly awe inspiring.

“On some planets,” he murmured. “The water is red, from like. Tiny microbe creatures living in it. We - my troop, I mean - were out on patrol when we found a red river. We're all from different planets, had no idea what it was. So we hiked all the way up it, thinkin’ there might be a dragon bleeding out at the other end.”

It had been months since he'd thought of his troop. No doubt by now they assumed him dead or rogue: absorbed into the underbelly of space, running weapons or parts. Part of him, a small part, wanted to run into them, to show them what he'd managed to do and find and survive.

Another part hoped they’d gotten as lucky as he had, and had left the Nova Corps far behind them.

“Dragon. Issat like a big aku?” Yondu rubbed his lips; they felt chapped and raw from the salt on the wind. How did Rashiki and the others whistle, when they had to contend with this every day? Maybe that was why they used unresponsive spears instead of yaka-arrows. He sucked on his bottom lip, pulling at the cracked flesh with his teeth until he tasted copper. Then thought back through Kraglin’s little speech.

Hearing him say so much at at any one sitting was odd. And while Yondu was far from the most empathetic - or even the most perceptive, especially with the loss of his fin - he got the feeling that there was something lurking unspoken, despite Kraglin’s upchucking of words.

“Your ‘troop’,” he repeated, Xandarian word dripping heavily from his tongue. “You. Miss ‘em?”

A bit blunt, perhaps. But Yondu had less finesse in his body than most people stored in their pinky fingers. If Kraglin wanted sympathy, this was the best he was getting.

“Nah.” He gave Yondu a tired grin, leaning back on his palms. “Just wondering what they think happened. I didn't tell any of them I was going, knew some of them for years. Just curious.” Kraglin shrugged, lifting a handful of slate to pick through it. There were some nice pieces, ones with some potential, which would have been set aside in the mines. “That’s all it was. I'm using a lot of stuff from what they taught us, so I just wondered. Good chunk of them are probably dead by now anyway.”

“It’s a dangerous life, sailin’ between stars.” Yondu felt like he’d gleaned enough from Kraglin’s stories to make that observation. Then, in case the idiot thought he was getting cold feet, he stretched up, tentatively so as not to unduly agitate his back. One arm came down across Kraglin’s narrow shoulders, deliberate and firm. No way that the half-hug, awkward as it was due to Yondu’s twinging spine, could be mistaken for an accident. “We’ll be fine though, you an’ me. We can take on anything.”

A fortnight ago, he’d have meant it. Now though...

His other hand brushed his forehead, unbidden. He missed his crest. That was to be expected. He missed the red swoop that jutted over his crown when he looked in a puddle with the sun’s reflective backing, and he missed the churn of Anthos’s lifeforce that had once beaten at a counter-rhythm to his pulse. But he hadn’t given a jot of consideration to the other things he might miss - the slight readjustments of his stance he’d always had to make so as not to be bowled over as gusts of wind, or the coolness on either side of his backbone where the skin used to be warmed as his crest absorbed the light. Or, most importantly of all, the buzz of his arrows in their quiver when he whistled.

He hadn’t taken any when they ran. Hadn’t taken anything, besides himself and his starman. And for a while, that had been enough. But there was a sinking certainty in Yondu’s gut that if he couldn’t
sense the life that teemed and bred in the rockpools along the shoreline, he wouldn’t be able to sense the vibrating frequency of Anthos’s Ore either.

Which was a damn shame, because the last thing Yondu wanted was to be a burden. How could he be anything else though? Injured and frail, without any weapons to his name… If he were in the forest with a huntpack, putting him down would be a mercy.

Sure, this place wasn’t anywhere near as hazardous as the deepswamp, despite Yondu’s initial misgivings. Kraglin was willing to stick around until he’d healed up before they set out into the endless night sky. But even then, Yondu wasn’t going to be much use. Not unless...

He pulled on Kraglin’s shoulders, wedging that uncomfortable bony body against his side. He wanted to ask. But this didn’t feel like the right time. Soon though - once his back was healed and he could walk more than three steps without jolting and hissing. Then he’d make Kraglin teach him how to fight.

Kraglin couldn’t help the pleased hum that came whenever Yondu showed him any display of affection. He was fond of Yondu, of everything up to and including his usual understandable reluctance to open touch. But that didn’t mean that when they were in private, Kraglin wasn’t going to drink up every contact, and enjoy them to the fullest. So he leaned against Yondu’s side for a moment, savouring it for as long as it lasted.

Shifting, he pulled his legs up onto the shelf and turned, settling back over Yondu's lap. He grinned up at him, head pillowed on his thighs, and caught the hand that had been on his shoulders. There - that way, he could hold it on his stomach happily, playing with his fingers.

"It's pretty rough," he agreed, as if nothing was different. "The travelling part is probably the safest, as long as you're sensible and mind the Outsiders. Keep Them happy, and you'll be fine. Just," He hesitated a moment, then let his fingers go still around Yondu’s. "Just, if we’re somewhere like a station or another planet, if I tell ya something - I ain’t trying to be annoying or act like I know better or anything, I’ll be tellin’ you it because you need to know it, or it’ll keep you safe. You know that, right? I won’t be rubbing it in, I just want t’help you learn. T’keep you safe, alright?"

There was going to have to be a lot of that, he was realising. Not because he didn’t think Yondu could look after himself, but because creatures - peoples - from uncontacted planets weren’t supposed to be in the stars. Yondu was going to be a rarity, a prize to collect, or an easy mark to take advantage of. While Kraglin had learned about Galactic Life the hard way, with intermittent teachers, he was determined to make it easier for his partner.

Kraglin’s weight on his legs - not that there was much of it - was as familiar as the ribs digging into his thighs were uncomfortable. Yondu allowed his hand to be turned, enjoying the simple pleasure of having someone else touch him. Given his cagey pride, Yondu didn’t get that attention often - only from Kraglin, and only when they were alone. Now he had him like this: sprawled over Yondu’s lap and lavishing him with small, intimate touches, Yondu didn’t want this moment to end.

So he made a quiet rumbling noise in his chest. Instead of answering the question, he ducked to kiss Kraglin’s bearded chin, hiding the flinch as his back contracted.

‘Ain’t that great at doin’ what I’m told.’

“Y’might have to get a bit better at it.” Kraglin squirmed happily, mashing his beard on Yondu’s lips. He tightened his grip on Yondu’s hand a moment, playing with it, finger by finger. “Sides, I wouldn’t really tell you what t’do. Might tell ya why something is a dumbass idea, but if you do the dumbass thing anyway, that’s yer own fault.”
He brought the hand up to his lips, kissing the back of it, then grinning as he pressed a quick flurry of kisses to each fingertip, hugging the hand to his chest. Brief moments of his foolish affection were rarely indulged, but he wanted to. Talking about being out in the stars, just the two of them against the universe - it lit a fond fire in his chest, buoying up his spirits.

“Just - I aint gonna lie about stuff, alright?” he said after a moment, studying the cave wall. “If I say something’s dangerous, then it is. Just means we gotta find some other way to tackle it.”

“Good. Wouldn’t want’chu to lie.” Not to me, and not ever. But if that needed to be said, it’d ruin it. Yondu flexed his fingers into a fist then splayed them wide, making the massage more of a challenge. He grinned when Kraglin hung on regardless. “Careful though. Can't have ya gettin’ too full of yerself, Obfonteri.”

“I’ll keep my ego in check.” Kraglin snorted a little, chasing Yondu’s fingers with his own. He swivelled onto his stomach, nuzzling at Yondu’s belly and pressing a kiss to the skin there as well, shutting his eyes contently, his shoulders relaxing. For a moment, he was happy to listen to the sounds of the ocean, breathing easy.

“If you wanna know anything about bein’ out there,” he murmured. “Ask. I’ll tell ya if I know.”

Well. There was one thing he’d been wondering.

Yondu took a breath. His diaphragm moved beneath the skin, making his pouch rim rub at Kraglin’s lips through the bandages. The sensation struck with a jolt of energy, Yondu’s spine smarting from the intensity. That line of darker blue, the only hint of the double-flap of skin protecting Yondu’s stomach muscles, turned out to be just as capable of responding to Kraglin’s touch as the rest of him.

He wriggled his hand free of his grip, and instead laid it atop the thick sprouts of hair, salt-crusted from their beachside trek, which coated Kraglin’s scalp.

“How about we still do this in space?” he asked, voice husking playfully low as he pushed Kraglin’s head further down.

Kraglin had to laugh, even as he nuzzled at Yondu’s hip, glancing up at him with a soft, amused huff. He closed his teeth around the edge of the fabric and tugged gently, teasing.

“Not in public,” he said, going back to nuzzling as he shut his eyes, pressing a few kisses to the skin there. “But yeah. Every day, if you want. Till you can’t even walk.” And it was true - for the most part, who people did the dirty with wasn’t usually top of someone’s concern, unless you were on a particularly backwards planet.

Not that he was going to name names on which planets were backwards.

“Some species have some rules about like, touching and stuff in public. But they’re always broadcast before you land, so its fine.”

“Til I can't walk?” Yondu tipped Kraglin’s chin up with one finger, wanting him to enjoy the full breadth of his leer. “That sounds like a challenge.”

One he planned on rising to, as soon as possible. Just… not quite yet. He could barely walk unassisted as it was. Last thing he needed was assache added to his culminating pile of problems. Nevertheless, the hand wound through Kraglin’s hair reclaimed its tight grip. “Ya think you got what it takes for that, boy?”

Kraglin shut his eyes, sighing out warm and rough as he relished the grip. He made a soft noise, lips
parted through it as he let his head follow the grip, tilting back to bare the line of his neck for him, swallowing with a bob of his throat.

“Sure do.” He cracked one eye to look up at Yondu, his expression pleased and warm, contented. “You just wait.”

Patience had never been Yondu’s forte. But some things were worth it. Kraglin looked happy, for a man whose head was being supported by his hair. Yondu rolled his fistful around the wristjoint, just to test how far Kraglin was willing to take this. He was delighted when he let himself be dragged, slack and pliant, gaze never leaving Yondu’s own even as he was tugged in a tight circle.

And dammit, but it had been a while. By their standards, at least. And so much had happened since the last time he had Kraglin on his knees, worshipping his cock with flat tongued licks and stealing under, tipping Yondu’s hips against his face so he could probe the tight blue bud of his ass...

Plus, while it wasn’t exactly what the healers had recommended, Yondu couldn't think of a better cure for back pain than an orgasm.

Kraglin had to tip his head to nuzzle at Yondu’s thigh, straining against the pull on his hair. He shifted a bit, rolling onto his side to face inwards, fingers coming up and plucking at the loincloth. Whatever else he thought about the little skirts, he sent up thanks to whoever was listening that they were easy access.

“You want something?” he enquired, tugging on the fabric.

That fabric was starting to show the strain of what Yondu wanted. If Kraglin didn’t hurry this up, Yondu might bust right through the damn thing. Then he’d have to walk around starkers. And that’d be terrible for everyone, because while this seaside society was more progressive than the one Yondu had left, seeing an ugly rake-thin alien fucking a crestless freak in the middle of the street might wear their welcome thin.

But none of this changed the fact that Yondu didn’t beg. He demanded.

“Ya fuckin’ well know, ya hairy turd.”

Kraglin had to laugh at that. He pointedly dropped the loincloth over his own head. If Yondu wanted to watch the way Kraglin’s lips teased and suckled at the tip of his cock, he could damn well lift the flap himself. Kraglin wasn’t gonna do all the legwork.

He shut his eyes, enjoying the dual-darkness of cave and tent. Shuffled closer, knees scraping rock, so that he might take more of him into his mouth, tongue working slowly over skin.

Kraglin had to move a bit, shoulder briefly digging into Yondu’s thighs as he bobbed, tongue revisiting the bobbles on Yondu’s cockhead, as if greeting old friends.

Yondu couldn’t squeeze his knees together, not with Kraglin between them. He couldn’t very well flop flat-out and spread his legs to let Kraglin work away either - not without risking jarring his back. He settled for angling rearwards, propping himself on his forearms, with enough of an arch to keep his sore tailbone from rubbing the dirty rock. He suspected they might be due a scolding from the healers when they returned to Naquia’s house - a ‘walk along the beach’ had very swiftly descended into ‘cave exploration and sex’, both of which were naturally messy activities.

But right now, his concentration was honed on the stifling heat of Kraglin’s mouth. The silky-wet slide of his tongue, the way every bob of his head made the loincloth buck and ripple like the sea below them...
Yondu wriggled until his calves were under his thighs, ass resting on his heels. There. Now, if he
flexed up he could shunt his cock along the line of Kraglin’s throat. Not hard - partly because Yondu
remembered what it felt like to gag on dick, but mostly because his back was already protesting and
he wasn’t sure how long he’d be able to keep this up. But he knew from the messy slurps, and the
hunch of Kraglin’s shoulders just past the edge of the draping loincloth, that his efforts were
appreciated.

Kraglin groaned around him on his next push, determinedly swallowing hard. He curled one hand
into Yondus thigh, partly to support him and partly for something for himself to hold onto, the other
digging into the shingle. All the had to do was focus well enough to ignore the ache in his shoulders
and his own want - and he was good at that. He tightened his mouth around Yondu on the next push
down, tongue squirming along the seams of each plate, lips catching on them on the upwards pull.

Come to think of it, he hadn’t had the chance to taste Yondu properly yet. He smirked inwardly,
wishing he had thought to leave his head uncovered. He wanted to see Yondus face when that
happened, and he reached up, fumbling the fabric away.

It gave Yondu a great view of his lips tight around his cock, dragging on the plates as he moved back
up, tongue finding and teasing the head. Kraglin opened his mouth, just enough to show off the
sliding dark blue plates within, before he sucked his head again, swallowing greedily.

“Mmmf…” Kraglin was lucky he had a cock in his mouth. It stopped him making stupid noises.
Yondu craned down his body, scrabbling at the loincloth rope and twisting until the front and back
panels hung to the sides, clearing his view. His hand weighed on Kraglin’s head, holding him on to
the root.

He tangled fingers in his lengthening hair - not to yank and encourage a faster pace, but just to give
Yondu something to hold as he supported his weight between his legs and the arm still behind him,
bowed backwards over the rock. “Fuck, Krags.”

When he swallowed, his throat squeezed. Yondu’s stomach muscles trembled. He was already in all
the way, but he couldn’t help bucking, greedy and - dammit, he could admit it - needy too. The
lowest bandages had come loose from their climb to the rear of the cave. They tickled Kraglin’s nose
as he worked his jaw around the lowest plate, teeth ever a second from scraping.

Yondu untangled himself from Kraglin’s mop long enough to unwind them completely, wincing as
he felt them peel from his goop-crusted back. The trailing ends were swept out the way, and while
the smell of his wound wasn’t conducive to a sexy atmosphere, Yondu could make do.

He rubbed his thumb at the join between Kraglin’s chin and his skull, circling that tender spot just
below his ear. There was power in those jaws, underbitten though they might be. But he trusted
Kragls implicitly not to use them. The touch made Kraglin’s eyes swim up to his. They shone bright
and wet as the stones around the cave mouth, and Yondu made sure to look directly into them as he
said:

“Thassa good boy.”

Kragl groaned at the praise, having to squeeze his eyes shut. Keeping his mind off his cock was
hard enough as it was - innuendo intended - without Yondu making it twitch using only his words.
He slurped, bobbing his head. The angle was messy and clumsy, but it meant he could let Yondu’s
cock slide against the warm silkiness of his inner cheek before it got pulled down into his throat. One
hand found the curve of Yondu’s hip, thumb rubbing circles into the bone.

He had to pull up for air eventually though, and he gasped for it with an open mouth. When he came
back after a moment or two it was with an adoring, hungry slide of his lips up the underside of Yondu’s cock, taking him into his mouth again with a moan. Position-wise, he probably wasn’t going to attempt this one again - Yondu could sit on the bed back at the hut and have Kraglin on the mattress; no need for all this stooping and back crikking. But the effort felt worth it, enough to show his dedication to the task at hand.

Yondu repeated himself as Kraglin slurped back down, hollowed cheeks making his already gaunt face look concave and skull-like. Light glanced from the water, coating the ceiling in a rippling lattice. Yondu tried not to be distracted by it, but couldn’t really help himself as his eyes rolled back. “Good boy,” he drawled. He swung Kraglin’s mouth back a little ways by the hair, but only to realign; when he next thrust he seated himself more firmly between those deadly-sharp teeth, cock pronging the spongey wall of Kraglin’s throat. “Very good boy. Now, y’want me to come in your mouth?” He didn’t let Kraglin pop off to answer completely, pinning him with the flat of his hand on his crown so the man’s nod made his textured cockhead waggle, bulging out that scrawny gullet. “Mm-hm. Gonna need some fingers too then. Get to it, Krags.”

For a moment Kraglin looked a little - perplexed, around the flesh in his mouth. There were several options on offer there, but only a few of them seemed entirely possible in this cave, not to mention with Yondus injury. In the end he decided on worming a hand under his chin, knuckles grinding and teasing on the scant, sensitive patch of skin behind his balls. With nothing to slick his finger, and an unwillingness to free his mouth to wet them, he could work with this instead. It meant he had to arch his neck uncomfortably, tongue squirming under the thickness of him. It was starting to get harder to breathe and work to any satisfaction, but if this was a test -

Then he’d pass it. Which meant going above and beyond.

He worked two fingers into his mouth next to Yondus cock, working with the slow, hitching grind of him past his lips. Then down, having to twist his arm to get fingers to rub and press against his pucker, probing slow and careful.

Kraglin was a damn good guesser.

Centaurian vocal cords were designed for guttural sounds. That included purring, as Yondu demonstrated, angling onto his supporting arm and straining to keep pressure off his back while still giving Kraglin enough of an angle to work with. It wasn’t the best position. Or the safest, considering the extent of his wound. His coccyx scraped across the rock - which was all well and good when that coccyx wasn’t exposed, without even the loincloth flap to cushion it. Yondu’s groans took on a decidedly less pleased note. Although Kraglin hadn’t pushed inside just yet - content to play and toy with Yondu’s hole until it softened - Yondu still clamped up, tight enough to be noticeable, as agony sizzled out from his tailbone. “Ah, fucking - Anthos-dammed hell. Kraggles, I gotta, uh, rearrange…”

How he was supposed to rearrange remained a bit of a mystery. Yondu had an idea though, and he was adamant that Kraglin cooperate.

Pulling out of Kraglin’s mouth - and allowing the man to suck huge, wet gulps of air; whoops, hadn’t realized he’d been smothering the poor kid - Yondu hauled him to his level. Then pointedly pushed at the center of his chest, making Kraglin dip to the rear. Kraglin’s back might be gippy after endeavouring to wrap himself around Yondu while simultaneously doing as little damage to his wound as possible in the nest Naquia and co. had built. But he could damn well suck it up - Yondu wagered it’d hurt a lot less for him than if they did this vice versa.
His cock felt cold, as the breeze from the cavemouth dragged over spit-slippery flesh. His inner thighs, in contrast, were hot from stubble-rash. Yondu rubbed them together, gasping at the grate of tender skin. “Hurry up,” he said, tapping Kraglin’s bony sternum. “I wanna sit on yer ugly mug yesterday.”

Kraglin did his best not to wheeze when he finally has access to air. While he was sure Yondu appreciated the effort he was going to, there was going to be some explaining to do if he had to go back to the village and explain he’d suffocated their strange visitor with cock. It took a moment or two to understand what was going on but when he did - that Yondu was in pain due to the rocks and the positioning. Then Kraglin scrambled back, glancing behind him to make sure he wasn’t going to pitch off the edge of their little shelf.

Had the water always been that high?

No matter. Kraglin scooted until he found a place with less loose shale, and a bit further from the edge. Then he motioned Yondu over, hands greedily hauling under his thighs when he was close enough to reach, mouthing little bites and kisses to the muscle.

He'd done this with girls before. Wasn't too difficult, though they had the added bonus of being able to work their hips against his ridiculous nose. He grinned, tilting his head to lick a stripe over his balls, waiting for Yondu to get comfortable.

Which Yondu did, and without delay. This was much better. His tailbone was still stinging, but the rest of his back sung with relief at finally being allowed to straighten. He levered himself to sit on Kraglin’s chest, wiry fuzz brushing the backs of his legs. Then, smirking, rubbed the wet head of his cock against Kraglin’s cheekbone.

The friction from that beard was pretty intense - almost past the point of pleasantness. But Kraglin’s measured laps around his balls made up for it. His nose dug into the base of his cock, and when he glanced up, eyes glimmering in the shadowed pits beneath his brows, he looked fey and weird: like a creature that’d crawled from the depths of this cave to taste the newcomer.

Yondu pinned his face there, one palm clamped on each temple. He made the dot of precum staining Kraglin’s beard into a sticky stripe.

“Remember what I said ‘bout fingers?” he said, rocking imperiously down, hard enough to crush Kraglin’s ribs and make his breath cut short. “As in, I want ‘em in me? Now?”

Kraglin adored taking his orders. He hummed, lips rolling around a blue ball for a moment before he nodded - best he could, anyway - and tilted his head to catch the tip of his cock instead. He slicked his fingers with his mouth again, sucking on them beside the head of his prick, rubbing it teasingly as he worked. Then they were gone, and he was able to lift his head, taking him deeper.

He slotted an arm under Yondu’s thighs, helping support him. He used two fingers, rubbing and kneading with the spit-wet tips, playing at spreading the rim open as his tongue danced between bumps and ridges, lips pulling gently on the skin.

Listening to Yondu was half the joy of all this; beyond the warm, musky taste filling his mouth, beyond the satisfying weight on his chest, it was the noises that kept Kraglin going. Any sort of confirmation of a job well done, be it a hand in his hair or the chest-expanding slur of ‘good boy’ or Yondu cursing in the language Kraglin brought to him from the stars - it all made heat jolt in his spine, and he pressed his knees together in a desperate bid to keep his attention where it should be.

The best thing about this, Yondu decided (beyond the obvious: the fingers plucking at his pucker,
dabbling past the tight ring to stroke the velvety muscle from the inside; the soft well of Kraglin’s throat) was his Star Man’s self restraint. The long, slim body beneath him was a mess of flushing twitches. Kraglin kept making jolting, desperate little half-thrusts: a quake in his pelvis that ground his hard prick unsatisfyingly against the front of his pants. Yondu, pressing forwards until Kraglin’s lips bulged around his last thick plate, didn’t plan on helping him out.

“Good?” Kraglin asked when he pulled off to breathe, fingers dipping past the spit slackened rim. He brought his knees up, an emergency backrest in case Yondu needed help to balance, and to ease the ache in his own hips.

When Kraglin retreated, the whine escaped Yondu without permission. Yondu figured that answered his question. Self conscious of the blue tint to his ears, he shunted against the tantalizing pressure of those fingers, fucking himself back so Kraglin was immersed to the knuckles.

His back hurt. But there’d been a lot of that lately. The lap of Kraglin’s tongue, the twitch of the fingers clamped tight together by his body, the way Kraglin kept his hands on Yondu’s ass, supporting him rather than tending to his own cock… It all made for an excellent distraction.

Kraglin shuddered when Yondu ground back onto him, a tease that made him throb against his fly zip. It was no relief to imagine Yondu bucking himself onto the most ignored part of his anatomy, so he tried not to - instead twisting his long fingers inside him.

His world focus had narrowed - either with concentration or oxygen deprivation, it wasn't certain. He flicked his tongue against each plate as they ground over his lips with each pass, fingers gripping and kneading the blue ass he held.

Kraglin had no way of knowing Yondu would be reciprocating in some way at the end of this. But it was part faith, part trust that meant Kraglin assumed something would be worked out, giving a rumbling moan deep in his throat as he sucked Yondu back into it.

‘Thassit. Yer suckin’ me so good, so sweet...’ the praise came easy, now he knew how well Kraglin responded to it. His throat squeezed, rippling and wet around Yondu’s thrusts. Mindful that he didn't actually wanna hurt the dolt, Yondu tried to keep them shallow, more engaged with circling his ass against the seat of Kraglin’s hand, savoring the sharp stretch as they tugged in different directions.

Little bastard had bent his fingers. He knew what that did to Yondu. Knew it hooked him in just the right way: too shallow to agitate his prostate but more than enough to promise. Yondu squirmed around them, cock slipping an inch from Kraglin’s jaws, followed by a string of drool.

‘Damn, ya look mighty fine like this,’ he breathed. It was true. For all his joking about Kraglin’s bonny good looks (whose existence was dubious at best) the pinched white face buried against his groin managed to channel an odd, grimy sort of sensuality. Yondu combed through Kraglin's hair, tugging at the tangles, and watched his star man’s eyelashes close even as his nostrils flared, struggling for air as he was drawn back over Yondu’s cock, keeping it warm in his throat. ‘Next time I want ya on yer knees.’

Flattery, especially baseless flattery that could be disproved with a simple look in a reflective pond, was still something that Kraglin found hard to swallow. From anyone, but then again, since he had other things to work his mouth around he could let this pass.

Kraglin groaned, his hips giving another upwards push as his curled fingers spread in a mimicry of how his knot forced Yondu’s walls apart. He kept them wide, pulling them down to tug and bulge the edge of his hole. While he was careful, he still let there be a bit of a pop on the out, and a grind on the way back in.
Part of him was almost insulted by the idea of being on his knees. Some dumb Hraxlian pride, revolted by the idea that the rest of the universe saw their planet and people as a resource, and now he was expected to kneel!

He could kneel for Yondu though. He'd be fine with it. He wasn't sure if that bothered him more.

The stretch was every bit as addictive as Yondu remembered. His pace stuttered, small even thrusts fragmenting into an unpredictable blend of jerks and twitches that alternatively had his cock dragging on Kraglin’s lips and crushing them to his crotch.

“Fuck,” he hissed. The bony digits pronged into him, again and again, making up for their slimness with sheer ingenuity as they manipulated his rim, testing the limits of silky, elastic flesh. The hands in Kraglin’s hair roved across his face, scraping through the beard, catching on his closed eyelids and the beaky, pre-cum smeared underside of his nose. “You're gonna be on yer knees, sucking me like this, shovin’ yer idiot face under to lick my hole… You’ll do everything I tell you, won’tcha? Cause we both know ya wanna behave for me…”

Two things happened to make Kraglin remove his mouth fairly swiftly from Yondu’s cock.

One was intent to speak - while he didn't mind Yondu insulting him all that much any other time, he found it a bit much when he had his cock in his mouth. If there was one time he expected a little bit of fairness and grace, it was when he was doing his best to give the man pleasure. So it wasn’t to yell, but to ask (a little indignantly) who the idiot was, considering Yondu was the one willingly shoving his dick into a mouth filled with knives.

Which was the second issue.

A Hraxlians anatomy was on constant high alert. It was an efficient machine, designed to thrive in even the worst of environments against the harshest elements and a cocktail of toxins in the water, air and food that would fell most other species after prolonged exposure. It was designed to react to four stimuli; fear, anger, pain and adrenaline.

The latter of which had been coursing through Kraglin’s system ever since Yondu had started this. It had peaked around the time fingers started dragging him around by the hair, and pain from the position and lack of oxygen. So although he was a little annoyed with Yondu calling him callous words during the act, he wasn’t annoyed enough to leave his mouth there.

Instead Kraglin’s eyes widened when he felt the prickles and slice in his gums, hurriedly sliding his mouth off the hot flesh, gasping out for air. Behind his frontal row, his second was visible and he whined in frustration, desperation pushing him to lap at the head of his cock as if in apology, pushing his fingers in tight, short thrusts to compensate.

Well, now what was the idjit’s problem? Yondu grumbled, peering down to where his dick now rested against Kraglin’s tongue. Which was nice n’all, but Yondu hadn’t taken on a star man with a body temperature far higher than his own, just to let his cock get cold in some shaded shoreside cave in the middle of buttfuck nowhere.

“C’mon, jackass,” he muttered, pinching Kraglin’s chin and turning him to face him. Those thin lips snared on Yondu’s fingers. He tugged them back to reveal the double-line of teeth that had emerged - teeth he’d only seen when Kraglin was in pain, or preparing to battle. Not exactly the sorta weapons you wanted levelled at your pride-and-joy mid blowjob. Perhaps Yondu was glad he’d removed ’em from the vicinity after all.

That didn’t stop him from slapping Kraglin’s cheek - more a caress, albeit a short and stinging one -
“Whas gotten into ya then? C’mon, talk. Ain’t never been a mind-reader, not even when I was whole.”

Dammit. Just saying those words made him remember that his back was currently giving him a whole world of grief. Yondu slumped, propping himself with his hands braced between his thighs, where they spread to kneel on either side of Kraglin’s chest. The fingers in his ass were moving faster now, squelching a little as they bottomed out against his spit-wet rim. But while Yondu ground back on them, he wasn’t in the headspace to enjoy them.

“Seriously,” he panted, forcing himself to clench and bear down in case Kraglin got it into his dumb head that he wanted him to stop. “Your face has gone twelve shades of stupid. Whas goin’ on?” He wasn’t yet experienced enough to hide his tells – a hard swallow, a nervous gnaw of the inside of his cheek. “Did I. Uh. Did I hurt ya?”

“No- Well, yeah, but no, it-” Kraglin didn’t stop the curl and twist of his fingers inside him, but he did slow down. “Not in -- a bad way. Brain just did a stupid, thats all, its fine, we-” Hraxlians. “-Uh -- sometimes, bite, during it anyway. That’s normal. Just, uh, not usually on that.”

That, being the prick he was moving his lips against, licking and kissing gently when he could. At least the reprieve had allowed him to catch his breath. His fingers described a wide circle inside Yondu, and he glanced up at him, pressing deeper. Just to make sure he had his attention.

“An’... An’ don’t call me an idiot when I’m suckin’ your cock. Aint an idiot for that, even if I’m one for you. Aint fair.”

Yondu inhaled sharply, nails grazing deep inside him. Satisfied Kraglin wasn’t about to call things to a halt, his grin returned, lazy and lascivious and smug as ever. He rutted rearwards, rolling his pelvis around the intruding digits, loving the fullness and the faint accompanying burn.

“How’s about when I’m sittin’ on yours?” he asked. “Can I call ya idiot then?” He framed his own prick between blue hands, bunching the plates together towards the tip and letting them part behind the tight pass of his fist. Smeared saliva made the beats smooth and sweet. With Kraglin kissing his cockhead like that, working him open on his fingers behind, Yondu could almost forgive him for stopping the blowjob.

Especially given Kraglin’s explanation. Nope, Yondu most definitely did not want bites to this part of his anatomy. Perhaps in other places - shoulders, chest, neck... He could think up more; they had time. But not yet.

Kraglin seemed wary of biting him properly. Not as if he was concerned (Yondu’d punch him for daring to coddle him). But rather as if he were far, far too eager: wanting it, yearning for it, but afraid of what it might portend.

Now, Yondu didn’t know - or care - much about Hraxian mating rituals. But if it meant so much to Kraggles, he’d save that privileged bite for a special occasion.

For now, Yondu stroked Kraglin’s sweaty fringe from his eyes: the gentlest touch he’d bestowed on him since this session began. Had to congratulate him for not giving into instinct and nipping him somewhere nasty, didn’t he?

“Maybe. Depends.” Kraglin nuzzled at the hand, taking a few deep breaths. It wouldn’t calm his pounding heart or his quick breath any, not too much, and it wouldn’t let his teeth slide back to where they were supposed to be, but it was a nice gesture that made him feel better mentally. Everything with Yondu felt - intense, pushing further and further each time. He wasn’t complaining,
he wanted to see where it led, but apparently he needed to slow down and get better at accepting it all.

“Cmere,” he said, voice low and pleased, mouth open to let Yondu slide the head against the wetness of his tongue, licking slowly. “Cmon - Still want y’t’finish…”

“Oh…" Yondu tugged on Kraglin’s lip, squinting into the white-glinting darkness. “Yer still lookin’ mighty pointy, friend.” Not that he was scared or nothing.

“I don’t mean get in there.” Kraglin rolled his eyes a little but grinned, tongue darting to.tease the slits between Yondu’s cock-plates. “Y’got hands and can aim, I’m guessing.”

Aw heck. He sure could. Yondu made a noise in the back of his throat that was absolutely, positively not a whine. He angled so his cock slid wetly between both palms and bumped into Kraglin’s incisors on every thrust, stowed as they were behind the star man’s lips. Only question left was whether he wanted to give Kraglin a nice streak over his big, dumb (adorable) nose, or see how much of it he could squirt into his mouth.

“Ain’t gonna take long, at least,” he panted, grinning down at him. His voice was coming unsteady now; he spoke in dribs and drabs, interspersed by sharp inhales as he rolled himself through the vice of his hands to prong at Kraglin’s lips, again and again and again. “‘Specially not if…” He squeezed around Kraglin’s fingers, almost tight enough to pop a knuckle. “…Ya give me a bit more motivation.”

Kraglin could do that. He kept his mouth open, tongue lolling flat and wet and warm over his bottom lip to give Yondu something good to work himself against. It was a shame he had to support Yondu’s weight the way he was; it’d be nice to help him jerk. But he didn’t want to risk toppling him, so that would have to wait for another time.

Instead he wriggled his fingers inside him, kneading knuckles over inner walls. He worked on pushing and pulling, squeezing the digits together and drawing them out until he felt cool air against his cuticles, Yondu a sizzling pinch on the very tips of his fingers. Then he ground them back deep, flicking his tongue against the twitching blue cockhead in synchrony.

“Fuck fuck …” Did Kraglin really have only two fingers buried in him? It felt like he was twizzling a goddam javelin about in there. Yondu’s hole had become ridiculously oversensitized all of a sudden; it quivered around the intrusion, each deep stab reverberating through his entire body. The throb spread out from there, buried halfway between his ass and his cock. It grew in time with Yondu’s rising pulse, with the ache in his back, and with the frenzied jerks as Yondu thrust one last time, and burst against Kraglin’s wet, welcoming tongue.

Kraglin caught most of it - his head had been moving, so some smeared over the edge of his lips before he sealed his lips around the tip, suckling gently. He was careful not to take him in too far, not wanting to risk introducing sensitive skin to his teeth. Instead he lapped with his tongue in slow, broad strokes, throat working as he swallowed. His fingers came to rest just inside Yondu’s hole, spread wide, hooking him there for the time being.

Yondu made a whole lot of noises that he wouldn’t be too proud of in the morning. He bowed forwards as best as his back would allow him and cradled Kraglin’s skull, shaking with the effort it took not to pull him in closer and risk those serrated fangs scraping his cockhead.

Kraglin must be able to feel him pulsing. His heart rattled around his chest, valiantly struggling to divert bloodflow back to his brain. It didn’t manage. Lightheaded, Yondu felt himself go slack as if from a distance, watching tension spill from muscles he wasn’t one hundred percent convinced he
owned anymore.

Every damn part of him was attuned to Kraglin: made pliant and soft by his fingers and tongue. And, to make it worse, Yondu loved it.

“Yeah,” he breathed, eyes drifting shut. He sagged against Kraglin’s supporting arm, hole no longer pinching his digits, just sitting snugly around them. When his limp cock slid from Kraglin’s mouth, it pulled a string of sticky cum with it. Yondu mopped it up with his thumb. He raised it to his own lips to taste. Then, on a whim, scooted back far enough that he could kiss him.

What? An orgasm that good could mellow anyone, even someone with about as much romantic inclination as a yolopp.

Kraglin had just finished swallowing when Yondu kissed him, and he opened his mouth out of surprise more than want. But want soon won out.

He wished he had arms and hands free, to wrap one around Yondu’s shoulders and bring him in properly. Another time, maybe. For now he kissed him as best he could, hoping not to catch him on his teeth as he leaned up, straining his back so that Yondu didn’t have to stretch.

“Mmmn.” he agreed, when his shoulders and spine couldn’t handle any more and he had to flop back, breaking the kiss with a shiver. Kraglin’s eyes were hazed with pride and adoration, and he grinned his toothy grin without reserve. If there was anywhere he would ever rather be, he didn’t want to be told about it.

Yondu’s scooting had put him close enough to Kraglin’s crotch panel to taunt. That was fine. Kraglin was good at ignoring things in favour of attending to Yondu.

While Yondu wasn’t the most observant when it came to taking care of others’ needs, he did have a generous bone in his body. A small one, approximately the size of a metatarsal or an inner-ear stirrup. But it was there, regardless. And once the thum began to fade, allowing him to think of more than crushing his lips to Kraglin’s and running his tongue over jagged, bitter-flavored teeth while starlight shimmered behind his eyelids, Yondu realized that this whole scene had been more than a little one-sided.

Kraglin hadn’t complained. And he claimed he enjoyed servicing Yondu. Judging by the hardness Yondu felt when he shuffled rearwards, he wasn’t lying. He’d gotten something out of it. Just not.

Y’know. Release.

Yondu shouldn’t give a shit. He was the one whose fin had been hacked off, who’d lost family and home in one cruel swoop of a machete blade. He deserved pampering. And yet…

Yondu came to a decision. He dropped another kiss on Kraglin, fast but intense, lying near-flat so he blanketed his skinny body with his own. Then he pulled away. Struggling to hide the sharp inhales at his twanging back, he turned so he was facing Kraglin’s feet. The loincloth was getting too painful; the rope bit through the bandages wrapped around his lower back. Yondu removed it, scrunching it up and tossing it to one side. Then set to work on Kraglin’s fly, popping the button in a move as practiced as it had once been clumsy.

“What’re you—” Kraglin did his best not to hiss at the bumps around his crotch, almost sitting up to see what was going on. The raw line of Yondus spine was presented to him instead, and he gnawed his bottom lip worriedly.

Granted, there was a plush and temptingly loose ass there as well, and it was almost an obligation to
reach out and grope one cheek, thumb slipping against his hole teasingly. He groaned a little, hips pushing up to rub against Yondus hands.

“You don't gotta,” he said, though there was no real conviction in his protests, and he gave a hiss of pleasure and relief when the pressure finally eased. The coolness of the cave was a shock, but it wasn't enough to dull his want. With the restrictions gone he could feel his pulse in the thick, hard flesh, focused at the base.

At least this wouldn't be too difficult for Yondu.

“Mm-hm. But I wanna.” Yondu pushed up onto his knees, hole twitching at the graze of Kraglin’s nail. He wanted him in him. But right now, with the orgasm haze dissipating and his sore, open spine crawling back to the forefront of his consciousness, Yondu didn’t think he was up for the hard fuck his body craved. Anyway, if two digits could make him writhe, plucking and playing with his soft navy rim, actually sitting on Kraglin’s cock was liable to jolt Yondu into a second orgasm. Then he’d pass out and Kraglin’d have to lug him back to Naquia’s hut on his weedy lonesome. Not happening.

But Yondu could help himself to a handful of hot, scented Hraxian dick. He fished Kraglin free from the rumpled material, and set to tugging the top half.

Everything was sure sticky down here. He savoured a burst of pride - pride at his starman for not submitting to the need in his lower half, and pride in himself for causing such a reaction, without touching him once.

Only now, Yondu could touch to his heart’s content. He rubbed the skin back and forth, smearing translucent beads along its length, and enjoying the way Kraglin’s still-filling knot could be manipulated. It stretched as Yondu dragged his hand over the cock above it, bunching when his fist bumped the base.

“Y’know, say what they might about yer face, but there ain’t nobody who can deny you’ve got a pretty dick.”

“Fuck-” Eloquent to a fault, Kraglin squeezed his handful of ass with a deep, heartfelt groan. He let his thumb press in, kneading and pulling in time with Yondu’s tugs. He pushed into the cool grip, biting his lip to smother the shaky groan.

Part of it was habit, used to the need for silence in the old village. But he couldn't help the louder, more breatheless curse when Yondu touched his knot, jerking up hard. A thick bead of liquid dribbled down his shaft, slicking the way as his skin flushed, knot swelling harder.

Yondu ground the base of his fist on the top of Kraglin’s knot whenever he pumped, squeezing to mimic the tight pinch of his hole. He worked the precum into the skin, Kraglin’s prick becoming ever slipperier. The gentle pace set by Kraglin’s thumb, the pad stretching flexible muscles without venturing too far inside, was soon overtaken by Yondu’s rapid tugs.

He worked Kraglin hard, fast, a little rough but never not-tender. His spare hand splayed over a slim thigh, keeping him pinned. Kraglin’s pants were worn by now. They’d been patched and darned at the village, but Yondu’s people had never come across material like them, and their efforts had been inexpert at best. Now they felt like supple calfskin: thinned by constant use, transmitting his starman’s alien bodyheat.

Yondu let his pinky and ring fingers loosen, slipping them over Kraglin's knot in a constricting ring.
Kraglin's hiss was heartfelt. He pulsed, feeling himself bulge against the grip. He wanted to lean up, press his lips to his scar. Maybe when Yondu was healed, and the memory (and flesh) was less raw. It wasn't as if he had much strength or presence of mind left anyway. Flexing his hips to meet Yondu's squeezes, he grabbed his partner's blue hip, fingers twisting in his ass to keep him still.

His gasp was brief and wet as his knot forced past Yondu's fingers. Whatever sensory memory it triggered made him stay there, the tapering shaft of his cock twitching as he started to come, pumping thin drizzles of sticky fluid into the chilly sea air. He pulled weakly, rocking his hips against the grip as if teasing to pull out, unconsciously testing the lock he had on him.

And there he went. Yondu grinned, delighted at the geyser. He clutched Kraglin's knot, trapping the turgid, plum-purpled flesh, and let the cum pour over the back of his hands. It splashed the bandages that wrapped his belly. Kraglin's tugs and the additional lubrication made him slip free - but only by a centimeter. Yondu quickly rectified that.

He wrapped Kraglin's cockbase between both palms, massaging hard, rolling the balls of his thumbs around the blood-taut globes to milk out spurt after spurt.

"Fuck, fuck fuck-" Kraglin echoed Yondu's earlier mantra. He all but writhed, struggling not to buck his rider off. If there was one thing that part of his anatomy didn't need, it was encouragement. The squeezing mimicked the contractions of a cunt, making him feel impossibly thicker.

While logically he knew he was still growing, not quite at his final, adult size, he also knew it wouldn't happen instantaneously. That didn't mean it didn't feel like that was the case, as he spilled over and over with each juicing clench.

"Shit fuck stop I can't-" Kraglin was well aware that the tone of his voice didn't suggest he wanted Yondu to actually call things to a halt. But he felt strained, stretched beyond his limits, and he cried out raggedly with another hard upwards grind, as the ball of Yondu's thumbs dragged over his knot ridges.

Yondu dithered a moment, uncertain as to whether that meant stop as in 'stop', or stop as in 'woah but yes'. Erring on the side of caution, but not wanting to let go entirely, Yondu loosened his grip, transitioning to clutching Kraglin's knot with one hand while the other rubbed through the deluge still erupting - impossibly - from the tip of his cock.

Huh. Well, he didn't feel nearly so embarrassed about leaking last time he took it inside. Wowza.

Yondu looked over Kraglin's bony, trembling knees to the creeping waterline.

"Careful," he said, adding a teasing twist to his toying with his cockhead, hands dripping with seed. "Jizz anymore and you'll raise the level of the ocean."

Kraglin's wheeze of a laugh made him shiver. He dropped his head back against the cool pebbles. He felt hazy, his brain bobbing about somewhere by his dick, and he hummed a pleased, low tone as the flow began to ebb. Eventually it was nothing more than a soft pulsing that sent clear drops of fluid snaking down Yondu's wrist - then nothing.

"M'sure I could joke about salt content," he said. "But can't be asked. Mm. Y'ass looks nice like this. Feels nice too." He squeezed it again, enjoying the rub of tiny scales against his palms.

"Well, duh. My ass is always nice." The difference between their body temperature seemed ever-more noticeable, as the glazed orgasmic bliss wore off and the chill and damp set in. Yondu was ridiculously relaxed, despite the pain that dug its claws into his spine when he tried to arch, blue
If his ass looked nice, Kraglin’s cock looked mighty funny in comparison. The floppy shaft had deflated, and dangled over the knot like a snake basking on a boulder. He poked it, sniggering, then turned to hunt for something to wipe his hands on that was neither his loincloth nor Kraglin’s now-soaked pants.

He didn’t climb off him though. Not just yet. And he didn’t snap for him to cease that delectable contact: tugging at Yondu’s cheeks to make his hole twitch, opening easily after its vigorous fingering.

“Might wanna wash these before we head,” he said, plucking at Kraglin’s cum-saturated pant leg. Then grimaced at the water, behind whose rippling black surface lay the submerged entrance to their cave. ‘Luckily the sea’s come to us. Might be stuck here a lil while yet.’

“That’s fine. We'll tell em we went swimming.” Despite the fact that he was pretty sure neither of them could actually swim. As long as they weren’t called on to prove it, it should be fine. “Cmon. Hop off, lemme get em rinsed. Then ya can settle back down and I'll keep y’warm.” Because he had no illusions about his use as a heated blanket.

Yondu obeyed - although his hop was more a slouch, back stinging too much for sudden movements. He rolled off besides Kraglin, on his belly with feet kicking besides Kraglin’s head, rinsing his hands in the seawater. The coldness came as a shock, after Kraglin’s bodyheat. Yondu bore it only as long as it took to let the waves pat the cum from his fingers, then wrenched them out and wiped them on his bandages, shivering.

“Good plan,” he mumbled. Who knew how long it’d be before the water receded? While Yondu’s mind was raring to get out and explore this new world Kraglin’d brought him to, his body was grateful for the rest.

By Anthos though, if a brief and decidedly unbrisk walk, coupled with a bout of lazy beach-sex was enough to wear him out, Yondu was in worse condition than he’d thought.

Kraglin settled after rinsing out his trousers, blessedly nude and not concerned about it in the slightest. It meant he could spread his arms in welcome, happy to be the self-heating mattress.

“Y’know, when we get into space and you find out about thermo-blankets, ya ain’t gonna have no need for me.”

Yondu snorted.

“Do the thermo-blankets hug back?”

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The days passed rapidly - and Yondu’s strength grew with each. Their hosts, were happy to show Yondu and Kraglin around the village, and when they seemed to be happy enough to find things out on their own, they were left alone to do so. There didn’t seem to be anywhere they couldn’t go, as long as they stayed out of personal homes. One communal hut was of especial interest. Lerlia described it as a ‘historical home’, shoving Yondu and Kraglin pointedly inside.

Kraglin could see why. It was like a museum, a set of circular rooms laid out in a chain that mapped the history of their people, and their coastside town. From the time it was settled, their customs, their ideas, and how it all had grown. There were numerous artifacts, and Kraglin imagined the phantom nod of his Corps Officer, pleased with the rigorous archiving. The townspeople had been meticulous,
noting the use and method for most of the artefacts they’d dug from the mud. Weapons, ritualistic or otherwise; tools; toys; clothes. Each was presented above a plaque, which described in a text incompatible with Kraglin’s translator and illegible to Yondu’s eyes what they were and who had owned them.

“Hey.” Kraglin paused in front of a stand that propped a quiver. He blinked at the slim gold shafts, tilting his head. “Are those-?”

Yondu was there instantly, grabbing the nearest arrow from the display.

“Yaka!”

He heard someone shout behind him. But by then he was engrossed: turning the arrow over, trying to see if the hunter it belonged to had carved an identifying symbol, whistling to it in a low, crooning trill and smacking it off his palm in frustration when it didn’t respond.

Ahead of them, Lerlia realized his tour guide’s monologue was falling on ears that were not so much deaf as out-of-audial-range. He turned, parsing the small crowd of townspeople - few of whom, he suspected, were here to gawp at the objects on display. Fascination about Naquia’s new houseguests had only grown. While children recoiled and adults turned interesting shades of turquoise when they saw Kraglin’s abundant bodyhair and Yondu’s lacking fin, they kept coming back for more. They hadn’t quite progressed to the stage of whispering and pointing, but they were studying the exhibits with an intensity none but scholars would naturally boast. This house, dedicated to collecting and preserving the history of their forefathers, hadn’t seen so many visitors this decade.

“Yondu!” he squeaked, when he saw the crestless man turning an arrow over and over, grunting to himself and squinting at each end before pursing his lips to whistle. “You’re not supposed to touch those!”

“Uh,” Kraglin seemed to be thinking the same sort of thing as Lerlia, given that he laid a gentle hand on Yondu’s shoulder. “I don’t think those are for sharing, buddy.” Because ‘Buddy’ was the sort of affectionate nickname he could allow himself in public, where there were a lot of blue people milling around. Especially blue people who were staring at Yondu like he was some sort of uncultured savage, only good at yelling and throwing things at people.

Kraglin couldn’t exactly argue against that. But it didn’t mean Yondu had to make it obvious.

“They’re not...” Lerlia came over, making a grab for the arrow. “They’re for display, not for touching. We’re not supposed to touch any of it. And these are super old! What if they break?”

“Ain’t gonna snap it, don’tchu worry yer lil head.” Lerlia, in Yondu’s mind, was that special sort of annoying that bordered on adorable. While he found his boundless optimism infuriating, he did tend to be a little more lenient with him than his brother - who would have been punched for daring try to take what Yondu had decided was his. He waggled the arrow back and forth in front of his nose.

“Funny. Can’t get nothin’ outta it. No signal at all.” He knew why.

“Whistle, wouldya? I don’t think this’un’s bonded to any particular warrior, but I wanna see if it responds. I’d get him to do it...” A thumb jerked unerringly in Kraglin’s direction, although Yondu was facing the other way. “But he just blows raspberries. Anyway, don’t think his species is right. It’d be like getting a nash’ryk to squeal and expectin’ that to make yer arrows fly!”
“Don't poke me, I didn't do anything wrong.” Lerlia tried to step back to avoid being jabbed, doing his best not to pout. Kraglin hadn’t been concentrating, and now wasn’t sure why he was being gestured at - he folded his arms, in case Yondu was trying to threaten Lerlia and was reminding him that Kraglin was, as ever, only three steps away.

“Yeah,” he added, unhelpfully. “What he said.”

Lerlia took the arrow between two fingers. In honesty, he’d never thought about whistling for one of these things. Fish javelins he could handle; you aimed, you threw, they landed. But arrows guided by sound?

He made a testing peep, the sound unpractised but shrill and pure. He was unsurprised when the arrow lay as unresponsive as his spear. He shrugged, turning to replace it in the quiver.

“See? Doesn’t work.”

“Huh.” Yondu relieved him of it before he could slot it back into the display, shaking the arrow one last time in hope. Then sighed and tucked it through the waistband of his loincloth. He’d have another try later. “Maybe you ain’t got what it takes. I dunno. But I’ve seen enough of this place.”

He strode for the exit, gait only slightly cumbered by the persisting twinges from his spine. The arrow remained at his hip, fletching caught securely on the golden rope. “C’mon,” he said as he breezed for the door, expecting his entourage to fall in line. “I’mma go see those spinny things on the hill.”

Naquia had trundled in that direction in the morning, while Rashiki trudged for the catamarans lined along the shore and Lerlia clapped his hands and declared he, Kraglin and Yondu were going on a cultural adventure. Yondu had been fascinated instantly - they looked tiny from a distance, but he could tell from his hunter’s innate knowledge of perspective that they towered far above the crests of even the tallest Centaurians.

He was gonna climb one, he decided. And he was gonna drag Kraglin with him. The stars would look amazing from up there.

“No, no no,” Lerlia darted forward, blocking the exit with his hands up in a way that he prayed was beseeching rather than a threat. He smiled at Yondu, nodding towards the display case. “You need to put that back, my friend. It’s part of the collection and the scholars will rip my hide open and make it into fishnet if they find one missing.”

Or they’d be disappointed, certainly. While they had several artifacts from the Settlement Era, the salt in the air and the water meant that some were more delicate than others, and didn’t last too long. Things like ceremonial robes or animal-made clothing were kept in drawers, between woven rushes, to keep them safe. They were only taken out to be examined by students, under strict guidance. The arrow seemed sturdier, but Lerlia didn’t want to risk it.

Yondu frowned. He put one hand over the arrow protectively.

“Um, scuse me. This arrow don’t belong to no hunter. An’ that means it’s free for all.” How backwards were these people, if he had to explain basic laws like that to them? “So I’m takin’ it.” He drew himself up, encroaching into Lerlia’s personal space, dedicating every ounce of his body to looming. “You really wanna try and stop me?”

At the moment, although the pain in his spine was no longer crippling, it’d still give Lerlia an advantage. But Yondu postured like he’d been born to do it. He doubted the little twerp would call his bluff.
“But it’s ours…” While he didn’t try to menace back, Lerlia could rock a pretty impressive set of puppy-dog eyes. His crest wilted, partly out of nerves and partly because, given his apparent foe, using that to make himself look taller was only going to rub salt in the wound and ruin what was, in Lerlia’s mind, a burgeoning friendship. He didn’t want to do that, and he dithered, clearly torn between responsibilities and goodwill.

“Yondu,” Kraglin kept his tone easy, light, as casual as can be in Xandarian. “Put it down, yeah? We’ll come back later.”

Yondu glowered at Lerlia, fighting to pretend he wasn’t being swayed. Stupid big shiny eyes. Lerlia wasn’t that young, but something about him still registered as childish, and while Yondu was more than capable of being stubborn and throwing tantrums, cute things were a weakness.

But… wait. Had Kraglin said ‘we’ll come back later’?

Yondu’s scowl transitioned seamlessly into a grin. He presented Lerlia with the arrow, bowing mockingly with far too much flourish.

“Go on then, kiddo. Don’t eat it all at once.”

Lerlia took the arrow with a certain degree of caution - he wasn’t sure if Yondu was about to flick it around and stab it through his palm and then run off, hooting, into the sunset. When that didn’t occur, he gave a sigh of relief and stepped around him. Kraglin smiled congenially and moved aside, shifting to stand by Yondu, hands clasped behind his back.

“Now!” Lerlia declared, once the arrow had been returned in its rightful place besides its brothers and sisters. “You wanted to go see Naquia and her work?”

Plastering on his smarmiest grin, Yondu draped an arm around Lerlia’s shoulder, sneaking a wink at Kraglin as he steered him towards the exit. “Sure thing. Lead the way.”
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Woops, this took a bit. Enjoy!

The turbines span like the wheels on the stinking, crate-stacked carts the fishermen pulled in from the beach. Yondu, who had seen neither wheels nor windmills before, found that he’d been staring slack-jawed at the spinning blades for a good minute only when Lerlia elbowed him with a grin.

“Awesome, aren’t they?”

Yondu couldn’t think of any other word to describe them. Each blade was as long as his body was tall (possibly a bit larger; he was still adjusting to not have to duck when he walked through doorways, so his estimate might be off). They were made of sculpted metal. The concept wasn’t entirely unfamiliar. However, whereas Yondu’s village could just about hammer a yaka-arrow straight, Lerlia’s people were able to construct pillars as tall as tree trunks, to which the blades were attached around a free-moving pivot so that they might be turned by the wind.

Try as he might, he couldn’t cajole his expression into looking unimpressed. From a small servicing platform halfway up the nearest windmill, he saw a blue face and a waving arm. Naquia.

“What are they for?” he asked.

“Well, now I’m not entirely sure...”

Leaving Lerlia to fumble through an explanation, Kraglin stared up at the windmills with a degree of understanding. He examined the huts at their base, trying to gain an insight as to their use. He hadn’t seen any proper electrical equipment, although the sea-Centaurians were clearly well on their way to mastering that important milestone. So that made this... an experiment, of sorts?

Naquia covered her eyes from the sun, as if she needed the confirmation it was them. As if Lerlia would be accompanied by any other crestless man and his pet albino stick-insect. She grinned, latching her belt onto her climbing rope before she jumped.

Thank goodness Rashiki was out working. He hated her going into free fall. She caught herself with a clip at the end, swinging onto her feet with a bright grin and a laugh. Unfastening the buckle, she hopped off the roof of the grinding house and sauntered to their little group.

“They're really something, aren't they?” She propped a hand on each hip, nodding up at her babies, still a touch breathless. “These are just the local ones. We have a few other sites in mind, but we want to perfect it all first.”

Yondu whistled through his teeth, sidestepping so he was out of the nearest turbine’s shadow.

“They’re mighty big. Ain’t gonna fall over if the wind blows too strong, are they? Cause I don’t reckon I’d look nearly so pretty as a pancake.”

Naquia, being the most academically minded of the trio, had dutifully been attending her lessons with the scholars. By now, she was competent enough in Zatoan to reply:
“Course not. They’re uh… I don’t know the word for ‘cemented’. Buried? They go right down into ground.” Naquia waved up at them with the pride of a child who had climbed its first tree. “They’ve got a few machines down in the grinding huts too-”

“Grinding?” Kraglin repeated. His accent was apparently never going to match that of a native; he sighed when Naquia shot him an uncomprehending look. “Like - corn, or flour. Whatever it is you guys made bread from.”

Naquia turned to Yondu.

“Why is he talking about bread? Is he hungry?”

“I’m not hungry!”

“He’s totally hungry,” lied Yondu, hauling Kraglin against his side. “We both are, actually. What with me still recoverin’ from my, uh, grievous wound an’ all. How’s about you fetch us some grub, honey?”

Naquia was a village-sitter after all, albeit one who sat in a tower doing who-knew what to monstrous machines, rather than crouching over a loom or a nurturing peapods in a garden. Plus, ordering other people about was second nature to Yondu. He blinked when, rather than scrambling to obey his command, Naquia pointed to the hut that had been constructed around the nearest turbine, a round base on the shaft that made Yondu waggle his eyebrows at Kraglin and snigger.

“You want it? Go get it.”

The hut’s interior was clouded with smoke. It took Yondu several moments to realize it was flour dust. So much of it, more than he’d ever seen before.

It hung in the air like ash after an eruption, thick and white, coating the lungs. Yondu’s people made flatbreads by crushing corn with pestle and mortar, mixing it with river water and milk to make a rudimentary dough, then wrapping the little pats in damp leaves so it would bake by the fireside without turning to toast. But that was a dull process, one Yondu’d never had time nor patience for. Why waste half a day baking bread that’d vanish within five seconds of coming into contact with a hungry Hunter? Better stalk large prey and take it down yourself. Sure, Yondu could happily spend a week or more tracking animals through the jungle and the swamp, but killing them with a whistle was so much more satisfying than slaving over the corn-crushing slabs.

This though, was something else entirely. The system had been mechanized - or at least, made feasible on an industrial scale. Rather than a production line of village-sitters pounding wheat to flour, there was a single millstone, broad and flat, grinding around and around its axis while flour shivered out of the grooves, collecting in fluffy white piles in the grain bags below. Their mouths were clipped open to ensure as much of the dust was caught as possible.

Yondu boggled at the sheer quantity. There were bags piled in the corners of the room, one man with bulging biceps and a wheelbarrow tasked with lugging them out at regular intervals so the hut didn’t overflow. By Anthos. If his people had access to technology like this, they’d never go hungry again!

...Which begged the question of why the village he’d left was so backwards. But while he’d cut his ties to the settlement halfway up Anthos’ face, Yondu still originated from them, and acknowledging their shortcomings meant acknowledging his own. In other words - like hell was he gonna.

“I don’t see no food!” he yelled over his shoulder to Naquia, who was nursing a private smile at the difficulty Yondu was having, trying to convince himself that poking the millwheel while it was
revolving had the potential to be a Very Bad Idea. “You lying to me, missy?”

“I would never! But we can’t have ovens in with the flour dust. It’s flammable, you know.”

Yondu didn’t. But that wouldn’t stop him pretending.

“Course I did, woman! I ain’t stupid! C’mon Kraglin. Les’ get out of here and fetch us some proper grub.”

“But I’m not hungry! Look,” Kraglin stepped further into the hut peering at the mechanism. This was good - this was a promising start. But if this was all they were using these things for, then it was a damned shame. He turned to Naquia, speaking rapidly - then sighed when her expression became humoring, as if she could understand his babble.

“He’s very sweet,” Naquia offered to Yondu in what she hoped was a consolatory tone. “I really wish we could understand each other. He’s clearly very passionate about flour.”

“You just need some magnets!” Kraglin said, waving his arms to try and get her attention back. “Do you people have magnets? Yondu? Anything? Am I pissin’ into the wind here, cmon, someone, if you’ve got magnets- Fine. Take me to a cave.” He folded his arms, scowling.

Time to exercise his own birthright, apparently.

“Fuckin- Cave. An inland one, not the sea. Can’t send fuckin tree-people to do a rock person’s job, I guess.”

“Mag-net?” Yondu tried to imitate, but choked on the new Xandarian phrase. He, as was by now a relatively common occurrence, had no idea what Kraglin was on about. He grinned at Naquia instead. “Yeah, leave him alone with a barrel of this stuff an’ he’d probably snort it. S’why his nose is so large.”

But Kraglin had demanded a cave, and his wish was Yondu’s command - when Yondu was in a mood to play along, rather than denying him for the fun of it.

“Hey Naq,” he said. The woman made an understanding noise, tipping her head on one side to squint at Kraglin’s beaky face from a new angle. At Yondu’s address she snapped upright once more, trying to pretend that she hadn’t been caught staring. Yondu didn’t know how much of his speech she understood - probably the occasional word. But it must be enough for her to get the gist. He mimed along anyway, helping consolidate the concepts as he spoke.

“Do you...” He pointed to her. “Know of any...” A finger circling besides his ear, simulating the churn of thought. “Underground places? Caves? Like by the shore?” He stomped the flour-dusted dirt to demonstrate. Then, when that met with little success, drew a circle in the air and mimed walking into it. Then gave in and pointed adamantly at the beach, to where the heightening tides would hopefully have rinsed away the evidence from his and Kraglin’s excursion the week before.

“Magnet. Like, rocks what stick together.” Kraglin grumbled a little, watching Naquia’s confused expression fluctuate through Youndu’s little performance. She rubbed her chin thoughtfully, trying to understand. The shore was more Rashiki’s section of knowledge not hers, though she was sure she could talk Lerlia into giving them a tour of that area if they so wanted one. Anyway, it wasn’t as if she’d never seen them scurrying in that direction alone.

She could guess what for. Bed draperies did not sufficient noise blockers make. This was to Rashiki’s well-hidden (or so he thought) delight, that she couldn’t keep herself quiet while he was inside her, but Naquia couldn’t blame her guests for wanting privacy.
“A -- mine?” she guessed, tapping the rotating core of the tower with the sort of ease that suggested she was used to the grind and scrape of the metal against her fingers. “Where we get this? Does he want to know where we get it?”

Close enough. Yondu resisted the urge to clap his hands.

“Sure!” Why Kraglin wanted caves, he didn’t bother to ask. It was probably some weird Hraxlian thing. Maybe he felt the urge to be underground, like Yondu missed the leaves and the trees of the forest. “Uh. Can we grab some bread to go though?”

He was a growing boy. And kvetch while he might about being forcefed, Kraglin was still far too skinny.

“Sure.” Naquia motioned for them to follow. Kraglin stuck his hands in his pants pockets, remembering that they were worn through when he palmed his hairy thighs.

They really were going to have to set off for space soon. No way would he be caught dead in a loincloth.

At a loss for what to do if he couldn’t hide his hands and slouch along, he kept his head down and did his best not to mutter too much. Naquia took them to one of the side huts, opening the door to the rich smell of freshly baked bread and the tartness of fruit jam. There were a few people in there working away, but it was at a sedate pace; with no urgency and no pressing hunger in the village, there were supplies enough to spare for experimentation, trialling of recipes and new inventions. It only took a few short phrases from Naquia before they were presented with a cloth bundle - warm, crusty rolls, a jar of pickle, a couple of blocks of the strange, sharp crumbling cheese that was often sliced and eaten with fruit. Naquia plucked up two water skins from the stone box, slipping it into the bundle with what she hoped was an understanding smile.

Honestly, this was all fine practise for having children.

“I’ll take you to the mine paths. You can’t get lost, just follow them right along.”

Yondu nodded, chirpier than ever now food was in sniffing-distance.

“Sure thing, hon! Want me to carry them?” His back still smarted like Anthos himself was jabbing it with fiery pokers, but like hell would he let a village sitter haul weight when he, a big strong hunter, was nearby.

Naquia, dubiously assessing the wound, which had finally been freed from its bandages and was airing in all its ragged-edged, granulated glory, pushed it at Kraglin instead. Yondu considered arguing. But one look at Kraglin - every tatty, scarecrow-like inch of him - resolved him to let this one go. A trip to the caves might be good for his star-man. And if Naquia planned on letting them trot off unsupervised… Well, Yondu wasn’t going to delay their trip any longer by kicking up a fuss over who carried what.

“Alright,” he snapped, ripping a crust from inside the picnic bag to munch as they walked. “Let’s get going!”

It took him a good twenty paces to realize he had no idea what direction they were supposed to be headed in. But by then Yondu had firmly established his lead - forfeiting it was unthinkable. He watched their shadows instead, cast long and low by the dipping sun, and when Naquia veered left he hastened to make it look as if he’d meant to go that way all along.

Kraglin perked up a little bit when it looked like the ground was getting rockier - seems like his
request had been understood after all. He quickened his step a little, looking around as if hoping he might memorise the route. Unlikely, but he could give it a fairly good effort, maybe. Naquia chattered a little bit as they went, little pieces of information about certain plants or trees, or once, a glimmering brown snake that whipped itself under a rock as soon as they were close enough. Not deadly, barely painful, but they were often used to keep children away from the mines.

As they crested the hill, for the first since landing on this star-forsaken mudball, Kraglin felt a little more at home. It was, his mind supplied, something more akin to a quarry than a system of tunnels, but peering closer at the sheerness of the rock walls revealed caves and holes cut in. This was more something he could work with, and he rubbed his palms together as Naquia pointed out a path down to the main area. A few blue people were milling around down there, carving and shaping rocs that had been brought up.

Granted, every planet was different. Kraglin reminded himself that they might not even have the sort of materials here that he needed, or that this location might not. But he was a Miner, if anyone could find it, he was sure it was going to be him. Fuck the Nova Corps regulations; if he wanted to teach these blue, mostly-naked people how to make electricity and teach the basics of steam-powered travel, then he would do, and nothing could stop him.

“Come on.” He snagged Yondus elbow, impatiently holding his hand out for the bag, eyes never leaving the area below them. “I’m gonna blow your lil blue minds wide open, with any luck.”

“Baby, you can blow me wide open any day.” Shoving the bag at Kraglin, Yondu made his way down the incline, skidding and sliding in the scree. Eventually he submitted to gravity and sat, letting the dune-like spill of fine grains carry him to the bottom. There were paths hewn into the craggy rocks opposite; escaping the quarry wouldn’t be a problem. But that was the last thing on his mind. The Zatoan dug yaka from the lava beds, but they rarely had to tunnel for it. An organized boring operation of this scale was one exciting new thing atop the host of exciting new things that’d been assailing Yondu since he first opened his eyes in Naquia’s hut.

“Yeah, yeah.” Kraglin grumbled fondly, hefting the bag easily with one hand. He gave half a wave to Naquia, who had watched Yondu’s descent with something between concern and amusement. “Yeah, you and me both, Lady.”

Getting down was no issue for him, even if he elected to stay standing instead of sliding on his ass. He hopped the last few steps, looking round critically. It didn't look too bad here, he reasoned to himself, stooping to pick up one of the pickaxes as they passed a pile of them, feeling the weight of it in his hand.

Even light-years away, picks still felt like a pick. He rested it on his shoulder with a casual familiarity, letting it dig into a groove in the bone with something close to fondness. Kraglin pointed at one of the tunnel mouths, nodding to it.

“Lets take that one.” He said cheerfully, starting to head that way. “If you're lucky we'll find you a shiny too!”

Picking himself up with barely a wince - damn back - Yondu trotted to walk besides Kraglin, brushing dust from his loincloth. He flicked the head of the pick with his nail, the noise resounding tinnily before it was drowned by the echo of miners’ voices and the clash of metal on rock, which rebounded around and around the bowl-shaped quarry pit. Ahead of them, a hollow had been dug beneath an obelisk-like outcrop, a dark funnel whose mouth seemed to suck them in. No way was Yondu gonna wuss out though. Not when Kraglin was marching determinedly towards it.

He kept pace, eyes eating the strange surrounds: the extractors chipping metal ores from the stone,
their faces weathered and scar-flecked from flying chips; the linear strata that striped the cavern’s ceiling; the fluttering amber light from the wall-mounted candles that lit the hole ahead.

“Damn right you’re findin’ me somethin’ shiny. I ain’t walkin’ all this way for no reward. And unless ya fancy screwing me in front of an audience, shiny things’re yer only option.”

Naquia had no qualms about enticing Rashiki to her nest when Kraglin and Yondu were napping not five feet away, but Yondu had been raised properly. Not to mention that he held a little residual fear about showing affection in public, as if every display of acceptance Rashiki, Lerlia and Naquia had made might be retracted the next time he and Kraglin held hands.

“You didn't have to come if you didn't want to. You coulda gone to take a nap or something if you were feeling old and tired.” Kraglin suggested, a sort of absent innocence in his voice that implied he was probably mostly joking. He grinned down at him though, nudging him affectionately in his side. “No sex in the tunnels though. Trust me on this, I heard horror stories.”

There were some places rock chips weren't meant to go.

The darkness of the tunnel was inviting and safe, a welcome respite from the glare of the suns. It was strange; he'd spent so long above ground that the headache from the light and constant frowning at the glare seemed almost normal now. He sighed in relief, one hand trailing along the rock walls as he followed the path down.

Kraglin trusted Yondu to follow, figuring if nothing else his curiosity would drive him on. There were dim candlelit dips in the wall for those who couldn't adapt their eyes to the pitch - or, he assumed, for when these people didn't want to make their crests glow to see. He took the paths that led deeper and deeper down, sound gradually fading behind rock walls and ceilings.

Old and tired? He’d show him old and tired. Huffing, Yondu strode after Kraglin, sparing a moment to wave at Naquia, who had remained at the summit of the slope, and now turned to make her way back to her precious wind farm. It wasn’t a far walk from the quarry to the turbines; they couldn’t get lost. And even if they did… While there had been stares a-plenty from the miners, at his crestless state and Kraglin’s… Well, Kraglin’s everything, none had been hostile. They’d give them directions, at least.

He trundled after him, noting the gradient of their path and how Kraglin always chose the steeper of the forks.

“Hey buddy. I sure hope you’re remembering which way we came.”

“I won't get lost.” Kraglin replied. Which didn't really answer the question, but didn't not answer it either. He had a hand trailing the rock walls as he went, the pick bouncing very slightly on his sharp shoulder as he went. From the looks of things, they had been exploring this far down and taking samples - he could see holes and chunks bored into the rock.

Alone, he might have hopped down the sharper drops to places unknown. With Yondu, he stuck to places that could be reached by walking. It was dimmer down here, not as many candles attended to or relit once they guttered out. Occasionally he lifted his hand to feel the dust between his fingertips before he replaced his palm, sweeping it along the curves.

It was almost twenty minutes before he veered, following the feel of something sharper poking from the rock; his pace slowed and he followed the curve round, fingers probing the seam with a soft, curious hum.
“Might have something here.”

Yondu poked the wall. Scowled. Squinted too. The backlight from the nearest candle, whose wick curled low to the waxy pool, didn’t generate a bright enough shine for him to make out more than the oily veneer of the rockface.

“What? Like more rock? S’all we’ve seen for hours, Krags.”

They may have barely been down here for half, but Yondu wasn’t going to let that get in the way of his whinging.

“What are we even lookin’ for?” He’d figured Kraglin wanted to come here and meditate or some shit. Communicate with his bloodfire, or whatever the Hraxians called their Anthos. He hadn’t factored in there being quite so much walking. Not that Yondu would usually complain about that - he may have been laid out infirm for a day or eight, but hey, he was a hunter. He could trek through the swamp for days on end without feeling fatigue. But at least in the swamp, there was some variation in the scenery. This - cavern after cavern of knobbly geological formations - was soporific in comparison.

And, thought Yondu, wincing as he rubbed the sole of one bare foot on his opposite calf, the swamp didn’t have nearly so many stones to stub your toes on.

“Magnets. They’re somethin’ special,” Kraglin explained, leaning the pick against the wall as he talked. Talked and stripped, no less, pulling his shirt off over his head and tossing it into a crumpled pile on top of a pile of rocks. He spat on his hands before he picked the tool up again, hefting it in his hand with an ease of familiarity. “If I show that Naquia woman how to use them with her windmills, they’ll really kickstart your planet. Stand back,” He advised, as a final comment, before swinging the pick at the rock.

It took a few slams before he got back into the rhythm of it. Some things the body just didn’t forget: the burn and ache in his shoulders, the wrench of his wrists and elbows absorbing the impact. It was a bitter reminder, something his memory welcomed too easily for his taste, and he squinted a bit to get a better read on things. It seemed like he had been right, though he’d had to show them how to smelt the material down to strengthen it. At least they already knew how to work metal, it was just combining it…

“Here,” He said finally, after half an hour of heaving away. He wiped his face with his shirt before picking up two choice chunks of - whatever this was. He demonstrated to Yondu how they were two separate pieces, utterly apart from each other.

Then put them a little way apart from each other on his palm, and watched them click together, drawn by invisible threads.

Yondu had been admiring the view from the moment Kraglin’s shirt fluttered to the ground (what was left of it, after half a year of being dragged across jungles, swamps, and windy beaches). Admiring as best he could, with the stupid dusky ambience they had going on.

He missed his crest. He’d thought it a thousand times already, but he was thinking it again. Without its glow, he could only just make out the stretch of wiry muscle under Kraglin’s skin - not that most Centaurians would think that a travesty, as that skin was pallid as a groundworm’s, and about as hairy to boot. But Yondu had never had the most conventional taste. He wanted to tell Kraglin so, if only because the idiot always made the best aggravated faces when he was complimented. But when Kraglin found his rhythm, pick swinging in an arc with the blade reflecting the candle’s feeble light, it seemed like it’d be rude to interrupt. Like he was communing with something deep, something
inside himself, something Yondu couldn’t have sensed or accessed even if he were whole.

Normally, Yondu wouldn’t let that stop him from running his mouth. But right now, he wasn’t sure Kraglin would hear him.

The noise thrummed through the tunnels. Kraglin’s swung smooth, bringing the pick down to clash on the wall and absorbing the impact with every limb juddering, before letting it drop and shucking it back into the air on its own momentum. By the time he’d finished sweat glistened over his shoulders, salt matted into the bristles on his back. Yondu’d been too engrossed watching Kraglin to notice the time pass, but the candleflame was wobbling dangerously low, on the cusp of drowning in its own molten wax. When Kraglin mopped off and stalked over, his pale chest was all that was visible: it hung suspended in the shadows, his spindly legs melding to black.

Yondu pushed off the far wall. The tunnel wasn’t wide: three paces and the two of them were nose to nose. But for once, it wasn’t Kraglin’s nose that drew Yondu’s attention.

He sneered at the two pebbles Kraglin presented him with. He thought these were adequate gifts, to make up for dragging him so far from civilization? They were barely even shiny.

Then they jumped together. And while visibility wasn’t the greatest, Yondu could’ve sworn that Kraglin hadn’t touched them.

“The fuck?”

“This?” Kraglin pulled them apart, showing him again - he had a smile on his face, his free hand clasp Yondu’s shoulder. The pebbles clicked together again, and he couldn’t help the rueful sigh. “This right here, is the start of the secret of how my ship flies. Everything builds offa this. We give these to the village…”

He glanced up the tunnel. There was no one there, and even if his voice carried well enough, there was no one else on this planet besides Naq and the scholars who understood their patois. They were safe.

“We give them this. I’ll teach them how to get it all started,” he murmured. “That will keep them busy for a while. Once the heat’s died down and they’re all over this, and you’re healed enough? We go to that museum, at night. Take one arrow - there’s plenty in there, they won’t miss it. Then I’ll go to the ship, hide the arrow there, and we leave the next day.”

“Thas the sexiest damn thing anyone’s ever said to me.” Yondu grinned, eyes still fixed on those marvellous, magical rock chips. He had questions… So many questions. Would these rocks fly if you gathered enough of them? Could they be used like a boomerang? What would happen, hypothetically, if you put someone’s head between two? But there wasn’t time to ask them all, snatch the rocks for himself, and kiss Kraglin simultaneously. He could only manage two of the three.

Kraglin couldn’t help the little, breathless laugh that eked out of him when Yondu kissed him, and he caught one arm around the blue waist to help keep them both steady. He was tired from all that, and knew they had a little more ahead of them to get enough together to show the others at the village. But that could wait in favour of licking Yondus lips open in a quick sweep, tasting him happily before he drew back.

“You play with those.” He said, giving an apologetic grin. “If we want this plan to work, I gotta get some more together, to show em it all. So I gotta get back to it. Then, I saw a shiny or three on the way down. I’ll get em for you.”
Sit around and play with fun new toys while watching a free show? That sounded right up Yondu’s creek. But he couldn’t help but glance dubiously at Kraglin’s biceps. Boy was mighty twiggy, to be lugging that pick about.

“You sure ya don’t want me to take a turn?” It was very, very rare to extend an offer like that - especially when he had the opportunity to laze about and watch, and even moreso when his back still jabbered with needle-sharp pain if he stood up too fast. Yondu didn’t plan on making it twice.

“Its fine.” Kraglin couldn’t help but be pleased to reassure him, and he chanced a kiss on the other mans cheek to cement the deal. “Been doin’ this since I could walk. S’fine for me. Wont take me long at all.” While he appreciated the offer - and he truly did, for the thought of it and for what it meant from Yondu - the quicker they could get done, the better. And that involved being able to strike out the best pieces, with as few other fragments as possible. In this lighting, he knew asking Yondu to get to work was probably a bad idea.

So if it meant another almost-hour of toil, that was fine. He sat back down when he was done, catching his breath and reaching up his hand to knead his swinging shoulder, groaning low and enthusiastic about the ache. It was something strange, biology; even though all that he, Kraglin, resolved to be rebelled against the satisfaction of such work he couldn’t help feeling the pleased twinges up and down his back, his reward center firing off happily. This was what he was built for, and no amount of dislike for the role could erase that.

“That should be enough.” He said, nodding at the pile of rough-hewn chunks. The vein was richer deeper inside, and it glistened a little in the fading golden light. Kraglin noticed the dimness with a start, having been unthinking on it, and he felt a stab of guilt. Poor Yondu must have been bored stiff. “We can head on up now. Just lemme pack the rocks.” He said, reaching for his shirt. Not to put it on, and Anthos have mercy on that village. He tied it into something he could carry them with, loading the chunks into the center.

Yondu’s natural body clock, having taken note of the darkness as the candle wobbled, guttered, and snuffed, had decided it must be nighttime. He was staving off yawns by the time Kraglin finished. Watching wasn’t nearly so fun when he couldn’t see shit - but at least he knew from the repetitive crash of the pick that Kraglin hadn’t wandered off and left him here to rot.

Not that he would. Yondu didn’t think. Not unless he really pissed him off.

The breathy little moan Kraglin made when he stepped back from his self-made alcove was more than worth the wait though. Grinning, Yondu pressed chilly fingers to the other’s sweating, heaving back. The heat of Kraglin’s skin was always a shock, but right now he was a furnace, warming Yondu as if he had his palms outstretched inches from a fire.

“If I knew it took a bit of diggin’ to get ya to make noises like that, I’d have had ya tunnelling under the damn village.”

Kraglin didn’t yelp at the freezing touch, but he did jerk back to them with another hungry noise. The chill was perfect, shocking back through his spine pleasantly with a tingle. He had to tilt his head to grin at Yondu, the expression slow and lazy and punctuated with a sigh.

“Don’t be jealous of the rock,” He teased gently, turning around to curl an arm around Yondu’s shoulder, pulling him in for more roasting. “You get me t’make all sorts of noises, and it’s way more fun too.” Granted, they were more grunting than moaning, but Yondu was very welcome to try and get him to make these ones too.

He may or may not have been biting his tongue to stop himself from encouraging Yondu to think
about how hot - temperature wise - his cock would be to take right now. Because he was a mature ex-Nova Corpsman.

“Ugh.” Yondu swatted at him. He wasn’t trying to push him off - more like he felt that he had to express displeasure at the sheer amount of sweat now drenching him. Couldn’t have Kraglin knowing that being sandwiched to his side, inhaling the smell of hard labor and splintered rock, wasn’t nearly as unpleasant as it ought to have been. He might try hugging him more often - or worse: in public. “Sheesh. Yer like a one-man sauna.”

Despite his complaints, he slipped his arm around the other’s slim waist, relishing the feel of hot muscle under the skin. Exertion made Kraglin’s body thrum like a tapped tuning fork; Yondu nuzzled his ribs, satisfied that the darkness hid his navy face. Just heat. Totally just the heat. With Kraglin’s bicep looped over his back, careful so as not to rest on the scabbing wound, Yondu felt like he was buried beneath several thick eiderdowns on a muggy summer’s day. But he didn’t mind. What was a little slow-roasting, between friends?

“Mhm.” Kraglin grinned, nuzzling at Yondu’s temple, kissing it with a satisfied noise. Waiting here to cool off and let his muscles relax sounded fine to him, and if he got to keep Yondu pressed up against him while he did, it was even better. He tilted his head, catching Yondu’s ear gently between his teeth for just a second, tugging on it playfully before he released it.

“Probably gonna be busy tonight.” He said, nuzzling his way down his jaw. “What with teaching these lot how to do stuff. So don’t worry if you doze off before I get back, alright?”

“You are… Dammit, you are not allowed to say that shit while yer suckin’ on my damn ear.” Weary he might be, but sleep was impossible when you had sharp teeth tugging on your earrings, stretching the lobe just enough to sting before shifting to brush your chin. Yondu tossed his head to one side, opening his neck up for more. “I’d come watch, but I wouldn’t have the first clue what y’all were talkin’ about.”

It wasn’t often that he admitted any weaknesses - least of all ignorance. But it was only him and Kraglin in this cave, and Kraglin couldn’t very well look down at him for not knowing something his species had yet to develop as a whole. Yondu peered at him a moment, just in case. But even the faint bioluminescence of his eyes didn’t show more of Kraglin’s face than a silhouette in profile: all beaky nose and tapering jawbones as he ducked to breathe across the tendon in Yondu’s throat. The shirt-fashioned bag of magnets bumped Yondu’s pouch. He stuck his hand inside it, feeling out the surprisingly smooth shapes as he returned the two he’d stolen to clatter against their brethren.

“Ain’t they all gonna be stuck together when ya get them out?”

“I’ll pull em apart. Wont be too hard.” Kraglin grinned and pressed another kiss to Yondu’s skin before he straightened up, reasserting his grip on the bag. He’d promised Yondu a shiny, he remembered, and he stepped back to give them both a little bit of breathing room. That involved getting to drag his hand over the flat of Yondu’s shoulders, and he unconsciously rubbed his fingertips against his palm afterwards, savouring the lingering chill.

“Cmon.” he said, clearing his throat. “Let’s get you a pretty shiny thing, then put this plan into action. Sooner we get them distracted and busy, the sooner we can get up there.” Now that there was a plan for it beyond ‘wait for Yondu not to die’ he couldn’t wait, thinking about zipping from place to place. Nothing but them and the stars and freedom, navigating their way from station to station, getting work.

And they would get work, he resolved. There was no way he was going to take Yondu to space, just to let them starve. No, crashing here had been a chance to reset things, to try again. Maybe this time,
he wouldn’t end up in the gutter.

Yondu bounced on his toes, rejuvenated by the promise of shinies.

“Smartest thing I’ve heard from ya, Kraggles!”

He would’ve been willing to let the promised present slide, if Kraglin was too worn out to retrieve it (albeit with a lot of grumbling). But if Kraglin was up for more digging? Yondu didn’t have the heart to keep him from doing what he loved.

“Uh. I’mma just go steal a candle from the next lil’ alcove-thing though. So you. Have light to see with. Yup.” Not for his own benefit at all. It was merely that Yondu didn’t want Kraglin to go swinging his pick around in the darkness and gouging himself an extra windhole. Not because he wanted to watch him work; nosiree.

“It’s further back along. We’ll pick one up on the way.” Kraglin agreed, hefting the bag over his shoulder, the pick held by his side. He moved along, sure that Yondu was following, eyes tracing the lines of rock and glints from before. It wasn’t that he had the route memorised - it was that he just had other ways of determining where they were. The light levels, the staleness of the air, the muted sounds from far, far above; they all painted a picture for him, however rough around the edges it might be. He let his elbow bump against the wall now and then, out of habit more than anything else. On Hrax, the echoes would let him know what part of the tunnels edged onto other ones, would give older miners a spook. Half the fun of it was hearing them muttering about the Knockers at the next meal time, after all.

Kraglin hummed when he reached an intersection, turning down one fork. It was a lesser-trodden path, but he didn’t have any real concerns about what they were doing. If the stones turned out to be some sort of sacred thing, he could claim fair ignorance and make it up to Yondu some other way. If not, well - he had a nose for this sort of thing.

And given the size of that nose, Yondu was in for a treat.

Kraglin knocked a few rocks and melted down candles from one of the alcoves, motioning a place for Yondu to put his newly gathered ones. The walls in this section glittered in the wavering golden light, like so many shards of glass caught in the mud. Some vague part of him that still held pride in his planet puffed up, sure that there were no jewels comparable to what could be found on Hrax - something he’d had confirmed to him over and over as he travelled the galaxy. But there would be something fitting here, something to soothe the irritated, bitey part of his soul.

If he could get that part of himself to shut up for a while, that would be grand.

“How seems good. You comfy?”

“Hell yeah.” Yondu was no princess. He strove to remind Kraglin of this, plonking his ass down on the rock without complaint. However, despite his best efforts it only took him five minutes to start shuffling from cheek to cheek. Those were some serious pins and needles. Why couldn’t underground be comfy, like the trees were? Why did it have to have gnarly bits and knobbly rocks and protrusions that jabbed into Yondu like they were trying to pop his kidneys? Was the universe trying to imply that he and Kraglin were incompatible? If it was, Yondu took great pleasure in ignoring it. Eventually he stood again, slouching grumpily against the wall and hoping Kraglin hadn’t noticed.

There was a fair chance of that. Kraglin seemed engrossed in his task. The light shone liquid gold, glossing the irregularities on Kraglin’s back - the hairs and the moles and the shadowed cavities
between his ribs. He looked like seamless marble. Living marble. His skin throbbed under the wavering gleam of the candleflames, as Kraglin hammered his pick into the wall. Yondu couldn’t look away. He tucked up one knee, sole of his foot resting on the solid rock wall. If he shut his eyes and concentrated, he’d probably be able to feel the shudders reverberate through the sloped tunnel roof and down the other side, whenever Kraglin’s pick struck rock. But he wanted to savor this visual for as long as possible: Kraglin heaving and straining, focused only on retrieving Yondu’s prize.

He weren’t no princess, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t love being spoilt. Luckily, Yondu knew he deserved it.

Kraglin could feel the vibrations up his arm, old habit and bred instinct telling him which way to angle his pick for the best yield. It wasn’t something he consciously thought about, just a twitch of his shoulders or his wrist to winkle out the best nuggets of rock. He struck something harder, a jerk in his elbow as he frowned. Something good, he hoped. Striving forward, he chipped and worked, twisting himself at a strange angle to be able to see the glimmering, gleaming thing while avoiding hitting himself in the face.

“Here we go,” he breathed, hushed and reverent as a midwife. He was chipping gently with one hand, the other carefully scooping rock chips away from the hole, smoothing it out. A raw rock, certainly, but he had no doubt that there was someone in the village with the correct tools to shape it. Either way, he drew out a palm-sized stone in swirling hues of white and deep purple, bleeding into black-blue at the edges. He blew and dusted with his fingers, smoothing away the dust from the glossy surface.

Hraxlian tradition dictated that he hide it from Yondu until it was perfectly formed, chipped and faceted until it gleamed. Somehow, he didn’t think Yondu had the patience for that. So instead, Kraglin smiled and turned, offering it out to him in the palm of his hand.

Yondu picked up the stone, holding it an inch from his face and twisting it to admire the refracting light.

“Purple?” he said, just to confirm it wasn’t his eyes misreporting in the candle-lit gloom. His grin cracked over his face, as he rubbed the rough stone between his palms, feeling how hot it was from the strike of the pick. “I like it.”

“Yeah?” Kraglin did his best not to puff up too much, though he couldn’t help the broad grin that spread over his lips. He admired the look on Yondu’s face, feeling ridiculously pleased that his gift had been accepted.

“Well good. Now we know these ones are here, we’ll come back here if we need to.” As if Yondu could ever not need shiny objects.

Yondu nodded along, engrossed with rolling the stone across his palms. When he’d satisfied himself with that, he rested it on his cheek instead, smiling at the transfer of warmth. Then, on a whim, licked it.

It didn’t taste of anything special. Dirt, perhaps. Yondu smacked his lips, pulling a face, and spat to one side.

“S’prettier than it’s tasty.” Before Kraglin could scold him or tell him that putting strange minerals in his mouth wasn’t the smartest idea, Yondu scooped up Kraglin’s hand so they were holding the damp stone together, blue fingers wrapping white. Then tugged him back along the tunnels the way they’d come. “Let’s get going then. I know you wanna get busy with yer show and tell, an’ being
out the sunlight’s makin’ me sleepy.”

Kraglin stooped to pick up his bag of magnets as he passed it. He didn’t let go of the other man’s hand though, doing his best not to oversqueeze around the stone - it was quite rough, and as much as Yondu seemed to like it, he had the distinct feeling that he’d like it a little less with bloody edges.

He took a moment to stare at the candles before they got out. He still had to shut his eyes tight though, when sunlight blasted in through the mouth of the tunnel, giving a near-silent pained noise.

“You might haveta get us up the edge of the dig.” he said, slowing his tread and tapping his toes on the floor of the slope as if testing for loose rocks. “Can’t see shit till my eyes adjust.”

Yondu, shielding his eyes from the glare, turned to sneer at his starman and tell him to quit being such a wuss. This was nothing. Kraglin oughta try running through the deepswamps and into a clearing at midday - at least in this instance the suns were dipping towards the horizon, their light stretching into crimson and ruby rather than bright blazing white. He shut his mouth when he saw Kraglin’s face. Pinched and sickly-looking, the man was picking his way through the quarry shale slow as a blind man.

Yondu and Kraglin’s biology differed. That much was evident from a glance. One was blue, one was white. One was suited to swinging through trees, the other… Well, the last hour had proven what Kraglin was designed for. Yondu ran fingers over his rock’s sharp edges, the skin catching and tugging but never enough to break. Kraglin’s hand loosened to allow the movement without letting him go. Yondu smiled to himself, drawing them to a halt rather than dragging Kraglin along at his own pace.

Yeah. Having a mine-dweller for a partner meant you got damn sweet presents. However, this also meant that what merely ached for him might well be agonizing for Kraglin.

Yondu blinked, forcing himself to stare at a bright reflective patch of ground until his pupils shrunk. When he was only absorbing a sliver of the evening sunbeams rather every ray that fell to earth, Yondu lifted his spare hand to Kraglin’s forehead. He cupped it across his eyebrows, taking the chance to smear away the mining-dust caught in the hairs while Kraglin’s eyes were shut. His palm cast shade across Kraglin’s cheeks and the bridge of his nose - which was still peeling from their beach excursion, days prior.

“Y’ alright there, you dumbass cave-dweller?”

Kraglin’s shoulders dropped a little at the gentle touch, pressing his forehead to Yondu’s hand. It took longer for his eyes to adjust from the grey shades he saw underground, but the cooling shade helped.

“M’okay. Just takes a few minutes sometimes is all.” He cracked one eye open a sliver, to reassure him as best he could, and gave a crooked smile when he mostly saw hand. “Thas helpin’ though. Won't be too long.”

Even if it took forever, he was fine with it. Ashamed to admit it though he was, Kraglin would gladly take burning pain if it meant it prompted Yondu to display some of that rare tenderness. Kraglin didn't want it more often, exactly - he wasn't a whimpering podling, seeking comfort for a scraped knee. But these brief moments were all the more treasured for being rare, and he clung to them while they happened. It was a good feeling, one that he was sure would fade with time and familiarity, so it was to be cherished now.

“Think I'm good,” he said, blinking against Yondu’s palm. “Thanks.”
“Yeah, yeah. You can thank me by gettin’ yer lil’ presentation over with sharpish.” Yondu smiled as he spoke, the expression undermining the curt words. He scritched Kragllin’s fuzzy cheek when his nose pressed on his lovelines before pulling away. “There’s a whole lotta space to explore, after all. And we ain’t getting any younger.”

“Speak for yourself, old man.” Kraglin grinned into the brighter light. He stepped back with a laugh, shuffling his bag higher, adjusting his grip. “But - I get it. I can't wait.”

It felt strange to admit that. But it was true. Since he'd flown his ship here he felt the itch in his palms for her controls, the drop in his stomach from take off. Soon.

The trudge back to the village was an easy one, following the well-trodden path. Kraglin only took one detour - to the ship. It was in one of the arable fields overlooking the cliffs, and it took barely any time at all to nip in and grab a few things for his presentation. Granted, the process was only hazy in his mind. But he understood enough of the science for the Centaurians to work out the rest on their own.

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